

AHS Class '61 comments about John Gerhart

Friday, April 21, 2006

The boy most likely

Johnny Gerhart's name came up again this week, in an incidental way. Oran Logan, a ninth-grade classmate of John's at South Junior High School (Abilene, Texas, 1957-58) came into possession of scrapbook material that Oran's mother had kept all these years. Among these was a page from the school newspaper, the "Coyote Howl" (coyote pronounced "ky-yoat," in the West Texan dialect).

The page announced the results of student polling for ninth-grade class favorites. There were Friendliest Girl and Boy, Beautiful Girl, Handsome Boy, Most Talented Girl and Boy, Best All-Around Girl and Boy, Girl and Boy Most Likely to Succeed, Most Athletic Girl and Boy.

This page was circulated among an email classmates list. It was fun seeing again who won, and wry comments were passed around ("Bob Cluck was runner-up Handsome Boy?").

Most of the comments, though, were about Johnny Gerhart, who was selected Boy Most Likely to Succeed.

It shows the power of even the unsophisticated to detect greatness. Not a single one of us in the hallways of South Junior in 1957-58 would have seen Gerhart coming down the hall and thought: "Harvard grad, double degree in English and French history and literature; at Harvard, he wrote for the Crimson (school newspaper); took a year off in 1963 to teach high school in Tanzania; a Masters and a Ph.D. in Public Affairs from Princeton; international educator and philanthropist; from 1969-98, a Ford Foundation representative all over Africa; president of The American University in Cairo, 1998-2002; named by Princeton's graduate faculties as one of their 100 most notable alumni of the 20th century."

Nope, we just saw Johnny, coming down the hall, on the short side, plaid shirt, Levi's rolled up two laps, grinning and waving hello (I'll bet he won Friendliest, too, but they couldn't give two awards), just one of us. But we knew something. We looked at Johnny Gerhart and voted him Boy Most Likely to Succeed, hands down. How did we know he would be South's most notable 1958 alumnus of the 20th century, 43 years before the Princeton vote?

That's what the talk was about this week. It felt so good to us to find his name there. Johnny Gerhart died of cancer in July, 2003. We had hardly seen him in all those decades; he left Abilene, went to private school in Austin, then to Harvard and off on his international path of brilliance. But we didn't forget him. We were among the first to see, somehow, the unforgettability that stayed with him wherever he went, among whomever he walked, from unschooled ninth graders to foreign kings. We felt included in a natural community with John at its center, the creator of the community, which is how, after his death, he was remembered by so many.

The eulogies and remembrances and stories were collected and now are maintained at the Website of "Alliance" magazine, "the leading magazine on philanthropy and social investment across the world." The first three tributes are from the president, the first lady, and the prime minister of Egypt. The rest, "Messages from friends and colleagues," from all over the globe, scrolling down and down, are more informal and informative, filling in many blanks that our South Junior instincts knew were there.

Not a one of the 40 messages is from one of John's South Junior classmates, a gap which I undertake to correct. Much of the affection is nothing new. "Always when we met again it was as if we were resuming a conversation that we had left off in mid-sentence." Yep. That's the way Johnny put us all first. "I have been lucky to know all kinds of wonderful, smart and original people," says another. "But John was one of the very, very, very special ones." No lie, as we used to say at South.

But he was also a collector of African art, and an expert bird watcher. I never knew that. He was also an expert storyteller, and I don't remember that, but it makes sense. Many of his friends remembered John's father, the Rev. Willis P. Gerhart, as anyone does in 1957-58 Abilene who met John's father. There was no mistaking Rev. Gerhart's intellect, or *vivre*, or fondness for good stories, or willingness to tell them. Being his son made Johnny mysterious. So austere a robed presence, commanding a towering white Episcopal church on South Sixth. Directly across from the church was a neighborhood grocery store, with wood floors and screen doors, owned by Eddie Baldwin's father. Eddie was named "Friendliest Boy" in our poll. And just around the corner from these two lived Pam Oswalt, who was just gorgeous but, darn it, went to Lincoln Junior. That block on South Sixth must have been the closest thing to a vortex that Abilene had.

Now there are a couple of things about Johnny that the other messengers may not know. Wherever in the world he was, or whomever he was with, if Johnny saw a coyote, and called it a ky-yoat, he was only being true to his roots. Once a South Junior Ky-yoat, always a South

Junior Ky-yoat. Secondly, a Ford Foundation colleague wrote about John and women: "His reputation for hiring smart, dynamic women was known throughout the Ford Foundation."

When you went to junior high with Gena Jay ("Friendliest Girl"), Pat Wright ("Best All-Around Girl"), Crystal Ragsdale ("Most Beautiful Girl") and Nancy Shoemaker ("Girl Most Likely to Succeed") AND lived across the street from Pam Oswalt, you couldn't help but take that appreciation forward. We haven't forgotten Johnny Gerhart. And Johnny didn't forget us.

posted by Michael Grant

From: eddie kriegler To: John Odam

Sent: Wednesday, April 26, 2006 5:04 PM

Subject: My Little John message is now complete...for now

The recent post relating to John Gerhart have been great and I have really enjoyed the sharing of thoughts and feelings about John. I wish I could capture just a portion of the thoughts and memories that have been shooting through my old head as I read these messages.

I can't remember when I didn't know John Gerhart. Until we moved the first time that I can remember we lived just three houses down Highland street from the Gerharts. How lucky I was to be a part of that great neighborhood. John was known as Little John in those days to keep from being confused with Johnny Garner who lived between us. We had great fun in those early years: climbing trees and playing Tarzan, playing "kick-the-can" till well after dark with the Gerharts front yard usually being home base, having a foot race at least every week or so down the street because I was determined to out run Johnny --never did--, wrestling in Johnnys front room with his Mom, Eleanor, watching from her arm chair as I was always having to yell "calf-rope" when Johnny put his deadly scissor hold around my middle--I never won one of those wrestling matches either.

One of the biggest treats that I think of often was getting to go with Parson Gerhart, Johnny, and Harry to Mrs Brown's boarding house for lunch. If there was ever a better spread laid out on a table, I would like to partake of it. I can still see Parson paying the lady (probably Mrs Brown) as we went into the dining room. She sat at a small table and would put the money in a cigar box. After lunch the diners would take their plates and glasses to the kitchen after they were done eating. A different time that becomes more valuable as the years accumulate.

Just a few more memories and I'll shut this down. I'm already sitting here with tears running down my cheek. Feels great.

I remember John and Harry's room and all the books and wonderful posters on the wall. Johnny was reading Newsweek while I was reading comic books. However, I do think that he and his family were probably most responsible for my love of books and reading. Johnny and I would ride the bus downtown on Saturdays to go to the library to get five or six books to bring home. Mine were always Westerns. He suggested once that I read A Paradise of Birds--I did and still remember the name of the woman that wrote that book, the first non fiction book I can remember reading. Other books he pointed out to me that I remember:continued, for what it's worth, below. I meant to save this and get back to it, but it was 5:45 in the AM and my fingers and brain weren't connected

Green Mansions was one I remember the most. I think I still have John's copy in the Modern Library edition and Tale of Two Cities which I felt I had to read because Mrs Gerhart offered me two dollars at some point to read that book. (I think she was concerned about my education or lack of it.) I read that book, enjoyed it, and thought about John's mother the whole time I was reading it. Other books that I'm sure are a result of John's influence: Washing of the Spears and The History of the Boer Wars.

I also think of John every day when I look out the kitchen window to see if there are any new vistors to the bird feeder. How often I think, Boy, I wish Gerhart was here to tell me what the hell that bird is. A painted bunting comes to the feeder every year and it is like a reunion. The first time that bird appeared at the feeder was the day John was buried in Austin.

I look every day for that painted bunting.

How lucky we were to have John and his family in our lives. And, how lucky many people were or are that John Gerhart was there to enrich their lives. Everyone should be so lucky.

I plan on calling John's brother Harry this evening to see if he is aware of these memories of John. If he hasn't seen them, I will forward all to him.

Thanks to you all for bringing these thoughts and memories to the surface. And, thanks to you, Odam, for being both the catcher and the pitcher of the words. You have my permission to edit my attempt at putting anything on paper.

Grant---What grade are we in now?

From: Nell Anne Hunt

Sent: Wednesday, April 26, 2006 11:13 PM

Subject: RE: My Little John message is now complete...for now.. by Eddie Krieger...

The Gerharts were some of my best childhood memories. In remembering Johnny, I think of the West Texas saying, " An acorn doesn't fall far from the tree."

... Harry and Johnny are in all my Sunday School and Vacation Bible School pictures (all black and white taken with a Brownie camera).

... My mother's family were all Baptists but Mother said as a child she would look out her window every once and a while and the Parson would be standing in the middle of my grandmother's rose garden with garden shears cutting my grandmother's roses to take to someone sick in the hospital. When my sister was involved in a serious automobile accident in college and had to be hospitalized in Hendricks for weeks, she always had a roomful of floral arrangements. The Parson would arrive on the scene every few days and ask Elaine which arrangement she could do without because he had just discovered one patient who was very sad and had no flowers, and he would be more than happy to take one of hers to them for her....

...Eddie's memory of the Boarding House is a favorite memory because after Confirmation Classes, the Parson would always take all the class to lunch there. To this day I don't remember a thing I learned in Confirmation Classes, but I'll never forget all the fun we had at lunch afterwards...

...One of the rich members of the church decided it was embarrassing that the Parson was wearing around a rather threadbare coat during the winter so she gave him a very fancy tailored one. He wore it a week or so and then started appearing in the worn-out one again. The rich parishioner called to inquire about the coat, and he explained to her quite matter-of-factly that he was visiting someone in the jail, and that person had no coat so, of course, he had given him his coat. In his way of thinking it seemed a perfectly logical thing for him to do...

...Every Christmas everyone could hardly wait to see the Christmas card their family would create. It always featured their boys in non-angelic poses in the church. One time I remember they were both in choir robes at the altar, both sporting large black eyes!

...I remember when Johnny got ready to go to college that Stanford and Harvard both bid on him. Both coasts wanted the West Texas boy for their own...

...The Parson was a devout Episcopalian but he was totally devoted to ALL the faithful. There were only three families in Abilene who belonged to the Greek Orthodox church, and they all ended up at the

small Heavenly Rest church. He was such a scholar that he loved the Old Testament and made friends with the Jewish families in town. I remember him saying that one of his greatest thrills was when the First Baptist Church's minister had an emergency, and he called The Parson to see if he would mind preaching at the service. Of course, he said yes, because he said he could hardly imagine getting to preach in front of so many people!

...My mother was an English teacher at Cooper High School, and The Parson would come and listen to her read Shakespeare to her students. He loved the classics as much as she did.

...His influence taught me the importance of tolerance, faith and being of service to others. It's a funny thing. I don't remember any of his sermons. I just watched him live.

Nell Anne Walter Hunt
