

This project examines the history of the high school prom tradition. Proms emerged in the early twentieth century as a component of social education, a result of new theories of adolescent development and a rapidly expanding public school system. Viewing individual development as a fragile process, educators increasingly recognized their role in guiding the attitudes and behavior of young people. In an effort to solve the growing problem of juvenile delinquency and ensure the stability of American society, schools began offering classes and extracurricular activities designed to promote social values. At the prom, students put these lessons into practice, demonstrating their maturity, normality, and commitment to the dominant social values. The emphasis on gendered appearance and heterosexual romance, thoroughly engrained in the prom tradition, reinforced the norms and expectations of social education and of American society more broadly. This thesis looks at the historical origins of the high school prom ritual, beginning with earlier rituals that influenced its development and continuing with the twentieth century conditions that allowed it to become a national phenomenon, crossing geographic, economic, and racial divides. Essays by school teachers and administrators combined with popular culture sources illustrate how the prom served as a means of social training, reinforcing traditional ideals of gender and sexuality.