

from
M I D D L E T O W N
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-----*Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd*-----

In 1929, Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd published *Middletown*, a landmark sociological study based on research conducted in 1924–1925 in Muncie, Indiana. Among other findings, the Lynds’ research showed that a typical middle-American city of the mid-1920s had undergone dramatic changes due to the influence of increasing industrialization and the availability of new consumer items. This excerpt examines life within the high school.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Drawing Conclusions

What conclusions can you, as a historian, draw through an analysis of this sociological study? Be specific in your response.

SCHOOL “LIFE”

Accompanying the formal training afforded by courses of study is another and informal kind of training, particularly during the high school years. The high school, with its athletics, clubs, sororities and fraternities, dances and parties, and other “extracurricular activities,” is a fairly complete social cosmos in itself, and about this city within a city the social life of the intermediate generation centers. Here the social sifting devices of their elders—money, clothes, personal attractiveness, male physical prowess, exclusive clubs, election to positions of leadership—are all for the first time set going with a population as yet largely undifferentiated save as regards their business class and working class parents. This informal training is not a preparation for a vague future that must be taken on trust, as is the case with so much of the academic work; to many of the boys and girls in high school this is “the life,” the thing they personally like best about going to school.

The school is taking over more and more of the child’s waking life. Both high school and grades have departed from the attitude of fifty years ago, when the Board directed:

“Pupils shall not be permitted to remain on the school grounds after dismissal. The teachers shall often remind the pupils that the first duty when dismissed is to proceed quietly and directly home to render all needed assistance to their parents.”

Today the school is becoming not a place to which children go from their homes for a few hours daily but a place from which they go home to eat and sleep.

...This whole spontaneous life of the intermediate generation that clusters about the formal nucleus of school studies becomes focused, articulate, and even rendered important in the eyes of adults through the medium of the school athletic teams—the “Bearcats.” The business man may “lay down the law” to his adolescent son or daughter at home and patronize their friends, but in the basket-ball grandstand he is if anything a little less important than these youngsters of his who actually mingle daily with those five boys who wear the colors of “Magic Middletown.” There were no high school teams in 1890. Today, during the height of the basket-ball season when all the cities and towns of the state are fighting for the state championship amidst the delirious backing of the rival citizens, the dominance of this sport is as all-pervasive as football in a college like Dartmouth or Princeton the week of the “big game.” At other times dances, dramatics, and other interests may bulk larger, but it is the “Bearcats,” particularly the basket-ball team, that dominate the life of the school. Says the prologue to the high school annual:

“The Bearcat spirit has permeated our high school in the last few years and pushed it into the prominence that it now holds. The '24 *Magician* has endeavored to catch, reflect and record this spirit because it has been so evident this year. We hope that after you have glanced at this book for the first time, this spirit will be evident to you.

“However, most of all, we hope that in perhaps twenty years, if you become tired of this old world, you will pick up this book and it will restore to you the spirit, pep, and enthusiasm of the old ‘Bearcat Days’ and will inspire in you better things.”

Every issue of the high school weekly bears proudly the following “Platform”:

- “1. To support live school organizations.
- “2. To recognize worth-while individual student achievements.
- “3. Above all to foster the real ‘Bearcat’ spirit in all of Central High School.”

Curricular and social interests tend to conform. Friday nights throughout the season are preëmpted for games; the Mothers’ Council, recognizing that every Saturday night had its own social event, urged that other dances be held on Friday nights instead of school nights, but every request was met with the rejoinder that “Friday is basket-ball night.”

This activity, so enthusiastically supported, is largely vicarious. The press complains that only about forty boys are prominent enough in athletics to win varsity sweaters. In the case of the girls it is almost 100 per cent vicarious. Girls play some informal basket-ball and there is a Girls’ Athletic Club which has a monogram and social meetings. But the interest of the girls in athletics is an interest in the activities of the young males. “My daughter plans to go to the University of———,” said one mother, “because she says, ‘Mother, I just *couldn’t*

go to a college whose athletics I couldn't be proud of!" The highest honor a senior boy can have is captaincy of the football or basket-ball team, although, as one senior girl explained, "Every member is almost as much admired."

Less spectacular than athletics but bulking even larger in time demands is the network of organizations that serve to break the nearly two thousand individuals composing the high school microcosm into the more intimate groups human beings demand. These groups are mainly of three kinds: the purely social clubs, in the main a stepping down of the social system of adults; a long distance behind in point of prestige, clubs formed around curriculum activities; and, even farther behind, a few groups sponsored by the religious systems of the adults....

"When do you study?" some one asked a clever high school Senior who had just finished recounting her week of club meetings, committee meetings, and dances, ending with three parties the night before. "Oh, in civics I know more or less about politics, so it's easy to talk and I don't have to study that. In English we're reading plays and I can just look at the end of the play and know about that. Typewriting and chemistry I don't have to study outside anyway. Virgil is worst, but I've stuck out Latin four years for the Virgil banquet; I just sit next to———and get it from her. Mother jumps on me for never studying, but I get A's all the time, so she can't say anything."

The relative status of academic excellence and other qualities is fairly revealed in the candid rejoinder of one of the keenest and most popular girls in the school to the question, "What makes a girl eligible for a leading high school club?"

"The chief thing is if the boys like you and you can get them for the dances," she replied. "Then, if your mother belongs to a graduate chapter that's pretty sure to get you in. Good looks and clothes don't necessarily get you in, and being good in your studies doesn't necessarily keep you out unless you're a 'grind.' Same way with the boys—the big thing there is being on the basket-ball or football team. A fellow who's just a good student rates pretty low. Being good-looking, a good dancer, and your family owning a car all help."...

In this bustle of activity young Middletown swims along in a world as real and perhaps even more zestful than that in which its parents move. Small wonder that a local paper comments editorially, "It is a revelation to old-timers to learn that a genuine boy of the most boyish type nowadays likes to go to school." "Oh, yes, they have a much better time," rejoined the energetic father of a high school boy to a question asked informally of a tableful of men at a Kiwanis luncheon as to whether boys really have a better time in school than they did thirty-five years ago or whether they simply have more things. "No doubt about it!" added another. "When I graduated early in the nineties there weren't many boys—only two in our class, and a dozen girls. All our studies seemed very far away from real life, but today—they've got shop work and athletics, and it's all nearer what a boy's

interested in.”

The relative disregard of most people in Middletown for teachers and for the content of books, on the one hand, and the exalted position of the social and athletic activities of the schools, on the other, offer an interesting commentary on Middletown’s attitude toward education. And yet Middletown places large faith in going to school. The heated opposition to compulsory education in the nineties has virtually disappeared; only three of the 124 working class families interviewed voiced even the mildest impatience at it. Parents insist upon more and more education as part of their children’s birthright; editors and lecturers point to education as a solution for every kind of social ill; the local press proclaims, “Public Schools of [Middletown] Are the City’s Pride”; woman’s club papers speak of the home, the church, and the school as the “foundations” of Middletown’s culture. Education is a faith, a religion, to Middletown....

Source: Excerpt from *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* by Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1929). Used by permission of Staughton Lynd.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may describe several historical conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence presented in this sociological study. Some students may note similarities between the school and the broader society. The description of the many extracurricular activities suggests that society is increasingly concerned with leisure activities. The authors also note that extracurricular activities mirror the “social shifting devices” of adults. The importance of school affiliation, reinforced through following the “Bearcat” athletic teams, seems to reflect the process of assimilation emphasized in a nation of immigrants. The relationship between school and society is also suggested by the Lynds’ description of the students as being “largely undifferentiated save as regards their business class and working class parents.” The specific activities suggest the gender roles prevalent at the time, such as girls not participating in competitive athletics. Some students may argue that few conclusions can be drawn from this analysis because it deals with a single school. They may note that because the analysis focuses on a high school in Indiana, basketball is considered more important than it would be in many other schools.