

## **“Make Yourself a Nuisance:” The Battle Over Student Culture in Great Depression Milwaukee**

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In the 1938 film *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, teenager Andy Hardy wanted to go to the Christmas dance. The dance was one of the major social events of the year and Hardy spent most of the film preparing. He found a date, bought tickets, and prepared his formal attire; Hardy even found a top hat to don. As the costs for the evening added up, Hardy found himself without the one thing that he deemed vital to the night’s success: a car. Without a vehicle, Hardy explained, “I’ll be a social outcast.” So Hardy hatched a plot to purchase an old jalopy and spent the rest of the film trying to earn the money to purchase the vehicle and thereby save his social reputation. He worked out a deal to watch over his pal’s girlfriend while his friend was away in exchange for money and he tried to borrow the money from a neighbor. Finally, after all his attempts to raise the cash failed, Hardy turned to his father and confessed the whole affair. In the end, Hardy got the car and proudly drove his date to the Christmas dance where he led the grand march with all the students dressed in their evening gowns and tuxedos.<sup>1</sup>

While things worked out for Andy Hardy in his fictionalized world, the film pointed to two very important realities for the nation’s Great Depression high school students. First, the high expectation of school dances: these functions demanded student’s pay for formal attire, a pre-dance dinner, a corsage, and transportation. These costs could run as high as \$5.00 in the 1930s. The film also demonstrated the consequences of the failure to have these social necessities. Like Andy Hardy, many high school students believed they were “social outcasts” if they could not afford all of these extras. This fear of being socially ostracized caused many young people to simply skip dances. School officials in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for example, noticed more and more youth staying home from dances. Milwaukee’s Washington High School officials reported that attendance at prom and other dances significantly dropped and across town only forty couples showed up to the 1935 Custer High School prom.<sup>2</sup> Poor

<sup>1</sup> *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, DVD, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> “Love’s Dream Beats School Spirit; Custer Prom Is Somewhat Quiet,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 5, 1935; “Dance

<sup>2</sup> “Love’s Dream Beats School Spirit; Custer Prom Is Somewhat Quiet,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 5, 1935; “Dance Committee Reduces Entrance Fee 50 Per Cent,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), May 10, 1933.

children, one Milwaukee administrator observed, were “heartbroken” because they could not attend the dances.<sup>3</sup> However, like Andy Hardy, many of these heartbroken girls and boys took control over their own fate and figured out ways to attend school dances. However, unlike Hardy, who sought to find enough money for the frills, students in Milwaukee simplified the events so more students could afford to attend. In 1933 underprivileged Washington High School students succeeded in cutting ticket prices in half.<sup>4</sup> In 1935 poor students in the suburban community of South Milwaukee launched a successful drive to eliminate the prom extras so more students could attend the dance. A group of poor students got the school newspaper to run an article calling on their classmates to simplify the prom. They also won the support of school administrators who urged students to skip the pre-prom dinner and other frills. “The students now are trying to simplify the prom itself, and they are trying to break down the idea of ‘extras,’” the school’s Dean of Girls reported. “They are suggesting small home buffet lunches after the party instead of a restaurant.”<sup>5</sup> This idea caught on and other schools all over Milwaukee began encouraging students to skip the frills. By the late 1930s Milwaukee’s proms had been simplified with some schools even allowing students to wear semi-formal attire to the dance.<sup>6</sup>

This campaign to simplify the prom provides a valuable window into Milwaukee youth’s effort to reconcile the image of teenage life presented by Andy Hardy movies and in other popular culture and the harsh reality of life for 1930s youth. In the Great Depression, the ideal teenager attended high school and participated in extra-curricular activities. This social definition of the ideal teen was promoted by educators and student leaders and reinforced by movies, radio, and comics. However, the Great Depression denied many Milwaukee girls and boys this ideal life. The economic crisis forced many families into poverty. Unable to participate in extracurricular activities or attend games and dances, these poor and working class youth found themselves social outcasts. However, Milwaukee youth did not accept this outcast status. Inspired by young heroes in popular culture and community leaders, many poor and working class students took control of their own destinies and fought to make school culture more accommodating to disadvantaged girls and boys. These battles not only changed Milwaukee’s school culture, but also made many middle class children aware of and compassionate towards the plight of needy students. Additionally, these clashes awakened the political consciousness in many disadvantaged and middle class girls and

<sup>3</sup> “Pretty Girl Without Date for Prom? It Won’t Be,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 29, 1935.

<sup>4</sup> “Dance Committee Reduces Entrance Fee 50 Per Cent,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), May 10, 1933.

<sup>5</sup> “Simplify Prom, Idea of South Milwaukee,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 11, 1935.

<sup>6</sup> “Juniors, Seniors Complete Final Plans for Prom,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), May 4, 1938; “Attention Astaires! The Spring Swing-out,” *Oracle* (Bay View High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 3, 1936.

boys causing them to funnel their newfound activism toward influencing local education policy.

This story has been left out of much of the scholarship about youth in the Great Depression. Education historians produced two book length studies of Great Depression schools but neither examines the student experience. Dominic Moreo's *Schools in the Great Depression*, and *Public Schools In Hard Times* by David Tyack, Robert Lowe, and Elisabeth Hansot examine teachers, administrators, politicians, and parents, but for the most part leave out students. They argue the economic crisis severely damaged the nation's schools, but did not significantly alter the education system. Both of these studies only occasionally discuss students; using them merely as examples to illustrate the damage cuts did to the quality of American education.<sup>7</sup> Joseph Hawes, Kristi Lindenmeyer and other children's historians have also largely left children's experiences out of their work. They rather emphasized the Great Depression's effect on the social definition of childhood. Lindenmeyer, for example, argued that the 1930s represented a major turning point for the social construct of childhood. While the concept of modern childhood existed decades prior to the 1930s, Lindenmeyer asserted that it became "imbedded. . .in popular culture, law, and public policy" during the Great Depression.<sup>8</sup>

There are a few notable exceptions to the exclusion of children's experiences from the scholarship. Psychologist Glen Elder's classic work *Children of the Great Depression* assessed the psychological effects the economic crisis had on girls and boys. Using a 1930s survey of 167 Oakland, California girls and boys, Elder argued that some poor girls and boys became more self-reliant and autonomous, while others lost self-esteem. He also observed poor children became more sensitive to elitism and mean behavior from peers.<sup>9</sup> The other study that looked at children's experiences is Robert Cohen's insightful introduction to *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression*. Cohen noted that the Great Depression made needy children feel ashamed of their poverty and isolated them from friends and children's culture. Cohen suggested that while most girls and boys welcomed the New Deal, they also had a

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<sup>7</sup> David Tyack, Robert Lowe, Elisabeth Hansot, *Public Schools In Hard Times: The Great Depression and Recent Years* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4, 139-169; Dominic Moreo, *Schools in the Great Depression* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1996), xiii-xiii; Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reform* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 323-326; Tracy L. Steffes, *Schools, Society, & State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890-1940*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 187-192.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph M. Hawes, *Children Between the Wars: American Childhood, 1920-1940* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1997), xiii-xiv, 1-11; Kristi Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up*, (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2005), 3-7.

<sup>9</sup> Glen Elder, *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 64, 66-67, 119, 128-131.

conservative attitude about charity that emphasized self-help.<sup>10</sup> While these two studies do look at children's experiences, the missing piece from this literature is how poor and working class children took control of their destinies and changed school culture and then engaged in adult political battles over education.

This study will use Milwaukee, Wisconsin to examine children's experiences and influence on schools. Milwaukee stands as a window into American cities. According to the 1930 census Milwaukee was the twelfth largest city in America with a population of 578,249. The suburbs surrounding the city had an additional 100,000 people.<sup>11</sup> Like many cities, particularly Midwestern urban centers, it grew from a trading post in the early nineteenth century to a major industrial center by the end of the century with factories, breweries, and foundries driving its growth. And like other cities continuous waves of European immigrants flocked to Milwaukee drawn by the jobs in manufacturing. However, Milwaukee was not unique in how hard the Great Depression hit the city and its residents. Between 1929 and 1933 the average annual American family income dropped from \$2,300 to only \$1,500.<sup>12</sup> A study of Wisconsin families found that per capita income fell by almost one-half between 1929 and 1933.<sup>13</sup> Government officials reported that millions of needy boys and girls were denied adequate food, clothing, and shelter.<sup>14</sup> The economic crisis not only denied many girls and boys the essentials of life, it also significantly hindered their transition to adulthood. In the 1930s a job was the doorway to adulthood, but most youth could not find work. Nationally an estimated 4.5 million sixteen to twenty-four years-old were unemployed in 1934.<sup>15</sup>

With employers not wanting most youth, many decided to continue their schooling. Education had become more and more important over the course of the early twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1929 the number of America's children regularly attending school almost doubled.<sup>16</sup> Milwaukee children followed the trend as daily attendance in the city's schools ballooned. In 1900 only 31,707 boys and girls attended Milwaukee Public Schools and by 1929 over 74,000 children were in regular

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Cohen, Introduction to *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 14 -20, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999) 248.

<sup>12</sup> Lindenmeyer, 15.

<sup>13</sup> "State Income Drops in '38," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 15, 1940.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Maxine Davis, *The Lost Generation: A Portrait of American Youth Today* (New York, NY: Macmillan and Company, 1936), 168.

<sup>16</sup> Bureau of Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Part I* (Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1975), 374-376.

attendance.<sup>17</sup> A significant part of the increase was in high school attendance, particularly among middle class children who saw high school as vital to successful careers. Between 1900 and 1930 the country's high school enrollment increased over eight times.<sup>18</sup> In Milwaukee, the number of children attending high school jumped from 1,424 in 1900 to 11,546 in 1930.<sup>19</sup>

The Great Depression accelerated this trend. "Being unable to find employment many children wisely decide to use the time to good advantage by continuing their schooling," Milwaukee Public School Superintendent explained.<sup>20</sup> A 1935 study revealed that youth felt that employers were demanding higher educational standards from their workers and that more schooling brought increased job security.<sup>21</sup> One girl argued that more education affords "a better chance of advancement in the world of today."<sup>22</sup> Nationally, high school attendance increased by 43 percent between 1930 and 1940.<sup>23</sup> Milwaukee and its suburbs were part of this explosion in the student population in the Great Depression. In the Milwaukee Public Schools the average daily attendance rose from just over 11,000 in 1928-1929 to 19,600 by 1939-1940 school year.<sup>24</sup> The city's suburbs saw similar growth, particularly early in the 1930s. Between 1929 and 1933 Wauwatosa's enrollment increased by 22 percent, over 3,000 more students attended West Allis schools, and the student population in the South Milwaukee schools doubled.<sup>25</sup>

By the time these poor children entered high school, the institution's culture was already well established. In the 1920s and 1930s participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities became the centerpiece of student culture and participation in

<sup>17</sup> Milwaukee Public Schools, *Forty-first Annual Report of the Milwaukee Public Schools* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1900), 101, 136; Milwaukee Public Schools, *Seventy-first Annual Report of the Milwaukee Public Schools* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1929), 94, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Bureau of Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Part I* (Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1975), 368-369.

<sup>19</sup> Milwaukee Public Schools, *Forty-first Annual Report of the Milwaukee Public Schools* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1900), 101, 136; Milwaukee Public Schools, *Seventy-first Annual Report of the Milwaukee Public Schools* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1929), 94, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Milwaukee Public Schools, "Financing the Schools," *Seventieth-fifth Annual Report of the Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1934), 6.

<sup>21</sup> "Look Up Fate of Graduates," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 8, 1935.

<sup>22</sup> "Popping the Question," *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 5, 1941.

<sup>23</sup> Hawes, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Milwaukee Public Schools, *Seventieth Annual Report of the Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1929), 71; Milwaukee Public Schools, *Eightieth Annual Report of the Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1939), 189.

<sup>25</sup> "355 More Pupils in Public Schools," *Wauwatosa News*, September 11, 1930; "School Attendance Shows Increase," *Wauwatosa News*, September 7, 1933; "Schools Gain In West Allis," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 10, 1930; "School Enrollment on Par With '32 Attendance," *West Allis Star*, September 14, 1933; "Public Schools Show Increase," *South Milwaukee Journal*, September 3, 1930; "School Bells Call Students To Books," *South Milwaukee Journal*, September 8, 1933."

school clubs and events was mandatory if girls and boys wanted to fit into school life. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s student leaders vigorously promoted participation and argued that involvement was “expected” and “essential.”<sup>26</sup> Student leaders also asserted that every child had the duty to improve the school by participating in social events and clubs. “What have you done for your school?” an editorial in the Bay View High School *Oracle* asked students. It went on to encourage children to participate in school clubs and attend games and dances to aid the school. Involvement in extracurricular activities was more important than just improving the school however, it also demonstrated membership in student culture. The editorial explained that participation was “how you ... let the rest of us know you are part of Bay View High School.”<sup>27</sup> Another pupil argued that students who missed dances and mixers were “neglecting” a vitally important side of school life.<sup>28</sup> Students took these warnings seriously and almost everyone joined at least one activity. In the 1927 Washington High School senior class 119 of the 121 students participated in at least one activity. Most Washington students were involved in between three and six activities and a few students were active in as many twelve clubs and organizations.<sup>29</sup> Full participation in student culture through involvement in extracurricular activities continued to be encouraged in the 1930s. “How can sophomores aid Washington? Participation! That one word expresses their duty,” a student leader urged his peers in 1932.<sup>30</sup>

Student’s duty to participate in extracurricular activities was reinforced by popular culture. By the 1930s movies, radio, and comics provided significant source of entertainment to Milwaukee’s and the nation’s young people. Despite the difficult economic times, in the 1930s radios became common in many American homes. In 1930 half of American households had radios and by 1940 83 percent of families owned radios.<sup>31</sup> Americans also increased their purchase of newspapers as circulation increased by a million over the course of the decade.<sup>32</sup> While movie attendance did fall off in the early 1930s, by 1933 over 75 million people attended movies every week.<sup>33</sup> In an effort to maintain or expand their reach, all three of these mediums began to cater to the youth market.<sup>34</sup> One of the strategies to attract young people was to feature stories starring

<sup>26</sup> “Our High School Girls,” File 27, Box 2, MSS 1680, Milwaukee Public Schools Collection, Milwaukee County Historical Society.

<sup>27</sup> “Participation in School Activities,” *Oracle* (Bay View High School, Milwaukee, WI), March 1929.

<sup>28</sup> “To the New Student,” *Oracle* (Bay View High School, Milwaukee, WI), October 1923.

<sup>29</sup> 1927 *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI) [Yearbook], 28-36.

<sup>30</sup> “There’s A Place for All,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), February 10, 1932.

<sup>31</sup> Lindenmeyer, 164.

<sup>32</sup> William H. Young and Nancy K. Young, *American Popular Culture Through History: The 1930s*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 162.

<sup>33</sup> Young and Young, 186.

<sup>34</sup> Young and Young, 24.

youthful protagonists attending high school. These teenaged characters were presented as ideal young people who did more than just attend classes, but who were also very active in sports and other extracurricular activities. In the comic strip *Freckles and Friends*, which appeared in the Milwaukee *Journal* beginning in 1935, protagonists Freckles McGoosey played football, baseball, and boxed.<sup>35</sup> He also wrote the school play and served as a stage hand, was a member of the prom committee, debate team, and attended school dances.<sup>36</sup> On the screen, Andy Hardy was also presented as the typical teenager. MGM turned out nine Andy Hardy films in the 1930s that depicted Hardy as the ideal teen who was active in school extra curriculars including attending dances and writing and starring in the school play.<sup>37</sup> On the radio, high school student Henry Aldrich, who appeared on the *Aldrich Family*, attended football games and his pal Homer played in the school band.<sup>38</sup> In the radio serial *Jack Armstrong, The All American Boy*, Armstrong played on sports teams. The opening of the program presented a roaring crowd at a football or basketball game. The undistinguishable crowd roar quickly moves to the chant of “Jack Armstrong, Jack Armstrong, Jack Armstrong!”<sup>39</sup> This opening identifying Armstrong as not just involved in sports, but as the star player on the team.

Popular culture even depicted the dire consequences for failure to participate in school culture. The 1933 film *Wild Boys of the Road* opened with the two protagonists Eddie and Tommy living a care free life as high school students. However, Eddie's father abandoned the family and his mother lost her job so Eddie, unable to afford admission to the school dance, tried to sneak into the event. When he was caught, Eddie and Tommy pleaded for compassion from the student organizers who reject the boy's pleas. This was a turning point for the two and Eddie dropped out of school. A few weeks later Tommy also dropped out when his father lost his job and the two boys jumped a train and began their journey into poverty, homelessness, and juvenile delinquency.<sup>40</sup> The film emphasized the importance of attending dances and

<sup>35</sup> “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, September 11, 1935; “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, May 8, 1938; “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, May 13, 1938.

<sup>36</sup> “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, April 3, 1938; “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, May 7, 1938; “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, March 29, 1938; “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, September 9, 1938.

<sup>37</sup> *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, DVD, 1938; *Andy Hardy Gets Spring Fever*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 1939, Streamed on Amazon, <https://www.amazon.com/Andy-Hardy-Gets-Spring-Fever/dp/B0077CGP4Y>, accessed January 5, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> “Christmas Show,” *The Aldrich Family*, December 19, 1939, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/TheAldrichFamilyAf1939-12-19025ChristmasShowrepeatScript4431948-12-23.mp3> accessed December 16, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> “S.S. Pelican Afire,” *Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy*,” ca. 1937, MP3 CD, Old Time Radio Company, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> *Wild Boys of the Road*, First National Pictures, DVD, 1933.

participating extracurricular activities to fit into school life. It also conveyed the message that the inability to be part of high school activities would lead youth to lives of crime and delinquency.

While popular culture and student leaders urged youth to participate in school activities, poverty prevented many Milwaukee boys and girls from joining in this extracurricular work and barred them from fitting into school culture. Most needy children could not afford club dues, admission fees, or special equipment, such as athletic shoes and musical instruments required to participate. Many poor children were forced to forgo involvement in student life. At Riverside High School 21 percent of the class of 1932 could not afford to join a club or organization and at Washington High School a full 37 percent of students did not participate in clubs or sports.<sup>41</sup> Most poor children also could not afford to attend school plays, ball games, mixers, and dances, which further isolated them from student life. Not attending dances or joining school organizations branded these students as outsiders. “The students of the school can be divided into two main classes,” a high school editorial asserted, “those who have school spirit, and those who lack it.”<sup>42</sup> Those with spirit participated and those who did not were deemed disloyal and lazy. Poor students who failed to support school activities were admonished for not attending events and cheering on the team. “It is up to you whether or not Tech is going to get the [football] pennant this year,” a student leader argued in the school newspaper. Other school’s teams are just as good he explained so “the encouragement they [the football players] get [will] determine who is to win.”<sup>43</sup>

Poor girls and boys were also isolated from student culture by the attitudes of some of their classmates. Some children saw poverty as a failure in character and let their needy peers know it. One senior saw the poor as lazy. “If any one of these people would have the gumption and backbone, they could succeed,” she argued in articles published in the local city newspaper.<sup>44</sup> One of her classmates asserted that “there will always be unemployed, but those willing to work can always find something to do.”<sup>45</sup> Some students believed poor children used the Great Depression to justify their bad behavior and one student reprimanded them in the school paper. “If your clothes need cleaning or mending, why bother! There’s a depression,” an editorial sardonically asserted. The editorial went on to scold poor students for using the bad economic times as a pretext for everything from not returning borrowed money to being disheartened

<sup>41</sup> *Mercury* [Yearbook] (Milwaukee, WI: Riverside High School, 1932), 22-54; “Discovered! Reasons for Popularity,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), December 16, 1931.

<sup>42</sup> “Keeping Busy,” *Craftsman* (Boys’ Technical High School, Milwaukee, WI), September 30, 1932.

<sup>43</sup> “School Spirit,” *Craftsman* (Boys’ Technical High School, Milwaukee, WI), September 29, 1933.

<sup>44</sup> “Student Editorials Reveal Thoughts Which May Rule Country in Future,” *Wauwatosa News*, June 16, 1938.

<sup>45</sup> “Student Editorials Reveal Thoughts Which May Rule Country in Future,” *Wauwatosa News*, June 16, 1938.

about the future. The editorial concluded by asserting, “Yes, there’s a depression, but why use it as a blanket excuse?”<sup>46</sup> This attitude was very hurtful to poor children. One disadvantaged girl said that the other students “thought they were better than us”<sup>47</sup> and another called her middle class peers “cheap, petty snobs.”<sup>48</sup>

While many poor children felt inferior and alienated, they were urged them to change their world. In the 1930s, educators intensified their efforts to teach students to be socially active. Teachers had been emphasizing socially conscious citizenship even before the Depression began. In the first decade of the twentieth century educators around the nation began embracing community civics which emphasized good citizenship, rather than the structure and workings of government. This curriculum encouraged students to be engaged and active citizens in school, their communities, and the nation. To promote active citizenship teachers included the study of current events into the curriculum. In the late 1920s some progressive educators began to call for an expansion of civics education to include not only current events, but also a critical examination of American society and they urged students to work to reform its defects.<sup>49</sup>

Milwaukee educators embraced this new approach to civics education.<sup>50</sup> A 1929 pamphlet promoting the Milwaukee Public Schools explained “the classroom teaches elements of good citizenship and government.” Children learned about patriotism and politics in history, civics, and other classes. The booklet also maintained that participation in extracurricular activities “develops initiative, leadership, individual responsibility, and social consciousness.” “Thus is the lesson [of good citizenship] learned that one cannot hope to enjoy the fruits of cooperation and organization unless there is individual contribution,” the pamphlet explained.<sup>51</sup> While participation in school, government, and community continued to be stressed throughout the 1930s, the emphasis on social consciousness was expanded. The Great Depression brought poverty and many other social problems to the forefront causing educators concern. Some, including those in Milwaukee, used the deteriorating conditions as an opportunity to redouble their efforts to develop a strong social consciousness in children by teaching them about current social, economic, and political problems. “We have been afraid to

<sup>46</sup> “There’s A Depression,” Editorial, *Oracle* (Bay View High School, Milwaukee, WI), March 3, 1933.

<sup>47</sup> Gladys Klier Krueger, interviewer unidentified, unidentified date, transcript, Shorewood Oral History Collection, Shorewood Historical Society, Shorewood, WI.

<sup>48</sup> Betty Ann McKeon, Milwaukee Children in the Great Depression Questionnaire completed September 4, 2002, in possession of the author.

<sup>49</sup> Tracy L. Steffes, *Schools, Society, & State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890-1940*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 170-173, 187-192.

<sup>50</sup> Rolland Callaway and Steven Buruch, “The Milwaukee Curriculum,” in *Seeds of Crisis: Public Schooling in Milwaukee Since 1920* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 118, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Milwaukee Public Schools, “Our Junior High Schools,” in *Seventieth Annual Report of the Milwaukee Public Schools* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1929), 2.

have our youth deal with life situations and discuss those social and political problems which have real value to them," one Milwaukee educator explained. "If we are to get the results for which we hope, we must be willing to liberate the intelligence of our young people to think on the many vital problems about them," he concluded.<sup>52</sup> In an effort to encourage children to think about these vital problems, in the 1930s the Milwaukee Public Schools added applied civics, economics, and sociology to the curriculum. Students created scrapbooks on current events, discussed federal aid to education, and debated President Roosevelt's recovery plan.<sup>53</sup>

Not only did educators integrate this new emphasis on developing socially active young citizens into classes, other community leaders also encourage children to express their citizenship by changing the world around them. At church and children's organizations like the YMCA, boys and girls were urged to "take an active part in making your community spiritually, morally, and physically a better place."<sup>54</sup> This was part of their duty as good citizens, children were told. "Modern youth, the world is expecting great things of you," Reverend A. L. Booth preached to the children in his congregation in 1930. "Make yourself a nuisance in politics, in religion, in the arts, yes, in every walk of life," he implored. "The greatest saints of the ages have been the greatest nuisances in the eyes of many at their time. Jesus Christ was the greatest nuisance in the eyes of the Scribes and Pharisees. Modern youth can do no better than follow after him."<sup>55</sup>

This message that youth could change the world was also emphasized in popular culture. Movies, radio and comics provided examples of youth who solved their own problems, affected change, and helped people. On the radio, *True Adventures of the Junior G-Men* depicted high school boys who helped their parents and authorities solve crimes. In a 1936 story entitled "The Footprint that Solved the Crime" high school student Anthony figured out how to catch the bad guy by matching the perpetrator's footprint to the one left in wet cement.<sup>56</sup> "In the Secret of the Locked Room" it was the high school student Bob who figured out the mysterious and eerie voice was not a ghost, but rather it came from a record player. Bob also devised the plan that captured the bad

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<sup>52</sup> Milwaukee Public Schools, *Seventy-eighth Annual Report of the Milwaukee Public Schools* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1937), viii.

<sup>53</sup> "Children's Corner," *The Greendale Review*, March 11, 1939; "Round Table Debates Federal School Aid," *The Oracle* (Bay View High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 24, 1934; "N.R.A. Debate, Play Will Feature Next Hesperia Meting," *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), October 24, 1933.

<sup>54</sup> "1,300 Leave High School," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 5, 1937.

<sup>55</sup> "Be a Nuisance in All, Pastor Advises Youth," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 10, 1930.

<sup>56</sup> "Secret of the Locked Room," *True Adventures of the Junior G-Men* aired June 5-10, 1936, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/True\\_Adventures\\_Of\\_Junior\\_G\\_Men/TrueAdventuresofJuniorG-Men36-xx-xx03TheSecretoftheLockedRoom1of3.mp3](https://archive.org/details/True_Adventures_Of_Junior_G_Men/TrueAdventuresofJuniorG-Men36-xx-xx03TheSecretoftheLockedRoom1of3.mp3), accessed December 16, 2016.

guy who was trying to swindle a widow out of her fortune.<sup>57</sup> Another problem-solving youth was Johnny from the comic strip “Amazing Adventures Johnny Round-the World,” which appeared in the Milwaukee *Sentinel* in 1930s. In a 1935 adventure Johnny traveled in Dutch New Guinea where he discovered gold and saved his father and the entire entourage from a tiger attack.<sup>58</sup>

One of the ideas these stories emphasized was youth taking control of their own fate. These high school students did not wait for adults to come to their aid, but these young heroes developed the plans and executed them on their own. In one 1930s *Jack Armstrong* adventure, Jack and his friends Billy and Betty were on ship in a frozen ocean trying to rescue another vessel that had become trapped in the ice and caught fire. The ship’s captain and Jack’s uncle could not figure out how to save the stranded ship and its crew. Teenaged Betty came up with the idea of using a breeches buoy, a rope based rescue device that is similar to a zip-line. Armstrong volunteered to walk over the ice to string a line between the two ships. Armstrong argued that he could walk the frozen ice because he was trained as an athlete and practiced his quick and sure footedness on the football field. Finally, the captain agreed and Jack navigated the frozen ocean and rescued the burning ship’s crew.<sup>59</sup>

These fictitious young people did not just save people from burning ships and solve crimes, some addressed the problem of poverty. In a 1935 story line from *Freckles and Friends*, Freckles and his brother Tag organized a charity drive. They gave away old toys and clothes and purchased food for poor families.<sup>60</sup> In 1936 Freckles helped a friend take care of his sick mother whose family could not afford to buy medication.<sup>61</sup> In 1937 Freckles took in and fed homeless transients and the following year Freckles’ pal Nutty provided a homeless man food and lodging.<sup>62</sup> Freckles, Johnny Round-the World, the Junior G-Men and Jack Armstrong, were more than fun adventures, they provided examples of young people changing the world and helping the poor that Milwaukee youth could emulate.

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<sup>57</sup> “The Footprint that Solved the Crime,” *True Adventures of the Junior G-Men*, aired June 12-17, 1936, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/True\\_Adventures\\_Of\\_Junior\\_G\\_Men/TrueAdventuresofJuniorG-Men36-xx-xx06TheFootprintThatSolvedaCrime1of3.mp3](https://archive.org/details/True_Adventures_Of_Junior_G_Men/TrueAdventuresofJuniorG-Men36-xx-xx06TheFootprintThatSolvedaCrime1of3.mp3), accessed December 16, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> “The Amazing Adventures of Johnny-Round-the World,” Milwaukee *Sentinel*, August 18, 1935; “The Amazing Adventures of Johnny-Round-the World,” Milwaukee *Sentinel*, August 25, 1935.

<sup>59</sup> “Jack to take the line to the Pelican,” *Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy*, ca. 1937, MP3 CD, Old Time Radio Company, 2000; “Jack Gets Line to the Pelican,” *Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy*, ca. 1937, MP3 CD, Old Time Radio Company, 2000; “Rescue All Pelican Crew,” *Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy*, ca. 1937, MP3 CD, Old Time Radio Company, 2000.

<sup>60</sup> “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, November 25, 1935; “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, November 26, 1935.

<sup>61</sup> “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, March 23, 1936.

<sup>62</sup> “Freckles and Friends,” Milwaukee *Journal*, June 19, 1937.

With popular culture providing examples of youth changing the world and educators, YMCA officials, and ministers urging Milwaukee high schoolers to become activist citizens, many poor students took steps to change school culture. They worked to make school life more compassionate toward the plight of needy children. This was not an easy task, as many middle class students, who dominated school culture, frequently fought these efforts. Poor students' first assault on school culture was waged on high fees and admission prices. Needy children contended that admission costs placed an undue financial burden on students who made great sacrifices to stay in school. "The price of the tickets [to school events] should be reduced as every penny counts in families where incomes have been greatly cut," one girl implored.<sup>63</sup> The most intense battle over the nature of student culture was over graduation attire. It was customary for graduating senior boys to don new suits and girls to wear formal dresses and gloves to graduation ceremonies. Most poor graduates, particularly girls, objected arguing that they could not afford expensive clothes. They complained of feeling "embarrassed" and "inferior."<sup>64</sup> "Graduations for the past several years have resembled style shows [with] one girl trying to out show the other," one senior explained. "Caps and gowns," she contended, "will eliminate this annual fashion parade."<sup>65</sup> By the mid-1930 disadvantaged seniors all over the city began calling for the use of academic regalia in graduation ceremonies. Caps and gowns, one student asserted, would eliminate the "unavoidable humiliation of a girl in a \$4.98 dress sitting along side the girl in a \$19.95 [dress]."<sup>66</sup>

As the idea gathered momentum many middle class students, particularly girls, objected to the idea and fought back. Some middle class girls saw the effort as denying them the opportunity to wear "a lovely graduation frock," as one senior explained.<sup>67</sup> Another lamented that academic regalia would eliminate the sentimental value of her graduation outfit. "A graduation dress can be used for a long time and with much pleasure; for it would bring back the happy memories of high school life."<sup>68</sup> Cap and gowns, one student observed, makes graduation "too drab of an affair because of the similarity of costumes." Graduation "should be a pleasant cheerful event;" the student reasoned, "therefore colorful costumes are necessary to promote a cheerful atmosphere."<sup>69</sup> With such strong opinions on both sides, the issue divided class meetings, where votes on wearing caps and gowns were very close. The South Division

<sup>63</sup> "Popping the Question," *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), February 15, 1933.

<sup>64</sup> "Caps, Gowns for Graduation," *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 10, 1935.

<sup>65</sup> "Caps, Gowns for Graduation," *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 10, 1935.

<sup>66</sup> Mary L., Letter to the Editor, *Milwaukee Journal*, July 3, 1935.

<sup>67</sup> "Caps, Gowns For Graduation," *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 10, 1935

<sup>68</sup> "Popping the Question," *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), May 24, 1933.

<sup>69</sup> "Popping the Question," *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), May 15, 1935

High School Class of 1935, for example, voted 182 to 176 against wearing caps and gowns and in 1939 Washington High School seniors also rejected academic regalia on a 233 to 175 vote. Disadvantaged seniors won most of the votes and caps and gowns became commonplace at their graduation ceremonies.<sup>70</sup>

These battles took place in high schools all over the city, as many poor students called on their classmates, teachers, and administrators to reduce the high cost of school life. In many cases these efforts yielded results when most schools lowered some fees and costs. Some schools offered poor students the opportunity to pay activity fees and admissions on installment plans. Others created multi-priced events thus allowing less fortunate students to buy cheap seats to school plays and other events. Many schools simply lowered fees. Almost all the city's high schools reduced the price of school newspapers.<sup>71</sup> “[A] twenty-five percent reduction in price! That is the [Washington High School] *Scroll*'s depression relief measure,” the school newspaper advisor explained. “This price reduction was made in order that more students might be financially able to purchase the paper.”<sup>72</sup>

These efforts did not always achieve their specific goals, but they did succeed in changing school culture. The efforts not only won the reduction of many fees and simplified many graduation ceremonies, but they also heightened many middle class children's awareness of the problems facing their poor classmates. Many middle class children noticed their friends and classmates wearing old clothes, skipping prom, and struggling to pay fees. They were moved by poor children's tales of struggling to fit into school culture and many rejected their earlier unsympathetic attitude toward the poor and a great sense of compassion was awakened within many middle class students. These students explored issues of poverty in school projects. Two middle class boys spent the night on the floor of a mission to gain an understanding of homelessness for

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<sup>70</sup> “Graduate Vote Caps, Gowns Out,” *Cardinal* (South Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), June 7, 1935; “Graduates Reject Cap, Gown Plan,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), May 3, 1939; “Grads to Wear Caps, Gowns,” *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), March 27, 1935; “Senior Class Chooses Red Caps, Gowns,” *Cardinal* (South Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 9, 1938.

<sup>71</sup> “June Grads to Pay \$2.50 Class Dues,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), March 16, 1932; “Committee Sets Admission Fee to Senior Class Play,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), May 17, 1933; “Operetta Ticket Sale Will Begin,” *Oracle* (Bay View High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 3, 1936; “Lesson Cost of School Activities,” *South Milwaukee Journal*, September 25, 1931; “High School Finance Group Gets Under Way,” *Wauwatosa News*, September 7, 1933; “Merrill Club to Entertain Frosh Girls Thursday,” *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), September 20, 1933; “Three Divisions of Girls Club Pick Committees,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), September 28, 1932; “Slash Ticket Prices for Football Games,” *Whitefish Bay Herald*, September 14, 1933; “33 Annual Will Be Lower Priced,” *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), January 25, 1933.

<sup>72</sup> “Reduced Price of Scroll 25% to Aid Financial Depression,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), September 16, 1931.

economics class.<sup>73</sup> Several high school students wrote their English class papers on how the economic crisis affected Americans.<sup>74</sup> Many middle class children became very sympathetic to the plight of the needy. “In these days of depression,” one school editorial compassionately observed, “some parents cannot, no matter how hard they try, provide proper clothing to send their children to school.”<sup>75</sup> Poor children and their parents were seen as good people who were trying hard, but experiencing bad luck. One girl expressed this compassion after a man was caught stealing a little boy’s coat in her neighborhood. “Maybe his child didn’t have one [a winter coat]. I felt sorry for him,” she said.<sup>76</sup> Another child summed up this new found compassion for the underprivileged saying “them [poor] kids ain’t got much. . . , but they got good hearts.”<sup>77</sup>

Many middle class boys and girls turned this new sympathy into action. “We may be too young to realize all that the community fund means,” one girl explained, “but we are not too young to realize that thousands of children like us in Milwaukee are living with no more than the bare essentials of life. I think we should be willing to sacrifice some of our luxuries and pleasures to help them.”<sup>78</sup> Most middle class children agreed and helped poor children just like them. Helping the underprivileged had always been a part of Milwaukee children’s educational activities. During the 1920s schools held annual holiday food drives to benefit the city’s poor.<sup>79</sup> During the Depression, charity work increased dramatically. It was vigorously promoted at school assemblies, club meetings, and in editorials in the school paper. These pleas for charity frequently appealed to student’s sympathies by describing poor families in the neighborhood as “weary and long-suffering” and who had not had a “real meal in many moons.”<sup>80</sup> One child asserted that “a concerted effort by Washington [High School] students who are not in dire straits can accomplish much in relief of the less fortunate students and neighbors.”<sup>81</sup>

Some middle class children organized charity drives to help the weary and long-suffering. The traditional holiday food drive was supplemented with a variety of new fund-raisers. School children in Milwaukee and its suburb collected and repaired

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<sup>73</sup> “One Night at ‘Mission’ Boys See ‘Other Side,’” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 30, 1930.

<sup>74</sup> “English Pupils Write Depression Stories,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 27, 1932.

<sup>75</sup> “They Need Your Help,” Editorial, *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 1, 1931.

<sup>76</sup> Alice Cieslak, Letter to Captain Larry, published in “Folks Like Newsy Letters Like Those Printed Here,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 30, 1932

<sup>77</sup> “Picture Page,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 8, 1933.

<sup>78</sup> “Today’s Children Know, So They Aren’t Selfish,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 8, 1934.

<sup>79</sup> “Thanksgiving Baskets,” *Quill* (Lincoln High School, Milwaukee, WI), December 1924; “Aids Needy,” *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), January 1925.

<sup>80</sup> “Help Merrill Fill Baskets,” *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), December 9, 1931.

<sup>81</sup> “Shouldn’t We Help,” Editorial, *Scroll* (Washington High school, Milwaukee, WI), December 7, 1932.

clothing for area poor families.<sup>82</sup> Members of the Riverside High School Household Arts Club raised money to buy their poor classmates school lunches and the West Division High School Merrill Club provided odd jobs to its disadvantaged members.<sup>83</sup> Children attending Washington High School were some of the most active and creative. The Student Council organized a book drive to help their peers who could not afford to buy texts. Student leaders called for the “whole-hearted cooperation” of their classmates, noting that “book shelves and attics are . . . bound to yield the desired text books and classics used in all courses here at Washington.”<sup>84</sup> The school’s Girls’ Club also started a loan program for its needy members. The club sold candy and stationary to raise money for the loan fund. Girls who could not afford books, school supplies, and other school expenses applied to the organization’s faculty advisor for a loan of up to \$10.00. This “action makes the Girls’ Club even more of an asset to the school,” an editorial in the school paper proclaimed.<sup>85</sup>

These actions helped many poor and middle class girls and boys develop a keen awareness of the world around them and awakened a political consciousness in some of Milwaukee’s children. “Among youth. . .there has been a noticeable social awakening in the last few years,” one educators observed in 1936.<sup>86</sup> Another noted that “youth of today is very sure of itself and has a definite understanding of the problems confronting it.”<sup>87</sup> Through their efforts to change school culture and their philanthropic work, some needy and middle class children developed more than just social awakening, however. They recognized their own power to influence events. These boys and girls saw that their action could address problems and advance their interests. Girls and boys, one student asserted must “demonstrate its mass strength in solving. . .[the] nation’s

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<sup>82</sup> “School Offers to Aid Needy,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 29, 1931; “Mrs. Perrigo Heads Relief Project Here,” *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), October 21, 1931; “Any Old Clothes? Bring ‘Em to 402,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 4, 1931; “Sewing Classes Complete Work of Distributing Clothes to Needy,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), February 10, 1932; “Collect Clothes for Shorewood Needy at School,” *Milwaukee Journal*, September 9, 1931; “Girls Sew Dresses for Red Cross,” *The Scholastic Reporter* (West Allis High School, West Allis, WI), published in the *West Allis Star*, December 15, 1932.

<sup>83</sup> “Our Help Is Needed,” *Mercury* (Riverside High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 1931; “Merrill to Provide Odd Jobs for Needy Members,” *Comet* (West Division High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 4, 1931

<sup>84</sup> “Council Committee Plans Relief Work,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 26, 1933; “Popping the Question,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), March 26, 1933; “Deeper than Mere Discomfort,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), March 26, 1933.

<sup>85</sup> “Girls of School Can Borrow from Fund Established by Club,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 30, 1930; “Fine Work, Girls,” Editorial, *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), April 30, 1930; “Your Dime Will Help,” Editorial, *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), November 18, 1931.

<sup>86</sup> “Youth Leader Finds New Interest in World Affairs,” *Milwaukee Leader*, October 23, 1936.

<sup>87</sup> “Parents Bewildered Ones, Not Youth, Forum Is Told,” *Milwaukee Leader*, November 26, 1936.

problems.”<sup>88</sup> “Youth,” declared another “has the fire, enthusiasm and ideals necessary to build that better world.”<sup>89</sup>

After changing school culture these boys and girls then turned this fire and enthusiasm to building better schools. They watched the depression decimate school budgets. Nationally, spending per student dropped from over \$90.00 in 1929 to \$66.50 in 1933.<sup>90</sup> School districts cut teacher’s pay, shortened the school year, and eliminated programs such as band and football.<sup>91</sup> The crush of the Great Depression also fell upon the schools in Milwaukee and its suburbs. By the 1933-1934 school year Milwaukee Public School’s operating funds were reduced by \$2.26 million, one suburb cut 28 percent from its operating budget, and another reduced per student spending by over eleven dollars.<sup>92</sup>

Some boys and girls were gravely concerned that these cuts were damaging their education and demanded a voice in education policy. They were concerned about school budget cuts and how they were damaging their education. In 1933 three students produced a pamphlet that argued against slashing school budgets. Excerpts of the tract were reprinted in the *Milwaukee Journal*. “The present generation must decide whether or not their children will be deprived the ‘frills’ of education,” the students explained. “If they decided to eliminate them, school children will be without music, art, science, physical training, manual training and household arts and in general all subjects which will prepare students for the rapidly increasing abundance of leisure time.” Such action, they reasoned would damage their education and preparation for adulthood, while only saving the average taxpayer fifteen cents per month.<sup>93</sup> Several boys and girls at Riverside High School plastered the school halls with signs and placards reading “We Need An Addition” and “Sanitary Accommodations Here Are Inadequate” to call attention to the crowded conditions and run down facilities.<sup>94</sup> Some of the children in

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<sup>88</sup> “Nation Faces Christmas Paradox,” *Scroll* (Washington High School, Milwaukee, WI), December 16, 1936.

<sup>89</sup> “Youth Faces Necessity of Rebuilding World Scheme,” *Whitefish Bay Herald*, June 24, 1937.

<sup>90</sup> Edward A. Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School, Volume 2, 1920-1940* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 208.

<sup>91</sup> Krug, 211.

<sup>92</sup> Milton Potter, “Financing the Schools,” in *Seventy-fifth Annual Report of the Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Schools, 1934), 24; Milwaukee Common Council, *Municipal Government and Activities of the City of Milwaukee, 1929* (Milwaukee, WI: City of Milwaukee, 1929), 72; Milwaukee Common Council, *Municipal Government and Activities of the City of Milwaukee, 1933* (Milwaukee, WI: City of Milwaukee, 1933), 141; “School Incomes Are Hard Hit,” *South Milwaukee Journal*, May 18, 1934; “School Cost Per Pupil is Decreasing Figures Show,” *Wauwatosa News*, April 11, 1935; “Cudahy School Opening Sure,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 9, 1932; “School Closing Threat Ended,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 2, 1935.

<sup>93</sup> “Now It’s Students Who Say Schools Must Keep ‘Frills’” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 21, 1933.

<sup>94</sup> “Plaintive School Signs Stir Directors’ Wrath,” *Milwaukee Journal*, September 10, 1936.

the city's suburbs also voiced their anger over the direction of school policy. In the working class community of Cudahy 300 students marched through the city calling on community leaders to build an addition to the high school.<sup>95</sup> Two hundred Wauwatosa students joined their parents in going door to door to convince voters to pass a bond issue to construct a new school.<sup>96</sup> In Whitefish Bay a boy stood outside a polling station on Election Day urging voters to support a bond issue to build an auditorium on the Atwood School.<sup>97</sup>

Some of these socially active students also tried to influence a host of other school policies. Several children in suburban West Allis joined their instructors in signing a petition asking the school board for an earlier school starting time, and thirty students successfully petitioned the suburban Greendale officials to allow students to select which area high school they would attend.<sup>98</sup> The largest school protests, however, were over staff issues. When favorite teachers and principals lost their jobs or had their salaries cut, social active girls and boys reacted. They staged rallies, picketed schools, circulated petitions, and went door-to-door arguing in support of their favorite instructors and principals.<sup>99</sup> Some students even went on strike to protest personnel decisions. In 1940, 500 suburban Wauwatosa elementary school children staged a two-day strike to protest the firing of a popular teacher and cuts to other instructors' salaries. The students, who were encouraged by their parents to organize the protest, carried signs calling the school board's action fascist and un-American. Some Wauwatosa students went beyond picketing outside the school and organized marches on school board members' homes. The children demanded the teacher be rehired and the salary cuts be restored and chanting "Phooey On the School Board!"<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusion

As the Milwaukee example demonstrates, children did not just witness the Great Depression, but rather they helped shape the period. Many poor and working class girls and boys helped define the school experience by changing school culture. They made

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<sup>95</sup> "Cudahy 'Kids' 'Go to Town'" *Milwaukee Journal*, October 28, 1938.

<sup>96</sup> "In Crowded Auditorium, Pupils Join School Completion Drive," *Wauwatosa News*, April 1, 1937.

<sup>97</sup> "Auditorium Voter Is Called 'Pal' By Atwater Youngster," *Whitefish Bay Herald*, January 25, 1934.

<sup>98</sup> "School Strike Threatened Here as Pupils Complain," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 16, 1934; "Students Petition Board for Earlier Closing of School," *West Allis Star*, May 5, 1938; "School Choice Is Considered," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 12, 1938.

<sup>99</sup> "School Strike Threatened Here as Pupils Complain," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 16, 1934; "Students Talk To Aid Union Teachers," *Milwaukee Leader*, May 12, 1937; "Vocational Pickets Protest Suspension," *Milwaukee Leader*, May 17, 1937; "Demand Jobs Be Given Back To 2 Teachers," *Milwaukee Leader*, May 19, 1937; "Pupils Plead to Retain Woman Head of School," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 26, 1933.

<sup>100</sup> "500 on Strike at School Here," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 20, 1940; "Pupils Strike Finds Support from Parents," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 21, 1940.

schools more accommodating and welcoming to poor and working class students than ever before and this effort awakened a political consciousness in some children. These girls and boys understood how education policy was made and how decisions made by school boards affected them. And their citizenship training taught them that they had the right and the patriotic duty to openly criticize the government and work to change and improve school policy. Even during the nation's worst economic crisis when most Milwaukee's girls and boys had no economic means and very limited political power, they found a way to play a role in education debates. By complaining, writing editorials, and organizing protests some children joined the dialog over local education policy and worked to influence its direction. This is the story that historians need to examine to fully understand the Great Depression.