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Edward Howard

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# The Taylor County High School Prom of 2003

Edward Howard

Deep in Georgia's agricultural heartland sits the small town of Butler. This town of only 1900 residents is the county seat for Taylor County, which has a population of only 8,800. Butler appears as the classic example of a rural county seat in the South. Commanding the high ground is the stately, columned courthouse. Surrounding that are a few dozen pre-war brick buildings that comprise most of the businesses in town. A few pick-up trucks parked at the curb, and some people walking about at a leisurely pace complete the picture of a town where time seems to stand still. Some would say the atmosphere reminds them of the good old days but others would remind us that those good old days had some bad institutions. One of those institutions is right there in Butler, Georgia: racially separate high school proms.

Racially separate school proms have been the norm in Taylor County for the past three decades, but the 2003 prom gained special notoriety because it seemed to digress from the racially combined prom of 2002. The conflict received nationwide media coverage in May 2003, because separate proms in the South appear to many as an indicator of a discriminating school system.

The roots of Taylor County High School's separate proms go back to the school's desegregation in 1970. Prior to this time its two school facilities served as the segregated K-12 schools for a county with equal numbers of Black and White students. Like many other schools in the

South, TCHS delayed complying with the requirement to desegregate for many years after the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case. In the summer of 1970 the Taylor County School Board was finally forced to integrate, so to assuage citizens' fears of interracial dating, they segregated by gender while desegregating by race! To accomplish this they reorganized the two facilities as the K-12 boy's school and the K-12 girl's school but the mile of distance between those two school facilities would not be a barrier for one unavoidable social event: the prom. No longer able to segregate by race in any school activity, the school board was forced to choose between having integrated proms or having no prom at all. Their fears of interracial dancing influenced them to choose the latter. Not to be cheated out of having a prom, however, the racially divided student bodies each formed a private party as an unofficial substitute the following May. Informally called, "the Black prom" or "the White prom" by students, these private parties were actually not proms in the technical sense, so they were outside of the control of the law.

From May 1971 to the present the prom continued virtually unchanged, even after a 1978 a court order finally forced the school to integrate by gender as well as by race. Even after the school system reorganized to appear much like any other school, vestiges of segregation remained (Lange, May 10, 2003). Today the school still hosts racially separate groups of cheerleading

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squads, class officers, and senior superlatives, so it was in this setting that racially separate proms do not seem out of place.

The racial attitude of the school today is still one of racial separation, but with no racial conflicts (J. Doe, J. Smithers, personal communication, September 19, 2003). A major change in this attitude came in the spring of 2002, when the junior class hosted the first combined prom in the history of the school. The idea was supported by 75% of the juniors and seniors and was attended by over 250 students (J. McCrary, personal communication, October 17, 2003). The prom drew positive media attention from all over the US and from as far away as England (Rowland, 2003). It was hoped that it would be the end of segregated proms, but the next junior class, contrary to the hopes of many, had other things in mind. When they reconsidered the issue, the Black 2003 juniors voted to combine the proms, but their White peers narrowly voted to keep them separate (A Few Words, 2003) That decision by the White juniors would bring embarrassing repercussions the following spring, with a return to separate proms, an onslaught of negative media coverage, and public debates across the nation over the appropriateness of student-spon-

sored proms (Lange, May 7, 2003).

The Taylor County School Board and the school superintendent hold the viewpoint that private, or student-sponsored, proms are appropriate for their school. If the traditions of the community are reflected in the student body and the elected school board, it can be safely assumed that this viewpoint is also held by most of the Taylor County community. This was also the viewpoint of the majority of the TCHS students until about 1999 when the freshman class first decided they would host a combined prom three years later, in 2002 (W. Smith, personal communication, September 19, 2003).

School Superintendent, Mr. Wayne Smith, states that liability concerns, not interracial dancing, are the main reasons now for keeping the prom a private event. The liability concerns arise from increased risk of traffic accidents and accompanying lawsuits. Taylor County is such an undeveloped area that it has no facilities suitable for a prom, so the students must travel about 50 miles to Columbus or Macon to find a large dance hall or other suitable place (W. Smith, personal communication, September 19, 2003). One teacher further explained that the concerns over interracial dancing are long over, as is demonstrated by the school's last 13 years of sponsoring interracial homecoming dances (J. Jones, personal communication, September 19, 2003).

Another reason given by Mr. Smith, is that, until recently, the majority of students wanted to keep the proms private because the school would only sponsor them if they were held on school grounds. He surveyed the students in 1997 to see if they would prefer a combined school-sponsored prom

to be held in the school gym (Lange, May 7, 2003). Both groups strongly declined his offer because they wanted a better facility (W. Smith, personal communication, September 19, 2003). Still another reason is that the two groups raise money separately and maintain different budgets. The White group is more affluent, and until the 2002 combined prom, have always opted for a more expensive prom (J. Jones, personal communication, September 19, 2003).

Those opposed to the Taylor County's policy of not sponsoring the prom include the NAACP, the majority of the news media, other school boards, government officials, and even some Taylor County residents. While none of them deny that Taylor County can legally allow proms as private parties, they expressed their disapproval of Taylor County's position in varying degrees. An NAACP district coordinator, Elaine Hatcher, called it a form of blatant racism (Walsh, 2003, 1). The Muscogee County School Board said they, "abhor the idea of racially segregated student activities" (Muscogee County Board of Education Minutes, May 2003). The coordinator of the 2002 prom, Jerica McCrary, said the school board's concerns about liability were only an excuse (J. McCrary, personal communication, October 17, 2003). State School Superintendent, Kathy Cox said of an identical case, that the school should play a leadership role in influencing students to attend combined proms (Rogers, 2003).

The role of the media in shaping the outcome of this story cannot be understated, and the coverage was almost always unfavorable to the TCHS viewpoint. Columbus columnist, Kaffie Sledge, acknowledged "We came. We saw. And in many ways we

influenced the outcome of the . . . story" (Sledge, May 3, 2003). Smith blamed the media for misleading the public into believing the school was sponsoring segregated proms, as opposed to simply maintaining a neutral position and sponsoring no prom (Lange, May 7, 2003).

Radio talk show host, Bill O'Reilly was a very vocal critic of the TCHS view. He passionately argued on his program that it was wrong for the school to remain neutral (O'Reilly, May 10, 2003). The two sides of this issue were best articulated in a debate between Bill O'Reilly and one of the few TCHS supporters, radio talk show host, Neal Boortz. Emphasizing the prom's legality as a private party, Boortz asked, "What part of freedom of association escapes your great intellect, Bill?" O'Reilly responded, "Yes, Freedom of association is fine outside of a school process" (O'Reilly, May 7, 2003).

It is my personal opinion that Taylor County's reasoning of liability concerns does not justify such a controversial policy because lengthy driving conditions are coped with by hundreds of other rural schools. Taylor County is one of only two in Georgia, and possibly in the entire country that doesn't sponsor its proms. On the other hand, the reasoning that most students prefer private proms has some merit because it allows students to vote, plan, and make decisions on their own, including the decision to combine the proms. The problem here is that it took over three decades for the students to arrive where others have long been. Obviously, strong guidance was missing.

The opposing viewpoint is too harsh in stating that the school board is racist. The TCHS interracial homecoming dances, the

superintendent's offer to host an interracial prom on school grounds, and the school's lack of interference with the combined prom are pieces of evidence one should consider before labeling them as racists. While apparently not in the forefront of integration, they appear to have some measure of tolerance for interracial dancing.

The main outcome of the conflict is that Taylor County High School will begin sponsoring the prom. At a school board meeting on May 12, 2003, Superintendent Smith proposed that the board sponsor the prom, which they later agreed to do (W. Smith, personal communication, September 19, 2003). Their primary reason for sponsoring the prom was to repair the image of the school in the eyes of the nation. One Board member said, "We have been make to look like . . . rednecks . . . but we're not racists" (Lange, May 7, 2003).

Another outcome of the conflict was the swift reaction of the public to the media reports. Mr. Smith received about 500 emails, most of which were negative. Individual teachers also received emails from people they didn't know accusing them of encouraging discrimination. A third outcome is that the combined prom will have the added benefit of substantially reducing costs. TCHS will only sponsor it if it is held on the school grounds, so the school gym will cost the students nothing, and expenses such as music and catering will no longer be duplicated. This is important in a region so poor that 60% (double the state average) of the students qualify for reduced-price lunches (greatschools.net, 2003).

A fourth outcome is that the majority of the students displayed a high level of interracial unity by forming an impromptu com-

bined prom. The Black prom organizers invited all the White students to attend their prom. (Taylor's Whites-Only Prom Reborn, 2003) The result was that three quarters of the White students abandoned their plans to attend the White prom and attended the Black prom instead, making it the de facto combined prom.

Until the recent decision to sponsor proms, the Taylor County School Board viewpoint was that students should sponsor their own proms, but the viewpoint of most others was that proms should be school sponsored. The school board changed its policy due to media pressure, not because it felt it had been wrong. To most of the public, they appear as staunch racists who maintain a Jim Crow environment in their school. Whether or not this is true, their practice of neutrality has kept their school's full racial integration decades behind almost every other school in the country. On the other hand, their neutral position has allowed the students, on their own initiative, to choose integration – an accomplishment few other student bodies have experienced.

Contrary to the media's portrayal of the 2003 prom as a failure, it should be seen as a success because the inclusive prom was part of a progressive trend toward voluntary integration. The 2002 and 2003 proms offer one strong implication for the school: that other racially divided elements, such as the class officers and the senior superlatives, will eventually break down.

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Edward Howard is a CSU junior majoring in Education, Secondary History. He has recently retired from the Army with 23 years of military service in the infantry and related fields. His last position was First Sergeant. He is currently the President of the CSU History Club. His primary research interest is in history.