

The Principal Called It
"The Poor Man's College"

The buildings resemble a small New England college, only it's not in New England, it's not a college, not even a poor man's college for that matter; but a unique group of buildings that house fifteen hundred teen-agers during each school day. It's name is Tamalpais High School, and it's located in Mill Valley, California.

The architecture is not that of a conventional high school. Why? probably because the high school was forced to develop in a piecemeal fashion at times without the aid of public support. Tam High was developed in individual units through the last seventy-eight years of this century.

Right from it's conception the faculty and students played an important part in giving the high school it's architectural face that it presents to us today. For instance, the arch that stands over the front entrance steps was constructed in Mr. Guillou's 1911 mechanic class! School bonds that fail today are not a new trend. A building bond that was presented to the public one year after the first tiny building was constructed also failed, and that was way back in 1909!

The first principal, E. E. Wood, was an unusual man to say the least! Not only was he a Phi Beta Kappa graduate, but also an excellent carpenter and mechanic. I think the trustees were swayed in their selection by the latter fact. It didn't take a Blue Ribbon Committee to realize that money was not available to build the first four-room building until a month before the start of school, scheduled for August 4, 1908.

The principal was indeed an unusual person. The record shows he finished grammar school then went to work in the building trades. After developing his building skills he decided to enter the local high school in the Gold country at the tender age of twenty one! After graduating from high school he breezed through the University of California with Honors.

The population of Marin County was "booming," even back in the 1900's. The census read 15,702. An ad in the first high school journal tells us that you could purchase a building lot for the paltry sum of one hundred pre-O.P.E.C dollars! The resident population of southern Marin County swelled each consecutive year as San Franciscans moved into Mill Valley. In fact it was the practice of up and coming city dwellers to build their "summer" homes in the area. They soon metamorphized into Marin County residents, and the need for a high school became evident.

The first Board of Education --- minus a high school met on September 20, 1907. Messrs. Elliott, Johnson, Linsley and Folger started to look around for a high school site. They were able to purchase about five acres, partially on flat and hilly land from a Mr. Jackson for the sum of eight thousand dollars. However it had some of the qualities of Florida; that is, it flooded every once in a while when rain and tides teamed up. The location was designated as Mill Valley Junction. On May 12th, 1908, E. E. Wood was appointed Principal of the non-existent high school, which was to receive sixty-four students by August 4th, 1908!

There was only one minor problem--no funds for construction. Some individuals "kicked" in another eight thousand for the construction of a permanent four classroom building, but it would never be ready for the opening day of school. Meanwhile Wood didn't wait; he rolled up his sleeves and, to the horror of today's building inspector, tacked up the first classrooms on the hill at a point where the school clock tower now stands. "By God! He built her, and she was plumb--she consisted mainly of three parts: a wooden platform, plank walls and a canvas roof. The school was ready!" It lasted for about six weeks until the elements of nature forced Wood, his three teachers and sixty-four students into the half-completed permanent school building. It worked! Wood had bought enough time, and the teachers

and students finished the first year to the accompanying sound of saws, hammers, and dropping planks. It still remains as part of the present Wood Hall.

The school was starting off, the question was--could it survive? On the plus side, Wood had three superb teachers along with himself as general trouble shooter and line backer. On the minus side, they lost their first bond election in the second year of the school district's existence. Two seniors dropped out; nevertheless, the first class graduated three proud seniors.

Nothing could stop Tam High now! Two teachers struck a blow for Fine Arts when their students raised enough money to buy a piano. The vehicle was a stellar performance called "The Sweet Girl Graduate."

If one were to describe the architecture of the high school he might run into a problem. Unlike most high schools of today, it was not conceived as one complete comprehensive structure. Units were added here and there, always in tempo with scarce funds and the perseverance of the faculty and students. If anything, I suppose we might call it delayed Winchesterian. As the structures rose and the faculty changed over the years, a delightful tradition arose in honoring past teachers and Board members by naming the buildings in their honor. So today one will hear students say, "I'll be in Wood Hall," or, "Meet me for lunch in Mead Theatre," (an outdoor Greek theatre, built by the W.P.A. in 1937), or, "The meeting is in Keyser," (English classes). Principal Wood owned his home on the campus; his children were born there. The house is gone now; and Palmer Hall, one of the newer structures, occupies the space. If you happen to walk by Palmer Hall you will notice four magnificent Redwood trees in a cluster that tower over the building. They were planted long ago by Mr. Wood in celebration of the birth of his four children. The science building was constructed carefully to save these Redwood trees.

It is said that the railroad build the West. In a way, the same thing might be said about Tamalpais High School. It's gone now, but the "Special"

was the train that stopped right in front of the school entrance! This train faithfully, year in and year out, hauled generations of students--some eager, others reluctant--to their classes from all over South and West Marin. The "Special" in the early years originated at Point Reyes and was a milk train that hauled dairy products from there to the Sausalito terminal. The "Special" would stop at Fairfax for half an hour in the early morning to pick up students, then continue to San Anselmo, Ross Valley, and finally to Almonte Junction, where it would take the spur that ran in front of the high school. The train would then deposit its load of high-schoolers in time for their first class and continue on its way to Sausalito. A month of rides cost the students about \$2.40, no matter where on the line they boarded. The school district made up the difference in fare; school buses had not yet appeared on the scene. In later years the North Western Pacific modernized their trains and turned to electricity. The newer models were called "over-grown street cars." In the thirties, the students might pass their commute time as people on the Transit bus of today, doing homework, sleeping, or better yet, checking out the entertainment guide of the school paper--after all the Orpheus in San Rafael might be featuring Warner Oland in "The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu," or down in Sausalito the Princess might be showing Ted Lewis in "Is Everybody Happy?" Yes, it seemed like everybody was happy, but things were changing. A notice in the school paper stated that, "Student train riders must show their tickets before boarding the train." The N.W.P. was putting this policy into effect to force fare-dodgers to purchase commute tickets. The bridge was under construction, and they were talking about making a new highway with three lanes yet! And before we knew it the "Special" was only a memory.

Today Tamalpais High School stands almost as it was. The 1912 tower is still displaying its class-donated 1946 clocks, while the maiden of Mount Tamalpais watches silently in the background. Things are changing as always;

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and maybe not this generation of students, but the next might hear the whistle of a new "Special" as it makes its way towards that old student-made arch that reads: TAMALPAIS HIGH SCHOOL.

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