

What Did It Mean?

They Closed Their Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951-1964, by Bob Smith (University of North Carolina Press, 281 pp. \$5.95), is an account of the events leading up to and through the five years when the public schools of Prince Edward were closed in order to avoid desegregation. The reviewer is a novelist and free-lance writer.

By PAUL JOHNSON

PRINCE EDWARD is a name to conjure with—and so many persons have done precisely that during the past decade and a half that we might well have despaired of ever learning what actually transpired there.

In 1959 Prince Edward County, Virginia, chose to close the public schools rather than obey a federal court order to desegregate. The schools remained closed for five years, during four of which Negro students of the county received no schooling at all. Last September the doors opened again—this time for desegregated classes. The ordeal was over legally. But what did it mean?

Seeking the answers, Bob Smith, editorial page editor of the Charlotte, North Carolina, *News*, had to go back to April 1951, when the county first received national publicity through a dramatic strike organized and executed by Negro students protesting the conditions in their high school. That publicity served only to widen the tremendous gulf between the white and Negro populations, to harden already intransigent attitudes, and to accelerate an inexorable process that resulted in an experience unique not only in the annals of the civil rights movement but in all of American history—the only case on record where a community chose to terminate so basic a democratic institution as public education rather than conform to the directives of the highest court in the land.

There are a great many other, less simple reasons why Prince Edward's story is unique. While Mr. Smith would not pretend to have discovered them all, he has done a fuller, deeper, and wiser job than we had any reason to expect. Starting in 1959, when he was an associate editor of the Norfolk, Virginia, *Pilot*, he spent his free time and weekends immersed in the Prince Edward school situation, interviewing, reading, and re-

reading pertinent newspaper stories, and personally observing the unfolding events. His book is really, he asserts in his preface, "the outgrowth of a desire to produce a contemporary history of race relations in the South that would be so painfully specific in human detail that the reader would be hard pressed ever to hide again behind the comforting bulk of ideology." In this he falls short; this is a story of Prince Edward in particular and not that of the South. But then, too, this is one of those books whose faults are nearly always as instructive as the virtues.

A refusal to deal in abstractions, especially when treating a subject such as this one, is certainly praiseworthy. To reach into a mess of tangled events and pluck out glowing messages is not necessarily to begin to understand it. But, on the other hand, a story can be as specific and unique and intensely complicated as you please, without becoming particularly meaningful. Such conundrums, as cryptic as they might seem, are entirely pertinent here. Much of the meaning, for us, of Prince Edward must lie in the apparent lack of any clear one. And much of the strength of *They Closed Their Schools* will be found in the dramatic weaknesses of the tale it tells.

To begin with, there is no beginning—any more than there is an end in sight. Smith has striven nobly, but the farther down he dug, the more there was still to uncover. Finally he decided to start with one participant, Leslie Griffin, as he returns to Farmville, the county seat,

in 1949, to help with the preaching at his father's church. This was not at all a bad choice. The younger Griffin is a looming figure, pivotal—if the story can be said to have any pivots. He has been at war, at college, living in the North. He has joined the NAACP. In short, he is not the same person who went away. But in Farmville, he sees immediately, "very little had changed."

Griffin introduced, we wade into the murky subject of the local power structure. Then comes the students' strike. The hopeful excitement is marvelous while it lasts, and Barbara Johns, the leader, would be a splendid heroine if this were only fiction. Ah, yes, if this were only fiction, there would have to be a cathartic outcome, defeat, or victory. Certainly no novelist could ever get away with what we have here—fourteen years of anticlimax, with Barbara becoming a housewife in the North while the fire she helped to ignite smolders on.

There are many other characters, black and white, who strut about this cramped stage for a while. We come to feel we've lived for years across the street from them—we know them that well, and that poorly. They are as individual, and as inscrutable, as neighbors. They make their speeches and gestures and then, when we begin to think there *must* be a showdown this time, they shuffle quickly away into the wings. Frustration follows fascination, becomes the only fascination, and avant-garde theater receives an ironic confirmation from this strangest of quarters. Prince Edward is waiting for Godot, and long before he finally arrives, in nine long black robes, we have sensed that this last can only be the bitterest joke of all. Despite the white leaders who envisioned a glorious rallying point for segregationists everywhere, and despite the NAACP strategists who counted upon winning a test case with far-

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PRENTICE-HALL

**UP THE
DOWN
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reaching implications, there simply was "no large Constitutional question" to be settled. What's more, by the time the "long, deadening stalemate" produced by "absolute reliance . . . on both sides" upon "judicial oligarchy" had been ended, the civil rights movement had passed Prince Edward by. The real answers were no longer to be looked for in the courts, but rather in the streets, and the final results in Prince Edward were of barely more than local consequence. The footlights come up slowly on the faces of the fooled: "Prince Edward ended finally as a special case."

And what, if anything, has changed? The Negro children still go to segregated schools, after five years of no public schools at all. They go to the formerly white schools, it's true, and these are certainly better plants than their old "temporary" tarpaper shacks. But the white children, all but a handful, go to their private schools. On the strictly debit side, friendships and all other kinds of relations have been strained beyond all quick healing. (But "in the broad sense of the word," as Mr. Smith points out, "there have never been race relations in Prince Edward.")

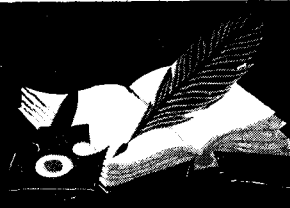
WHILE abiding these ultimate ironies, however, the reader's main source of satisfaction is in the persistent destruction of all the clichés. For one of the more obvious examples, there is the testimony of Helen Baker, a Friends field worker: "I came expecting all sorts of strife and tension and I have found instead a great restraint and unfailing courtesy. These people are not gun-toting bums, they are gentlemen." Virginia, of course, is not Mississippi or Alabama. But this does not mean that solutions here are any closer to hand.

There is also, throughout, an instructive (if seldom explicit) dialogue going on between two currently conflicting democratic ideals: local autonomy and public education.

And then there are the victims, the children, whose loss can neither be assessed nor repaired. They were the battleground, and they remain the sole monument and meaning of it all. They were (we tend, unforgivably, to forget this) "the ultimate stakes."

It should be reiterated that Mr. Smith's is not a brilliant book. Its quietly asserted conclusions are tentative, or conceivably controvertible, or do not reach very far. And there is not one really stirring, quotable passage, aside from the actual words of some of the participants. But we do not need brilliance. Not this time, at this point in the game. We need the facts of the matter, fairly and thoroughly investigated. For that, Mr. Smith deserves more gratitude than praise, possibly, but he ought to have quite a lot of both coming to him.

New Books



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By Robert J. Havighurst and J. Roberto Moreira. University of Pittsburgh Press. 263 pp. \$6. A study of the social and economic forces shaping education in one of the key nations of South America.

Formative Ideas in American Education from the Colonial Period to the Present.

By V. T. Thayer. Dodd, Mead and Company. 394 pp. Paperback, \$3.95. Traces the various schools of our education philosophy and links them to the cultural factors and historical influences responsible for producing them.

Vacations Abroad, 1965. *Unesco Publications Center (317 East 34th St., New York, N.Y. 10016). 162 pp. Paperback, \$2. International Directory of Summer Courses, Study Tours and Work Camps.*

Research on the Talented. *By Miriam L. Goldberg. Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University. 72 pp. Paperback, \$1.50. Compares recent findings with those from past research; examines the work of current projects on perennial, unsolved problems and on new uncharted ground.*

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