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Chicago High School Football Struggles, the Fight for Faculty Control, and the War against Secret Societies, 1898-1908

In the decade from 1898 to 1908, three developments helped shape the American public high school into the institution that we know today. Public high schools were moving from being almost solely college preparatory institutions serving a small sliver of the middle and upper classes to becoming broader educational institutions serving a much larger segment of the student population from all kinds of socio-economic backgrounds. During this same period, school administrators were in the process of taking control of the extra curriculum, notably sports and athletics, which had previously been run by the students. And finally, high school educators succeeded during this era in suppressing the activities of secret societies (i.e. fraternities and sororities) in the schools and at the same time their domination of the extracurriculum. The author contends that these were not merely coincidental developments, but they are all interconnected and related to the kind of educational institution Americans wanted their high schools to be at the onset of the twentieth century.

In the standard story on how sports evolved in the high schools, sport historians have asserted that the imposition of faculty coaching and administrative control was generally accepted and appreciated by the students. The accounts present a picture of students welcoming the reforms and the assumption of control by school authorities, with a minimum of conflict, essentially because their student-run programs were filled with abuses that the students wanted ended as well. This paper presents a story that is more mixed, especially if one considers the existence of fraternities and

sororities in the public schools as part of the battle over control of the extracurriculum; vigorous student opposition to faculty attempts to suppress the secret societies was a battle that ultimately rested on who in the school controlled sports and other areas of the extracurriculum.

This paper will show how Chicago-area public high school football programs through its various triumphs and travails in the decade from 1898 to 1908 served as the primary area of conflict, as well as the most emblematic, in the educational establishment's drive to take control of the extracurriculum and to suppress secret societies in the city's schools. Thus, in the fall of every year as the schools reopened, the student battles with the faculty over the extracurriculum and secret societies manifested itself immediately on the football field. The accumulated evidence of a student revolt in the football league in 1902, faculty abandonment of the football league to student control during 1906 and 1907, numerous battles in the courts involving the "frat" status of football players, and other student-faculty conflicts illuminated the larger battle over the meaning of the American high school in the first decade of the last century.
