

The Spirit of the Times *(Reflections of a Broward School Teacher)*

By Maureen Dinnen

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Maureen Dinnen. Courtesy of the Broward County School Board.

In August of 1962, I was hired by the Broward County Board of Public Instruction to teach eighth grade American History at Northeast Junior-Senior High School. Located on the site of the present-day Northeast High School in Oakland

Park, Florida, my first classroom was a non air-conditioned portable with wooden jalousie windows and a heater that looked like a pot-belly stove.

We never got to try out the heater because shortly after the start of the term, the entire school was moved to the old Fort Lauderdale High School buildings on N.E. 3rd Avenue in downtown Fort Lauderdale. In earlier days, when I was growing

up, not only was Fort Lauderdale High School located there but its football field, Stranahan Field, was a major center used by schools and city groups for a variety of events. By the 1960s the Broward County School System was growing so



The School Board Administrative Offices. Broward County Historical Commission.

rapidly that old school buildings were used as temporary holding places while new schools were being built.

One day while leaving school in downtown Fort Lauderdale, I remember being held up in traffic as a long convoy of freight train flat-bed cars went by for what seemed like a half-hour. The parade of tanks, large artillery and a variety of fearsome war machinery slowly passed as we got out of our autos to watch. This was before we had heard anything about a Cuban Missile Crisis. On my way home from work, I looked down from the 17th Street Causeway Bridge to see that all sorts of U.S. Navy craft had moved into Port Everglades. You can bet the Dinnen family and everyone in Broward County was glued to the nightly news on television that night.

As a result of the Cold War apprehensions that atomic blasts were possible, teachers of that era had to practice bomb drills with students. I can recall having to demonstrate the “turtle position” on the floor in

front of my eighth graders. Needless to say we all dissolved in hysterics. Meanwhile, I was thinking how in the world the turtle position training would help us withstand an atomic attack in these old buildings.

Fortunately, I was only 21 years old and regarded this entire time as an adventure. My adventures continued, for next I was assigned one large class of some 289 pre-teenagers on the second floor in the former high school library with the book shelves removed. Televisions were located around the room because during each class a history lesson was transmitted from the Dade County Lindsey Hopkins Center. Since the TV presentation came on in the middle of the class, I had about 15 minutes before and 15 minutes after the TV program to teach my students. This large TV-class style of instruction was the new idea in that era’s education circles. I can tell you, teaching teens this way did not last long.

An even more sorrowful experience was being in that large classroom when the news of President

Kennedy’s assassination came on the TVs in Dallas. What a horrible history lesson for our students.

Soon we all moved back to the Northeast High School site where the junior and senior high schools were separated, and we were renamed Rickards Junior High School. While at Rickards I honed my teaching skills, and even took a year’s unpaid leave to go to graduate school.

In 1964 as part of the racial integration of Broward County Public Schools, Rickards Junior High admitted African-American students. I remember two young boys coming to my seventh grade class looking scared but brave. I was proud of the way my students welcomed them amidst some of the negative atmosphere that existed in the county.

Even though Rickards Junior High was a new school, the non-stop student population growth made the use of portable classrooms necessary once again. I taught in a portable that seemed so dingy that one Saturday the students and I painted

the inside. They were so proud of their work. It was beautiful.

In 1967 I decided I needed a new challenge and embarked on high school level teaching. Once again, adventures loomed. I took a job teaching mathematics at Dania Sterling High School. Over the summer the school name was changed to Hollywood Hills High School and the school was set up at the old naval air barracks on the Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood Airport. This site had once been a junior high school called Naval Air Junior High and had served as the first location for Broward College, then known as the Junior College of Broward County. Unknown to our parents, as children, we used to play around and in the earthen bunkers in that area.

Well, into the barracks went Hollywood Hills High School. The faculty shared one mimeograph machine and one hand-cranked ditto machine. My classroom was on the second floor of a barracks building that had previously been used as an electronics lab. There were five narrow poles standing in a row down the center of the room. Since I walked around a lot when I was teaching, I became a navigation expert! Again, no air conditioning was provided, and the awning style windows had to be propped open with sticks since the opening handles had long since vanished. Let me tell you, barracks are hot in South Florida in August and September.

The building was strange in that you had to walk through two other classrooms to enter or leave my room by the front door. There was a back door that led to a rather shaky stairway down to the ground. As a teacher, one had to keep alert as some enterprising students would sneak out the back door when you turned your back. The only available teaching tool was the blackboard that was about six feet wide by three feet high. About mid-year someone stole my classroom back door so sometimes bugs and birds



*History Teacher
Miss Maureen Dinnen
from the 1972 Epic,
Hollywood Hills
High School's annual,
Hollywood, Florida,
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Hollywood Hills High School, 2013. Photograph by Joan Mickelson, PhD.

did fly into the room. The low mark was when I returned from winter break to find that some creature had chewed off the edges of my grade book.

During that year at the barracks we had other challenges. A group of young men from our school on the way back from an airport luncheonette got into a disagreement with an airport official and began to rock his car as a joke. Remember, this was 1967. The official, understandably upset, called for help and the sheriff's office responded with a number of officers. Somehow this whole incident escalated into a ma-

major riot with racial elements. I remember using every ounce of force and threats I could muster to prevent my kids from joining in. What a mess! Racial tensions were apparent during that time. Hollywood Hills High School incorporated a smaller nearby African-American high school named Attucks High School. Attucks' kids felt outnumbered, and they were. I recall how great we all felt when Tyrone Ash from Attucks became a Hills student leader.

Also, 1967-68 was the year that the Broward County public school system was the pilot case for the



Hollywood Hills Classroom. From the 1977 Epic Yearbook.

Florida state-wide teacher walk-out. Most of the 4,000 Broward public school teachers turned in resignation slips to the Broward County Classroom Teachers Association. All of them were dramatically put in a giant steamer chest on the stage of the War Memorial Auditorium where every day for two weeks teachers assembled instead of reporting to their schools for work. An agreement was forged for Broward teachers to return to work, and an injunction was slapped on the association to keep them from joining the state walk-out. The teacher resignation forms were burned in back of the Broward County Courthouse. These were really tough times professionally. We lost some excellent teachers. However, I did receive textbooks for my students to augment the 30 I had for some 175 students and we got a small raise.

Hollywood Hills was the high school attended by the kids who lived on ranches in Davie. In the spring during those years students were allowed days off for cattle round-up. It is amazing to think of that much vacant land existing in Broward County.

Once we moved from the barracks into the new Hollywood Hills High School building we enjoyed new classrooms, air conditioning, a modern cafeteria, movie projec-

tors, overhead projectors and all the latest audio-visual learning aids of that school era. We were doing great! At Hills, I taught American history most of the time in both regular and portable classrooms because Broward County never seemed to be able to catch up with the monumental student population growth. One portable I taught in was dingy beige in need of a paint job. Again, my students and I came on Saturday and did the work. After the students rejected my color choice we put on a second coat that made everyone happy. It looked fabulous.

One January day at Hills my students were taking an exam when I told them to put down their pencils. I explained we were going outside because it was snowing, and they might never see this again. It melted before it hit the ground, but you could actually see snow falling on your shoulders in Hollywood, Florida.

A highlight of those early days at Hills High School was the winning of the state football championship. The entire school got so involved. Everyone who could went to the championship game in Orlando, including parents, students, teachers, administrators and community members. We felt invincible!

I stayed at Hollywood Hills High

for 10 great years. Known for winning National Merit scholarships, the school grew to be one of the top high schools in the county and the state. Many of its students, including those in the classes that painted that portable classroom, are today attorneys, teachers, doctors, business leaders and prominent citizens. The Hills faculty still has reunions which I attend although I left in 1977.

All during this period the school district center, called the County Office, was located in a group of World War II buildings clustered in what is now the Sailboat Bend area of Fort Lauderdale. For a growing district to operate out of such an old, cramped location was a wonder. When I needed a film to show in my classes, I would go there to the film center, pick it up by hand, and later one person would return several films for the rest of the faculty. When the School Board meetings attracted a crowd, people had to stand out on the lawn in front of the building and listen to the proceedings over loud speakers.

The period from 1962 to 1977 in the Broward Schools was certainly eventful, and there are some wonderful memories for anyone who taught or attended our public schools. As I reread these accounts of that period in our school system I know today's teachers, students and parents must wonder how we ever got anything done successfully. We did rise above a great variety of problems. The redeeming features were the people I worked with and the students I taught. We had a certain spirit that I still see in many of our public schools and at the school district level. With that you can do anything!