

## Thirty Years Ago—Hunter High

by Roslyn Sternberg Willett

In 1937, I was a student at a co-educational, progressive junior high school. I intended to go to a co-ed high school in a new building, reasonably close to where I lived, that had at least some bright kids to consort with. But, not willing to foreclose any possibilities, I took the Hunter High test, and made it.

Conflict ensued: My father wanted me to go to Hunter. He didn't like boys, anyway. The principal of the progressive junior high called all nine Hunter acceptees into his office. "Don't go," he said. "It's an awful place, fit only for people who don't care about anything but studying." I vacillated. It was a trivial circumstance that made the decision. I had thrown away my report cards (all A's of course) from junior high school, not thinking anyone would want them, and I knew what they said. The co-ed high school would have no part of me without them, even when I showed them the Hunter acceptance. The nuisance of getting a transcript put me off. Hunter it was.

### In the Beginning

Junior high school students arrived for sophomore year, and discovered very quickly that they were socially and politically "out." Very few of them ever recovered. Girls who arrived at Hunter High from 8-year elementary school had the power relationships all sewed up by the time we got there. Our courses were slightly different, and we were labeled "J" for junior high, right through the next three years. Junior high students in the high school suffered, in miniature, some of the "late-arriving immigrant" syndrome of students from other high schools when they arrived at the College. (At least, three years later, we all knew each other.)

Second-year high school students did not attend high school in the building ostensibly intended for that purpose, about which more later. Instead, along with sundry low-prestige

students from the College (freshmen, perhaps?) we attended classes on 32 Street near Lexington Avenue in a warehouse owned and partly occupied by Modernage Furniture Company. It was relatively nice furniture so we didn't mind the association.

I had lovely transportation, the 3rd Avenue El, all the way down from Fordham Road in the Bronx, with an intimate view into apartments, a panoramic view of the shapes of the city, the color of the sky, the daily pleasure of inspecting the Empire State Building in shifting light, sometimes decapitated by thick cotton wool vapor, at other times, gleaming blue and gold.

That was the bobby-sox era: ankle sox, brown and white saddle shoes, sloppy joe sweaters, and pleated skirts—a great uniform for school, permitting low-priced purchase, and keeping us warm. (In winter we wore the sox over stockings.)

The high school's facilities at Modernage didn't include anything but classrooms. We carried sandwiches and had milk delivered to the classrooms, where we ate. This was no hardship. It was cozy, and we wouldn't have been able to afford lunch anyway. We sometimes could not afford milk.

I took on the job in September 1937 of 32 Street "rep" for the New York Times. This involved my distributing the paper to people who ordered it, keeping records and bringing the money to the Times Friday afternoon with my next week's orders. I distributed the paper during lunch hour daily, and walked to the Times Building on 43 Street and 8th Avenue to save the 5c carfare they allowed as an expense. Salary: \$1 per week, of which 25c per week went to milk, usually; 50c per week to carfare; and the rest financed a major part of my clothing purchases. (Don't laugh. I repaired clothes till they were in shreds; was given occasional somewhat large clothing by a grown-up cousin who was working; and for the rest: you could buy a slick dress at Klein's for \$3 then.)

### Academia

Junior high students were obliged to start Latin (most of us had arrived with a year of either French or German), which occasioned a bit of grumbling. ("Latin is a language, at least it used to be. It killed off all the Romans, and now it's killing me" was a standard blackboard scrawl. On the subject of blackboard scrawls, it may be of historic interest to note that the word "Foo"—perhaps an expression of generalized distaste—was as ubiquitous on the boards at Hunter as Kilroy where GI's went during World War II.)

During most of high school Hunter's elite young ladies carried six majors whereas most academic high schools required four. Except for physics, which defeated a few, it was no hardship. If we had had any doubt that we were the smartest girls in the city, the principal and other hierarchy would have considered they had not done their jobs. The message was constantly reiterated in the auditorium, along with the anticipation that we were going to get the largest number of Regents scholarships of any high school in the city. (I think we did, but I'm not really sure.) To this end, we were drilled unmercifully with Regents Review books and old exams. All exam-taking was traumatic, and marks were the really important things. But we learned efficiently.

Hunter had another mission: to refine our speech. I realize now it was because so many of the college girls went into teaching and the speech exam for a license was one of the more difficult to pass. We were told of our provincial errors: dentalized "t's" and "d's"; glottal stops; foreign accent (even in the American-born; Hunter's speech teachers could hear a Yiddish or Italian sing-song back three generations). We spent three hours a week for several years on speech. Some young ladies went from Bronx vernacular to British theater English in a single act of will without backsliding. The rest of us modified our original patterns by

*The Faculty of Hunter High in the 1930s.*

eliminating flagrant error but were embarrassed to go further.

### **The Real High School**

There is an ugly old building, now used by a vocational high school, on 96 Street near First Avenue. It had once been a public school. Rumor had it that the Board of Education decided it was substandard sometime in the late '20's or early '30's, and sold it to a Hebrew school. The Hebrew school got rid of it and it then became the academic home of the city's elite young ladies. No improvements had been made.

There was no lunchroom, although we were forced to remain on the premises for lunch (Haaran High School boys were nearby, and the neighborhood was rundown). Again, we brought our sandwiches, bought milk, ate in the classrooms. The school had no gym. (We had gym once every two weeks, I think, in two rooms from which a dividing wall was removed. This was just as well for me. The gym teacher, a bra-less lady who should not have been, told me I was the worst-coordinated girl she's ever seen.)

Lunchtime garbage was stuffed into the desks and remained for weeks. Mice attended classes with us. One delightful scene took place in a Latin class in which a teacher newly returned from maternity leave was presiding. A mouse ambled down an aisle, and she paled and backed quickly across the front of the room to the door. When she was safely there, she screamed. "A mouse! Run, girls!" and ran.

### **Electives**

The last year, we were permitted to choose one or two sequences for ourselves: we could take an additional math sequence of solid geometry and trigonometry; or an additional science sequence of chemistry or biology; or continue languages with three and four years respectively; or, the real prize: take the social studies sequence of economics and problems of democracy. Economics was as bad as it usually is in this coun-



try: all about effects of legislation on a specific functioning economy. (I do not consider that economics, or worth spending much academic time on. Political economy is more interesting, useful, relevant.) But the problems of democracy was a great course: we used reference works, wrote reports on real subjects like family structure; economic planning; varieties of economic structure, etc. And best of all: there was no regents exam in the course.

### **Extra-Curricular Activities**

Opportunity for extra-curricular activities was limited. No sports, few clubs, no intramural activities. We had a newspaper, only so-so as compared with my junior high's Columbia medalist; we did choral speaking (a new art form to most of us, directly influenced by the emphasis on speech); and finally, there was the annual hysteria of Sing. Sing in high school was as good as Sing in college, and provided the training ground for our year's very talented Sing leader: Esther Dos Santos.

Because it was a subway school, casual neighborhood after-school visiting among the students was rare. Friendship for me was summed up for two years by a daily ride home, with another girl, one day on the Lexington Avenue subway, the next on the Third Avenue El to 149 Street and Third Avenue where one of us changed. We conversed in French all the way, which may help to explain why with three years of high school French thirty years behind me, I can still speak and understand it. In my last year in high school, I

moved into a neighborhood where other girls in my JA class lived. They came in a group to visit, the first Friday night after the move: the most touching event of my adolescence, and one for which I am still grateful. In school, the few minutes of lunch hour provided social opportunities. I learned to do the lindy hop in a classroom filled with the fragrance of banana peel.

### **People**

The style of indifference to students, per se, that characterized the faculty of the much larger college was true of the tiny high school. We had no conversation with most of the teachers. I remember being surprised that a French teacher built a sentence around the word "peau" to describe my nice skin. Once a chemistry instructor said she didn't like the way I wore my hair. For the rest: they concentrated on subject-matter and exams. But we had some quirky marvels: two old girls who taught history, one a Miss Verplanck, of an old Hudson River Dutch family, smart, terrifying and a bit nutty; the other a Miss Blunt who had taught in Japan and amazed us by singing the Japanese national anthem. Another history teacher, Miss Orgel, was younger, had a brisk no-nonsense manner, but even she succumbed to a smile the day a student offered comment on the "Prostitute Revolution," thus revealing what many of the rest of us knew: it was hard to differentiate between "prostitute" and "protestant." They sounded alike and the largely Jewish students had no experience of either of them.