

“A Good Beating is Needed to Keep Him in Line”: Boys, Boyhood, and Juvenile Delinquency in California, 1890-1910

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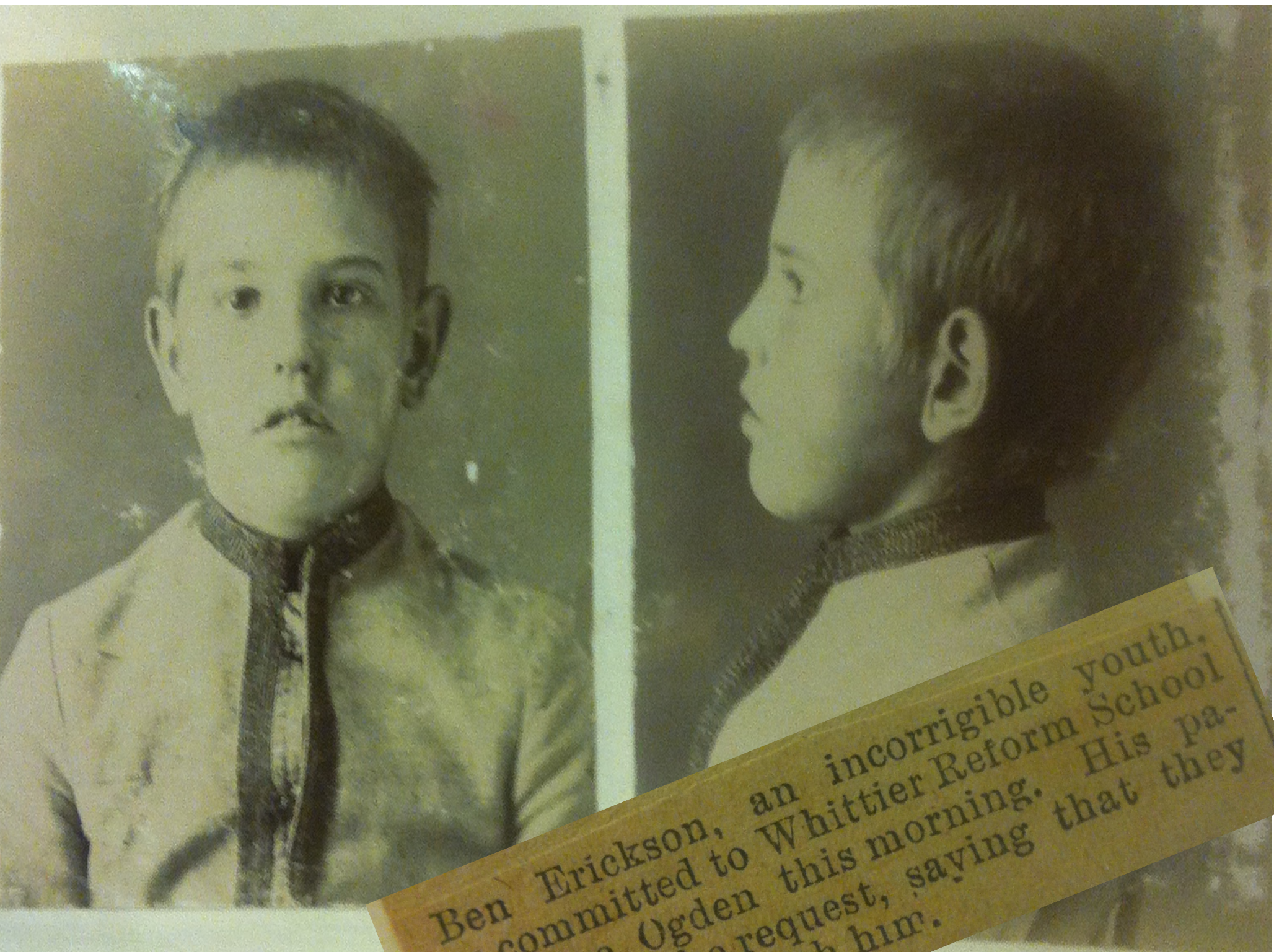
Abstract

My dissertation argues that children, specifically young boys, were integral to the development of juvenile reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through their behavior, protests, and even escapes, I show that incarcerated boys created a dialogue with adult administrators about the conditions at Whittier State School, a reform school just outside of Los Angeles, California.

My project draws from over 4,000 individual case files of incarcerated boys at Whittier State School between 1890-1910 that enable me to cull not only individual histories of inmates, but also collective forms of action, both formal and informal, in which incarcerated boys engaged. Although the process was by no

Whittier State School

Whittier State School, originally named *Reform School for Juvenile Offenders at Whittier, California*, was built in 1890 by the state of California on forty acres of land, and doubled in size in its first ten years. Its construction responded to the activism of middle class reformers who decried the condition of youth in the cities.



What Makes a Juvenile a Delinquent?

Incorrigibility is a vague legal term that encompassed a wide range of behaviors and was used to incarcerate boys who were mischievous, had runaway from home, or in most cases, stayed out past the state mandated curfew of 8 p.m. for children under eighteen.

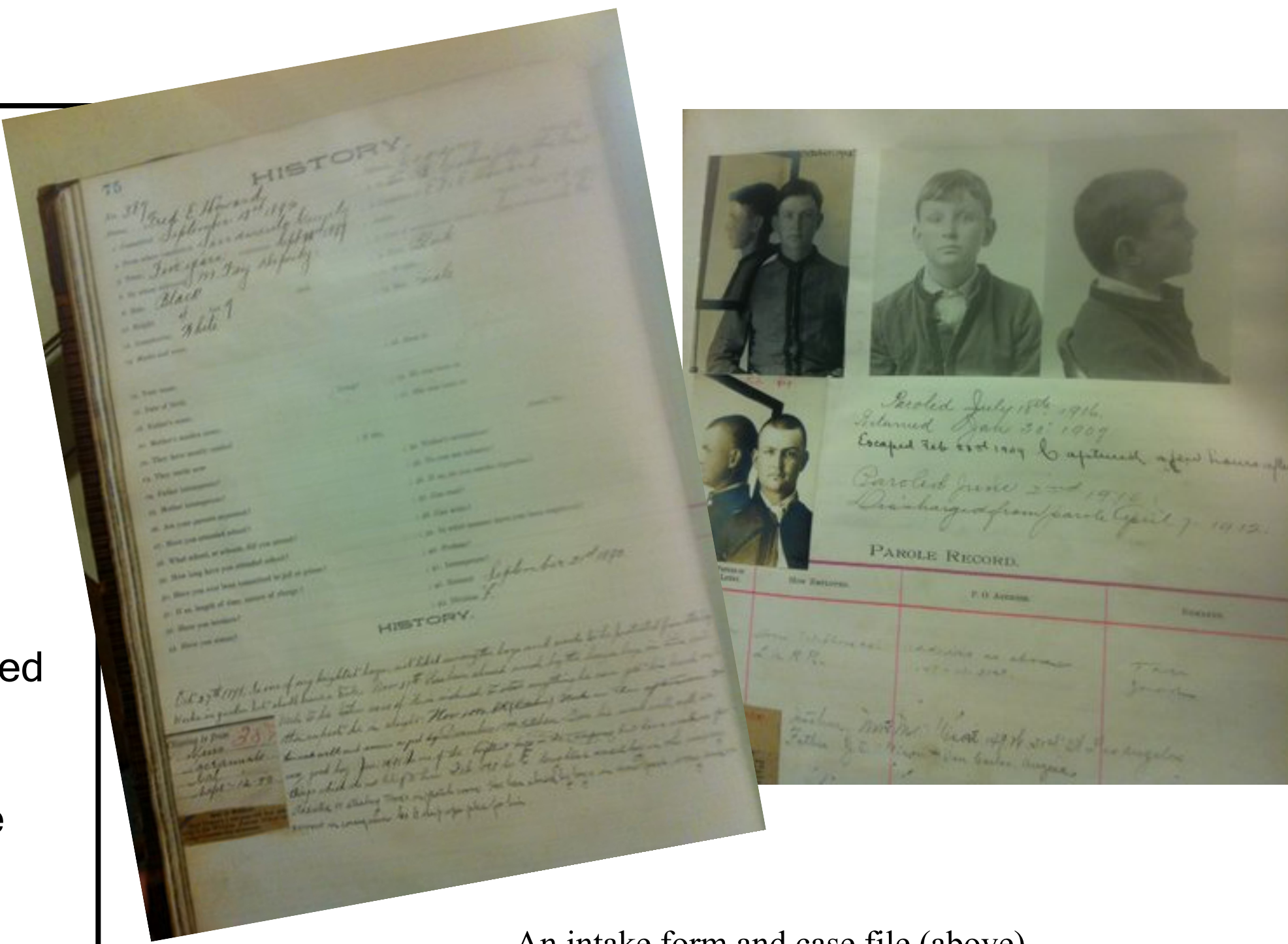
Incarcerated boys in late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century California were hardly the hardened criminals. The vast majority were charged simply as an “incorrigible.” Of the boys labeled “incorrigible,” nearly 75% were brought to court by their parents, particularly single parents, who would often say that the boy was “beyond my control.”



An uncontrollable child (above)

A Boy’s First Day at Whittier State School

Upon his arrival at Whittier, a boy would be taken into an office where he would first be measured and weighed, then asked a battery of questions ranging from his past criminal record to his fathers relationship to alcohol. During his sentence, instructors, company commanders, and even the superintendent would make formal and informal comments regarding his behavior and the punishment meted out. Each boy’s file would be recorded on two pages in a large, leather-bound ledger that was 20 inches tall, 14 inches wide, and roughly 6-8 inches thick. Between 1890 and 1910, there are ten of these, each containing roughly 400 individual records.



An intake form and case file (above)



Inmates standing in military formation in front of the Superintendents Quarters, 1894

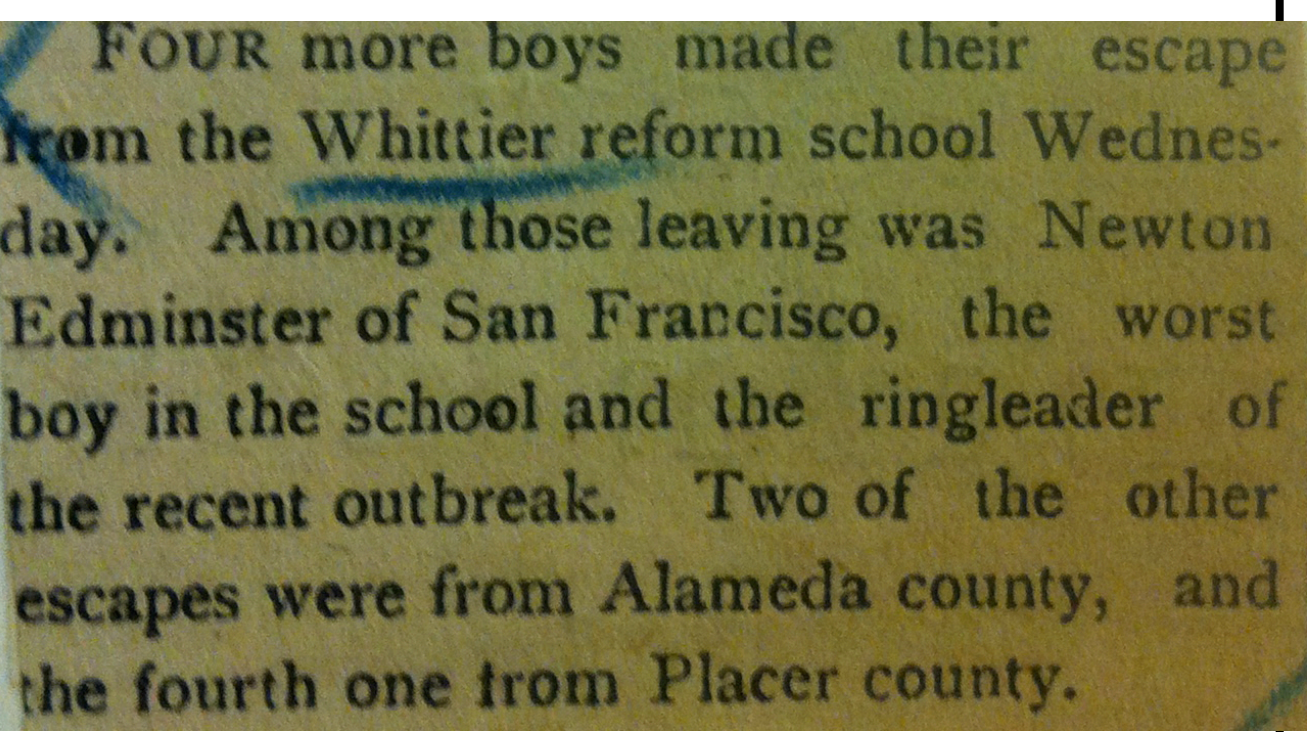
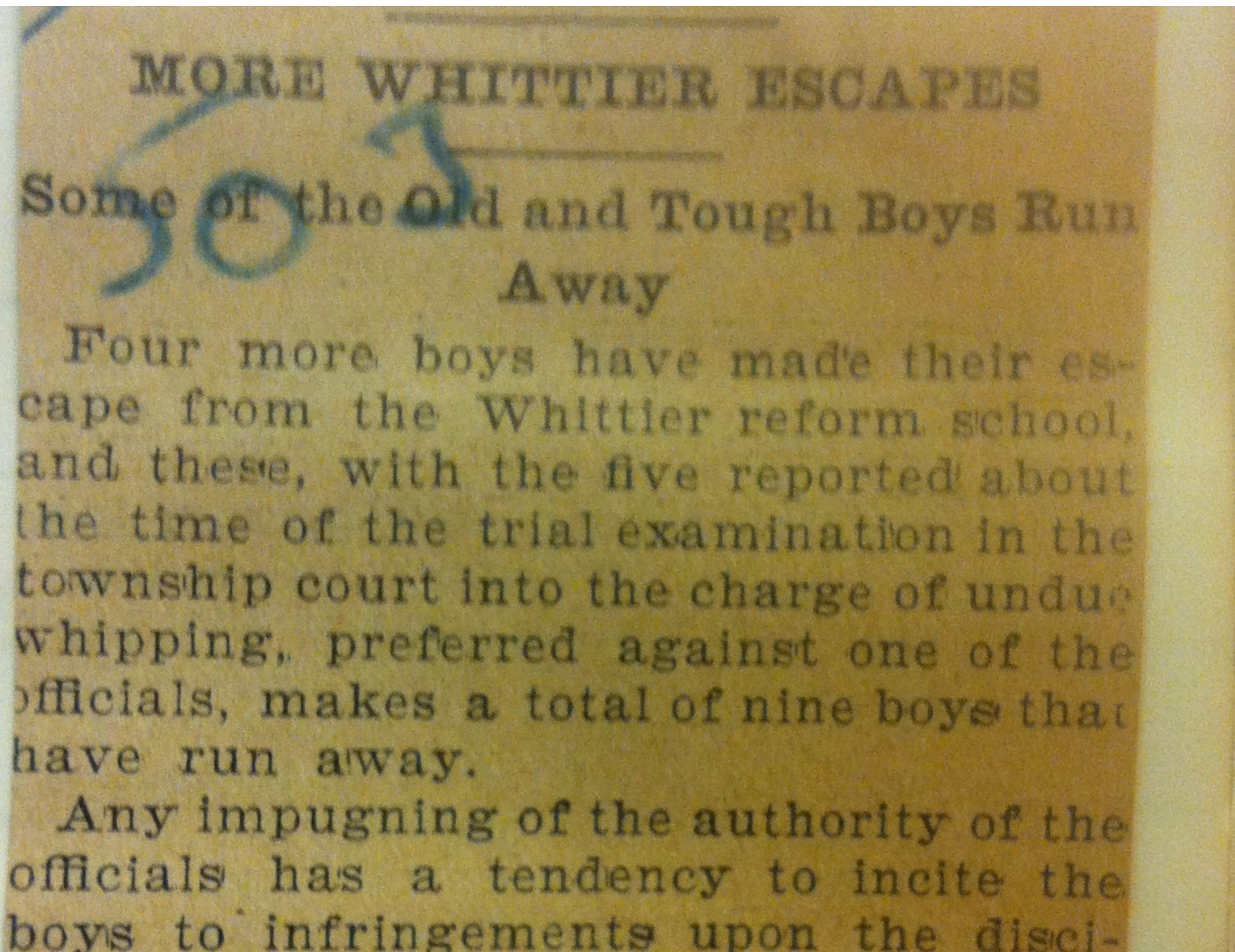


Military training was at the foundation of Whittier State Schools curriculum, echoing the sentiments of contemporary child-savers who believed that “a military rank or honor conferred on a boy encourages him to form higher ideas and put forth nobler efforts to effect their realization.”

The portrayal of life for inmates at Whittier State School was one of education, along with military and vocational training, balanced with trips to Catalina Island (a nearby vacation destination). However, social life behind the walls of the institution was rife with violence and mistreatment that masqueraded as discipline. Escapes and escape attempts were common. There are also many recorded instances of full scale revolts, silent protests, and highly organized mass escapes, the most notable being the marching band, which staged a mass escape from custody in Pasadena after performing in the 8th Annual Rose Parade in 1898. Soon after, Whittier State School began to reconsider its disciplinary policies for escapes and misbehavior.



Thomas Foley (above) was the first recorded gang leader at Whittier State School. His gang, “The Straight Guys,” constantly defied authority, attempted various escapes, and organized a silent protest when the choir refused to sing at a gala performance honoring the Governor of California in 1894. He was given fifty lashes with a length of garden hose as punishment. He escaped in March of 1895.



Conclusion

Escapes were common at Whittier State School in its early years, as were small uprisings and forms of protest and resistance to their treatment at the hands of the administration. In fact, the persistence and even the sincerity of these protests no doubt prompted administrators to listen. Over time, the administrators instituted policies that directly responded to the implicit demands of incarcerated boys. The methods and behavior of incarcerated boys created a collective voice to which the administration at Whittier State School at the turn of the twentieth century responded positively, and for a short time changed the culture of the institution for the better.

Implications

Today, the optimism that surrounded juvenile reform in the late nineteenth century is long gone. Few of us can look at the problems that pervade juvenile justice today- court scandals, reports of extreme abuse and degradation, and general mistreatment- and be optimistic. I argue that the growth and evolution of Whittier State School in its first twenty years offer a roadmap as to how we might revitalize and restore a positive attitude towards juvenile reform in the twenty-first century. It begins by listening to the children.

