

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST  
AND THE FUTURE AT THE  
20TH REUNION OF THE  
ABILENE HIGH SCHOOL  
CLASS OF 1961

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It is impossible to adequately comment on the memories that each of us has. The 20 years that have elapsed since that early summer evening when we crossed the stage with diplomas in hand at the age of 18 have seen the 500-plus of us go our separate ways. We each have had our own unique experiences. Some of us have remained in contact from time to time but mostly not. Really it is the 18 years or so in Abilene that we did share. Those years are rich ones. I've told my wife many times that I can recall my Abilene years better than recalling where I put the car keys last night.

Looking back, it now seems that they were far simpler times. I am told we naturally forget the bad times and remember only the good. The things that we share in common are not just a graduation together 20 years ago but 12 years of common experiences; of Alta Vista, Valley View, College Heights, Fannin, Lamar, Bonham and a few more; of those 3 junior highs, North, South and Lincoln. The stark simplicity reminds me of the Civil War between the States of the 1800's. Abilene saw the North with its army of Broncos fight it out with the Coyotes from the South with Lincoln in the middle. And that's when we really began to come together--against each other on the football and baseball fields, basketball courts and student council meetings. And on the dance floor at the VFW. As our parents pushed us together on the one hand and worried about pulling us apart on the other. Remember? Starlighters, Carousel and those dance cards! How 'bout the Fair Park recreation center--pool, roller skating, pingpong.

And we also merged out at Fair Park Stadium, not only on Thursday night at the junior high football games but on Friday night and Saturday afternoons at the Abilene High school games. We began to see those senior high students that seemed 20 years older. We lived in awe of the famous Abilene Eagles under the guidance of Chuck Moser; that unbroken winning streak as the Eagles beat the best in the State -- 1954, '55, '56 State Champs. And on into 1960, each year a dominant football strength in Texas but each year, unfortunately recinding, but remaining near the top. We watched as the Eagles racked up more touchdowns against teams from such far away places as Ysleta of El Paso, Austin of Houston and others. Glynn Gregory, Twyman Ash, the King Brothers, Rufus and Boyd, and many others all seemed larger than life.

Then we all moved on into that relatively new building on North 6th and Mockingbird. The summer of 1958, 23 years ago some of us faced the heat of the West Texas sun and the heat of Coaches Chuck Moser, Wally Bullington, "Blackie" Blackburn and "Shorty" Lawson and others as we began football practice in August. As I recall, some of us made the varsity, Gerald Williamson, David Winkles and Mike Grant, but the rest did not. Most made the Junior Varsity with the rest relegated to the "B Team". (Some, like myself had the unique privilege (?) of 2, that's right 2 years on the sophomore team. Remember, Krieger?) But we all began to share in the glory we had shared only vicariously those past years in elementary and junior high school. It was now our time to mount that black and gold athletic bus and head off to do battle. It seemed like some invincible machine of war. Some wore the black and gold letter jackets with the State patch on the sleeve or the "JV" jackets that we jokingly said were made from the canvas that surrounded the practice field stretched tight on that chain link fence. And some wore those "expensive" black wool sweaters. And the more important part, not only the having but the sharing. The girls weren't completely dressed unless they had on a full skirt with 5 freshly starched pettycoats and bobby socks, rolled up or down depending on the year, and an oversized letter jacket that practically hung to the ground. And of course as sophomores you girls were really "in" if you had some senior's or junior's letter jacket. (I always worried that Susan Bell was going to stumble and fall over David Parks' jacket).

And the trips began: the band trips, the choir tours, the speech tournaments, the student council workshops as well as observers and participants in the athletic contests. Our world was a microcosm. Our "country" was that of 2-4A with the other State capitals being Midland, Odessa, San Angelo and Big Spring. And if we ever did get out of our District it was to those exotic foreign capitals like Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin and even far away Houston. (One summer, Ralph Arrel, Mike Grant and I drove, all by ourselves mind you, to far away Dallas for dinner and to see the movie, "Ben Hur". We thought we had gone to another planet!)

And the music was pre-Beatles, Grateful Dead, Stix, Hearts, Rolling Stones. Back when music was music. When you could understand the words and they seemed to fit like a glove. When tunes were simpler, when you could pick up a guitar and plunk out 4 basic cords and have down "You Cheated", "Donna", "In the Still of the Night", "Young Love" and "A White Sports Coat and a Pink Carnation". Elvis Presley played at the Big State Jamboree at Fair Park and Buddy Holly, not the Texas Tech Red Raiders or Mac Davis put far away Lubbock, Texas on the map.

And we had graduated in another sense as well. Though still in high school, out of the Queen, Texas, State and Majestic theaters and into the big time, the Paramount Theater. No more Saturday afternoons with Roy Rogers, Lash LaRue, Whip Wilson and those on-stage yo-yo contests. We had made it, right into the balcony at the Paramount, on the right side only of course. And finally all

the way down-stairs but now over to the left side.

And as the bodies and minds began to develop, we began to explore, to reach out, to go to the drive-in. Town & Country Twin, the Crescent, the Park Drive-in, to name a few of that now vanishing breed. Again, the simpler times. We had a simpler way of rating attendance at drive-ins: Double dates made it "GP" and no double dates insured at least the "R" category. And always the same afterwards, cruising the Dairy Delight on South 14th, listening on the car radio to KRBC and "The Mighty KOMA" in Oklahoma City and maybe even WNOE out of New Orleans.

And finally we arrived. September, 1960. Big Seniors at last after 11 years through the system. Jennie Lankford, Pat Wright, Marie Adamson, Terry Butler, and Jane Pruitt were now our cheerleaders. They revved us up with their cheers and Wylie Newman, Gerald Williamson and David Winkles, as the Captains, broke through that paper covered door, clad in boots, Levis and letter jackets. They would amble up and take to the microphone at those Friday morning pep rallies and comfort us on the good practices they had had all week and the fact that they were ready to beat those Mustangs, Bobcats, Panthers or whatever other "varmints" might stand in our way. And we hit the school parking lots to sell those ribbons and wear them pinned to our blouses, shirts and legs of Levis. We went steady with each other, we walked each other to class, we cried together as Abilene lost the Victory Bell for the first time in 6 years as it moved on to Odessa Permian. And the new Permian High School seemed to typify the changing times. Now Abilene would have 2 high schools the next year and a multitude of junior highs.

Our eyes and minds began to turn toward the future. Our former upper-classmen had now moved on to inhabit the far away, seemingly grown-up worlds of Tech, TCU, SMU, Texas and Baylor and others. Slowly we began to peek out into those worlds; to visit the college campus, to attend the fraternity and sorority parties and begin to think of what we might do with our lives, if not for 40 years, at least for the next 4. We began to decipher, no longer Spanish and Latin, but Greek, now mostly in the form of 3 letters. Delta, Gamma and Theta seemed to be the most common.

But we still wanted to hold on to the simpler times, to squeeze the last drops out of the grapes of life, to do the Senior Follies, plan for the Senior Picnic and think about what our senior gift should be and most importantly plan the Senior prank. We spent more time figuring out how to get that wagon chained to the covering over the breezeway by the door near the student council store than on final exams. Then spring came with a great track season and an All-State team. And new feelings began to set in for the first time, excitement at the prospects of jobs and college, life in apartments and dorms and

moving; but simultaneously overladden with sadness as we knew we were leaving our sheltered world of close friends. We held back the tears and tried to put those sad thoughts out of our minds as we rushed into the future.

Suddenly the future was ours. We promptly tilted the graduation hats on our flat-tops and over ponytails and glided across the graduation stage into an unknown world.

And that begins Chapter 2, the past 20 years. I cannot effectively capsulize those 20 years because we have all gone our separate ways. Many to four more years of college and further, seeming to dive bomb from the heights of popularity and security to an abyss. From a small pool into a big sea. Into auditorium-like classrooms filled with hundreds of unfamiliar faces. Trying to stumble through incredibly more difficult subjects. And beginning to encounter a large world that began to touch our lives. To view on TV snarling dogs held by police in faraway places like Atlanta and Birmingham as they attacked young blacks who "dared" sit at lunch counters and sit at the front of the bus. And it began to make most of us realize that there was a uniformity to our past lives in Abilene that we as whites had never thought of. That maybe the "blacks" of Abilene did not just attend Woodson High School because it was conveniently closer to where they lived. That there were two water fountains in Kress and Woolworths for mere convenience. And suddenly our world was shattered by a bullet fired in Dallas, Texas on an autumn day in November, 1963, at a young charismatic President. It seemed that violence began to encroach on our formerly simple lives. Our fellow Texan, Lyndon Johnson, sadly assumed the Presidency. And we were knocked back again as a rifle bullet killed a non-violent preacher from the South, Martin Luther King, Jr. We recoiled and were collectively thrown down yet a third time as another assassin's bullet took the life of Bobby Kennedy.

The simplicity was gone. Plunged into marriage, into families, and for some, into war. A small Asian Country none of us had even heard of on graduation, May 1961, became a living hell for many. Vietnam. We all either went or watched family members and friends go. And again things became more complex. We, the Class of '61, had been reared on West Texas values of patriotism, discipline and respect. Now we partook or watched TV as the young people of Woodstock burned draft cards, draped themselves in the American flag and suddenly punished their minds and bodies with drugs and blasting sounds that they said was music. And then as we slowly recovered from the senseless assassinations, the civil disobedience, the civil rights battles, and Viet Nam, we were suddenly propelled into another crisis as two young Washington Post news reporters began to divulge something about a break-in at some apartments in Washington, D.C. called Watergate. We suffered yet another shock to our values as we watched Congressman and Senators move to impeach and finally remove a President of the United States.

But we survived those crises and we survived personal crises as well. For some, the simplicity of marriage in the late teens and early 20's became more complex. Some realized that they just were not meant to grow old together and split.

Recently, when I told a friend I was going to my 20th high school class reunion, he said he had just had his and it was great. So much better than the 10th, which he had attended. At 10 years, he said, everyone at age 28 or so were like young colts, a little nervous and anxious, on their way up or on their way to something. They weren't quite sure who they were or what they were supposed to become, but most thought they weren't there yet. He said the 20th was remarkably different. They were survivors, who for the most part, had come to grips with who they were and were selfconfident and secure in their respective roles in society.

That brings us to Chapter 3. Today, tomorrow and the future. What is it? Well, I can't say with absolute certainty, but I can make some pretty safe predictions. We will cope. We will survive. Oh, we will still have some rough spots, but I am confident that collectively the Abilene High School Class of 1961 will enjoy a course of smooth sailing for the most part. We will continue in such professions as sales, law, pharmacy, medicine, education, and many others. Our female classmates will continue to wear multiple hats, some with their professional careers, some as homemakers, some successfully handling both. And I predict that we will gather in 5, 10, or 20 more years to reminisce like this again. Our ranks will slowly diminish with illness, disease and death, but as a group, we will survive. Maybe it's because we were reared under that hot West Texas sun or survived those bitterly cold northers. Maybe it is because we had stern but caring families and teachers that molded our minds. Maybe it is all of these or maybe it is none of these, but whatever the reasons, I know we will make it.

I am proud of my hometown, of Abilene High School and you, my friends of the Class of '61. Why don't we get together and do this again sometime?

Addendum: Post-reunion observations in memory of Dub Galbraith.

All of the above was written the day before our reunion. I had not intended to try to summarize the weekend but the news of the tragic death of my friend and classmate, Dub Galbraith, made me reconsider. (Dub was killed in a one car accident a few weeks later near Abilene when his car collided with a bull that had wandered out on the road late one night.)

I will not re-cap the events themselves, the program at high school, the bar-b-que and the dance. Those that were there will recall it far more vividly from their own individual perspectives and it would be almost impossible to tell those not there of what they missed.

We will all have our own private memories of the Reunion as we renewed old friendships and acquaintances. For me, I will not be able to think of the weekend without thinking of Dub. I'll try not to let it be with too much sadness, although that will be natural, but with gladness and pleasure. Why? Because Dub epitomized the reunion. He, like so many others there, appeared to be content with his life, who he was. He physically embraced us, Jerry Grider, Cliff Sims, Bill Monk, Mike Grant, Jack Anthony, myself and many more in obvious pleasure at seeing us. Many of us broke the ice that Friday night out at the Kiva Inn until the early morning hours and managed to get together at the first opportunity the next morning at high school. Then on to the Country Club for beer, bar-b-que, swimming and kids. Kids all over the place. And the dance that night - those oldies but goldies" until early that morning. And even after the party, some of us just wouldn't let it end, including Dub. I hauled out my guitar and a lot of us stayed on for a sing-a-long for a few more hours. Although I had to crash about 3:00a.m., I understand some made it right on until the sun came up. Why? Not just to party, I don't think, but to drain the last drop of enjoyment out of being together, perhaps realizing that at the next reunion 5 or 10 years from now, for one reason or another, we might not all be together again.

So, I am glad I went, if for no other reason than to see Dub Galbraith. To share memories, to recall old times, to drink together, to sing together, to laugh together and, perhaps, to shed a tear or two together. Please, take care of yourselves and, as I said before and at the reunion, let's to it again sometime.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name "John". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping flourish at the bottom.