

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

The strands woven together in this study--the town of Monrovia, Monrovia's black community, the town's school system, Huntington Elementary School, Almera Romney--are each in themselves entities with distinctive and separate stories worthy of being told. This study, however, has attempted to focus on the intersection of the strands. Though their stories were quite separate during the first half of the century, the town, the black neighborhood with its segregated school, and the white educator interacted in significant ways in the years following the Second World War. The era was one of significant social change: events in Monrovia reflected a nationwide revolution in interracial relationships. The details of Monrovia's patterns of interaction are unique, but the overall pattern is repeated continuously as cultures, communities, schools, and educators intersect in the process of weaving, patching, and reweaving the multi-hued tapestry of American society.

Almera Romney was only one of the individuals who played a significant role in the story of Huntington School. So often, however, we read of the history of towns and institutions in terms of men of power and influence. Romney's story is

Californians of the time, and in some ways were actually more tolerant of non-whites than many residents of surrounding communities. In contrast to some Southern California towns which displayed signs forbidding blacks within their boundaries, Monrovia had included racially-diverse residents from its beginnings.¹ As for Huntington School's former pupils, few would categorize themselves as "victims." Both the school and its former students occupy a significant place in the history of Monrovia. In addition, many Monrovia residents of color formed close bonds of friendship and camaraderie during their Huntington School days that later helped see them through difficult times.

Although few white Monrovians knew persons of color well, some acquaintance between the races resulted because all of the town's young people attended the same secondary schools--a level of school integration unusual for most of the twentieth century. Occasionally at Monrovia's high school a black athlete--or, in later years, a musician or student leader--would be so outstanding that color lines would blur, sometimes to the point where the black student would nearly be assimilated into white student life. (Bob Bartlett, Monrovia's black mayor who was first elected to the city council in 1974, had a head start on political life in Monrovia after his career as a football star at the high school and local community college. He is a Huntington School alumnus.) Though few white Monrovians ever entered a black person's home, black domestic help was a fixture for many years in affluent

¹ For examples of Southern California towns who tried to bar black residents, see Lawrence B. de Graaf, "The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890-1930," Pacific Historical Review 39 (August 1970): 323-352.

Monrovia households. Unlike Almera Romney who grew up in Utah without ever knowing a single black person, most Monrovians were at least superficially familiar with people of color.

Monrovia's white majority accepted the presence of Huntington School--known as Charlotte Avenue School until the late 1920s--much as they accepted the presence of minority residents. Beginning as a true neighborhood school when it opened in 1907, it became a segregated school gradually, by custom rather than by law, largely unnoticed by many in town (although the school was perceived as a center of black community life by all Monrovia residents). Educational circumstances at the school, however, were unknown and invisible to most white Monrovians. In that respect the problems of Huntington School were similar to those suffered by many tenants in the neighborhood: control was in the hands of white absentee landlords who had little knowledge of or interest in the black neighborhood. Low socioeconomic status and lack of political power were perhaps more of a handicap to area residents than their skin color.

Educators assigned to teach at separate schools such as Huntington often experienced a situation oddly parallel to that of their students. In this respect Romney's story helps to illuminate the history of segregated education in California. When she was assigned to teach at Huntington School she suddenly found herself sharing the some of the indignities of the families whose children she taught: official neglect, indifference, and unequal treatment. This experience was life-changing for Romney. To borrow her own words, she went from being "blind and ignorant,

indifferent and unconcerned" about the effects of racial discrimination to being personally committed to working for racial equality. But Romney was never part of a "movement" within education. Teachers work in extraordinary isolation from their peers even within a single school, let alone within a district or a region. Even as a principal, Romney's battles on behalf of Huntington School were fought in isolation. There were no other principals in Monrovia's school district in a similar situation, and there was no network in California to connect the hundreds of principals--and thousands of teachers--who struggled to do their jobs in circumstances similar to Romney's. In most cases they never even knew of one another's existence. Their isolation from their colleagues was one result of the blind eye turned to segregated schools in California for most of the twentieth century.

Ostensibly California's schools "have always been racially integrated," as then-Governor Ronald Reagan indicated in his 1970 comment (*supra* p. 30); therefore segregated schools, and the teachers and principals who worked at segregated schools, did not exist. Official disregard of the needs of children of color extended to the professional educators assigned to serve them. It is probable that most were as poorly prepared for the experience as Romney was when she began teaching at Huntington School in 1946. Nothing could have been more frustrating for teachers assigned to separate schools, black or white, than their own profession's adamant silence on the actual circumstances of schools for black children.

Much of the responsibility for neglect of California's minority-group children and their teachers must be assigned to the state's educational leaders. This study has

already listed several examples of such neglect, but perhaps one more statistic will underscore the magnitude of the problem: from 1948 to 1961 (inclusive), the California State Department of Education issued well over 500 publications, most of them guidelines on specific educational topics, but only one, Teachers' Guide to Education of Spanish-speaking Children (prepared by the staff in elementary education, Sacramento, 1952) dealt with the education of non-white children. Although the state covered topics as diverse as repair of auto-shop machinery, guidelines for school secretaries, and two booklets on the education of children with cerebral palsy, neither the words "Negro" nor "black" appear in a single title published during the period encompassing nearly all of the years Romney was principal of Huntington School.² The Department of Education's silence emphasizes the void encountered by teachers who attempted to educate themselves about their students of color. It is hard for us, at the end of the twentieth century, to recreate the nearly complete absence of black faces and black history that existed earlier in the century--in textbooks, history books, the media, university classrooms, and board rooms. It is far from surprising, then, that both teachers and students at California's many segregated schools suffered from low status and often, low self-esteem. Perhaps the surprise is the number of students who succeeded in obtaining the skills they needed at segregated schools, and the number of dedicated professionals such as

² Information is based on a computer search of all the University of California libraries through their union catalog MELVYL, March 1993.

Romney and her associates who chose to teach there, surmounting the barriers raised by a hypocritical system in order to carry on their work.

The fact remains that the people of Monrovia missed an extraordinary opportunity to lead out and accomplish peaceful, voluntary elementary school integration earlier in the 1960s. Despite all efforts by citizens of good will, it was violence at the high school and pressure from the state that finally served as a catalyst for change. Huntington School, and Monrovia itself, epitomized "the way it was" in the western United States.

The Demise of Huntington School

Why were the teachers, parents, and principal who had worked so long to lift the quality of education for minority children in Monrovia not consulted when the time finally arrived to end *de facto* segregation in the community? By the late 1960s, at the same time that Monrovia's school leaders jumped belatedly on the federal compensatory education bandwagon, faith was already waning in lavish spending as the solution to educational problems of the nation's "culturally deprived" students. Instead, many educators and sociologists--and in some cases, federal courts--were pushing for elimination of segregated schools for non-white children by pupil integration. In 1966 historian Jack D. Forbes wrote,

The current trend among leading school authorities is to regard the separate uni-ethnic school as a disadvantaged school no matter how "excellent" its

program and to regard ethnic integration as a major step forward in the education of minority group children.³

Test scores indicated that black children seemed to do better in integrated schools, but the low status of non-white separate schools made it difficult to find comparable groups of children to test. In Forbes' view it was ironic that the Black Power movement of the 1960s arose at the same time pressure was mounting to close black neighborhood schools such as Monrovia's Huntington. School integration promised black families access to benefits previously enjoyed at schools run by the white majority for their children--but many black parents feared that by sending their children to integrated schools, they would lose the opportunity to participate in their children's schooling. Or, as Forbes asked,

More to the point, can integration be forced upon a minority if that integration means essentially that the minority parents will possess no "neighborhood" school or schools under their own control or influence and that their children will be spread among the district's population in such a way as to render more difficult the preservation of the group's cultural-ethnic identity?⁴

Fear of losing what little control they had over their children's education caused many black parents to fight to the bitter end to keep Huntington School open. It was a fear Almera Romney shared. While on one hand she represented the white hand controlling black education that activists such as Forbes resented, she was also the principal who stayed at Huntington School nearly three times longer than any of her

³ Jack D. Forbes, Afro-Americans in the Far West: A Handbook for Educators (Berkeley CA: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1966), 51. I have drawn heavily from Forbes' excellent Chapter VI, "Segregation and Integration: The Multi-Ethnic or Uni-Ethnic School."

⁴ Ibid, 54.

peers, long enough to know the school's families and to build a base of community support and participation at the school. Romney had watched as integration began quite naturally at Santa Fe School as black families settled south of the freeway route, and the boundary between Wild Rose School and Huntington--always an artificial one--was beginning to break down as a few black families who lived north of Huntington School enrolled their children at Wild Rose. If Huntington were a truly well-run and well-staffed neighborhood school with an integrated faculty, good resources, high standards, and strong community support (rather than a segregated school that black children were compelled to attend), it would be, Romney felt, a source of neighborhood pride. Many leaders in the black community, as well as Romney, were not happy about giving up on Huntington School.

Romney, while principal at Huntington, believed in the necessity of building pride and confidence in her students. She searched continually for capable black and Spanish-speaking teachers for the school. She scoured catalogs for biographies of Americans of color, searched for films and pictures about minority-group history, acquired records by black musicians, and talked to textbook representatives about including stories about non-white children in reading books. Would all these efforts be nullified when Huntington School was closed and its students divided up? Would children of color become an invisible minority at each of Monrovia's previously-white elementary schools, and would their parents be willing to participate in mostly-white meetings in unfamiliar neighborhoods? During the final years of Romney's career she worked with a powerful white PTA at Mayflower School. She worried that the hard-

working parent volunteers at Huntington School, some of whom worked as domestics in Mayflower-area homes, might hesitate to step forward to participate in Mayflower's PTA. Romney's doubts about the fairness of Monrovia's integration plan kept her silent as her career came to an end. Her opinion had not been solicited, in any case. Her generation of human rights leaders, both black and white, had been replaced with impatient new voices.

In September 1970, school integration came peacefully to Monrovia. According to Assistant Superintendent Ken Richardson, the results were "beautiful--no incidents at all."⁵ Although many "for sale" signs sprouted in white Monrovia neighborhoods, a deep recession then gripping area industry had nearly frozen the real estate market, and few white families actually left the school district. It was the white parents of the former Santa Fe Elementary School who were most unhappy, according to Monrovia school administrator Don Montgomery.⁶ Their school, previously the district's largest and only truly integrated elementary site, was now a new middle school, and all its former students, along with Huntington's, were bussed to other locations. Huntington School's building became the site of Monrovia's continuation high school.

In 1971, the Freedom Foundation awarded its American Educator Medal to Monrovia school superintendent William Lacey, in recognition for "integrating

⁵ "School Integration Plan in Operation, 'No Incidents,'" Monrovia News-Post, 11 September 1970.

⁶ Don Montgomery, personal interview with author, Monrovia, California, 13 February 1993.

Huntington School students throughout the district."⁷ Also in 1971, Romney's essay "All Children are Alike unto Me," recounting her experiences as a Mormon working at a black school, was published in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought. The following year the journal awarded her essay first prize for religious literature in its annual writing awards.⁸

Almera Anderson Romney died in 1980 at the age of seventy-six, after years of illness. She needs no apologist for her role in Huntington School's history. During her fourteen years as Huntington's principal Romney worked valiantly to improve the opportunities available to her pupils. Although she headed a segregated school that operated under far from ideal circumstances, most observers felt that under Romney's direction the school staff offered a quality education to its students. Romney's expectations and standards were high. She mobilized an effective team of teachers and parent volunteers, and she studied the needs of her pupils and made every effort to meet them. Mary Carr, looking back at the years that her five children were pupils at Huntington School, remembered fondly the many hours she spent as a volunteer working closely with Romney. She concluded,

I feel that our lives were richer by far for having known her. She was such a wonderful person. . . . It's not exaggerated. I never would have worked as

⁷ Peter C. Ostrye, Monrovia Centennial Review: 1886-1986 (Monrovia CA: Monrovia Centennial Committee, 1985), 88.

⁸ Almera A. Romney, "All Children are Alike unto Me," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 6 (Summer 1971): 53-59; "Dialogue Prizes," Dialogue 7 (Spring 1972): inside back cover.

hard at any school as I worked at Huntington School if it had not been for Almera Romney.⁹

Huntington School was not an easy assignment for an educator, but far more difficult for Romney was working within a system that assigned second-class status to her students. Romney put herself on the line to fight for the needs of Huntington School. In the end, however, she recognized that even her best efforts were not enough to compensate for the stigma of segregation.

⁹ Mary Louise Gadbury Carr, personal interview with author, Monrovia, California, 28 April 1992.

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