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We're from Oak Ridge High School

This one cheer keeps ringing in my ears when I think about our days at Oak Ridge High School from 1955 to 1959.

“We're from Oak Ridge High School, no one could be prouder.
If you cannot hear us, yell a little louder!”

And it got louder and louder as the cheerleaders urged us on. And yes, no one could be prouder than to be a 1959 graduate of Oak Ridge High School.

We had a championship football team that thrilled us with their exploits on the field. And best of all, those guys were champions off the field as well. Our athletes were friendly, wholesome guys. Most of these young men were achievers in the classroom and active in student life as well. Best of all, our heroes grew up to become fine men.

We went to district basketball tournaments, mostly in Knoxville high school gymnasiums, but sometimes in the old Alumni gymnasium at the University of Tennessee. Remember the climb to get into those seats up in the rafters?

I wrote the bi-weekly Teen Talk Topics column for the Oak Ridger. How I loved to get the news about the Y-Teen sock hops held at the Grove Nursery School and all the happenings at the Wildcat Den. The column was filled with parties and events of the church youth groups like the Methodist Youth Fellowship, the Catholic Youth Organization, the Baptist Youth group, United Church and Presbyterian Church. Do you remember that membership in the particular church was not a requirement? We followed the parties at the various churches around town.

My column covered the dances and the teas of the social clubs – the Swank-Ettes, the Penguins and the Sub-Debs. In our junior year, some of the guys formed their own social club, the Gents. The club dances in the Oak Ridge High School cafeteria were big events with bands like the funky Willie Gibbs and the more sedate Rhythm-Aires. I still have my dance cards and all those memories.

Do you remember the Junior Senior Prom and how hard the committees worked to make each one a grand affair? Do you remember the crowning of the Prom King and Queen? I liked our taffeta and net prom dresses held out by layers of crinolines. Wrist corsages fashioned of carnations or roses were very popular, but lucky was the girl who got an orchid!

What girl doesn't remember those Merry Widow foundation garments that were worn underneath the prom dress? And didn't the guys look great in their white jackets and black cummerbunds topped off with a boutonniere of red or pink carnations.

Who could ever forget the annual Nativity Pageant held in the ORHS auditorium? That was the pet project of our high school counselor Miss Margaret Barnes. She handpicked a smart and popular girl each year to play the part of Mary. Big, strapping athletes were transformed into the Three Kings. The Waits were a squadron of accomplished girls who walked solemnly down the aisle wearing white robes to complete the tableau on stage.

There was always a group of giggling angels placed on risers behind a screen of cheesecloth intended to give the angels a mystic aura. Never mind that our school had students of other faiths and cultures. I wonder when the Nativity Pageant gave way to modern sensitivities?

Who remembers our American Field Service exchange students? We always had a male student and a female student who spent a year far from home with a local host family. In our senior year, George Holt and his family hosted the affable Alan Wynde from England. The MacPherson family hosted the delightful Wanda Visser from the Netherlands. Our AFS exchange students added much to our student life.

How many of you actually danced in the lobby outside the auditorium during the lunch hour? I was never asked, but I loved to watch as the talented and the brave danced energetically as 45 rpm recordings of the Coasters or Buddy Holley were spinning on the record player in the corner.

Do you remember the elections for class officers and student council held each year? Can you believe they let us paint campaign signs on the windows in the glass covered stairwell that linked the old A and B

buildings? And what about the assembly programs where the candidates and their supporters gave hilarious skits and sometimes serious speeches.

Do you remember the productions of the Masquers Club drama group and how exciting it was when the script called for a kiss between our student actors? Who can forget the flamboyant faculty advisor, Bill Lewis, who directed the plays and often performed ballroom dance routines with our queen of ballroom dance, Mrs. Ethel Howell.

Let us not forget the after-school ballroom dance classes that Mrs. Howell taught in the school cafeteria. It was called the Social Dance Club. Many considered the dance lessons and the related teaching of the social graces to be sheer torture. But the dance and the social skills she taught us had much to do with shaping us into more confident men and women.

How many of you remember fashioning a toga from a bed sheet in order to be appropriately dressed for the Latin Club events? And what an honor it was to be Caesar and order the slaves around.

Were you one of the fortunate ones tapped for membership in the National Honor Society during a school-wide assembly program each spring? We had lots of smart people in our class. Wasn't it amazing during the 1959 honors and awards assembly just how many scholarships and awards we earned?

Science was our thing back in the late 1950s. We had a Biology Club and a Chemistry Club. We had Science Fairs every spring with lots of good projects. The winning projects went on to compete in the Southern Appalachian Science Fair at the University of Tennessee. We had our share of winners.

No need to answer here, but who remembers parking on River Road, back when we had a River Road? What about parking at the Overlook with the lights of the town twinkling below? Lest we forget, there were those who parked on G Road, but we are not naming names, just remembering.

The Oak Terrace restaurant in Grove Center and the Oak Terrace Drive In on the outskirts of town were centers for our social lives. I don't remember much about the menus, but I do recall that the White Pine Room special was a delicious combination of my favorite foods.

Our social lives got a boost when the Ark Bowling Lanes with automatic pin setters was built in the Downtown center. It was a great place to go with a date, a church group or just a bunch of friends.

Let's not forget our movie theaters, the Grove, the Ridge and the Center Theater. My brother was an usher at the Ridge where he made 25 cents an hour. But that's about what we paid for a ticket and 10 cents more for a bag of pop corn.

Did anyone ever watch an entire movie with a date at the Skyway Drive In theater before the windows got steamed up? Did you ever go to the sleazy Elza Gate Drive In? There are some girls I know who drove out there one night to be revolted by a movie called "Lillie's Wedding Night."

Perhaps our proudest moment is the fact that we were the first high school class in the South to complete all four years of high school in an integrated school. But how many of us realized then that we were making history? How many of us felt the isolation and the apprehension that our fellow African American students must surely have felt when they joined us at Oak Ridge High School in 1955. How many of us now, in looking back, are proud that we were the ones who integrated peacefully?

There is so much more that could be told about our high school days in Oak Ridge. And, of course, much more that should not be told. The girls could tell of slumber parties, giggling over dirty jokes and lighting up that first cigarette out of sight of parents and tattle tales. The guys could tell of driving around town late at night listening to WLAC, Nashville, Tennessee, on the car radio. Some might tell of nights when the ones who looked older bought a quart of beer. Some might recall being sick on warm beer, but again, I am not naming names, just remembering.

So it is time to recall that cheer again.

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