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SOME GLIMPSES OF THE CLASS OF 1962 OF ELGIN HIGH SCHOOL
OF
ELGIN, ILLINOIS
BY
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When I made plans to attend the 25th year reunion of my high school class this past summer, I made a conscious decision not to go as a reporter, but rather, as an alumnus of one of the older and more respected secondary schools in northern Illinois.

I wanted to experience the reunion as others--going, mixing, reminiscing, and returning with a collection of new memories to be added to those gathered over a three year period during an important time of my life.

That decision was reinforced when I arrived by a classmate known as a notorious "cheapskate", who made a very calculated trip to the United Way office while at the reunion.

Dave Johnston, a Dartmouth graduate with a Master's Degree from the University of Wisconsin in urban planning is now what I call a "social engineer". He and his partner specialize in conducting "assessments and needs" studies for cities across the country---for a price.

He said the United Way trip was to discuss developments in Elgin, but he added that his major purpose was to submit to the director of the United Way his company's credentials as a potential source to conduct a survey--and thus, he could write the trip off as a business expense.

My decision changed as I drove back to Hopkinsville the Monday after the reunion in early August. The reporter in me took over and I found myself scribbling notes while driving 65 miles per hour on the dual slab of interstate which connects southern Illinois with its more prosperous northern section.

I would use these to build a story which I felt listeners might be interested in, and also help me to purge myself of a strange depression which seized me as I prepared to leave Kane County, Illinois, the site of the reunion.

In its initial form, the story ran well in excess of seven minutes, far too long for radio. I edited it to just over three minutes, and was amazed at the response it received when aired, with numerous comments phoned in and delivered personally, and several requests for the text, including one from a person who said he planned to frame it and place it on the wall in his office.

Papers delivered during my tenure with this group have fallen into several categories, ranging from the scholarly to the travelogue, to the autobiographical.

This is my autobiographical effort.

When "Pomp and Circumstance" was played for high school seniors a quarter century ago this past spring, graduates stepped out into a world vastly different than it is today.

The Yankees were on their way to their 12th appearance in the World Series in 14 years, you could still buy a new Nash Rambler, and cigarettes were still being advertised on radio and television.

Blacks were still referred to, in polite society, as "Negroes", with the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 still two years away and a Democratic President just beginning the action in a small southeastern Asian country which would lead to one of the most tumultuous and divisive decades in 20th Century American history.

For the better part of two days, I was transported back to that time when this complex country, whose greatness is so well illustrated by the success of classmates, was somewhat less complex.

In the 1950's and 60's, Elgin, Illinois was much as I suspect Hopkinsville was after Thomas Industries located here and "peaked out" with about 1200 employees. However, in Elgin, it was on a larger scale and the T.I. was the Elgin National Watch Company.

It was said that the stores and banks stayed open on Monday night in downtown Elgin because that was the day the watch factory got paid. The Elgin Watch Factory, which has since moved to Nebraska, was located on a 10 acre site at the south end of Grove Avenue, the major thoroughfare in downtown Elgin, and the four story stone structure, with arches over each of the numerous individual windows, dominated the south end of town, hard by the Fox River, with room for three city busses to stop at one time to transport workers home when they left work.

Politically, Elgin, and Kane County, Illinois were as much Republican as Christian County is Democratic, with a capital "D". When I was in high school, it was said that Kane County was carried by every Republican presidential candidate from Abraham Lincoln in 1860 forward. One of the highlights of my junior year was the day they dismissed school to let students see John F. Kennedy, who was on a motorcade through the Fox River Valley as part of the campaign that carried him to the White House, with Illinois in his "win" column, though only by a margin of 8858 votes out of better than 4,750,000 cast. Voters in Kane County preferred Richard Nixon, 55,389 to 31,279 for Kennedy. Nixon received just 620 fewer votes in 1960 in Kane County than Dwight Eisenhower drew four years earlier.

Kennedy's narrow victory in Illinois was largely attributed to Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley and his "machine". Numerous jokes made the rounds among Republicans following the election concerning vote fraud, including stories about the disappointed Chicagoans whose dead friends and relatives had returned to vote, but hadn't had the common decency to stop and visit.

The ethnic makeup of Elgin was largely German and Scandanavian--indeed, the county seat is named Geneva--These people are known for producing the type person suited to painstaking, detailed work, such as watchmaking and other skilled labor.

They also produced their share of tradesmen, and in some cases, dominated a particular area.

I was amused when blacks raised a protest in the mid-60's with the skilled trade unions, and their lack of minority membership.

I doubt that there was a brick laid in Kane County, Illinois in the 50's or 60's by anyone other than a person with a last name like Swenson, Johnson, Olesen, or some other son of Scandanavia.

The population of Elgin in 1960 was 49,447, an increase of just over ten percent from the previous U.S. Census.

Elgin was known as the "City of Churches", with the Elgin Daily Courier News devoting two pages in its Saturday editions to churches by denomination, location, time of worship and pastor's name.

Though you must remember you are getting this thumbnail sketch from someone whose idea of reading the newspaper was a look at the sports page and the comics, I feel it is relatively accurate.

I also avoided news on the radio, and was glad one of the Chicago rock stations aired their news on the hour while the other's came five minutes earlier.

The song we listened to most the week we graduated was "I can't stop loving you" by Ray Charles--number one the first week of June, 1962

This was in the pre-Beatles, pre-Motown era when a band leader like David Rose, whose name was well-known, even among our ancient parents, could make Number One on the "Top Forty" and remain on the chart 13 weeks, while Mantovani had two charted records from 1957 to 1961, and Lawrence Welk even had a Number One song as late as 1961.

Though I can only speak positively from the experience of my close circle of friends concerning marriage, divorce, and family life, I would suspect that the majority of our classmates were in similar circumstances. Very few had mothers who worked, and the fathers were the dominant figures at home--as both breadwinner and decision maker.

The national divorce rate in 1960 was 2.2 per thousand. It rose to 3.5 per thousand in 1970, and continued to rise, standing at 5.2 per thousand in 1980.

Of the 8 boys in my immediate circle, none had parents who had been involved in a divorce. The two with only one parent had mothers who were widowed and had not remarried.

Of the four I have specific knowledge of 25 years later, three still have both parents living--and still married--and the other's father only recently died.

Other than the widows, none of the mothers of my closest friends had a career outside the home. I was the lone exception, with my mother being the Chief Nurse at Elgin State Hospital, a mental institution remarkably similar to Western State Hospital, which has followed virtually the same pattern over the years, right down to ceding a portion of its property for an 18 hole municipal golf course.

Since most of us were born in 1944--the last full year of World War II--it's safe to assume that our parents were married either during the Great Depression or shortly after the war swept it away.

Consequently, they were financially conservative, on top of their political conservatism.

As a result, none of the middle class children I knew, was a pampered child.

I can't recall a single classmate who had his own car who did not have a job to support it, and in the vast majority of cases, had worked for the money to purchase it.

Of course, most of us had access to "wheels", but we envied those who could deck out their cars with "spinner hubcaps", "makeout lights" under the dash, and the other accoutrements affectionately known as "Mexican speed equipment".

We were relegated to the family sedan, generally a 4-door, with a six-cylinder engine and automatic transmission.

I did have a friend whose parents had a two tone Buick two-door hardtop, whose first act when he got out of sight of home was to remove the hubcaps.

The "drug of choice", among those who did indulge in the class of '62, was Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, preferably in the quart bottle, which could be disposed of with one toss, and often was with the majority of its contents intact. When the effects began to show, including the frequent call for "Raaalph", one could say, "Hell, man, I drank 4 quarts."

Marijuana was something smoked by the small Puerto Rican population of Elgin, along with jazz musicians and beatniks in metropolitan areas.

My first exposure was in 1967 in Murray, and while I'm sure many classmates may have been exposed earlier, I suspect, given the backgrounds of most of us, not many became frequent users.

At the reunion, I did learn that one of our classmates was involved in a large drug ring stretching from New York to New Mexico to Old Mexico. Tony Deck is supposed to be serving time in a federal institution according to a classmate who saw it on national t.v.

When this was discussed reunion weekend, another classmate said he had had occasion to visit Albuquerque in the past several years and looked Tony up.

It seems that at that time Tony was in the business of importing exotic trees and plants from Mexico for replanting in posh subdivisions in New Mexico and Arizona.

I rather suspected that type conduct from a member of the Class of '63.

Against that backdrop, about 150 members of the Class of '62 gathered in Elgin August 8th and 9th to mark the quarter century that has passed since we left school.

1962 was a watershed year for high school seniors in the Elgin Public School System. We were the last class to graduate when only one high school operated in District U-46, which sprawls across at least three counties, feeding the 3 year Elgin High School, which peaked in attendance, at about 2,000 in 1960, dropped in enrollment with our class of about 550 in 1962, and the plummeted when a second public high school opened in the fall of '62.

According to questionnaires returned to the reunion organizers, in the quarter century since our graduation, our groups has produced at least one doctor--a child psychologist in northern California--, several Ph.d.'s, three attorneys, 27 teachers, principals, professors and others in the education field, 17 secretaries, 10 registered nurses, two firemen, 4 graphic designers, a Baptist minister, a veterinary assistant, a podiatrist, a museum curator, and others bearing such titles as "receiver", "houseparent", "expiditer", "alcohol rehabilitation technician" and "market support specialist".

Among classmates who returned the questionnaire are at least 20 who bear the title "president", or operate their own business, while there are at least five company or corporate vice-presidents, with four being female and the lone male in charge of "strategic planning" for the Speciality Hospital Group of National Medical Enterprises, who has completed advanced graduate work in "Mathematical Economics".

Self-operated businesses range from building and real estate to excavating to the interstate transport of show and Thoroughbred horses to heating and air conditioning to farming.

While I suspect there were many classmates who did not attend the silver anniversary celebration because of general indifference to such activities, it was my observation that the majority of those in attendance fell into two categories; those who have done exceptionally well and those who are comfortable with their station in life.

The observation centered around a Saturday night dinner/dance and a Sunday afternoon picnic, though several other occurrences made the trip worthwhile.

One of those was a Friday evening dinner with a recently retired teacher, whom I had for 8th grade social studies, but also became close friends with.

I count myself among the thousands whose formal education was advanced in his classroom, but were assisted even more outside the classroom in getting through the difficult adolescent years.

I place him at the top of my personal list of committed and excellent teachers who look upon teaching as more of a "calling" than a career, and recently thought of the consequences had I addressed him by his last name without prefacing it with a "Mister", as I recently heard my teenage daughter refer to one of the more popular--and, I'm told--more effective--local junior high school teachers. How times change!

It was with a good deal of pleasure that I bought this teacher's dinner, saying it was people like him who put me in a position to earn that money, while remembering there is no way to repay those who gave me not only the knowledge to function on a daily basis in an increasingly complex society, but also a simple appreciation of knowledge for its own sake.

The "notorious cheapskate" previously mentioned is the one who arranged the dinner, and I can't say it was a pleasure to buy his meal since he remained mute when I offered to pick up the tab, and only one check was present.

The dinner/dance brought with it contacts with numerous classmates, including those I was closely identified with during our high school years, though the "best man" at my wedding, now a hospital administrator in a town only about 150 miles from Elgin, was absent.

I first thought I would write him and tell him that if I could drive 450 miles from Kentucky, the least he could do was drive across Illinois; but I sent him a copy of my story and told him that I had had enough fun and foam for both of us--and his wife, too.

I'm still awaiting a reply.

Others among the absentees was my closest high school friend, probably the closest friend I'll ever have in my life, given our constant and close relationship which spanned a decade from age 12 to 22.

He died after undergoing surgery to correct a congenital heart defect--a death that leaves me aching fully 20 years later.

Bob Clark, for whom my only son is named, was operated on Friday, January 13th, 1967, and died two days later, having never regained consciousness.

I learned of his death on a typical college Sunday night in Murray, as I was suspended between enjoying the last hours of relaxation before addressing the work that would be due the following morning.

I returned home for the funeral and was a pallbearer, but my memories of those several days are vague, though I do recall trying to vocalize "A Mighty Fortress is our God", and inwardly speculating how many of the Ten Commandments inscribed in large letters over the altar in the Little Church By The Wayside in Wayne, Illinois, Bob had broken, and what the odds were on his making the hereafter.

I thought about our last night together the previous summer--a typical evening--pizza and beer, scoping out the girls. A popular song by the Four Tops played several times on the juke box, and I still get a lump in my throat when I hear it.

My memory of the funeral was so dim I had to go to the library to look up Bob's obituary to find the cemetery where he is buried.

I went there the morning of the reunion.

The cemetery overlooks the Fox River, which winds north and south through Kane County, flowing through Elgin, where Bob and I went to school; South Elgin, where I lived; and Geneva, where Bob's parents moved while he was in college, and was the last place he lived.

The hurt I carried away from the gravesite was somewhat offset by visits that evening with classmates like Jim McCall, whom I was in awe of in high school, but became better acquainted with while attending the community college in Elgin, and grew even closer to as his roommate one semester at Murray State University.

He was the tall, blond, self-assured, football player I wished I was in high school, who has gone on to do well in the business world.

Jim is one of those people who managed to make it through the undergraduate level in the American education system without once having read an entire book, even for pleasure.

He doesn't boast about it. He simply states it as a matter of fact, though he does now admit that he read "Valley of the Dolls" while confined to a hospital following a motorcycle mishap which occurred when he was alcoholically disoriented and thought he was on a 'through' street when in fact he was on a street that "dead ended" in the front steps of a junior high school. The result was a cracked vertebrae.

That was just another in a series of mishaps, most not of his own making, that plague him to this day, and include rear-ending a parked car after falling asleep on an interstate with the cruise control set on 65, hitting a tree stump while "planing" across a plowed field in a 4-wheel drive truck and being thrown through the windshield, and falling from the roof of his house to a concrete patio below.

I had thought of him as a rather distant, cocky individual while observing him in high school, only to find him an imperterbable, down-to-earth, "good guy", who has matured into a solid family man and a successful businessman.

I also visited with Mike Kenyon, a reformed smoker and now a long-distance runner whom I happened to run into Saturday morning and got talked into riding a bicycle three miles while he effortlessly jogged that distance while updating me on some of our classmates, including one recently arrested in a drug bust, who also happens to have a son doing a long stretch in the pen for murder.

Mike is from a family which has been in the business of buying and selling dairy cattle and operating dairy farms many years, and though he didn't say it, I can see that he is anxiously awaiting his turn to become more of a voice in the operation of the family business, and not be considered one of the kids, though he 43 years old.

Somewhere around the middle of the dinner/dance Saturday evening, I found myself on the dance floor, doing some semblance of an up-tempo step at the invitation of the "Belle of the Ball."

Merry Fishburn, a striking blond who has shed the plumpness she had in high school, is one of the few about whom it can be said looks better now than she did 25 years ago.

I precipitated the invitation when I earlier approached her somewhat sheepishly and apologized for my rudeness at a dance 26 years ago, when boorish behavior was often equated with a "macho" image.

Was I surprised when I learned after baring my soul to someone I had not seen for fully a quarter of a century, that she had no recollection of inviting me to the Girls' Club dance or my subsequent behavior.

And here I'd borne this guilt for the better part of 25 years! Though I didn't press it, I remember being on the point of tears. At such events, girls tend to go to the powder room in pairs, leaving a couple of guys unattached. I moved from group to group much of the evening, ignoring Merry.

She apparently blocked that out, like she did a Prom night trip the spring of our senior year she made to Wisconsin with two other girls who did not have dates.

I learned that from one of the other girls, Judy Paesler, who now lives in Wellesly, Massachusetts and is a planner with the Harvard Community Health Plan.

I had written Paesler, seeking some information about Merry, who had casually mentioned some problems with her marriage during a Sunday morning round of golf we had made in a joint fit of self-abuse, fueled by alcohol early Sunday morning.

Paesler responded with a letter which opened with the statement that she felt as if she had been passed a note in Hortense Wilson's math class asking if Merry would go out with me.

I wanted to know if Merry had mentioned her marriage to Paesler, thinking that sending her a copy of my original article might ^{not} be a smart idea if that were the case.

Paesler said she didn't know, but told the story about the trip to Wisconsin on Prom night, saying Merry had a recollection of the trip, but not that it was Prom night and they had no dates.

Paesler also responded with her own story about the girl-ask-boy dance and her shabby treatment, and I quote:

I must say that I was particularly touched by your admission that your behavior that night of Sadie Hawkins had bothered you all these years. I had been hurt by Jack Aley's performance that same night. Somehow knowing that you were sorry gave perspective to my 25 year old hurt and finally stilled the never-quite-buried fear that there was something fundamentally wrong with me! Since Merry doesn't remember the dance at all, (and Jack Aley probably doesn't either!), I'll claim the apology as my own, since I need it and you offer it. Now we can both lay that evening to rest! You're a good man, Jim Love, you're a good man.

Merry was an honor student who arrived stag at the reunion, making the 25th reunion her first, and attempted to erase her "goody-goody" high school image--a project she had no difficulty finding volunteers for.

Before my invitation, I can recall her dancing with several of the unattached males, including a Navy veteran whose chief claim to fame was the ability to consume a mixed drink and then eat the glass!

Merry's behavior during the evening apparently did little to erase her high school image, judging from comments I heard at the picnic the next day.

Her conduct created no jealousy among those I talked with, who probably based their judgement on the vast reservoir of "good will" Merry accumulated during high school by being the "good kid" she remains to this day.

The "good kid" was sorely tried by me during the golf round.

I learned several things about myself reunion weekend, with one being that I am starved for conversation about Elgin, Elgin High School, and, particularly, members of the Class of 1962, many of whom I spent six years of my life with.

I didn't realize it until Merry and I arrived at the picnic Sunday afternoon. (Simultaneously, by the way, creating somewhat of a stir, which wouldn't die even after I produced the score card, which showed her a winner by four strokes.)

She told everybody I hadn't changed a bit, and that I didn't take a breath until the 7th hole.

In addition to the talk about Elgin, I also found time to tell Merry what it means to be a "Yankee" in Hopkinsville, even after 15 years in one place.

Those of you who know me well know I will volunteer an opinion at any time on virtually any subject.

However, in gatherings with casual acquaintances, I hold my tongue, and keep my opinions to myself.

I have a fear of hearing the all-too-frequently voiced, "If you don't like it here, go back where you came from!"

That's the bottom line to non-natives who have the temerity to even suggest that methods, programs, or governments where they come from might have something more to offer than those available locally.

There are many natives who sincerely believe that those not born in Christian County forever forfeit their right to criticize it; and those who criticize it, forfeit their right to live here.

I also referred to our present company, saying my election to this society made me feel more like I am accepted in Hopkinsville than any other recognition I have received since moving here in 1972.

When I finally surfaced for a breath on the 7th hole--and I really can't dispute Merry's contention--I asked her about her life in general.

I learned that she is married to an obviously prosperous plastic surgeon and they reside in Westchester County, New York, with a ski lodge in Aspen, Colorado; a home on the Jersey Shore, and a condominium in Florida.

I had suspected as much from the evening before, and was even more impressed when I picked her up for the golf game, and found her with Aigner golf shoes, a complete set of Ping clubs, and little plastic tags attached to her golf bag she had obtained from courses in Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

One look at her swing also confirmed that she had had professional tutelege, while my golf swing comes out of a book.

I didn't feel the slightest bit guilty when she insisted that she pay for the golf, particularly after I saw the sheaf of 20's in her wallet.

Having the luxury of another night in Elgin, I stayed until the "bitter end" of the picnic, and began suffering from a staggering depression as I said my goodbyes, with frequent hugs, to those who had planes to catch or had to being the drive home in order to prepare for the coming work week.

It began as I sale farewell to several with the rather gruesome question to myself of "who would not be here 5 years from now?", like the 17 classmates already dead--two in Viet Nam, two suicides, one from leukemia, Bob from a heart ailment, and the majority of the remainder as a result of auto accidents.

The companion thought that this might be the last good time I'll ever have with these people also crossed my mind.

On the trip home, it also occurred to me that there are few places in this world where I can make an ass out of myself and get away with it.

Classmates who saw the adolescent pawings of a pair of inebrates on the dance floor Saturday night might say, "Look at that silly s.o.b. Love. He hasn't changed a bit.", while similar conduct in Hopkinsville would most likely bring, "Look at that Yankee s.o.b.!"

My depression peaked as I hugged the closest female friend of Bob Clark and lingered during the long, lonesome ride across central and southern Illinois the next day, headed toward people whom I know and who know me well, but have only an inkling of how I became the person I am; and away from those who knew me when I had a full head of hair, a limitless future, and the best friend anyone could hope to have.

I think part of the depression was also due to the sadness I feel for my children and others like them.

They'll never know the time when life was so much simpler--when there was one generally accepted more and ethical code, which was only then being called into question--and our generation had all the answers--in a United States of America which, though divided by regional bias still presented a united front to the world--and there was only one high school in Elgin, Illinois, whose Class of 1962 enjoyed each other's company at their 25th year reunion--and nobody enjoyed himself more than I did.