

Pathfinder

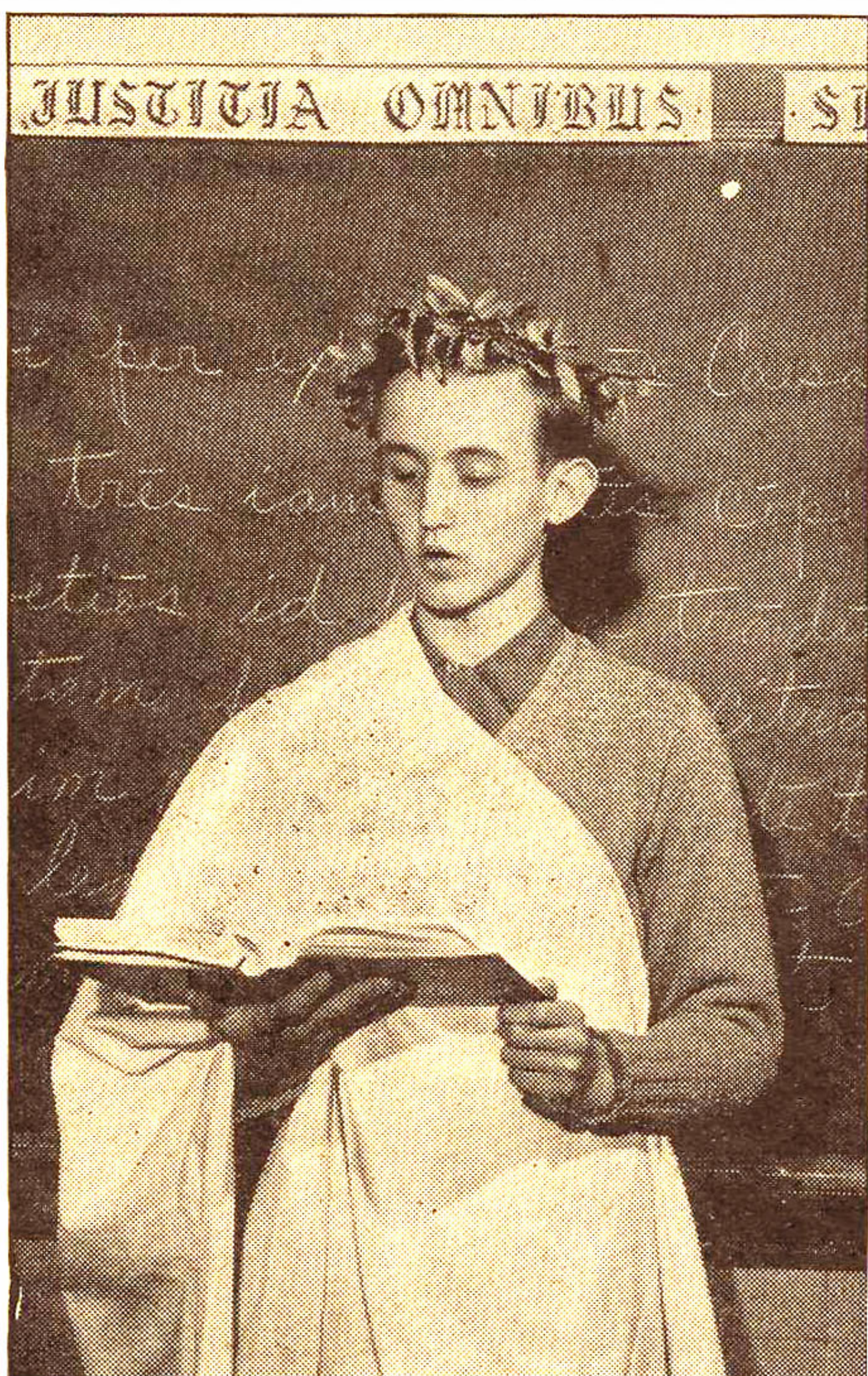
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Latin: how 'dead' is the language?

In 1900 "nearly everybody" took Latin in high school.

Actually, "nearly everybody" was just over half the total national student enrollment, but the figure was high enough to justify the larger impression. More students took Latin than English; only algebra had larger classes.

Last week the plight of Latin was causing its teachers to wail. U.S. Office of Education figures show that only 7.8% of all public senior high pupils were



Fun. At Washington's Roosevelt High School Latin comes alive for David Pierce.

studying the ancient language of the Romans in 1949 (the last year for which national statistics are available). Latin has dropped from second to 18th place in public high curricula—behind English, physical education, music, algebra and a host of subjects from bookkeeping to home economics.

Decline and Fall. What has happened to this once standard classic of the average U.S. high school? There are several explanations:

1. In the depression era of the 1930s many colleges—anxious to keep their halls filled—dropped Latin as an entrance requirement in order to lure more students. Now almost no major college demands Latin for entrance.

Latin

2. The vast increase in the number of U.S. high school students in the last two decades brought with it a decline in over-all academic quality. More and more newcomers had less and less interest in the classics.

3. America's "Good Neighbor" policy boomed the teaching of Spanish, which finally displaced Latin as the No. 1 high school foreign language.

4. World War II furnished another powerful blow by its emphasis on science and mathematics.

Latin teachers today frankly admit they are discouraged. They feel their subject has slipped farther since 1949. For instance, figures for 1951 show that New York City had only 6,891 Latin students, as against 55,000 taking Spanish, 44,851 taking French.

Latin's stronghold, despite the New York figures, remains in the Middle Atlantic and New England states, probably, educators feel, because of the East's traditional interest in the classics. Strongest Latin states are Delaware, with 17.2% of its students taking it; Rhode Island, with 16.7%; Connecticut, with 16.1%; Massachusetts, with 15.8%; and the District of Columbia, with 14.8%. Poorest states: Utah, 1.6%; Texas, 2.7%; Arkansas, 2.8%; Louisiana, 3.1%.

To combat the downward trend, Latin teachers have been forced into drastic course revisions which minimize the everlasting grammar drills which earned the subject its undying reputation for being hard—and dull. Many schools have their youngsters work on projects, such as making Roman costumes (see picture), to stimulate interest.

Greatest boon to the Latin student is his subsequent sure command of English. Emilie Margaret White, foreign language head in Washington, D. C., high schools, has years of proof of this. One recent example: reports from Washington police that candidates for the force who have studied Latin can be readily singled out by their better-written exam papers.

Is Latin on its way out in high schools? The answer is a confident "no." "It's hard to see how it can go any lower," declares Dr. John F. Latimer, head of Latin studies at George Washington University. At the Office of Education, assistant director J. Dan Hull agrees: "We'll always have a hard core of students studying the language."