

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**A Class Act:
High School Reunion**

A Class Act

July 26, 2010

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This past weekend I attended a high school class reunion. It was held for my class of 1957, as well as earlier classes. Because my hometown of Lovington, New Mexico, is a small community, the number of people who attend these get-togethers is not large. My original class numbered around 100 boys and girls. Around twenty of the class of '57 attended. The overall attendance numbered at least 200. No one is sure of the exact number as some alums showed up for one event and not another, or did not register.

Mother Nature

Mother Nature takes her toll. As we mortals help enrich her earth, the attendance at these affairs diminishes with each passing year. Consequently, Lovington's reunions now combine classes from more than one annual period.

For this occasion, the classes of 1940-1957---former Lovington High School (LHS) *Wildcats*---met to renew old acquaintances.¹ We also met to celebrate that we were not residents of the local cemetery. We were here to proclaim we were both gray panthers and Gray Wildcats.

The older LHS classmates would not have many of their former classmates present to help them reminisce about past times. But one of the beauties of growing up in a small town comes from the close networks that form among people of varying ages and between students in different classes.

Father Time

I had been looking forward to this week end because, not only would I be able to see my high school buddies from '57, I could visit Wildcats from other classes. Some were the friends of my older brothers. As a young lad, several of these boys became my heroes. Later, as a teenager, a few of them assumed the mantle of big brothers.

For the girls in the upper classes, I would be able to once again cast my eyes on those fair ones for whom I had carried a crush so many years ago. Of course, I knew Father Time had likely extracted his fare from their faces, that their physical beauty had faded. But I thought David Hume had it right. He said, "Beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists in the mind that contemplates them."

As for myself, I gazed in the mirror, realizing I was now a wrinkled reminder of a past youth---of former times when I thought life would never end. Still, I wanted to see these women; to see how they looked; to share with them the youthful adulation I had carried when they were my brothers' girl friends, or the sweethearts of other mythical upper classmen.

I had also hoped to see my former swimming instructor and hero. She was instrumental in molding an aspect of my young life that affected many aspects of my later life. She was a

¹ A loose translation of what a wildcat looks like is shown on the cover page. The image was taken from a flag donated by our class to the school. The artist remains unknown.

member of the class of 1950 and is one of the stars in my book, *A Swimmer's Odyssey*. I was told she was dead, but no one could confirm this rumor. I was hoping she was still alive, for my sake, as well as hers.

For this occasion, my '57 classmates and I would be drinking from the Fountain of Youth. After all, as the class of 1957, we were to be the kids, the rookies at this reunion. Imagine. Seventy years old and going to a high school reunion as a relative youngster.

Schools and Teachers

For the ongoing readers of *Your on the Street Reporter*, you know of my admiration for teachers. A couple years ago, at a building dedication ceremony for LHS's music teacher (Florence Anderson), I made the comment that teachers drove Volkswagens and professional athletes drove Porches. I said our society had its values reversed, that the drivers of these cars should change seats. I continue to hold the same opinion.

During this reunion, it was once again evident that my hometown of the 1950s had an extraordinary school system. The town and county had a lot of money (from oil) and spent it well on teachers and educational facilities. Our teachers were carefully selected by our administrators. Many of them had master degrees in several fields of study.

We students toed the line with our teachers. If we misbehaved we might be whipped. Fear is a great motivator and getting a butt beating with a big paddle was motivation enough to stay focused on why we were at school: Not to horse-around, not to diss the buildings and people, but to learn. Sure, we did our teenage things, but we also attended to our studies.

Some of my best friends on the East Coast were schooled in the demanding Catholic Jesuit system. Ours was not as taxing, but it was an effective Protestant oriented variation.



Figure 1. Paul, our very long term representative.

Our revered English teacher, Frances Price Campbell---still alive, reading these reports, and likely making corrections to my grammar---made a contribution to the class of 1957 to support efforts of our choosing. Using her generous donation, we used this occasion to announce a college scholarship fund for graduating LHS students. She gave much to the community a long time ago. She continues to give now. A class act Frances...eh, Ms. Campbell.

Figure 1 shows the class of 57's Long Term Representative Paul Homer leaving the podium after announcing the creation of this scholarship. Paul mentioned the office of Long Term Representative had taken on a new meaning. I agree; fifty- three years is long term. He has served it well.

Hang in there Paul. Your tenure is drawing down. So is ours. But maybe not. After all, we had Wildcats coming to this reunion from the class of 1940. They enjoyed the occasion as much as we kids of the class of 1957. Besides, “Youth is not a time of life--it is a state of mind.”²

Title IX

During one of the meetings, the master of ceremonies (my brother, Ross, shown in Figure 1 standing at the podium) asked various members of our reunion to stand up and be acknowledged. We applauded football players, basketball players, and so on. With the exception of cheerleaders, all the standees for athletic participation were men. A point was made by Ross: As future classes are included in this reunion, more females will stand. A fine testimonial to Title IX.

Today, it is nearly impossible to imagine an America without high school and college female athletic programs. Yet, in the times of the classes of '40 – '57, not one solitary interschool female program existed. The girls were fed (so to speak) into home economic classes. I don't know how the male readers of this report think about the matter, but I think Title IX helped liberate both sexes from our rigid stereotypes. Equality on the fields of athletic competition leads to equality on the fields of other pursuits and interests.

Where have all the (male) People Gone?

The photo shoots for the classes of WW II and Korean War periods took a bit more time to assemble those groups at the riser. Their movements were just fine by all of us “youngsters” attending this get-together. We minded not at all. Nor did Ralph Waldo Emerson. He said, “It is time to be old, to take in the sail.” One can't go quite as quickly when one's sail has been taken-in.



Figure 2. The riser was once crowded.

Old age and its inevitable finale revealed an absence of men posing on the riser. For the class of 1947, as seen in Figure 2, only females made up the assemblage, a common feature in our society. Perhaps it's poetic justice. We males are lords of the earth for most of our time on it. But our staying power? Look again at Figure 2. A dose of humility, injected into our increasingly sparse inventory of testosterone, should lead us to think we are not necessarily the stronger within our species.

Whatever Figure 2 tells us, I think this quote is fitting for the occasion of a reunion of...let's face it--old people. It's from a writer named Stanislaw J. Lec, and increasingly one of my favorites:

“Oh to be old again,” said a young corpse.

Salute to the Veterans

I'm a war veteran. I don't celebrate Veterans Day, nor do I expect anyone to thank me for my service. I recognize I may come across as a curmudgeon, but my logic is simple: It's my duty to serve my country. One way of doing it is serving in the military. I appreciate those who thank me, but I don't believe the thanks are warranted.

² Anonymous, and found in a framed message on General MacArthur's office wall.



Figure 3. Veterans.

Nonetheless, my somewhat indifferent approach to this subject melted quickly during this reunion. After the photo shoots of the classes were complete, military veterans were asked to come forward, stand on risers, and have their picture taken, as seen in Figure 3. During this time, some ten to fifteen female Wildcats formed a small choir and began singing “God Bless America.”

I was focused on the camera and did not see the women assemble slightly to our right. As their song came to us, most of us turned our heads to see what was going on. We beheld an unaccompanied rendering of a lovely song of Americana which was rendered just for us veterans.

They were audibly thanking us. I was silently thanking them for their thanks. For this occasion, I was grateful for their kind gesture. It was simple, elegant, and heartfelt. It was a class act. And perhaps that’s the way to think about Veterans Day---or for that matter, this specific aspect of a democracy. It’s a symbiotic cycle of appreciation: Veterans thanking civilians for civilians thanking veterans.

Old Friendships Remembered

These reports are designed to run a few pages. I wish I had space to tell you about each person I met over this weekend, most of whom I had not seen since I graduated from high school. I visited with the classmates of my older brothers and scores of friends I had known since my family moved to Lovington in 1945. We had many memories to share with one another.

Perhaps providing short spoken examples will suffice for this essay. Perhaps a brief story about my classmates will evoke recollections of your own.

Three of my favorite upper classmen were (and are) Joe Carson (class of 1955), Glenn Gillette (class of 1956), and Enoch Dawkins (class of 1955). The reason I held them in high esteem was because they treated me as an equal. They actually engaged in conversations with...yes, a lowly lower classman. Even more, Joe, Glenn and Enoch were funny. I liked to hang around them to listen to their quips.

Without making this idea a big issue, I think it accurate to say we can tell a lot about a person by observing how that person treats others who are not as high in the human pecking order as they themselves are. These boys gave me respect, and they probably never gave it a thought.

What is the most valuable thing you possess in this world? OK, besides your mother-in-law? Any guess? It’s time. Joe, Glenn, and Enoch, busy with their upper classmen things, took time to talk with me.

I'll wager they are surprised to find their names cited in this essay. That's their way, they remain class acts, modest class acts. I know this observation to be true because I had a chance to visit (only too briefly) with them this weekend.

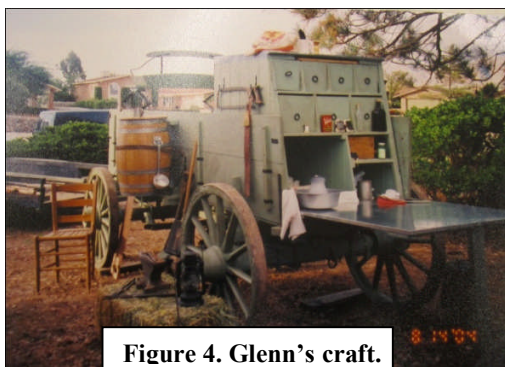
One Example of Many. Glenn was the older brother of one of my best friends (Leslie, who has passed). When I was a sophomore, each day of school before classes began, I would look him up and generally hang around his stake in a hallway, playing the role as an immature pain-in-the-ass. In hindsight, he likely tolerated me. He was a popular boy and had a lot of company around him. But he always had something funny or kind to pass my way.

I hung out at the Gillette home a lot. Often, I would just happen to drop by during lunch time. The Gillettes always had a place at the table for me. Dr. Gillette delivered me from my mom's womb. Perhaps the free lunches came my way because the doctor felt he had an obligation keep me healthy.

Glenn nicknamed me "Pink Black." The name came about because I often wore a turtle neck sweater to school that had a pink insert below the neck of the shirt. To this day, I smile when I think about the name. After Glenn and I came across each other this weekend, we talked about what we had been up to for the last fifty of so years. Given our limited time together, it was a thumbnail summary.

Glenn is involved in building a chuck wagon, a replica of those we see in western movies. He said he had some pictures of the chuck wagon in his car.

- He asked if I would like to see them?
- I said yes.
- He asked if I were sure, if I had the time?
- I said yes.
- And I thought, *My friend, my time is your time.*



Take a look at Figure 4. It's a photo of Glenn's masterpiece.

Another fine aspect of a school reunion: talking about new pursuits in relation to past interests: Glenn and I discussed making biscuits on an open fire and the difficulty of transporting sour dough over distances. I told him about my father; of his earlier life as a cook on a chuck wagon; of his teaching mom how to make biscuits; about how to cook in general. Glenn could

easily relate to my tales as he knew my mom and dad. By the way, he's passing me his recipe for sour dough biscuits.

Glenn's chuck wagon is used in exhibits and fairs around southeastern New Mexico. He makes no money on these excursions. I suspect he often goes in the hole to take care of the expenses. But that is of no concern to Glenn. He's doing what he wants to do. He described the details of each piece of the wagon. The leather strap around the water barrel, the wheels, the wood. I could have listened to my long lost friend all day, but we were often interrupted by other Wildcats, so we dispersed with the promise to stay in touch.

Who knows? Maybe we will. More likely, we will return to our habitats, only to emerge at the next reunion to say, "Damn! I meant to call you!"

I'm not complaining. We cannot possibly hold close in our present times all those whom we held close in our past times. Mother Nature and Father Time do not permit us this luxury. A reunion is a fitting adjustment to these realities.

Historian and Quilt Maker. Another of my '57classmates with whom I was lucky to spend a few minutes was (and still is...) Jean (Grisham) Dean. I had the pleasure to look at some of her



Figure 5. One talent among many.

creations, one shown in Figure 5. At LHS, Jean was a member of a very elite club: The National Honor Society. These kids were the school's intellectual cream of the crop. I never understood how these students were selected for this honor until I learned it had to do with studying.

Jean and I talked briefly about local and southwest history, about her finding a fine mate later in her life. I wanted to know more about her journey. But the visit, like all reunions of truly fine friends, was all too short.

Familiarity Breeds more Familiarity. These stories---Glenn's wagon, Jean's quilts---would be of general interest to a stranger. But to have known these two people since our childhoods made their narratives special. I know this last statement to be true, but I don't know why it is true. Some cynic once said that familiarity breeds contempt. Not for me and not for those who come to high school reunions.

Our Long Term Representative and his Mate

Paul, introduced earlier, was a late comer to Lovington. As I recall, he arrived our junior year. He immediately became a class favorite. He was an entry into the National Honor Society. He became a starter on the basketball team. He joked a lot, while excelling in those topics about which he joked. Paul and one of my best friends, Pat, became high school sweethearts.

Pat is one of the children of the Bevers family. I know this family well because they run the sibling gauntlet alongside my brothers. Jimmy Bevers played ball with my brother Tommy. Jackie Bevers was in high school alongside my brother Jim. Pat and I grew up together. In small

towns during those times, close familial associations were not unusual. Perhaps they are common in large cities, but I suspect they are not.

During our high school years, Pat and I were pals. She took on the role a quasi-sister, a welcome cast, as I only had brothers as my siblings. Even though we were of the same age, I looked upon her as a supporter. We joked a lot. One barb that got us a lot of laughs was about our losing the high school's 1957 "Best Personality" to an otherwise fine kid, but one whom we knew should have come in third. We concluded that as a rancher's son, he knew a lot of sheep jokes, which helped him garner more votes. We often made fun of our older brothers, an assuaging balm for both of us.

I think this kind of close association between families creates a network of extended families. It results in an association of familiarity, one of support and friendship. Again, I'm not saying these relationships don't exist in larger towns, in larger schools, but I do think they are rare in larger communities.

As we make our way down life's highways, we rarely know what lies beyond the next curve. Regardless of the supposed intelligence of computer forecasts, we simply do not know what lies in our future. For this weekend, we Gray Wildcats did not look to the future, we looked to the past in relation to the present.

And during this weekend (as well as past '57 class reunions) I had the privilege of watching Paul take care of Pat. He's a model for all of us Gray Wildcats. He's a model for all gray panthers.

For a long time Pat has been suffering from Alzheimer's. (So is her brother Jimmy, one of my high school heroes.) I have attended several '57 reunions, as well as the combined reunion this weekend. For all occasions, Pat was present. And Paul was there, taking care of her. Taking care with wit, love, and patience.

In preparing this report, I looked through the pages of the Lovington High School 1956 and 1957 yearbooks. I came upon one page that showed Pat and Paul as having been voted "Miss and Mr. Darkroom" of the Photography Club. On this page, Pat has penned to me, "Love, Pat." That's how Pat was, and how she is now: Wanting to express love to those around her. That's how we classmates, who also love her, know her. That's how Paul, the ever gentle and humorous man, takes care of her. Paul is surely a class act, if ever there was one to be so-described.

As we gray Wildcats become even grayer; as we become more dependent on others, as we assume caretaker roles, we should keep Paul and Pat in mind as guideposts for how to go about these duties to our loved ones.

Other Friends

For this weekend, I saw many examples of Gray Wildcats laboring against Mother Nature's dictates and Father Time's clock. As far as I could tell, we were doing a pretty good job.

And for this weekend, I wished I could have spent more time with other Wildcats. Time often did not permit much more than a, "Hello, how have you been?" to "Nice seeing you again." But

not always. On some occasions, I learned about the chuck wagons and quilts created by my old friends.

And I met my swimming instructor hero. Tudy, of the class of 1950, graced our presence and helped fulfill my hope for this class reunion.

It's a Wrap...for a While

A class reunion is about reintroducing ourselves to memories. It's about enjoying the experience of meeting past buddies or the buddies of my older brothers, icons of my youthful adulations.

Perhaps we come to reunions with the hope the people we once again meet are the same persons of the past. Perhaps we hope we are, too. Maybe all these recollections help us to remember we have lived a long and full life.

Whatever the motives may be, I found my friends to be as fine as they were over five decades ago. I exited the weekend happier than when I entered it. That's what friendship does for a person.

As for now, I look forward to visiting with Gray Wildcats at the next LHS reunion.

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