

Defacto Segregation In Monrovia, California
Almera A. Romney & Huntington Elementary School



By Mary Ellen Romney MacArthur

A Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DE FACTO SEGREGATION IN MONROVIA, CALIFORNIA:

ALMERA A. ROMNEY AND HUNTINGTON

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by

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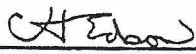
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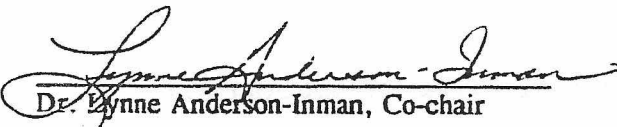
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In 1880 California passed legislation opening the state's schools to all children, regardless of ethnic or racial background. Many communities nonetheless maintained separate schools for children of color throughout much of the twentieth century. This study is a history of Huntington Elementary School in Monrovia, California, a typical *de facto* segregated school for black and Mexican children until its closing in 1970. The study describes the role of the school in Monrovia, a small city in Southern California's San Gabriel Valley with a long history of racial diversity.

For over fifty years Huntington was the only school black children were allowed to attend, its attendance boundaries reinforced by *de facto* residential segregation.

Children of Mexican and Japanese heritage were also assigned to Huntington. For many years the school's faculty turnover was high, and expectations were low.

This study is also the professional biography of a white female administrator, Almera A. Romney, who began teaching at Huntington in 1946. A Mormon from Utah with years of prior teaching experience, Romney had never known a black person before her assignment at Huntington. She was shocked by the inferior education provided to its students, and found that the teachers shared the school's low status and visibility. After Romney became principal in 1949, she fought to raise standards, to build faculty, and to win facilities and opportunities for Huntington's students. Working against district opposition, she formed an integrated team of teachers and parent volunteers who built a quality program to meet student needs. Romney's seventeen-year tenure at Huntington School encompassed the rise of the civil rights movement, the Brown v. Board of Education decision, and King's March on Washington. The school was closed in 1970, the year of her retirement.

The study of Huntington School contributes to an understanding of the dynamics of *de facto* segregation. Maintained by covert methods, separate schools were ignored by California's education officials until racial unrest and legal pressure in the late 1960s brought about change. The study also focusses upon the work done by capable educators who voluntarily remained at segregated schools in order to serve their students.

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-----, "Poetry Presentations: 'That's Entertainment!'" English Journal 78 (April 1989): 69-71.

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x

DEDICATION

To my mother,
Almera Anderson Romney,
whose book this is.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study is a history of one segregated school, Huntington Elementary School, in Monrovia, California. It is also the story of a white Mormon woman educator, Almera Anderson Romney, who worked as teacher and principal at Huntington School for seventeen years, from 1946 to 1963. Both the school and the educator now exist only in memory. In their own time neither was famous nor recognized as unique. What is unique is the fact that so little is known about schools such as Huntington, one of the many separate schools for black and Mexican children that existed throughout the Western United States during the past century. The stories of these schools--of the students who attended them, and of the teachers and principals who staffed them--are largely untold.

Although for many years no records were kept in California of the number of students in segregated schools, statistics now abound estimating how many children attended--and in many cases, still attend--schools where all (or nearly all) of the

students are non-white.¹ But statistical compendiums, no matter how detailed, cannot capture the complex human interactions that exist within these schools. This is particularly true in schools maintained specifically for black children, where separate education cannot be justified by the needs of non-English speaking students. In towns where black children have been deliberately kept within a specific neighborhood and required to attend a designated school (as they were in Monrovia), the only actual rationale for separation is race. One assumption underlying such segregation is that black children are inferior, and thus not worthy to be in white classrooms. As pioneering black psychologist Kenneth B. Clark explained nearly forty years ago, the self-concept of children who grow up under this stigma is often severely damaged:

As minority-group children learn the inferior status to which they are assigned and observe that they are usually segregated and isolated from the more privileged members of their society, they react with deep feelings of inferiority and with a sense of personal humiliation. Many of them become confused about their own personal worth.²

A significant aspect of such separation is that it is involuntary. Groups may choose to be separate for a multitude of reasons; segregation, however, is imposed by one

¹ See, for example, Racial and Ethnic Survey of California Public Schools, Part One, "Distribution of Pupils, Fall 1966" (Sacramento CA: California State Department of Education, 1967); and Racial Isolation in the Public Schools, Vol. I and II (Washington D.C.: United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1967). John and LaRee Caughey give an account of the long struggle to obtain an accurate racial census of students in Los Angeles schools in School Segregation on Our Doorstep: The Los Angeles Story (Los Angeles: Quail Books, 1966).

² Kenneth B. Clark, Prejudice and Your Child (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1955), 63.

group upon another. That distinction becomes vital when studying the history of Huntington School.

California's history of segregated schools for black children is relatively brief. In fact, few cities in the state had enough black children to fill a school until well into the twentieth century. Legally, the public schools in the state were opened to all children in 1880. How and when, then, did segregated schools arise in California? How were their invisible attendance boundaries drawn, and subsequently manipulated and maintained during the state's explosive growth? What was it like to attend a segregated school, and what was it like to work there? How did segregated schools fit into their communities? These questions, difficult and often emotionally-laden, cannot be answered simply or en masse. California is a large state, and each region has its own racial and educational history. By studying the history of one segregated school, perhaps issues that involve them all will be better understood.

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law

California's Invisible Students

The first studies of racial isolation in public schools, published in the late 1960s, disclosed the fact that three-quarters of the nation's black students attended schools that were ninety percent or more black. California's schools, although not as thoroughly segregated as those in southern states, were still often racially homogenous: in 1970 more than 150,000 of California's black students--over one-third--attended mostly-black schools. In the South it was common for black schools to have all-black faculties, but in the West the majority of black pupils had white

] Calif
Black

teachers, and almost all school principals in the West were white.³ In California alone, thousands of white teachers and hundreds of white principals spent at least part of their professional lives working at mostly-black schools. For most of the twentieth century, however, state officials carefully avoided mentioning the existence of separate black public schools. Two examples illustrate the extent of denial that existed in California concerning the existence of separate schools for black children:

A survey of the first one hundred years of education in California, written in the early 1950s by Roy W. Cloud, a long-time leader of the California State Teacher's Association, discussed "the Negro question" in California schools following the Civil War. According to Cloud, separate Negro schools were abolished by the state legislature in 1872 [actually 1880] and, "with the opening of public schools to the colored children of the state, a race problem was met in the right way." Cloud makes no further mention of education for black children.⁴

In a 1968 textbook written for university teacher education classes, Charles J. Falk of San Diego State College gave a brief ethnic survey of California in its early days, stating that "Negro slaves were the real outcasts."⁵ It is the only reference

³ U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, "Equality of Educational Opportunity" (Washington D.C., 1966), 15, 18; California State Department of Education, "Racial and Ethnic Distribution in California" (Sacramento CA: 1971), cited in Irving G. Hendrick, The Education of Non-Whites in California, 1849-1970 (San Francisco: P. & F. Associates, 1977), 114.

⁴ Roy W. Cloud, Education in California: Leaders, Organizations, and Accomplishments of the First Hundred Years (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1952), 45.

⁵ Charles J. Falk, The Development and Organization of Education in California (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), 7.

Falk makes to black Californians in his entire volume. He mentions neither the legislative and judicial actions (1874-1890) that officially opened the state's schools to all children, nor the legal battles underway against *de facto* segregation in California at the time his book was written.

In light of this silence, it is not surprising that teachers assigned to work at the state's many black schools during the first three-quarters of the century often felt as though they, as well as their students, were invisible. The majority of educators in California, as elsewhere, were middle class whites, not immune to the prejudices of their own race and social class. Educated before black history found a place in American textbooks, they arrived to teach at segregated schools oblivious to the social and cultural history of their new students, and without guidance from their own profession. Teachers were often overwhelmed at the prospect of working in black schools. A rapid turnover both of teachers and principals at segregated schools was common, with white educators either "succeeding" by winning transfers to "regular" district schools, or else failing and leaving the district. The low status of schools for minority children within school districts also carried over to low status for the professionals who worked at the schools. The consequence was often low faculty morale and lack of educational continuity, resulting in substandard schooling for students of color. (The few black teachers employed in California during the first half of this century had no alternatives; segregated schools were nearly always their only option for employment.) Remarkably, a number of dedicated individual

White
educator

educators, both black and white, nonetheless succeeded in working effectively within the system. Their stories deserve to be told.

Why Monrovia's Huntington School?

As human beings, we learn from stories. Reading about movements or trends, or looking at statistical charts for regions or cities, gives us only an abstract understanding of social problems. But perhaps by looking at a single case--in this case, the story of a single school and some of the people who staffed and attended the school during the last decades of segregation--we can better understand the human dimensions of separate education. Huntington School and the city of Monrovia lend themselves to such a study for several reasons:

First, Monrovia has been a remarkably stable community during its one hundred-plus years, especially considering its location in notoriously mobile Southern California. Many families, both black and white, whose names appeared in the city's early directories, have descendants still living in the area. Though Monrovia has grown since the turn of the century from a mostly-agricultural village to a suburban city, it has not been swallowed up by the spreading Los Angeles metropolis. Monrovia remains a small town at heart.⁶

⁶ A feature story, "It Might Be Mayberry," in the Los Angeles Times said of Monrovia, "This city of 36,000 has retained the feel of a friendly hamlet far from a big, tough metropolis. . . . People have such a hometown feeling" (25 August 1992, Metro section).

Second, unlike many of its urban neighbors, Monrovia has always been racially diverse, and it has maintained a fairly consistent ratio of white and black residents. For more than sixty years the city's black children attended just one elementary school, making their educational history relatively easy to track. In addition, Monrovia has a number of "old black families" who have been influential in community life for many years, and who remember much of the area's past.

Third, Monrovia's tradition of local daily newspapers provides rich source materials for tracing events within the community and its schools.⁷ In a metropolitan area the size of greater Los Angeles, news of a single school or even of a single school district was seldom covered by the big urban newspapers, but school news, though inconsistently reported, was a staple of the Monrovia News-Post.

Finally, I have the advantage of first-hand knowledge. I am "a local girl," and as such have enjoyed access to persons and resources that might otherwise be difficult for an outsider to locate. Even more significantly, I am the daughter of Almera Romney, the educator who spent seventeen years at Huntington School. As the inheritor of her personal papers, I have unique resources for the study of Huntington School, the Monrovia school system, and the town itself. All these factors have facilitated my study of Huntington School, and Romney's role there.

I was eleven years old when my mother began teaching at Huntington School. Through her I became very involved in the school and community it served, and in

⁷ The Monrovia News-Post ceased publication as a daily newspaper in 1974. The building which housed the newspaper on West Palm Avenue was refurbished and now serves as a community center.

many ways her story also became my story. Although I have tried to avoid it, the line between her vision and my own may sometimes blur. I have attempted to describe Huntington School both as she saw it, and as it appears now, set into the context of its time. In this task I have been helped immensely by Romney's co-workers and friends who shared their memories and insights with me. I recognize that my role as Romney's daughter has both facilitated my ability to gather information, and at the same time influenced the information provided to me. Wherever possible I have attempted to verify and augment my memories by finding additional documentation, but where such documentation is not provided, the reader can assume that I am relying on my own recollections and interpretations. I have chosen to write my historical account in the third person. Throughout the study I refer to my mother as "Almera Romney," and to myself as "Romney's elder daughter."

Monrovia's Missing History

When I began this project, I intended it to be primarily a professional biography of my mother. I assumed that I could turn to already-existing sources for Monrovia's school district records, and also for histories of Monrovia's people of color and of the school that long served their neighborhood. Little was available, however, in either category.

Monrovia's city school district was dominated for over twenty years—including over half the years of Romney's career in the district—by a superintendent who

preferred to run the school system by himself, behind closed doors. When the school board hired an outside consultant in 1956-57 to conduct a survey of the district, the investigating team awarded only fifteen of fifty possible points in the category, "Handling of [School Board] Minutes," including zero points for not keeping a duplicate set of minutes "in a designated place where they are readily available for inspection."⁸ In addition, board meetings during these years were not covered by the local newspaper, which instead ran news releases prepared by the superintendent himself. In subsequent years, as the school district passed through changes of administration and turbulent political times, no tradition evolved of keeping minutes of board meetings in a form accessible to the public. When the school district offices moved to a new location (adjacent to the former Huntington School) in 1983, nearly one hundred years of school records ended up "somewhere in boxes in the back of a warehouse," according to district officials. There they remain, inaccessible to the researcher. As a result, I have pieced together information about the policies and actions of the district from newspaper stories, interviews, my mother's personal papers, and the 1957 Melbo Report. Particularly helpful was the microfilmed record of fifty-nine years of Charlotte Avenue/Huntington School register pages which I was allowed to peruse at the Monrovia Unified School District office.

An even larger void exists in records of Monrovia's black history. I found, to my great surprise, fewer than a dozen references written prior to 1960 that even

⁸ Irving R. Melbo, "Report of the Survey: Monrovia City School District," April 1957, 28.

mentioned the existence of early black and Mexican residents in Monrovia, despite evidence that persons of color lived in the area from the town's beginnings. The historical "invisibility" of people of color in the early years of Monrovia seemed to me an important part of the story I wished to tell. I do not pretend to have become expert on the area's black history. Through interviews, newspaper stories, and readings in local and black history, however, I have tried to discover aspects of the lives of Monrovia's black residents during the middle years of this century to provide a setting for the story of Huntington School. I recognize my limitations in this area, and acknowledge my dependence on informants in the community who so generously shared their memories with me.

The information I gathered about Monrovia's early black settlers confirms that their remarkably interesting stories need to be written, and should be included in general histories of the region. I hope that this work serves as a stepping stone for future California historians who will move beyond the stories of the well-to-do white "founding fathers" of the area. According to historian Lawrence B. de Graaf, "The greatest vacuum in western black history lies in the area of black urban history."⁹ And in most cases, the smaller the city, the greater the vacuum. Educational historian Irving G. Hendrick, upon whose pioneering work I depended heavily, indicated how much remains to be done in this area:

While an author might wish to give greater attention to the policy issues suggested by the topic [of education for non-whites], much of the present need

⁹ Lawrence B. de Graaf, "Recognition, Racism, and Reflections on the Writing of Western Black History," Pacific Historical Review 44 (February 1975), 22, 42.

involves the less glamorous chore of fact gathering. . . . Most areas have hardly been touched. This is especially true for Indian education, the education of Mexican migrant children, and even for blacks in California cities between 1880 and 1960.¹⁰

Even more difficult than researching the education of black children, I discovered, is learning about a town's early Spanish-speaking residents, partly due to the language barrier and partly due to the inadequacy of census records. Because the Monrovia population of Mexican and Mexican-American students was small during the period encompassed by my research--and their stories even more seldom recorded--I have concentrated in large part on the story of Huntington School's black population, with apologies to the other minority students of color who also attended the school. Since Latinos are now the fastest-growing segment of Monrovia's population, I hope that the stories of the town's early Spanish-speaking settlers are recorded before the last bearers of memories of the early years of the century disappear.

I have struggled with nomenclature. I have chosen to use the term "children of color," borrowed from Lisa Delpit, a black educator whose writings on education I admire, to describe the entire group of children who are differentiated from the overall population by their non-Caucasian appearance.¹¹ "Children of color" accurately describes the students at Huntington School during my mother's years there, since the school always had a mixture of black and Mexican children and, at

¹⁰ Hendrick, Education of Non-Whites, ix.

¹¹ See Lisa D. Delpit, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator" and "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," Harvard Educational Review, 56 (November 1986), 379-385, and 58 (August 1988), 280-298.

times, a few Asian students. Noting the fact that my older black informants do not use the term "African-American" to describe themselves, I decided to follow their lead and use the terms "Negro" and "black," which also corresponds with usage in the literature of the times. By the same rationale I am using the terms "Spanish-speaking," "Spanish-surname," "Mexican," and "Mexican-American."

The pitfalls inherent in this undertaking are numerous and obvious, and I am sure that I will not succeed in avoiding them all. I plead guilty to following the path described by black historian John Blassingame, who warned that "most white writers who stress racist attitudes toward blacks are 'concentrating on white actions in the black drama.'"¹² White actions in Monrovia controlled the schooling of black children for many decades, and thus are a part of the town's unrecorded black history. The racial attitudes of Monrovia's white people, however, were no more homogeneous than were the reactions of blacks. I am convinced that the story of Huntington School, and the role of Almera Romney at that school, is worth telling, especially at this critical historical juncture in education of black Americans.

Organization of the Study

The history of Huntington School is a tapestry woven of various and multi-colored strands that reach back to Southern California's beginnings. In the chapters

¹² Quoted in de Graaf, "Western Black History," 48. Though de Graaf cites Blassingame's view, he disagrees with it, citing the advice of black nationalists "who have told white activists to learn about the prejudice in their own community before giving further advice" (n. 82).

that follow I attempt to trace the origin of each major strand--the town, the black community, the segregated school, the school's long-time principal--with emphasis on the intersection of the various strands as they came together at Huntington School in the years after the second World War.

Chapter II introduces Almera Romney and tells of her beginnings as a teacher at Huntington School in the 1940s. Also included is some of Romney's personal background, and a review of the legal status of school segregation in California up to that time. Chapter III takes a brief look at the history of the town of Monrovia, with emphasis on the long-standing role within the community of its citizens of color. Chapter IV tells the history of Huntington--originally known as Charlotte Avenue School--and follows its gradual evolution into a segregated school for minority children. It also tells of the events that eventually led to the construction, in the depths of the Great Depression, of a new Huntington School building in 1937. In Chapter V, I attempt to describe some of the circumstances of Monrovia's citizens of color in the middle decades of this century, looking particularly at the methods used to keep the town's black residents in a closely-defined geographic area. The story of Almera Romney is resumed in Chapter VI, beginning with her assuming the principalship of Huntington School in 1949, and looking at some of the personal factors affecting Romney's crusade to improve the quality of education at Huntington. Chapter VII continues the account of Romney's years as principal during the 1950s, including the Brown v. Board of Education decision and the lack of local response to the high court ruling. It also tells of the long battle waged against the school district

by Huntington's parents and staff to win more equitable treatment and facilities for their school. The last years of Romney's tenure as Huntington principal are covered in Chapter VIII, including her work to develop an effective, multi-ethnic faculty. Turbulent years of political change, both local and national, marked the end of Romney's years at Huntington. Chapter IX tells briefly of the last seven years of Huntington School's life, and the accelerating forces of the civil rights movement that eventually led to the school's closure in 1970. The conclusion, Chapter X, brings the story of Huntington School and Almera Romney to an end, and includes some overall observations.

My account ends with the closure of Huntington School following weeks of race riots at Monrovia High School in 1969. Ironically, twenty-three years later, my primary research trip to Southern California coincided with the massive, frightening Los Angeles riots of May 1992. The more things change, the more they stay the same.