

Prom: How a High School Ritual Brought Youth Closer to Adulthood, 1890-1970.

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Prom: How a High School Ritual Brought Youth Closer to Adulthood, 1890-1970

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that prom is a distinctive ritual, whose history offers a singular perspective on changing understandings of the passage from youth to adulthood and the role of the high school in that transition. Initially the outgrowth of a vibrant student

culture at elite all-male universities such as Yale, where juniors organized their first prom in the mid-nineteenth century, the prom spread around the country among coed college students who gradually adopted this social institution over the next fifty years. By the 1910s, the prom was established not only in colleges, but in high schools as well, as younger students sought to emulate "sophisticated" collegiate life. Adult administrators had an interest in encouraging this more grown-up behavior as long as they could maintain control. At the high school level, the prom reveals how students conflated adulthood with social mobility and autonomy.

In my research I draw heavily on student publications from high schools in San Francisco, Milwaukee, and Baltimore, as well as a variety of local newspapers and popular magazines, such as *Seventeen* and *Senior Scholastic*. These sources offer a diverse mix of youth voices and adult perspectives. My work deepens our historical understanding of how educational institutions served as incubators of youth culture, and argues further that high school students actively constructed their youth culture as a training ground for adulthood. For much of the twentieth century, as secondary education expanded, high school graduation symbolized a transition to adulthood and the promise of social mobility. As one avenue for students to rehearse the identities they wanted to assume as adults and to assert themselves in negotiations with administrators and other authority figures, the prom illuminates the social construction of age and adulthood. Prom's longevity as a high school tradition speaks to its ability to shift alongside students' ideas of their own youth and maturity. It also underscores the evolution of youth culture from customs transmitted more by peers to one that has become ever more mediated by adults.

My dissertation begins by foregrounding the high school prom with an examination of the origins of the prom in college life and how its transmission between campuses reflected college students' desire to imitate more elite campuses. In the second chapter, I contextualize the prom within the environment of high school dances. Students embraced dancing as an activity that expressed their youth but part of dancing's appeal was how it also allowed students to emulate adult behavior and the privileged classes. The next chapter explores the endurance of prom king elections in the Milwaukee area where the boisterousness of prom king elections led school administrators to seek greater control over students' campaigning activities, but students' dedication to their tradition pushed the administration to negotiate, rather than dictate, new campaign practices. I then examine students' debates over what extravagance and formality contributed to prom's significance as a ritual and students' challenges to the cost of prom, which proved prohibitive for some. I close my dissertation by looking at how adults from media, education, community organizations, and business, sought to take a more active role in proms during the postwar period.

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