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Late Edition

Today, mostly cloudy, a morning shower, high 71. Tonight, mostly clear, late fog, mild, low 62. Tomorrow, clouds then some sun, warmer, high 83. Weather map, Page D8.

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How Equal Was This Separate School?

You could listen to a lot of dry lectures by a lot of windy history professors and still not learn as much about race issues in the century after the Civil War as

TELEVISION REVIEW

NEIL GENZLINGER

you do in "A Place Out of Time: The Bordentown School." This hourlong film by Dave Davidson, Monday on PBS, seems on the surface to be a simple documentary: the history of an all-black school in Bordentown, N.J., that existed from 1886 to 1955. But by the time the story is told, you have come to see the school as a microcosm of all the good intentions, misguided theories and veiled prejudice that have made equality so elusive for so long.

The school was founded by a black minister, who wanted to create educational opportunities for youths as more and more blacks came north to escape the lack of economic possibility and murderous racism of the South. The school was successful enough that it was soon taken over by the State of New Jersey, but it remained all black — not an overtly negative thing, as scholars and alumni explain.

A Place Out of Time

The Bordentown School

On PBS stations on Monday night (check local listings).

Directed by Dave Davidson; Mr. Davidson, producer; Amber Edwards, co-producer; Ruby Dee, narrator. Produced by Hudson West Productions.



LEWIS HINE/PBS

A Lewis Hine photograph shows one student giving another a manicure at the Bordentown School in New Jersey.

An institution that was a microcosm of good intentions and misguided theories.

"It was separated, not segregated," says Barbara Wheeler, a 1952 graduate. "One group is voluntary, one group is forced."

Sounds like a laudable idea: establish a residential school where black educators could find employment and black youths could learn in a safe environment, free of the harassment by white students and teachers they might encounter at an integrated school. And Bordentown established itself as a model institution that emphasized discipline and personal responsibility.

But the seemingly feel-good story is not so clear cut after all. Bordentown was for much of its history a vocational school; the formal name was the Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth. And it reflected a view that was racist in its own way: Sure, it's great to edu-

cate blacks, as long as they're educated to be chauffeurs and laundresses.

School administrators who tried to make the curriculum more college preparatory met resistance. And the outbreak of World War II revealed just how antiquated the school had become: the students were still largely being trained for a 19th-century society and lacked skills in areas like electronics that the war required. Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 finally led to the school's closing, and it ended its days as a symbol of Jim Crowism.

But not to its students, whose personal recollections as they gather for a reunion are what give this documentary its bitter-sweet humanity. They seem to have nothing but good memories of this noble if somewhat flawed experiment.

ONLINE: VIDEO

A trailer for the documentary "A Place Out of Time":

nytimes.com/tv