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Tamalpais High School

a synopsis, 1908-1944

by Henri M. Boussy

Cities do not grow by a slow, unilateral progression but rather by a succession of surges of populations displaced by great national crises such as war or famine or major natural calamities such as volcanic eruptions, floods, tidal waves or earthquakes. The growth of Mill Valley was no exception. The auction sale of lots and acreage in 1890 produced the first surge that introduced the area to the world. Buyers flocked to secure a place in Marin's recreational wonderland.

In 1906, a major earthquake and fire destroyed a large portion of San Francisco and created a crowd of homeless refugees. Many sought shelter in Mill Valley where there was only minor damage. The fortunate ones set up housekeeping on their own summer properties in cabins and bungalows and became permanent residents.

One of the immediate concerns of these new resident families with children of school age was providing a good education. Construction of a high school in southern Marin had been contemplated since 1905. The new families gave added impetus to the demand and the procedure for establishing a public high school was initiated. A board was formed and two sites were proposed. Sausalito was anxious to have the high school in their own town but it was voted to build on the outskirts of Mill Valley because the Northwest Pacific Railroad only offered to add a stop at that location. Named for the beloved mountain, Tamalpais was the first Marin County Public High School as San Rafael was a city school.

The 8:17 AM Northwest Pacific train from Sausalito and the 8:45 from Mill Valley added a daily halt to their respective schedules at Tamalpais, the new station platform. On August 3, 1908, the first day of school, a group of 70

young people, the entire student body, came through the gate at the bottom of the hill and made their way up a utility road to the top of the knoll that would hold the flagpole. They assembled in front of a temporary wooden platform hastily erected by two carpenters hired and supervised by Mr. Ernest E. Wood, principal of the new school. The clamour of hammering and sawing, planing, welding and excavating greeted them. The first structure, made of wood, was divided into four rooms that would serve as their classrooms for six weeks. It was sheltered from the weather by a tarpaulin.

The assembly consisted of 40 freshmen (awed by their first day in high school), 21 sophomores, five juniors and four seniors (refugees from the long commute to and from San Rafael High School). The solemnity of the occasion was such that the students totally ignored the spectacular view of the colorful marshlands at their feet, the distant golden hills and the shining bay.

The boys were itching in their Sunday best suits, white shirts and ties. The girls were standing very straight in starched white dresses or stiff waists and long dark skirts while trying to keep their pompadours in place and striving to conceal the paper bag lunches they all carried. Three young teachers also in starched white blouses and long dark narrow skirts, with faces set but not forbidding under their own towering pompadours, stood before them.

A jovial but dignified young man, meticulously dressed, welcomed the students with a genial smile. He was the new principal, Mr. E. E. Wood, who would lead them through the joys and rigors of their years at Tamalpais. Mr. Wood also taught the social studies. Miss Keyser, the first teacher to be hired, taught English and supervised the

Drama. Miss Grace Pack taught science, while the languages, French, Latin and German were taught by Miss Shone Kurlandzik. These four capable people constituted the entire faculty. Mr. Wood made the first of the speeches for which he was famous and set the tone for the first 36 years of Tamalpais High School when he advised the new student body to "play the game square".

In the first few weeks a student body association was formed and a provisional constitution written so that elections could be held. Thomas Bunker was elected as the first student body president. Each class met and elected officers shortly thereafter. A Boys' Athletic Association was organized during the first year with J. D. Fair as football coach. A baseball club was also organized which lost its maiden contest to the Spartan Club of Mill Valley. Three other teams flourished; tennis, basketball and track but lacked competitors against which to test their mettle. A Girls' Athletic Association was formed that triumphed in its first contest, winning against Sonoma in 1910. The athletic field was dedicated that same year with Elsie Roemer raising the first flag. The first dramatic offerings were a pantomime, "the Cannibal and the Skeleton" and a play, "the Sweet Girl Graduate" staged by Miss Keyser and Miss Pack. They were performed on March 4 and 5, 1909, in Sausalito and at the Outdoor Art Club in Mill Valley to raise funds for a piano. The first yearbook, "The Tamalpais Graduate", with Gladys Hazen as editor, appeared in June in time to serve the first graduating class of three seniors. The first newspaper, a daily, had a short but active life beginning in February, 1910.

Construction continued on the campus. The "tent platform" proved unsatisfactory as a classroom. The morning fog and chill wind blew through



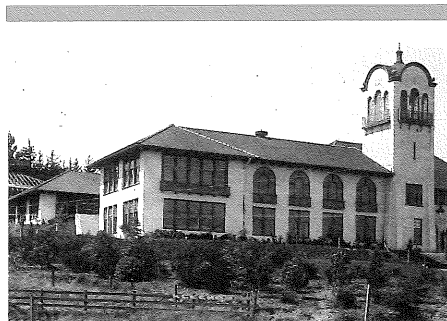
A panorama of Tamalpais High School and the "main highway" before 1915. The E. E. Wood family home is in the center foreground. A home provided for the head custodian on campus is at left, foreground.

the cracks and under the canvas. The August sun at midday made the rooms unbearably hot so the classes took refuge in the shade of the nearby woods. At one point, rocks from the excavations above pelted the canvas and pierced the fabric. One curious sophomore straddled the ridge pole and accidentally fell through the canvas onto a startled freshman class. To compound the misery, on September 16th, the seasons first rain fell on Mill Valley and the students were forced to seek shelter in the unfinished structure. The platform was abandoned and classes continued amid the din of building.

The construction work on Tamalpais High School had an unusual dimension. Student labor was used in erecting the first gymnasium, another wooden structure on the site of the upper court. Wooden walls were built 3/4 of the way up to the roof and the last 1/4 was open to the ceiling and "glazed" with chicken wire for light and ventilation. The co-ed gym was named Wood Hall but the name was soon lost. It simply became "the Gym". The athletes changed clothes in rooms in the main building. It was scheduled for the girls and for the boys on alternating days.

The incomplete buildings soon proved inadequate and a bond election was planned. It was opposed by voters in Sausalito who did not want to pay taxes for another school district. Mr. E. E. Wood saved the day by bringing 200 voters to the polls who favored the bonds and they passed. The bonds were used to fund seven additional classrooms, a cafeteria and an assembly hall. E. E. Wood was coming closer to carrying out

his vision of the high school as the "poor man's college... within its walls hand and mind should be trained to useful labour while the character should be developed toward high moral conduct and an appreciation of all that is best in life," and accomplished by the method of "Learning through doing".



Tamalpais High School, c. 1915

There were instances when that dictum was difficult to support, even for Mr. Wood. In the community there was a young girl named Mildred Folker who made clothes for the dolls of all the little girls in the neighborhood. By the time she was ready to enter high school she was a skilled dressmaker. She was delighted to learn that sewing was taught at Tamalpais and eagerly signed up for the course. To her dismay the sewing class was geared to students who had never so much as held a needle. She quit the school then went back only to offer her services as a sewing teacher. Mr. Wood was taken aback at the thought of a class being conducted by a fourteen year old and refused the offer of this

skilled craftsman who had "learned by doing". She became a highly respected and successful dressmaker.

The Tamalpais Union Polytechnic High School was established on the campus offering what was essentially an apprenticeship program in the building trades. The program opened in 1911 with 20 students. Student designed projects began to appear on the grounds. A new gate and the first wing of the commercial building were planned and constructed by student labor.

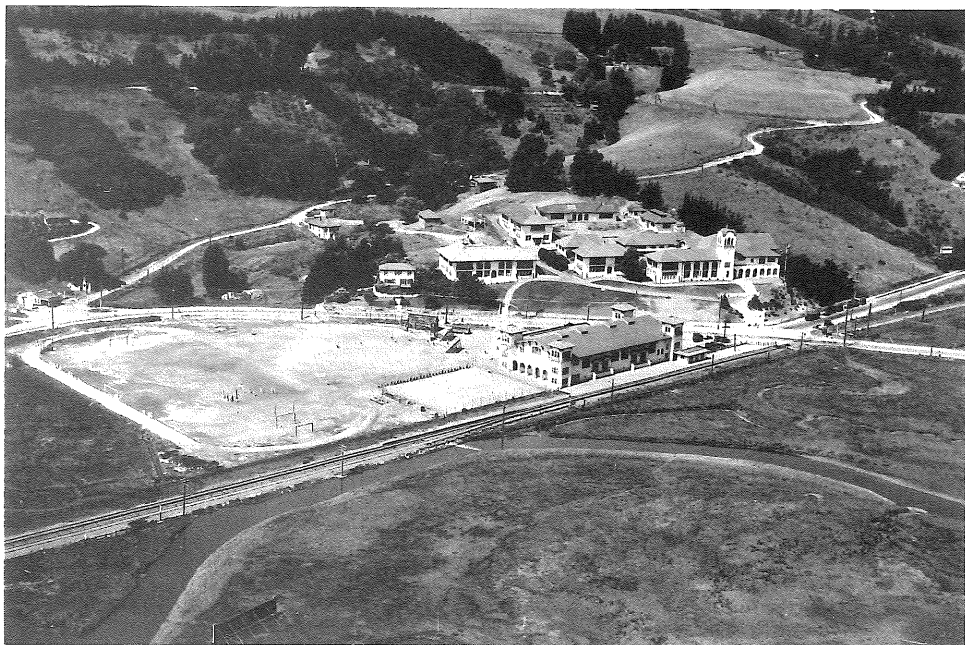
By 1912 there were classes in bricklaying, cement technology and carpentry for the boys. Domestic Science for the girls consisted of the operation of the new cafeteria. Students did the preparation of food, cooking and serving of meals. The offerings kept expanding with the addition of an electric shop with ten forges for blacksmithing. This large "industrial" building was divided into special rooms to accommodate drafting, an electric shop, a tool room and a machine shop equipped with milling machines, three Star lathes, a shaper and a drill press. By 1914, the teacher, Mr. Ralph Scott had opened an automotive shop where students and faculty could do repair and maintenance on their cars or trust them to the skills of the mechanic trainees.

The graduating class of 1912 was the first class to complete all four years of high school at Tamalpais. It was selected as the proper year for the dedication of the school which had become a miniature model of the complete comprehensive California high school. There were only five graduating students and what was

lacked in enrollment numbers, was made up in quality and diversity.

The president of the University of California, Benjamin Ide Wheeler, was to officiate at the graduation that represented a crowning achievement for Mr. E. E. Wood. Alas, Mr. Wood was ill and unable to attend the ceremony so Mr. Ralph Scott represented him.

In 1913, the school was blessed with the hiring of Miss Ruby Scott as a student teacher. She soon proved to be the person that Mr. Wood considered the best Latin teacher in the state. She initiated the popular and famous annual Roman Banquet. For the occasion the students wore Roman costumes and dined on traditional Roman food with spoons (historically no knives nor forks). Authentic plays and skits were performed, songs were sung and poems



recited, all in Latin. Ancient music was performed as incense scented the banquet room and slaves served the patrician guests sweetmeats, fruit and drink. The memory of that festive evening was retained by the students long after they had forgotten *amo, amas, amat and veni, vivi, vici*.

The installation of a print shop was the culmination of E. E. Wood's dream of a self sufficient campus capable of printing its own letterhead stationery, newspaper, yearbook, theatre programs and publicity. It would be several years before the major publication projects would be possible but the small press was a fine beginning.

The school was involved in a myriad of extra curricular activities and was not insensitive to major events in the community and the world. One such Bay Area event was the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915 on the San Francisco bayfront off North Beach, Cow Hollow and the Marina. It was glitteringly visible at night from Marin as it introduced the wonder of the electric light en masse. Students of that time remember the official educational field

Top photo: Camino Alto is seen directly in front of Tamalpais High School c. 1929. Northwestern Pacific Railroad tracks run through the center in front of the gymnasium. Photo above left: A snow covered Mt. Tamalpais rises above the campus, 1922. Photo at left: Tamalpais High School with gymnasium and swimming pool buildings around 1930.



Above photo: Tamalpais faculty with Mr. E. E. Wood standing extreme right. At left: Principal E. E. Wood dedicates a memorial to faculty members who had died while teaching or shortly after retirement. 1939.

trips as well as the informal excursions made possible by the direct ferry from Sausalito to the "playgrounds" of the fair.

WWI had started in Europe and cast its long shadow on Tamalpais where military related activities became common. One of the first actions was to sell six of the ten forges in the electrical shop to the government as there were none in the military installations in the area. The automotive shop was closed for the duration as the teacher, Mr. Scott, volunteered for military duty. The vocational training program was offered operating funds through the Smith-Hughes Act which provided support for apprenticeship programs. Tamalpais had 100 students in the technical high school committed to a daily program requiring three hours of apprenticeship training in addition to the basic courses; social studies, English, Mathematics and Physical Education. The federal funding made it possible to add classes in tool, instrument and die making, watchmaking, pattern making, forging (as in a blacksmith shop) and wood turning. The classes in iron and steel metallurgy were expanded and a program to train millwrights was added.

The Tamalpais student body now numbered 330. Seventeen faculty

members offered 30 courses in nine separate departments. At this time the school hired Mr. Gerard Wendinger to teach woodshop and to supervise the construction projects on campus. He was also named as the director of Physical Education where he designed a special program in which the entire student body gathered each day after school on the athletic field for calisthenics. He also coached football and basketball and trained a highly successful baseball team that sent a number of players out into semi-professional and professional leagues. He was so popular that the pool of water created on the playing field by the high tides and torrential rains of winter was known as Lake Wendinger.

Another traumatic event with direct bearing on the welfare of the school and the community was the great flu epidemic of 1918. No one knew how it was spread through a population nor where it originated. It lasted over a year and by the time it finished spreading its fatal pestilence the disease had killed 500,000 victims. The schools had to observe the same precautions as the general population. People were not permitted to gather in groups indoors so church services were held outside in the redwood groves of Old Mill Park. Everyone was required to wear a gauze mask for protection against germs. School classes were closed although the schools were open so that individual students could come in and get homework assignments from their teachers.

In 1921, the state issued a mandate requiring all elementary school districts to become associated with a high school district. In Marin nine elementary districts voted to be associated with Tamalpais Union High School District thereby increasing the assessed valuation from four million to twelve million dollars.

As Marin recovered from the austerities imposed by WWI there was a steady influx of settlers coming into the county. Tamalpais was becoming overcrowded. It was an active period. Construction began on the swimming pool. The song *Tamalpais*, was written by a student, Mary Lucas, and officially adopted by the student body. The yearbook resumed publication after nine years during which Mr. Wood had forbidden its publication as an economy measure. It appeared as the *PAI* for the first time. Emily Jones was elected as the first girl student body president.

In 1923, the Girls' Association voted in favor of a uniform for the girls. It consisted of a white middie blouse with a blue collar, blue kerchief (red for senior girls) and a long navy blue pleated skirt. The uniform was optional on one day a month so that the skirt could be cleaned. The electrical shop installed 480 feet of cable under the original Highway 101 to the boy's gymnasium to illuminate the indoor pool and activate the water pumps. The students installed a bell system in the school and installed electric lights in the machine shop.

In 1924 a bond issue was passed permitting Tam to expand by completing a new wing on the main building from plans drafted by the mechanical drawing classes. A modern kitchen was installed and the cafeteria was remodeled. An evening school program was initiated. The new gymnasium was completed and the swimming pool opened. Extensive landscaping was done and the first lawn was planted with the explicit understanding that students would stay off the grass. All obeyed and the lawns flourished. The athletic field was elevated with fill to above the high tide mark.

In 1926 one of Tam's distinguished alumnae graduated. She was Eunice Quedens, a fine actress, who had appeared in many amateur school productions. Better known by her stage name, Eve Arden, she starred in the TV series "Our Miss Brooks".

The library was opened in 1928 under the able direction of Tam graduate, Ruth Seymour Close. She married machine shop teacher Harry Close. A

music building was constructed on the level above Mead Theater. It was named "the Band Box" by Mr. Albert Binns, custodian. The building was later moved down to the playing field level where it served a variety of functions; cosmetology room, visual aids room and teachers' lunchroom. The present Band Box was built to replace it on the original site.

There was a temporary interruption in the school calendar one winter day in 1922 when the community wakened to an unusual white world. A snowfall during the night blanketed Mount Tamalpais with two inches of fresh snow. The rest of the day was spent in snow excursions and snow battles. The mountain railroad cooperated by delivering a freightcar load of snow to Lytton Square for local snow skirmishes.

The first pool at Tamalpais was indoors. It was a true luxury for any school in the 20's. The Tam gym was built on pilings driven into the silt of former marshlands naturally void of bedrock. It was decided that the pool would be built on a large barge sunk in the mud. It was constructed with a deep end for diving tapering up to a shallow end. In a short time the shallow end began to sink as the deep end rose. When it stabilized, what had been the deep end was now shallow and vice versa. It did not prevent the swim team from attaining a great record.

By 1929, the year of the stock market crash and the invention of scotch tape, enrollment at Tamalpais had reached 1000. Improvements continued and the athletic field was extended.

Rae Butner Kappleman, a social



Class Day, 1914.

studies teacher at Tamalpais, discovered that she was receiving less pay than her male counterpart. This policy was true for all of California. She found that every teacher had a different salary. A teacher committee protested to the board and a uniform salary was granted for all teachers. In 1934 an aviation class taught by Mr. Waterman, a pilot, had the distinction of being open to girls.

Mead Theater was built in 1936 under the WPA program. Named for Ernest Mead, a Tamalpais alumnus and long term member of the board, the theater was built into a natural amphitheater over a creek that ran through the campus. It seated 2263 spectators. A stage with a large proscenium arch bearing mosaic murals

on either side was one of several WPA art projects. The assembly hall had murals by Maurice del Mué showing rural Marin landscapes. There were also murals in the library and in the main hall done under the supervision of E. Shotwell Wood, an artist and part time teacher at Tamalpais. Mr. E. E. Wood inaugurated an armillary sphere in the upper court (a WPA project) and installed a bronze plaque commemorating the members of the faculty who had died. A fountain and fish pond were also constructed in the Orange Court.

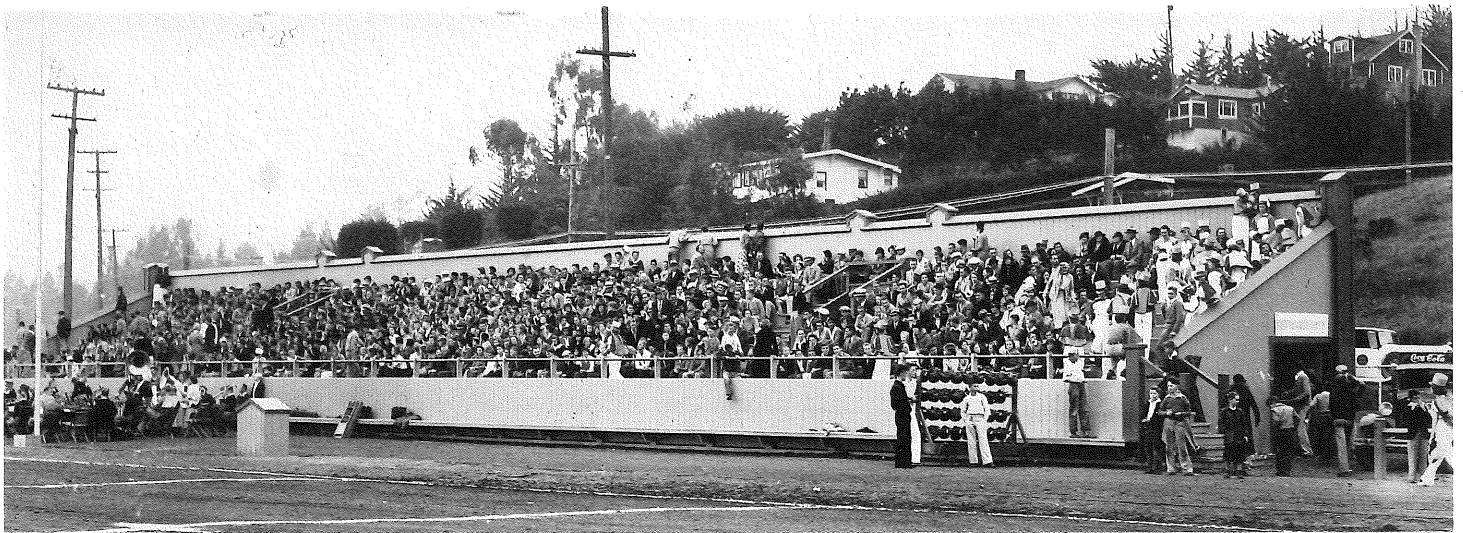
Over the years Tam produced a multitude of outstanding coaches and athletes—too many to talk about in detail. However, a handful made such a mark that they seem worthy of mention here. "Pop" Wendering's legendary baseball teams gave an early competitive start to such future major league players as Tony Freitas and Art Schallock from Mill Valley; Sam Chapman from Tiburon; Karl Olson, Fairfax, and Joe DeMaestri from San Anselmo.

In 1934 George Gustafson replaced Roy "Wrong Way" Riegels of U.C. Rose Bowl fame as the football coach and over the next decade worked with such stalwarts as Jack Hagerman, '39; Wally Lester, '42; and Jack O'Connor, '44.

Glidden Benefield assisted coach Cletus Graves as a track coach in the 1930s and also worked with the "lightweight" football team. In later years he would be the varsity coach in both sports for several years and enjoyed much success, particularly in track where Tam dominated the North Bay League for almost a decade. Three track standouts from that era include Arnold Nutting, '33; Bill McCurdy, '33; and Simon Scott, '36.

The Senior Class play, 1913.





Chapman Stadium served athletic competitions until it was declared unsafe and removed in 1954.

“Gus” and “Benny” as they were affectionately known were later inducted into the Marin High School Athletic Hall of Fame as were all of the athletes mentioned here.

Sam Chapman also starred in football at Tam, and went on to become an All-American player at Cal. He then enjoyed a long career in major league baseball and can arguably be named the greatest athlete ever to come out of Tam.

In basketball, Paul Valenti was a dominant player in 1938 and then went on to play and coach at Oregon State University.

The opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937 was a festive occasion and marked another boon to the growth of Mill Valley and Marin. But it opened in a period of depression that found the community and the schools forced to tighten their budgets. Teachers were put on part time and their salaries were cut. As an economy measure Mr. Wood had a laundry built to wash the gym towels.

The bridge doomed the railroad. The passenger trains to Mill Valley were discontinued by late 1940. A fleet (actually 12) of yellow school buses were purchased to replace the trains. Mr. George Stocking was hired to keep the buses in repair and on schedule. The economic depression caused stress to both students and faculty. It showed in delayed mental reactions and a change in physical appearance; fatigue, lack of concentration and a fear of the uncertainty of the future.

The curriculum was broadened during this period as a result of a national revival of interest in handwork and the crafts. Mr. and Mrs. Relzy Aiken, both artists, were hired to teach a widely

varied program of art metal jewelry, ceramics, weaving, leatherwork, book binding, stencilling and silk screen printing on textiles.

The new Band Box was completed in 1940. A summer school was also started that June. It provided students an opportunity to make up poor grades, permitted them to satisfy academic requirements without interfering with the basic curriculum and gave them an optional time for exploring cultural subjects in the arts, music and Drama. Modern medicine was revolutionized that year by the discovery of penicillin that was to be so important in treating the wounded in WWII and healing infections in post-war society.

Most traumatic in 1941 was the treacherous bombing of Pearl Harbor. The community and the schools were faced with the long nightmare of rationing scarce goods, the draft, the

threat of invasion and bombing and the spectre of a long, costly and crippling war. Mr. E. E. Wood was asked to continue his administration of Tamalpais but he reluctantly refused due to ill health and fatigue. With his resignation in 1944, Tamalpais ended an era that could never be duplicated and bade farewell to a man whose love of learning, force of character, great wisdom, imagination, vision and affection created a high school that is among the best in the world.

Author's note...

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The armillary sphere memorial to departed faculty members.





All photos taken from Drama and Foreign Language stage productions, 1918 and 1919.