Object Lesson: The High School Yearbook

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Abstract
In the fall of 1984, high school senior Beth Ellsworth and her yearbook staff were facing a tough task: how to tell the story of the good things that were happening at Harlan Community High School, while at the same time acknowledging the pain that they and their classmates were feeling in the wake of the agricultural crisis that was sweeping Iowa. While the obvious choice would be to focus in on a big event that was happening that year, or to do a "sign of the times" yearbook, none of that was particularly appealing. After all, in small-town Iowa in 1984, “this isn’t really inspiring, this sign of the times,” as Ellsworth reflected. The staff made a decision. “The way things were going at that time were really not so great, so instead of shying away from that we opted to tell it like it was.” The result was a remarkable Farm Crisis document, one that reminds us that there is a great deal to be learned about youth culture, both within and outside of the school, from the seemingly simple high school yearbook.

Disciplines
Cultural History | Labor History | United States History | Women's History

Comments
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In the fall of 1984, high school senior Beth Ellsworth and her yearbook staff were facing a tough task: how to tell the story of the good things that were happening at Harlan Community High School, while at the same time acknowledging the pain that they and their classmates were feeling in the wake of the agricultural crisis that was sweeping Iowa. While the obvious choice would be to focus in on a big event that was happening that year, or to do a “sign of the times” yearbook, none of that was particularly appealing. After all, in small-town Iowa in 1984, “this isn’t really inspiring, this sign of the times,” as Ellsworth reflected. The staff made a decision. “The way things were going at that time were really not so great, so instead of shying away from that we opted to tell it like it was.”¹ The result was a remarkable Farm Crisis document, one that reminds us that there is a great deal to be learned about youth culture, both within and outside of the school, from the seemingly simple high school yearbook.

For historians interested in late twentieth century youth, sources generated by young people can be hard to find. Letters and diaries have yet to make their way into collections, and other first-hand sources are scarce. Yearbooks, written by teenagers, for teenagers, would seem to be a logical choice for exploring the ins and outs of youth culture. The historians most likely to use high school yearbooks are, not surprisingly, those studying education. Brian K. Clardy examined *The Devilier*, the yearbook of South Fulton High School, in Tennessee, to flesh out his story of desegregation at that school, showing the many ways that even in a supposedly desegregated school, African American students suffered exclusion.² Other historians using yearbooks to tackle civil rights stories include John Hale and David M. Callejo-Perez.³ Using yearbooks in a different way, we find Sara Dwyer-McNulty diving into early twentieth century
high school annuals in search of girls’ presentations of themselves, within the context of the 1920s parochial school. She found that, in spite of their “uniform” appearance, “Catholic school girls took their cues from both the youth culture and the Church to present an identity distinctly their own.” In these four cases, yearbooks allowed historians a glimpse of student life in the twentieth century high school.

Using yearbooks to examine the history of education is a logical choice, but let’s suppose that you want to use yearbooks for a different purpose. Let’s suppose that you want to use the high school yearbook to explore an era, and not simply the way teenagers experienced that era in the classroom. I am in the middle of a project examining the social history of the Farm Crisis in Iowa. I want to know how Iowans in general experienced that decade, but especially how teenagers and young adults experienced the 1980s. They were, of course, among the first to abandon rural communities when their parents lost farms and jobs disappeared. For them, what did youth culture look like, and in what ways did the events of the decade influence how they felt about the place in which they lived? Yearbooks can help to answer these questions.

To a remarkable degree, late twentieth century high school yearbooks chronicle student life outside the classroom. Although yearbooks dating to the 1960s or 1970s, and before, often provide little in the way of editorial content, those of the last decades of the 20th century are chock full of commentary. If you want to know what teenagers did in their off hours, yearbooks will tell you. In the small towns of 1980s Iowa, teenagers devoted Friday and Saturday nights to cruising. They also seem to have spent a considerable amount of time drinking illegally, something that several yearbooks rather daringly documented. Ames High School served a university town, and its yearbook staff did not shy away from controversial topics. Ames High’s 1984 Spirit detailed the various alcohol-related storms that had arisen during the year, as well as
the measures that both the school’s administrators and students had taken to resolve the
problems. In 1987, student drinking merited a two page spread, heavily illustrated, entitled
“Readily Available.”5 Those students who weren’t cruising and drinking appear to have been
working. Many yearbooks featured discussions of stingy parents and the resulting quest for after
school and weekend jobs. Interestingly, the advertisements placed in some yearbooks included
pictures of the students who worked for that particular business.6

Do teenagers notice the news? Whether teenagers as a whole did or not, yearbooks staffs
definitely did. Many yearbooks included special sections devoted to the local, state and national
news, although with widely varying levels of detail. Most included a few stock images
memorializing the year’s events, such as pictures of the Challenger disaster or Britain’s Princess
Diana with her first child. (Prince William would probably be surprised at the number of
yearbooks in which his baby pictures featured.)7 Because of Iowa’s role as the home of the first
caucus of the presidential election season, many yearbooks reported on visits by political figures
to their town or even their school. In the mid-1980s, the young adult children of Democratic
candidates Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro visited Ames. Ted Mondale and John Zaccaro
met with students Ames High School on September 10, 1985, and the candidates’ sons
“presented their parents’ beliefs on taxes, nuclear weapons, war in South America and the legal
drinking age.” In 1988, Jesse Jackson came to Harlan Community High School, and as the
excited staffer for the yearbook noted, “HE SHOOK HANDS WITH EVERYONE! I didn’t
think he’d ever get to me.”8 Because the 1980s were hard times in Iowa, due to a deep and
painful crisis in agriculture, yearbook staffs reported on the ways in which that crisis affected
their lives, in the form of business failures, plant closures, slashed school budgets, and forced
farm sales. The shape of the local community influenced the way in which the students understood and depicted the crisis.

There are many other social and cultural issues embedded in these yearbooks from the eighties. In a number of them, graduating seniors discussed their future plans, giving me a glimpse into gendered expectations of work and changes in the number of students pursuing higher education. Because some yearbooks explore futuristic themes, such as Boone High School’s 1982 publication, I have a bit better idea of the way in which those teens (or at least the yearbook staff) perceived the shape of the world to come. (In case you’re curious, it included lots of space ships and computers.) Some yearbooks showed evidence of students grappling earnestly (or perhaps with a desire to shock) with the controversies of the day. Ames High’s yearbook went far beyond discussing alcohol, and included stories about gay students coming out, AIDS, abortion, and other controversies that engaged the adult public. The Ames Spirit, the product of a university-dominated community, was, however, unusual. The yearbooks for the small towns of Story City and Nevada, also in the same county, devoted considerably less space to similar hot button issues. These, however, could be equally surprising, in their own way. In 1985, Nevada High School used a “Purple Reign” theme for its yearbook, celebrating both Prince and the school colors. Perhaps it is a sign of my own lack of imagination, but I had not expected that Prince would be so popular in rural Iowa.

The most remarkable yearbook I’ve encountered is Harlan Community High School’s 1985 Harpoon. Front to back, this yearbook is a Farm Crisis document, examining the way in which the devastation facing area farmers disrupted community life. I had the good fortune (thanks to the internet) of finding the editor of that yearbook, Beth Ellsworth, who was able to give me additional information about the thinking that went into the yearbook theme,
“Something’s Missing.” Throughout the text, the yearbook staff invited their peers to reflect on conditions throughout the county. Harlan Community High School is located in the county seat, but is a consolidated school, serving families throughout the southern half of Shelby County. By 1984, western Iowa was in the grip of the agricultural crisis, with many bankrupt farmers, growing rural depopulation, and the small city of Harlan feeling the pain of the disaster in the countryside.\textsuperscript{12} The yearbook staff recognized the situation, beginning with a somber shot of a dark and empty school hallway, and the words “Something’s Missing.” The narrative, as it unfolded, pulled no punches: “Population growth has staggered and fallen in the Midwest as there are few jobs to keep people here. In the past year we have seen many of our own businesses close down . . . Over 150 houses were for sale in Harlan and things don’t look much brighter in the near future.”\textsuperscript{13} The writers mourned the friends and faculty members who had left, and commented “There were no new faculty members this year.”\textsuperscript{14} The narrative asked the members of the high school community to consider their situation. “Are we missing out here in ‘Small town’ Iowa? Is it all toil, humdrum and drudgery? Is this ‘no where city’ occupied only by corny farm folk? Do we occupy these seats only in anticipation of `getting out of this hole’ and on to other things? Life is sometimes what you make it. Is something missing? You decide.”\textsuperscript{15} While other yearbooks only provided the occasional glimpse into teenagers’ perceptions of the Farm Crisis, the 1985 \textit{Harpoon} provided compelling evidence that at least some young people were thoroughly and painfully aware of the decade’s troubles.

One of the most interesting, and perhaps even daring, commentaries appeared deep in the volume, on page 147. Between two sets of senior pictures were the words, “Seniors Going . . . Gone.” The writer noted, “In recent years, Shelby County has lost many youth. Many of the seniors intend to leave both Shelby County and Iowa. They find their home-town boring and
have discovered they can make more money and find more opportunities in other parts of the country.” The author concluded, “These seniors may be the exception. They seem quite adamant about leaving and staying away.” The yearbook staff had taken the bull by the horns and confronted one of the most debilitating problems facing rural communities throughout Iowa: the loss of their young people.

According to editor Beth Ellsworth, the yearbook staff carefully considered this approach to the year’s events. Given the seriousness of the crisis, just reporting the news from inside the high school did not seem appropriate. Harlan’s persistently powerful football team was not the biggest story of the year. These were “tough times,” and their peers’ families were suffering. One of their biggest concerns was to represent as much of their community as possible. Something not apparent in this and other yearbooks from the 1980s is that the divisions ran deep at Harlan Community High School, existing from the years when smaller communities had lost their high schools, and their students had boarded buses for the consolidated high school in Harlan. According to Ellsworth, people still talked about the “townies versus the colonies,” “colonies” being a derogatory term for the outlying farm communities. In spite of this, the yearbook staff wanted their project to provide a single vision, reflecting the high school motto, “joined as one, we get the job done.” They also believed it was important to allow their peers to come to their own conclusions about the community and its future. They preferred not to be completely negative, and repeatedly circled back to the refrain, “you decide.” They hoped to lead their readers to the “position that there are always positive things . . . but in the end, it’s you. I guess that was our focus on the literary, trying to get people to think from their own perspectives about their own year in school.” This approach emerged from long discussions between the staff and their sponsor, biology teacher Jim Tiller. It was the only honest approach
they could imagine, given the circumstances of this very difficult year, at the height of the Farm Crisis.\(^\text{17}\)

High school yearbooks are layered documents.\(^\text{18}\) As I discovered by interviewing Beth Ellsworth, what I saw on the surface was indeed correct; the 1985 *Harpoon* reflected the turmoil students were feeling in response to the ravages of the Farm Crisis. What I would not have found without the interview was the deeper story of long-standing county-wide divisions, and a desire on the part of a group of high school students to show solidarity with peers whose families were suffering. The story the students wanted to tell extended beyond the walls of the school, to the town square, and out into the fields of surrounding Shelby County.

I actually gasped – and nearly cried – when I found this yearbook. It confirmed for me the importance of examining young people’s understanding of the Farm Crisis, in order to appreciate better the whole range of family and community experiences. This document’s existence confirmed to me that yearbooks can be an especially useful source for the historian of youth. In the simplest terms, they offer a glimpse into the ways in which young people perceived and chose to define one of the most important institutions in their lives, the high school. The uses of these books, however, can extend well beyond the obvious. While I am using yearbooks to explore the way in which youngsters thought about a state-wide crisis, the possibilities are endless. Yearbooks hold up a mirror to the students, their community, and their perceptions of the larger world. Few sources are written by and for young people in the same way as the high school yearbook.
1 Beth Ellsworth, interview with Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, September 27, 2016.


6 Until the end of the 1980s, this was a regular feature in the Ames High School *Spirit*.


9 Boone High’s 1982 *Scroll* had a cover featuring a space ship, a section of predictions about the shape of students’ future lives, and an illustration featuring the “Boone Astro School 2020.” *The Scroll* (Boone, Iowa: Boone High School, 1982), cover, 1, 236.

It’s clear that this is a reference to Prince and his music, rather than just a coincidence. The frontispiece includes a photograph of a young man with longish hair, wearing shoes and clothing reminiscent of Prince’s style. He’s holding an electric guitar. *The Cub* (Nevada, Iowa: Nevada High School, 1985), cover and frontispiece.

A quick look at the Harlan newspapers, the *Harlan News-Advertiser* and *Harlan Tribune*, confirms the depth of the crisis facing the community. The number of homes and farms for sale in the county was staggering.


Ibid., 4.

Ibid., 7.

Ibid., 147.

Ellsworth.

I don’t even have room to explore some of the other layers. First, it’s not just the printed text that is of interest. Most yearbooks in personal collections include numerous messages from friends, acquaintances and teachers to the book’s owner. These messages might potentially tell the historian a great deal about the ways in which communication between teenagers, as well as between teenagers and adults, has changed over time. Another issue for the historian to ponder is the way in which yearbooks, as objects, are treated by those with a personal, rather than professional, interest in their contents. I was astounded to find that large numbers of the books held in libraries and historical societies had been defaced, with pictures of students removed from many issues. One librarian speculated to me that people were removing their exes from the historical record. They might also be removing younger, and what they perceive as unattractive, versions of themselves. Yearbooks are also often stolen. Whatever the reasons for the
vandalism and theft, the result is that yearbooks are often kept behind the counter, only to be used within sight of the librarian’s desk. As a result of this sad, but perhaps explainable, destructive behavior, library collections of yearbooks are often incomplete in one way or another.