

## Hair Today – Gone Tomorrow, Maybe

Schools and education serve as ongoing topics of discussion and opinions in all communities. Priorities and standards seem to evolve, and at times they have even been a bit controversial having occasionally stirred up protests and sit-ins. At the junior high and high school level, controversies involving hair and clothing seem to have been, historically, some of the more common catalysts for disagreement.

Back in November of 1956, a *Sentinel* headline read “*City School Officials Give ‘Hitch to Students’ Pants.*” The lead sentence to that story stated, “Fairmont junior high boys seeking that long, lean, sloppy look in blue jeans got their pants pulled up by school officials.” This style of attire, according to the article, was said to be the mark of “young hoodlums” in schools of some of the larger cities and was, consequently, outlawed by Fairmont schools. The concern was that some of the boys, reportedly, were actually sitting on their belt loops. One young man at one point apparently looked down to see his belt around his ankles! School officials quickly acknowledged that was entirely too low. The Fairmont junior high principal at that time, Gerald Barger, was quoted as saying: “I understand the so-called juvenile ‘hoods’ wear their trousers that way in large cities.” He went on to say, “It’s kind of a badge, I’m told. But it’s one badge that won’t be allowed in the school here.”

The school previously had a long-time ban on girls’ slacks or slack type clothing including Bermuda shorts. However, this was the first instance regarding what was considered offensive clothing worn by boys. The story made the following analogy regarding the low slung jeans: “Up to now a low belt meant a broken down, middle aged or elderly man using the belt to hold up a stomach that would look better inside a girdle.” It would seem that the preceding, rather colorful and uncomplimentary, description concerning the “broken down, middle aged or elderly man” might be viewed as offensive as well.

Although this phenomenon was also reported in some other schools throughout the state, it was primarily a junior high concern locally as only two incidents were reported at the high school. Apparently, the schools ability to quickly crack down on this loosely supported issue nipped it in the bud before it reached new lows.

Moving ahead to the 1970s, the hippie era, Fairmont High School experienced a sit-in protest regarding haircut policies for student athletes. The headline in the April 22, 1972, edition of the *Sentinel* read: “*Meeting set to pursue issues raised at sit-in.*” The senior high students staged a sit-in on a Friday morning in April of 1972 in the gym. Included were 203 of the school’s 712 students. That garnered the attention of the

superintendent, high school principal, and athletic director, all of whom were present in an attempt to develop a plan to resolve the issue. The superintendent, L. H Baumann, suggested that the students choose a representative group to meet with the district officials to discuss the matter further in order to come up with something that would represent the town and the school in an appropriate manner. That suggestion, and others, was rejected by the students. Some of the students' comments were as follows: "I'm not going to go out for sports if I have to get my hair cut." "We need guidelines, but not in terms of hair." "Just about all the students have long hair. If athletes have shorter hair, do they really represent the school?" Consequently, the sit-in continued and was not yet resolved by 10:45 a.m. of that day.

The following Monday seven students and four school administrators met for two and one-half hours in an attempt to resolve their differences and establish a time for a public meeting. It was finally agreed that the students would form a committee to meet with school officials in setting a future meeting time and format.

Seventeen days later, May 9, 1972, a public meeting consisting of approximately 200 attendees made up of students, school administration, and the public was held to discuss the "hairy" topic, with students barely outnumbering the public in attendance. There was considerable give and take between all sides, including a letter signed by 100 townspeople in support of the school administration's stance; however, based on that article, no definitive resolution was reached. Consequently, whether or not hair today would be gone tomorrow was not officially resolved; nevertheless, Supt. Baumann concluded that opinions expressed would be taken into consideration for the following school year.

Although some may have bristled as to the discussion regarding individual coiffures, apparently, the "mane" concern pertaining to this "shaggy" conflict remained unresolved. Perhaps it would have been helpful to seek the insights of the follicular challenged as well in order to gain their perspective and shed more light on the issue.

The lyrics of Bob Dylan's song, "*The Times They Are A-Changin*," might serve to exemplify the evolution of these issues. What was important to those living in one era may not be nearly as significant at another time. Nevertheless, society evolves, and standards from one period in history may not necessarily be applicable to another.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.