points of view

Out of control

100th graduation — a 'farce'

The writer, Martha B. Ehlers, is a Farmington Hills resident.

guest column

FARMINGTON HIGH School: "Striving for excellence?"

Hardly.

After attending the centennial graduation program at Ford Auditorium last Tuesday, a more apt motto would be: "Catering to the lowest common denominator."

Instead of a beautiful evening honoring the school and the graduates for the accomplishment of years of work, we were visited with a disaster.

As words were spoken on the stage of fine citizenship and good behavior, they were mocked with catcalls and shouts from the audience and, to a lesser degree, the students. One of the district's best teachers, who contributed beautifully written and well-presented remarks, was very rudely treated for her effort.

Eight years ago, when our older son graduated from Farmington High, we were embarrassed for our school and for him by the rowdy ceremony in front of both sets of grandparents. After that, we vowed to "endure" these evenings alone — just my husband and me.

When our daughter graduated in 1984, the situation was worse, but at least we had no visitors to shock. Last night was the worst ever. Thank goodness our second son and last child has graduated. We will never have to endure that again.

WHY DO the administration and the school board allow this calamity year after year? None of the school board can plead ignorance of what happened except Jack Inch (and I can certainly see why he would choose to be elsewhere).

Clearly, all on stage — administrators, superintendent, school board — were uncomfortable. Clearly, there was an effort made "just to get through it again" and to keep the rowdies from getting worse by not antagonizing them. Clearly, this behavior is expected year after year — and tolerated.

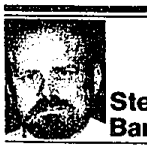
Why doesn't anyone care enough about Farmington High School to improve the situation? Is no pride left?

What an insult an evening like that is to the good, well-behaved students and their parents, relatives, and friends who hope that their graduation will reflect a fine, well-disciplined school and a quality education. Instead, the evening was more typical of a crowd at a wrestling match. What is a diploma worth from a school with discipline like that?

Next year, make a change. Have authoritative ushers, limit attendance to parents and guardians, publicize to the students well in advance what sort of behavior will be expected for "Reflections and Graduation."

Promise to hold the diploma and skip the name of any graduate who is disruptive. Set some limits and enforce them. Get some dignity and respect back — and have a graduation next year instead of a farce.

School district battle — a mirror for us all



Steve Barnaby

THE DRAMA going on in Clarenceville in a lot of ways is the story of the struggle across this country — big versus small, money versus local control. It's a struggle you should know and understand.

When it comes to talking about school districts in metropolitan Detroit, few people think of Clarenceville.

If somebody put it on a list of least known facts about southeastern Michigan, it would range close to the top of the list. Heck, if you ask most folks in Livonia, Farmington Hills and Redford Township, it would do about the same.

And that's unusual because the Clarenceville School District, a virtual dot on the map of metro school districts, shares ground in all three of the above-mentioned municipalities.

But for a moment, at least, you should learn about the battle going on in that district. For the parents of the 1,976 students, it's a struggle of principle against principle, a struggle for the heart of a community.

Clarenceville, although a school district, is and has been for many years, a community. Although it hasn't a mayor or city council, for many it has been just as much a community as most any hometown where families grow up, work and live.

AT ONE time, school board member Sam Prisk was called the "mayor of Clarenceville." Now he's retired, but the spirit remains.

He explained in a 1979 interview, "Our school district is our heart, our center. We're like a dog that thinks it's a human. We're a school district but also a community. We're a community that thinks it's a town."

In fact, Clarenceville is the oldest "community" in the area. Founded in 1837 as a settlement, it is named after a previous owner of the Botsford Inn, Thomas Clarency.

But some in "town" see Clarenceville through a different shade of glass than does Sam Prisk. They see a district whose enrollment has dwindled substantially and which has had to close two of its four grade schools.

The district had only one high school and a middle school.

AND RECENTLY, they've been on the stump to persuade others to vote in favor of dissolving the district.

You can't really fault them for holding that view. But then, you can't fault the other side either. It's a battle that, in the end, will foster hard feelings for years to come — sort of an emotional civil war.

The fact is that residents are taking the disagreement so seriously that police are investigating death-threats against an organizer of the dissolution movement.

Looking at the facts and figures, it would seem sensible to close shop and let residents put their children in one of the three other districts wherein they reside. The district is small, the millage rate high and the facilities so-so.

BUT MANY of those who have gone to school there and feel that the benefits go beyond tax dollars and elaborate facilities are fighting hard to maintain the district's autonomy.

"The way I see it, bigger is not better. This is what I wanted for my family. I don't want to see this destroyed," Butch Bowden, who has two children in the district, said recently.

Clarenceville — a story of America in microcosm.

Steve Barnaby is managing editor of the 12 Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Narrow the focus to produce better debates

Tim Richard

AT FIRST I thought someone across town had read my 1988 column on the Lincoln-Douglas debates and was expropriating the idea.

"No, I didn't see it," chuckled Clark Durant. "I guess great minds work along the same channel."

Durant, 49, a lawyer in Detroit, is seeking the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate next year. He's one in a prospective field of three or four who would like to take on two-term Sen. Carl Levin, 54, of Detroit. And Durant isn't coy. He's running.

Picking up on Levin's own stated intention of campaigning on issues, Durant is challenging the incumbent to debate. Not one debate, mind you, but seven. And not your pot-boiler TV debates, but a Lincoln-Douglas style series — the real life, genuine article.

TODAY'S DEBATES are made for television and people with television-type minds.

The TV mind can't concentrate on a single topic for more than a minute and a half. The TV mind thinks in terms of 20-second, smart-aleck bites instead of substance.

One recalls the vice-presidential debate where the only line that made the news was Lloyd Bentsen's jibe to Dan Quayle: "Senator, you're no John Kennedy," conveniently forgetting that JFK's senatorial nickname was "Bedchamber Jack."

In the typical TV-style debate, a panel of newspeople pop surprise questions on any topic under the sun, and the debater has one to three minutes to respond. Such debates reveal who has been coached in TV-style answers, who can memorize and deliver quips, but not who can formulate public policy and run a government.

The pundits analyze who "came off" best, who seemed most confident, who sweated. They never get into substance.

DURANT IS proposing the winner of the GOP primary and Levin discuss topics Lincoln-Douglas style.

In that format, the first speaker goes on for two time units, the second for three time units, and the first closes in one time unit. The time units can be up to a half-hour.

In my own view, the debates should have a single topic: the defense budget; why the U.S. has the most expensive medical care in the world but not necessarily the best; the international economy; the dissolving family and its burden on the welfare system — or anything else the combatants can agree on.

But none of this two minutes per topic, OK?

Durant's notion is to scatter the debates across the state, and not just in a TV studio or the Economic Club of Detroit. I propose the UAW local on Plymouth Road, Clarenceville High School (some folks are serious about dissolving the district), some place near the Warren tank plant, a Farm Bureau hall in Clinton County (the farm economy has been wretched for years), and the Miller Auditorium at Western Michigan University (Upjohn Co. is there; it waited for years to get federal approval for a hair product, and it's the topic of takeover gossip).

Both men are attorneys of some skill. I'd like to hear them discuss the Bork nomination to the Supreme Court (Levin voted no), a matter covered superficially as a women's rights political story on TV. The Wayne State Law School in Detroit or the Cooley Law School in Lansing would be good sites.

A college debate coach would referee them. I'm uncertain whether I would work reporters' questions into the format. If there were questions, they should be confined to the debate topic and aimed at clarifying points or eliciting direct replies of Candidate A to Candidate B's remark.

Now those would be *debates!*

Tim Richard is director of the Suburban Communications Corp. News Service. SCC is the parent company of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

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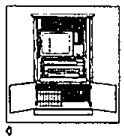

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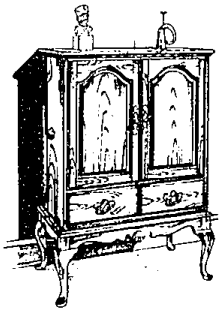

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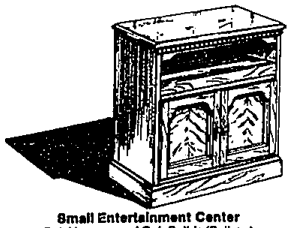

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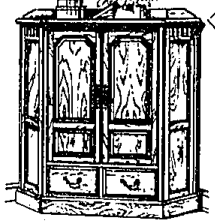
Top View



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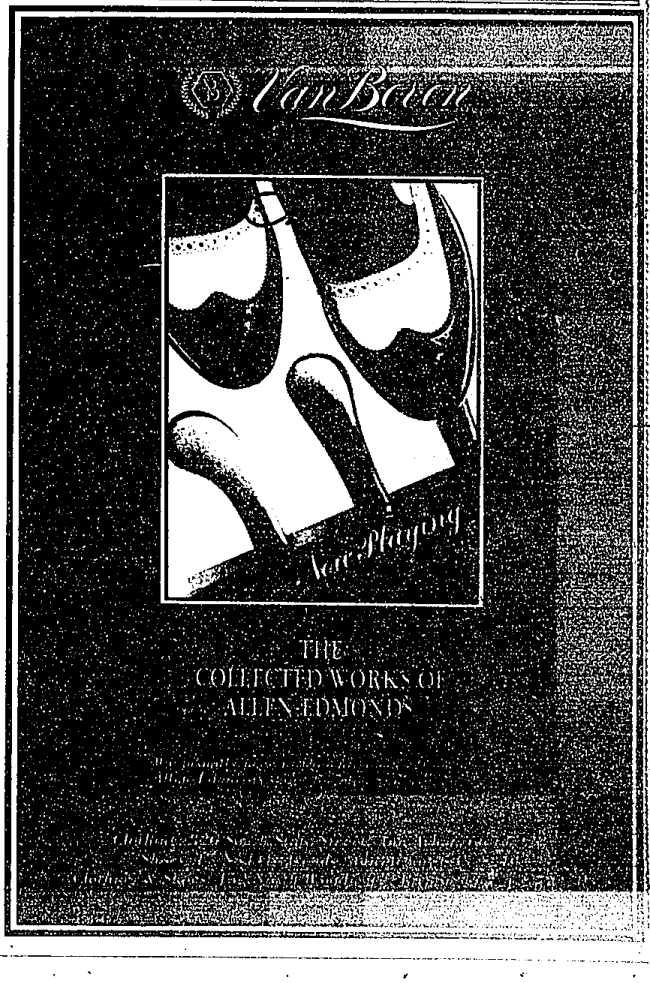
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