

# **EARTHWORKS, ANN ARBOR'S FIRST ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL: A PERSONAL HISTORY**

by  
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NOTE: this was written in 1988 as an article submitted to an area publication but not printed. With minor revisions, it is being submitted in 2006 to the Bentley Historical Library's archive of Ann Arbor Public School materials in hopes that it will serve as an introduction to the Earthworks papers being stored there. The reason given for rejection by the local publication was that they did not wish to print "insider memoirs," which certainly is what this is. The hoped-for book mentioned below never came about, but perhaps some former students will add their own insider memoirs. The collection in the Bentley may be of interest and use to anyone wishing information on this exciting period in public education in Ann Arbor. A.S.

## **Forward**

*I was sitting on a hilltop along Lake Michigan, wearing a blindfold, along with two high school students, both of them mute. They had led me here during an Earthworks School fall retreat. One-half of our group were blindfolded for the day and accompanied by one of the other half, who were mute. The students, Karin Tice and Dan Ezekiel, and I were joined by the teacher who had planned the event, Tom Dodd. Just before the experiment ended, Tom said, "Turn your head this way, Allan, I'm going to give you a present." He positioned my head, quickly lifted my blindfold and quickly replaced it. A view down the Lake Michigan shore, dunes and beach of white sand and deep blue water, was burned into my brain. I can see it clearly still.*

*This was the fall of 1972 and we spoke, the two students and two teachers, of writing about the school we were then in the course of inventing. It was a group effort, with shared responsibility and as much equality in the process as we could effect. Any attempt to describe the process ought to be collaborative as well. What follows is my attempt to begin the process. I hope it can become an invitation to all Earthworks students, teachers, parents, supporters and detractors to tell their own version of the history and meaning of the experiment. For me, the experience is still as clearly remembered and felt as that image of white sand and azure water from that day on Lake Michigan.*

## **The Portable School**

On September 30, 1970, I sat in the darkened auditorium of Pioneer High School with another teacher and a student. The doors were locked, and from the hallway beyond we heard shouts and the sounds of glass breaking as display cases were smashed. Students, mostly black, frustrated with the lack of progress on the demands that they had presented annually, were on their way out of the building having wrecked the school library. Such rioting was not new to the Ann Arbor high schools; disturbances were annual events, disturbances of all kinds. The first serious disorder occurred in the spring of 1968, when the

black student demands were originally presented. During a subsequent disruption, the sheriff sent helmeted deputies into the school uninvited, marching in military formation with shotguns and clubs at the ready. It also was the era of the Great Dress Code Controversy across the school system. Rules prohibited girls' wearing short skirts or shorts, prohibited long hair on boys and sandals on anyone. A Pioneer student challenged the policy by coming to school in a full suit of armor and his dismissal became a citywide controversy. A faculty member triggered another dispute by ripping off black armbands from students protesting the Vietnam War. Any student or teacher of that time will recall days when tension in the air was a palpable thing, thick and oppressive like August humidity before a storm.

It was against this background that a new teacher, Ray Silverman, had begun teaching English in the fall of 1970. He was quiet, friendly and familiar with currently popular writings about school reform by Ivan Illich, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol and Herbert Kohl. Ray brought a carpet from home and put it in his classroom. He had a couch installed and he kept an always full coffee pot in the back of the class. Students sat in a circle or on the window ledges, and they called him "Ray". He covered the window in his classroom door until the assistant principal, making his rounds, discovered that there was a room he could not see into. The window cover came down. Next, the principal notified Silverman that it was against fire codes to have stuffed furniture or carpeting in a classroom. They went out as well.

Students accustomed to a regulated system were not prepared to function without controls. His own students could explode into the room with undirected energy after leaving a rigid classroom the period before, or could enter the class following his with noticeable lack of discipline. Understandably, there were complaints from fellow teachers. Students, not in his classes, would come into Ray's room, take his coffee and offer derogatory comments in return. One day a student cut off Silverman's tie with a pair of scissors. Ray did not respond to this challenge, and discipline eroded still further. He did not return the following year, but he left a legacy: the Portable Classroom proposal.

Silverman, with some of his responsive students, had submitted a three-page plan for an alternative program based on a free-school concept, influenced by Herbert Kohl's *The Open Classroom*. It would be voluntary on the part of both teachers and students. Classes would be held in the cluster of portable classrooms behind Pioneer High, to avoid cross-contamination of or by non-participating students. The plan was rejected with no serious consideration. Independently, some students leafleted to get support for an alternative high school while a group of parents organized and met with Superintendent Westerman to present him with their own plan for such a program, which they called "Pioneer Free School Number 1". Others petitioned the school board directly. I was one of several teachers invited to meetings taking place at this time.

Scott Westerman had been superintendent on an interim basis for four years. His unenviable task was to serve as caretaker during this time of tension and turmoil. Finally, in May 1971, he made his getaway. His replacement was a jovial, bear-like educator from Philadelphia, Bruce McPherson. Scott was always known as Dr. Westerman; Dr. McPherson was Bruce. He had received national attention with a school-without-walls program, allowing students to earn school credits for jobs and other non-classroom endeavors. Its success is what led him to sponsor what would become Ann Arbor's Community High School. With him, McPherson brought his own lieutenants, personnel he wanted to serve in almost all of the major central administrative positions. Among these was Steven Daniels, known for a book he had written about alternative school teaching, *How Two Gerbils, 20 Goldfish, 200 Games and 2000 Books and I Taught Them to Read*. (Westminster, 1971; now out of print but used is of interest to Christian homeschoolers, which well might startle Steve.)

Daniels' first title was Director of Curriculum Planning, which became Director of New Schools' Planning, and he was interested in implementing the Pioneer Free School and Portable Classroom plans. In July of 1971, Daniels called to ask if I would like to be involved in such a program. It was a startling question. To contemplate the realization of Ray Silverman's idea, Ray with his coffeepot and cut-off necktie, was amazing. Still, I declined. It seemed too far removed from the mainstream where the students who needed help most would remain, and it did not confront the issues within the big school.

I was part of a group called "Teachers for Change", which sought to make minor reforms in the management of Pioneer High. We had suggested, for example, that department chairs be elected by department members rather than appointed by administrators and that student representatives be installed on all standing committees. We talked about pass-fail grade options and student choice in selection of classes and teachers. After those who elected the alternative program left to begin their adventure, our group was given an in-service day to discuss proposals with the entire Pioneer faculty. As the discussion day neared, fellow teachers grumbled. On the teachers' cafeteria bulletin board someone pinned a diaper and on the diaper, written in large letters with black marker, was "Teachers for Change". The in-service day was a frustrating bust. Not only was there little enthusiasm for innovation, there was neither debate nor disagreement. Just an unresponsive, suppressed stillness. The only issue that aroused interest was adjourning.

In frustration, I went to see Joe Pollack, then in his first semester as principal of Pioneer High. I asked him if there were still openings in the alternative school. The Portable High School was now in operation under the name Pioneer II. I was given a part time appointment for the spring semester, 1972.

## Pioneer II

When the McPherson administration arrived and found the existing amateur plans for an alternative high school, they ran with them. The school board was anxious to allow them man they had hired as a change agent to be given his day but, as with any suggestion for change in those days, it aroused heated debate.

Two basic arguments developed. Some conservative members of the community saw this program as an educational frill, a mere distraction for students in the conventional program and a burdensome cost as well. As things were to turn out, the costs would be very low. The Pioneer II budget per student was never more than a small percentage of what it cost to maintain a student in the regular program. The distraction concern was easily met by establishing Pioneer II off the main Pioneer campus. The second concern, brought up by the only black board member, Henry Johnson, was that this alternative had the potential of being designed for and by well-off, intellectual white students. The administration gave assurances that special attempts would be made to encourage the participation of black students in the program.

The concern about elitism was prescient, nonetheless. Black students did not want to participate in this innovation. Their efforts at that time were bent to reforming and making the mainstream program more responsive to the black students' needs. In subsequent semesters, when I was attempting to convince the parents of black students to enroll in our alternative, an allied attitude was expressed eloquently by some: to enter a school away from the mainstream, they said, would be just another way to put blacks out of sight so that they could continue to be neglected. Much later, when Earthworks was withering because of its lack of contact with the rest of the system, I would remember their wisdom. As it was, Pioneer II never had more than a handful of black students.

At the board meeting before Labor Day, September 2, 1971, only one week after it had been proposed and following only two public debates, the school board hastily approved the new program and directed that it be established immediately. A mere six weeks was allowed for planning. As a department of Pioneer High, Pioneer II would be a responsibility of Principal Joe Pollack while Steve Daniels would supervise the start-up. On October 11, 108 students gathered in the gym of the old Jones School building on Division Street. Ann Arbor's experience with alternative secondary programs began there.

The most basic concept of the alternative was the creation of a system where students had say in setting program goals and a voice in the governance of the school. Teachers were to be part of the voice with students, neither above them nor controlled by administrators. Parents were encouraged to participate as well, and did. The early weeks were a chaos of meetings. Everyone had an opinion to express and every issue was a cue for debate; the most practical questions became points of philosophical deliberation. Par-

ents attempted to establish positions of influence and teachers debated parents, while students insisted that the program belonged not to the adults but was theirs to direct as they saw the need.

Before this disarray of democratic process had the chance to settle into any sort of operational routine, the new school moved into its permanent home. Then a textbook depository, and once the home of Fritz Elementary feeder school, the three-room building on Maple Road became Pioneer II in November. Students had moved out 20,000 books and the Fire Marshall had ordered certain repairs, but now the building was declared ready. The roof leaked, the heat never was sufficient, the lighting was inadequate and the dirt parking area was usually either too dusty or a sea of mud. Nevertheless, the students that first semester were involved in more than claiming a new space. They, with their adult supporters, were inventing a new kind of school and were inventing almost solely on their own. Somehow, during all of this, classes got organized and the classroom part of alternative education got underway. By the time I arrived, it was flourishing impressively.

I loved my first experiences at Pioneer II. Teachers with whom I had had only a slight acquaintance at Pioneer became close friends. Seeing students who not only were interested in what went on in classes but also anxious to take over the direction of their own education was a new and exciting experience. I began teaching Shakespeare. Soon I was teaching a cooking class as well, making a hobby part of the job. The debates had not ceased, of course, and they remained a critical part of the climate at Pioneer II.

One of the basic arguments had to do with governance procedures. An elected governance committee had been suggested, to have three students and one faculty member. There were to be weekly meetings for the entire community and each student was to be a member of a smaller group as well. Devising this scheme took time and debate. Moreover, no teacher had yet emerged as a designated on-site authority.

Meanwhile, the administration, watching from across town, became impatient. Pioneer principal Joe Pollack informed the group that the central administration could no longer put off the establishment of some sort of official person-in-charge. Two teachers with very different personal styles, science teacher Bill Casello and art teacher Tom Dodd, vied for the position. Each had partisans among the students. Parents became involved, and involved emotionally, in the campaign. An election was held, Casello won, but questions arose about the amount of advance notice provided for the election. The steering committee decided, in the name of fairness (a concept devoutly clung to at Pioneer II), to hold a second, widely publicized election. Tom Dodd won this time, but now there were objections about the vote-counting method. Two elections, two disputed results, no head teacher elected, central administrators still disgruntled. Bitterness over the Dodd-Casello rivalry lasted until the end of the first year.

During this time, Superintendent McPherson began another secondary alternative high school, this one based on his successful school-without-walls concept in Philadelphia. Unlike Pioneer II's rushed and hasty 6-week startup, however, this program was to have a full year in the planning and five teachers were released from their duties full-time to develop the plans. Steven Daniels, assuming Pioneer II to be on its way, devoted his attention to establishing this new program. Bill Casello transferred to the new alternative and some students decided to switch with him. The program, named Community High School, was to be housed in the Jones School building.

Joe Pollack, unhappy about the election feuds, insisted that the internal democracy be cleaned up for the second year of Pioneer II. Casello was gone, Dodd no longer wanted the leadership role, nor did the only other full-time teacher, Robin Franklin. My request to transfer full-time to Pioneer II had been granted, however, and I accepted the position, no election necessary. At the year-end meeting/party, with all students, faculty and many parents present, Tom Dodd made the announcement. As he did it, he removed the clerical collar in which he had been costumed for the party and placed it around my neck. "My god," I said. "I've been frocked."

### **The Hidden Curriculum**

The second year of Pioneer II was much smoother. Students were there not only because they wanted to be, but they had also made a choice between three different schools: Pioneer High, the conventional program; Community High, the school-without-walls; and us. After the fractious first year, we all were ready to settle down and concentrate on education. The enrollment was at what would be its record high, 125 students. We were left largely on our own, since Daniels and McPherson were concentrating on CHS and Joe Pollack had enough to occupy him at what we had come to call Pioneer I. By the end of the school year we would find ourselves even more on our own.

The stewardship of Superintendent McPherson and Joe Pollack's term as Pioneer principal each were to last only two years. While Pollack went on to a superintendency elsewhere, McPherson went down in flames. His style and philosophy were too much for an increasingly conservative Board of Education. Ann Arbor experienced its first-ever teacher's strike. The Administration Building on Wells Street burned to the ground in what rumor held were suspicious circumstances. There were scandals among his staff, including a chief assistant who seemed to have falsified her credentials and an affair between two administrators that became public controversy. Steve Daniels quit and took out a full-page Ann Arbor News ad in which he identified himself as "a new homeowner". In it, he blasted Ann Arbor's fondness for the status quo, indicating the community did not deserve a Bruce McPherson. Shortly after Steve left Ann Arbor, we received word of his suicide.

The new superintendent, Dr. Harry Howard, made a visit to get acquainted shortly after taking office. I began to describe our philosophy and educational practices. He listened patiently for a few minutes, then stopped me with a wave of his hand and said, "I'm not really a curriculum man, I'm a budget man." He visited only occasionally from then on. The new Pioneer principal was Milo White. A long-time Ann Arbor High School teacher, Dr. White was supportive of the alternative nominally under his guidance but bigger issues at the bigger school dominated his duties. In the next six years, he visited the program only one time.

For the rest of the existence of the alternative program, we were left completely alone to learn from our mistakes and celebrate our triumphs on our own. In time, this isolation from the rest of the school system would hasten the ultimate termination of Earthworks. For the moment, however, it suited us just fine. We needed the opportunity to create a system out of the hit-or-miss experience of that first year.

The school board had had to label Pioneer II an experimental program to establish it with North Central Association accreditation. Our experimental purpose: to discover how students' education would develop if they were excused from meeting locally controlled graduation requirements. (The state set only American Government and US History as mandatory classes.) Our students intended to take full advantage of this freedom to design their own curriculum. Some definite policies had been established. One was that no marks would be given for classes and that a credit/no-credit system of grading would be used instead. Another was that students, with parents and advisors, would be free to decide for themselves how to earn that credit.

For classes requiring special facilities, such as lab sciences, students ordinarily traveled to Pioneer High—although we did have a chemistry class in the Fritz Building kitchen one semester and occasionally had science taught by Pioneer faculty volunteers or student teachers. Most classes we offered were by student request or faculty wish. Often the most interesting classes were those students arranged for themselves. We saw students working in University labs, for which we would give them credit. Others worked on construction or performed in the Ann Arbor Symphony for school credit. Some, with professors' approval, managed to sit in on University courses despite University policy to the contrary and we gave them credit for that too. A guiding principle was that with the freedom to control their curriculum, students themselves assumed responsibility for achieving their own education.

In June of the first year, teachers discovered that we also had new responsibilities in this open type of education. In the departmentalization of the large school, each teacher need only be concerned with the grade for an individual student in a specific course. Here, teachers faced decisions over who would graduate and who might have to spend an extra year in high school to earn additional credits. It was sobering. In the heady first year, such technicalities as determining what would constitute the completion of an inde-

pendent study or how it would be evaluated had been set aside. Then, a teacher was asked to visit the apartment of a student who unexpectedly asked credit for Interior Decorating—and whose place was a mess. How to deal with that? Another student expected credit for a garden she claimed to have been nurturing. When the semester ended and teachers wanted to examine her work, the garden turned out to be in Traverse City, over 200 miles away. Neither of these students would have been able to graduate without these questionable credits but neither had been pre-advised about what requirements would need to be met to earn the credits. That was the first-year legacy of the rush to get the program going. In the parent school with its system of fixed deadlines, final examinations and a set curriculum, such problems had never arisen.

Beginning the second year of the program, a regulated system of learning contracts replaced the erratic practices that had been in place the first year. Each semester every student was required to work out a statement of goals, with long-range objectives for high school and beyond and immediate course objectives for that semester. Each course selected required a separate statement of purpose—the contract—that included a pre-determined means for final evaluation. These were worked out with the student's advisor and were then signed by student, teacher and parent.

Education critics used to refer to the “hidden curriculum.” It was a way to describe a student's need to learn the rules of the bureaucracy and modes of non-academic behavior necessary for success in school. A student who was polite, on time, and gave the answer the teacher expected, succeeded. In our system, the burden of responsibility for learning was placed directly on the shoulders of the student. No sub-surface set of policies or prejudices meddled with the process. Students had to decide what was important to them, ponder their future possibilities and then make decisions about their education around these perceptions. This was our hidden curriculum.

The variety of courses that earned credit was astonishing. Tom Dodd, editor of our school paper “On the Fritz”, delighted in printing a list at the end of the school year and we included it in our required annual reports to the Board of Education. (None of which ever received the slightest response, by the way.) One of our favorite quotes came from our first principal, Joe Pollack, who explained to skeptics that Pioneer II was a place “not where anything goes but where everything counts”.

## **Earthworks**

Pioneer II became Earthworks during that second year. Dodd was teaching a course in Art History. I had a unit in Native American Studies as part of a U.S. History class. Tom was familiar with the Indian mounds of southern Ohio and was planning a trip to see them. I wanted in. This was the earliest of the Earthworks camping trips that became a hallmark of the school. Leaving behind to mind the store those teachers and students who could not get away, we car-caravanned to places like Chillicothe, Newark and



Sinking Springs, the location of the fabulous Serpent Mound. Archaeologists debate its purpose, but we were not mystified. It became our symbol.

None of us were really prepared for a camping trip with two dozen people. Some had no camping experience and did not know enough to bring adequate sleeping gear. Some were shocked to discover that they were expected to help with camp chores. There were potential problems with drinking and drugs. The first night, as we all grew hungry and curious about what dinner might be, we learned that none had been planned. No one had coordinated menus or procured food. One student had brought a bag of potatoes. Another had a shaker of pepper. I had a large cooking pot. Boiled potatoes were our entire dinner that night.

Our first morning, hungry and chilly, we began to plan. We found that some of the students with no food also had little money to chip in. We pooled resources. Some went shopping in a nearby village. Others began to assign chores for the remainder of the week. By the end of that trip we had all learned a lot about planning and about sharing responsibility, lessons which improved future trips and carried over to daily school operations. We discovered that people in the areas we visited were curious to know who we were and why we were there, and this led to the realization that we had to be responsible for our reputation. When Tom Dodd gathered the group for a last circle meeting before returning to Ann Arbor, it was inside the oval “egg” mound at the serpent’s head. We huddled together, holding hands, affected by the spell of the place and the discovery of ourselves as a group.

We returned with a new feeling of comradeship and purpose. We no longer wanted to be Pioneer number 2. Since the program was soon to be open to students from Huron and ninth-graders from the junior highs, there was some practical rationale for a new name. A vote was held to select one. Earthworks, after our mound trip, won handily. Our motto became, “Earthy, Organic, Intense.” We also chose the combination of “gray and clear” as official Earthworks colors. The change of name was approved by the Board of Education, which was also told of our color choice. Shortly afterward, Superintendent McPherson made an unscheduled visit to the school, one of his last. With him he brought a large rectangle of burlap, dyed gray, with a clear hole cut out of the center. Students cheered the superintendent and ran it up the flagpole. In Bruce’s honor, the Art History class drew up plans for a “Bruce McPherson Memorial Mound”. The drawing looked more like Yogi Bear than Bruce McPherson, but nonetheless the digging began. An Earthworks time capsule was buried containing a mélange of items vital to Earthworkers: class descriptions, student work from writing and art classes, and personal commentary on the school. That flag and name change represented the quickest response and most attention that we were to receive by board or administration from that point on. We were left on our own while the mainstream rushed on. Were we a harbor from it, we wondered, or an outpost on some frontier?

Whichever, we found ways to make use of every bit of space in our Fritz Building sanctuary. Tom Dodd wanted to teach ceramics but had no place for it. One day the school was startled by the sound of electric saws and ripping wood. The stalls were removed from the girl's lavatory and a worktable placed over the toilets. That became the clay room and the boy's room became our unisex restroom. The art class decorated it with a fantastic set of murals, and every visitor to the school was given a tour of the facility. The Earthworks dance class, taught each semester by a student teacher provided by Vera Embree of the U of M, performed a dedicatory "Dance to the John" at the next potluck.

Potlucks were monthly events. What started out as the usual baked-beans-and-brownies school affair became impressive banquets. They were usually well-attended family affairs and provided a chance for parents to meet teachers and see the place, toilets and all. Unlike the first year, parents became less and less directly involved. They signed the contracts, chaperoned the school trips and sometimes offered to teach classes. They seemed satisfied to let the school proceed under its own guidance. The number of younger siblings who followed older brothers and sisters to Earthworks indicated the satisfaction they felt.

### **On Our Own**

People from outside Ann Arbor continued to find us noteworthy. Education students from Northwestern, Indiana U and the University of Massachusetts visited us. The University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University schools of education sent groups regularly to observe and question us. Some of the college students were dismayed, other fascinated. We were definitely unusual. Visitors were likely to be told to participate if they wished to watch. Some did, some fled. We had visits from the Chancellor of Education for West Germany and from the Assistant Superintendent of the Washington, D.C. schools. We were regular contributors to the alternative school newsletter published by U-Mass. We participated in international conferences on education at the U of M. I was a regular guest lecturer in classes at both local universities, often accompanied by students.

There were those in Ann Arbor who were overt in their dislike of our program. On one occasion, Tom Dodd had driven from the Fritz Building to Pioneer High to pick up some students and to get some office supplies. The faculty parking lot was full, causing Tom to double-park his van and run into the building to get our Ditto masters. A teacher came out and found his car blocked by a van full of students, apparently outsiders. He ordered that it be moved. One of the students responded hastily that it was a faculty car, that they were from Earthworks, were awaiting the driver, and had every right to be there. The teacher became more enraged, demanding that they move the van. When Tom returned, he found the Earthworks students locked inside and the teacher, red-faced with anger, threatening them with the blade of a rotary lawn mower he had gotten from his trunk. Even though Dodd was a witness, the teacher was given a mild reprimand for

threatening students with a lethal weapon, while the Earthworks student was warned of possible expulsion. Perhaps this was an early warning that we were becoming too separated from the mother ship. Once, at a Pioneer High faculty meeting, a teacher arose to accuse us of not even conducting school regularly, based on his observation of so few cars in our parking lot. My reply that few Earthworks students drove to school was greeted with skepticism.

Not that we did not invite some negativity. It was difficult not to feel that real schools had never before existed, and that the non-believers would be converted. We half-joked that Pioneer High would move to the Fritz Building and Earthworks to Pioneer High. That did not happen. Before we realized that it would not, though, we managed to offend a few people with our smugness. We made proclamations about the proper use of time and space in schools. A reporter met me in a local bar for an interview and, to my red-faced amusement, printed our conversation verbatim. I made claims for providing a superior mode of education and a higher level of teaching than found anywhere else in the school system. When it appeared, I called Superintendent McPherson to apologize for any embarrassment or hard feelings it might have caused. He was nice enough to dismiss it with a laugh, saying "There may have been some wine-sodden truth in there, don't worry." I didn't know enough to worry, as yet. The next year, when Milo White took over as principal, he gave me only one instruction for Earthworks: "Don't get your name in the paper."

In our isolation from the rest of the school system we found freedom to offer courses for which there would have been no room in the conventional curriculum and to conduct activities for which permission (had we sought it) might not have been granted. Our school trips by car caravan became more ambitious. Visits to the Detroit Institute of Arts were regular and commonplace. The Urban Studies class visited different Detroit neighborhoods. A "river trip" took us over 2000 miles by car in one week, staying along the Illinois, Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. On one of our two trips to Toronto, we found our expected hostel accommodations were closed to us. Nadine Bishop, a chaperone on the trip and mother of three Earthworkers, Anita, Gail and Susan, met the Lord Mayor of Toronto while touring city hall. She described our plight. The developers of the Four Seasons Hotel, just being built across the street, owed him a favor, he said. For \$4 per person per night, just what we had budgeted for the hostel, we stayed in luxury and loved it.

Another trip began when we had noted in the newspaper that the Board of Education was the owner of a piece of land near Grayling that had been unused for many years. The trustees and administrators, none of whom had ever seen the property, were debating its usefulness to the district. We decided to be of service. We got the central administration to send us to this land by school bus, drop us off, and pick us up five days later. By now, students and staff were accomplished planners. We packed in the mile from the road, carrying water, personal gear, tents, tools and provisions for thirty people. We camped in comfort, aside from the thick nests of mosquitoes. We explored the property, taking pho-

tographs and making maps. For the return trip, the school bus driver met us on schedule and when he stopped at the side of a forest road, picked up a fresh road-killed deer and tied it to the hood of the bus, we did not think it a bad way to re-enter Ann Arbor. Our students made a public presentation at a Board of Education meeting, explaining to them just what they had in that land. Our conclusion was that, sandy, marshy and partially wooded as it was, the land was too delicate to sustain camping groups like ours on a regular basis. We had practiced carefully designed communal living in the wilds, learned about mapping, forestry, botany, wildlife and the history of logging in Lower Michigan. We met and befriended an old couple who lived in a cottage nearby and were long-time dwellers in the remote forest. It was a good example of the way in which Earthworks learning took place.

Education could be just as vital back at the Fritz Building. One afternoon, students started a fire in a wastebasket. I was scared and angry and after the fire was out and I had screamed at the student responsible, I babbled on to Tom Dodd about starting fires being a sign of sexual tension and that we had to do something. Tom stopped me with a laugh: "Have a sex class," he said. Students had been requesting sex education anyway, so we began it and it was continued over several semesters, team-taught by Tom and me. We agreed to be as frank and open as possible: no veiled references to subjects we would not elaborate on and no clinical biology without human references. After the class period began, the classroom door was shut and no one was allowed to enter. No class members were allowed to leave except during breaks. Teachers did not take phone calls. The period, often three to four hours, usually once per week, was to be devoted to this most personal of topics and a mood of serious intimacy was vital.

One day we discussed rape. Some students had prepared reports on the sociology of the topic; others discussed their research into psychological studies. As usual, these were not cold academic presentations but were interrupted with questions and class reaction. We were nearing the end of class and discussion was winding down, when one female student indicated she wished to speak. Something soft but urgent in her manner made us all pull closer together in our circle on the floor. She began to relate her experience at having been raped the previous summer, a date rape. She had never told anyone about it, not even her parents. She recounted the experience slowly, in hushed tones, and she began to cry. Others did as well, all of us silent and intent upon her story, some moving closer to hold her as she spoke. The class stayed together an extra hour, comforting her, relieving each other, discussing rape in a different more personal way. It was long after the usual school closing time then the group disbanded, we locked the building, and quietly went home.

## **The Decline**

Superintendent Howard and Principal White had matters more pressing to them than tending our esoteric program. By the mid-'70's, our remoteness from the school sys-

tem at large was unmistakable. What had been the blessing of being left alone we now referred to as “benign neglect”. We received no restriction from the administration neither did we get support. As long as we continued to do nothing to cause disruption or negative publicity for the school system, we continued to be left alone. Our roof continued to leak; the furnace and the lighting remained inadequate. If we attracted negative attention, however, we got immediate action. A neighbor called the superintendent’s office to complain that we were not flying the American flag from our pole. (Ours had been put into the freezer box of the refrigerator months earlier and now was covered in frost an inch thick.) We received a phone call from Dr. Howard’s office inquiring about it. Our explanation that we had none available was quickly acted upon. Assistant Superintendent Ralph LaJeunesse personally delivered one to us the same day.

Our most serious concern was the size of our enrollment. Action on that was less brisk. After having reached a high in our third semester of existence, student population began to decline. The original Earthworkers graduated and were not replaced in like numbers. As the school disruptions of the late ‘60’s and early ‘70’s reflected events and feelings of the nation as a whole, so we felt the national cooling-off of the middle ‘70’s. Some of the impetus for an alternative high school was gone. Our feeling remained that in Ann Arbor there were enough students who could benefit from an educational program that would let them proceed at their own pace in areas of greatest interest to them for us to be able to maintain our enrollment. Elements built into the system, however, did not allow those students to find their way to us.

Ann Arbor’s high school attendance had reached its peak in 1973. As the size of the student base declined, so did overcrowding and accompanying tensions that had led to support of our program in the first place. Attendance at Pioneer and Huron High, moreover, is determined by residence. There is no need for either of those schools to compete for students or to recruit them. Earthworks, however, needed to find students for itself. There was no mechanism for this. In fact, the need to sell the program to students made it seem suspect. Community High was traveling to ninth grade parents’ meetings at middle schools, where counselors met to present information for students entering high school the next fall. We piggybacked on those parent nights, but they were not really a productive source of new students. Parents in attendance were those already planning on Huron or Pioneer for their children.

As our enrollment declined, so did the “teacher hours” allotted us. The fewer students, therefore, the fewer course offerings; the fewer course offerings, the fewer students we could attract. It was a downward spiral. There were now only two full-time teachers, Dodd and Schreiber. Witty and erudite as we may have wished ourselves to be, the two of us combined could scarcely represent a complete curriculum. The dependence on student teachers and volunteers grew. We attempted to get the Superintendent’s office to help us by providing a brochure describing all of Ann Arbor’s alternative programs and assisting us to promote them. Central administration did not feel this was needed. Finally, in our

last full year of independence, one was created. Earthworks sought a written statement from Dr. Howard that we could use to establish that we were, indeed, a legitimate Ann Arbor Public Schools program that deserved consideration by high school students and their parents. None was ever given. An assistant superintendent did provide a statement describing both Community and Earthworks, but that too was in our last complete year of independence.

One other high school program was established during the Howard regime. First called “The Alternative High School,” which annoyed us, it became known as Roberto Clemente School and was intended as a place for students in trouble in the big schools. Some called it “Bad-Ass High”. It was more an alternative for the school system than for students, who were enrolled into Clemente because of troublesome behavior and upon recommendation of school authorities. Students who tried to enroll voluntarily found it difficult.

The same high school counselors who recommended students to Clemente should have been our best source of students as well. We tried to establish better relationships with them. To provide accurate information about Earthworks, we invited the counseling staff of the two high schools to meet us at the Fritz Building during a regular faculty-meeting period. Only half of the Pioneer High counselors showed up and one from Huron. They looked about—our sloppy surroundings never seemed so messy as when outsiders visited. Our students were still assigned to Pioneer counselors but saw them infrequently at best. One student recognized her counselor and sneered, “What are you doing here?” The counselors who came were not hostile but were frank and pointed out that Earthworks students had lost touch with the parent schools. Why should they send their best to us? All we could point out in return was that we were part of the same school system and that some students might benefit from our unique program. However, the separation we originally had sought, the isolation that had allowed us to develop, was now complete and it was costing us.

The type of student whom counselors frequently sent now was not the self-starting academically oriented sort who had started Earthworks. They were more likely to be disaffected students who didn’t fit the big school mold and sought relief from it. Some were problem-students who were seen as too sensitive for Clemente, which had a reputation as being a tough place for non-conformists. Others were teen-age drifters, young people who had no family home and who didn’t mesh with the usual school population. By the fall of 1977, our enrollment had declined to about 60 and four of them had been patients at the University’s Children’s Psychiatric Hospital within the previous six months. Our new role was to be the place to deposit misfits. One student, over eighteen, was a recently released patient from the state hospital at Traverse City. When he tried to enroll at Pioneer, they sent him right to Earthworks where he participated in school programs briefly but soon stopped showing up. A month later he jumped from the top floor of the Wolverine Building onto Fourth Avenue. There were students who had lived in a

succession of foster homes and who seemed to be sent to us almost automatically by certain counselors.

The students who were at Earthworks for academic freedom and personalized academic development found that they were becoming out-numbered by those who simply had escaped from the big school or were squeezed out of it. The atmosphere had changed; we were seriously concerned about the students who sat about in the hallway, neither attending classes nor doing independent studies. With our enrollment already dropping, we hesitated to evict them. A separation emerged between the more academic students and the hall-sitters whom they called “dregs”. Fewer and fewer students bothered to attend weekly governance meetings and participatory democracy began to crumble. The teaching job had become harder. Stimulating enthusiasm took more energy than it had ever done, and we were required to deal with young persons who had problems with which we were incapable of dealing.

Then Assistant Superintendent Lee Hansen called me into his office on an early winter afternoon. He informed me that Earthworks was to be merged with Community High in the fall of 1978. We had discussed joining Community High ourselves in 1975, by detaching from Pioneer High and attaching to CHS. But this plan would have left Earthworks its semi-autonomous state in the Fritz Building. Now, we would no longer have our own building or autonomy. We might not even have the name Earthworks any longer. Hansen wanted me to supervise the shift. “You’re ending Earthworks and you want me to preside over my own funeral,” I said. But I felt a sense of relief as I left the Administration Building. Perhaps this was a case of euthanasia.

It was not an easy time. Our students were distraught and Community High people were not pleased. We held a series of workshops with both Earthworks and Community faculty and students, under the guidance of Tom Dodd. Gradually a feeling of renewed energy emerged. We discussed what we would like to change about our current programs. We tried to imagine the perfect school. We then sought to envision it at Community High. Earthworks would be one of several separate houses, or components, as they came to be known. Each of these would have a particular curricular orientation or a particular methodology, such as Earthworks’ self-directed education. I would be the Earthworks head teacher. Tom Dodd joined the arts component. Our former Pioneer II colleague, Bill Casello, headed another component.

In the fall of 1978, when Earthworks reopened for its eighth year, it was as a component of Community High School. We were welcomed warmly. Our students became more and more involved with CHS programs as the year went on. Connie Craft, Dean of Community High, credited us with revitalizing her school. By the end of the school year, however, June of 1979, Earthworks had ceased to exist in any substantial manner. I could still teach the subjects I liked best—Native American History, creative

writing, foods—and I found myself directing plays once again. But it didn't feel the same. After that year ended, I decided to leave the Ann Arbor Public Schools.

### **Afterthoughts**

What were the lessons? We did, in fact, come to some conclusions about the use of space and time in a school setting. Size of class and opportunity for students and teachers to establish meaningful personal interaction is the key to successful school learning for young people. Breaking down the bondage to rigid schedules and the unnatural barriers between subject matters only can make learning a more compelling experience. More recently, my experiences in small private schools, strictly academic in curriculum but as personal in atmosphere as was Earthworks, have reinforced this for me.

I do not believe that if a form of standardized testing had been carried out, we would have found our students to have done appreciably better or worse than any similar group from the conventional programs. I believe, however, that we might discover that those students who took advantage of the Earthworks opportunity to plan their own learning found decision-making easier in future educational and vocational settings. I am especially sure that the richness of our shared experience is still meaningful to those former Earthworkers.

There are a few regrets. Earthworks, or Pioneer II, was established as an experimental program. The experiment involved allowing students to design their own curriculum. But observations and evaluation are the heart of any experiment, and we were neither observed nor evaluated by any agency inside or outside of the Ann Arbor Public Schools. Formed in haste, we then were ignored. Looking over memos I sent to administrators and pleas in our annual reports, I can see that we were aware of the need for support from the district to inform students and parents of what our program had to offer and to make enrollment more accessible. It is clear as well that we were aware of not receiving budgetary support that had been approved as part of the founding. Certainly, our complaints about the shortcomings of the Fritz Building were well documented. The response to these was mostly silence: even personal memos did not get answers.

It is likely that our attitude and non-conformism were in part responsible for this, but it was also built into the Earthworks position from the start. Ted Heusel, a school board member during this period, was to point to the establishment of the alternative schools as a reason why disruptions ended in the high schools—he had seen alternatives as a “safety valve”. We could see that counselors and administrators often were relieved to move difficult individuals into Earthworks, activists at first and problem students later. With little overt student unrest remaining, the easing of school crowding, and our own smug detachment, the need for alternatives was forgotten and the potential of the experiment for the rest of the school system ignored.



In May of 1980, my last school year in Ann Arbor, I went out to the Fritz Building just to look at it one more time. It had been transformed in less than two years. It now housed administrators(!) of the adult education programs for the school system. The parking lot had been nicely asphalted. Inside, there were newly hung ceilings of acoustic tile, with bright lighting fixtures. A worker there told me that the school district had put in a new furnace. ("The old one was of no use at all," he said, but of course I knew that.) The roof had finally been redone. Outside, I walked under the old oak trees, just beginning to get fully green and kicked a few of last fall's brown leaves as I circled around the rear of the Fritz Building to return to my car in the smooth, dry parking lot. In one spot I found the ground strangely mounded in a formless way, like someone had begun to excavate and had changed their mind and filled it in again. Probably a problem for whoever mows this, I thought, but I recognized that lump in the earth. It was the never-completed Bruce McPherson Memorial Mound, the one that was going to look like Yogi Bear when finished. And underneath it, I knew, was the Earthworks time capsule. Maybe it held lessons about time and space, or maybe insights about the value of self-directed education, or maybe just evidence of a group of people who were given the opportunity to share learning with each other and who relished it.

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