



Froebel Elementary School, 1945. (image courtesy of the Chicago Board of Education Archive)

Froebel School was built in 1885 at the corner of Clayton Street and Robey Avenue, now known as 21st St and Damen. The school was named for Freidrich Willhelm August Fröbel, the early childhood educator who first introduced the term Kindergarten in 1840, and who taught the world that play was an important part of childhood development. In 1962, the school was remodeled and converted from Froebel Elementary School to the Froebel Branch of the Carter G Harrison High School. The school served Pilsen 9th grader students coming from Cooper, Jungman, Pickard, Whittier, and Jirka who would go on to Harrison for 10-12 grades. The school loomed 2 stories above other buildings, and in it's final years, it held the distinction of being the oldest school building in the city.

I had not heard of Froebel Branch until a few months ago, which is funny because I eat, live and breathe Chicago schools, as a k-12 art teacher educator. I also live about 2 blocks from where Froebel stood. It was there for 90 years, but there is almost no information about Froebel aside from newspaper articles from one month in 1973. This is the only picture I could find of the school. Let me backtrack to explain how the gentrification of Pilsen is linked to the uprising at Froebel Branch High School, and why recovering the history of struggles can lead to deeper understanding of our current predicament.

In 1968, African American and Latino/a students at Harrison High School (at 23rd and California, now Saucedo and Telpochcalli Elementaries) walked out of classes in response to the deplorable conditions and terrible teachers, and they demanded that the school do more to meet the needs of the students, including better teachers, more books in the library, more inclusive courses, and they called for the addition of bilingual and African American teachers. At the time, students who were not proficient in English were put into classrooms designated for mentally impaired students where one can presume they sat and did nothing until they dropped out. 70-80% of the students from Pilsen reportedly not make it to graduation at Harrison. After the walkouts in '68, Harrison hired it's first bilingual teachers, and the 1973 yearbook showed several Afro, Chicano/a and Puerto Rican student groups and clubs. Then, without input from the community, the Chicago Board of Education announced its decision to close Froebel Branch. By June that year, tensions exploded, and Froebel Branch of Carter G Harrison High School was in the national news.

My friend Pete Rodriguez told me what happened at this school one morning while drinking coffee with his friend Bill Campillo, who is also a teacher. At one point Bill began to describe some Channel 2 TV news footage where you could see tables, chairs and bricks sailing out of windows, and a student standing on the roof raising the power fist in triumph. I couldn't believe that 9th grade students had taken over a school! I could see it playing, like a movie in my head, overlaid by footage of the Los Angeles and Crystal City student uprisings portrayed in so many documentaries. Could this be the midwestern version of the Chicano/a triumph over educational neglect, and the fight for civil rights in schools?

I began to research the uprising, starting with newspapers and a handful of academic papers that mentioned unrest at Froebel or Harrison. One would think that Froebel would be better known considering it played such an important role in the community's struggle for a new high school, leading to Daley's commitment to build Benito Juarez Academy High School. I was lucky to find ethnography about Froebel written in 1973 by a doctoral student at Northwestern who happened to be in the school during the incident, and in the months leading up to the incident, which provided a very different view of what happened. When I found 4 Chicago Tribune photos and I was able to study them, the last remaining hope I had for recovering the heartwarming story of the fight for civil rights at Froebel faded, and I realized this was a very complicated story.

What happened on June 5, 1973 is often called the uprising at Froebel, but it involved a series of actors, including the 9th grade students, community activists, Brown Berets, and police informants. The unrest in the community cannot be separated from the gun violence and increase in narcotics that was effecting the young population.

So, when I read that 9th graders barricaded the doors of the school so they could drink several cases of beer on the roof, I could feel that particular aggravation 9th graders can generate, and I realized that I'd let rainbows and unicorns obscure my vision.

That day, a white reporter for the Chicago Defender was on the scene and he interviewed a "Spanish" youth who was marching in front of Froebel that day, she told him that people were protesting to keep Froebel open because they did not want to go to Harrison with Black students. And the last rainbow faded away.

Over 100 police in riot gear stormed the school that day, in response to an officer who was nearly killed when he was struck by a cinder block tossed from the 4th floor, hitting

min in the race. 8 students were reported to have been arrested and people said that they were severely beaten by the police.

There are reports that describe members of 4 street organizations calling a truce and participating in demonstrations as peacekeepers. People blamed students from nearby Gads Hill, gangs, government informants and even Brown Berets for instigating the violence that day. The truth about what happened at Froebel is that it was not simply an uprising, a civil rights victory, or an out-of-control teenage beer party. It was many things, little of which has been written down, and none of which will be known to future generations unless we work to recuperate the history, complete with flaws and brutality.

A lifelong Pilsen resident told me that during the 1968 riots, he saw a line of National Guardsmen standing on top of the train tracks along 16th street, pointing their weapons north, in the direction of the West Side which was on fire, where enraged black Chicagoans took to the streets following the murder of Dr King.

Pilsen was not only shaped by people inside of its fortified borders, but by the city and the legacy of brutality of a nation founded on racist ideology. I remember what Maxwell Street was like in 1988, and I know how much Taylor Street and Chinatown changed. The relatively sudden removal the black community is, to me, central to the narrative of gentrification of Pilsen. It was not just something that also happened before Pilsen came under siege by developers, but an intrinsic part of the same plan to transform the Lower West Side.

Pilsen may also be razed, or perhaps only the older housing stock will be demolished, like it happened to thousands of working class families in public housing communities just a few blocks north of Pilsen. If the Mexican and Mexican American community doesn't believe in building affordable housing in Little Village or Pilsen, then it very possible that the vulnerable people including the elderly, single mothers and families with several children will not be able to live here. Some people might like a rebranded repackaged Pilsen, the "vibrant" destination neighborhood, where Authentic Mexican Food will be served to guests, and culture will be packed for consumption, minus flaws and complications, and frozen in time.

People moved to Pilsen because in many cases, they had no choice. The Plan for Chicago included racially restrictive housing covenants, and even after they were outlawed, they continue to affect Blacks and Latino/as. But there were times when working class Mexicans and Blacks had kids in the same schools, shopped and rode the train together. I've seen pictures. We have been poor, excluded from jobs and housing in a hostile violent city, together. But when it has been time to fight for justice, we fought against each other. This is not a heartwarming tale of the fight for justice, and we should not shy away from this story because it is complicated and messy. _____

I was heartbroken to hear that the television footage so many people saw on channel 2 in 1973 is either lost or destroyed, but I am still searching. If you would like to share your first hand account, I'd love to hear from you.