

My High School Reunion

July 19, 2011



July 15-17 **I attended one of those iconic milestones - a high school reunion.** It was for the classes of 1964-67 at my old home town of Carrot River, population 1200, 150 miles northeast of Saskatoon as the Whiskey Jack flies.



A reunion is a wonderful time to reminisce, get sentimental, see old friends, and revisit the past - possibly the latter more for me than most for the drive up is a cruise through my earliest reincarnations. We lived in six different places in my first six years, most en route. And it all started here September 14, 1946 when I popped out at Melfort Union Hospital squalling because no one thought to have a Single Malt on hand to greet me with.



At the time we were living in the village of Gronlid, a two elevator (one is left) town north of Melfort. Mom was teaching at the one-room school and my dad was running the livery stable, launching a farm, delivering milk and selling seed for Newfields. A livery stable?



Some of my earliest memories are in this tiny shack on the edge of the school yard.



Further along is Schoonover Road, a grid past my grandparents' homestead half a mile to the right. My Uncle Lyle and Aunt Ina still live in that grove by the highway. It was at the homestead that I lived the winter of '49 while my mother attended teachers college. Our horse driven farm had failed, the first of many like outcomes in my father's unhappy life, and he joined the army.



With my grandmother teaching and my grandfather farming, they prospered even through the Depression - enough to buy this classic 1936 Bonnie and Clyde Ford. That's my dad (yes, bad hair runs in my line) next to my nattily dressed grand-dad - no bibs and straw hat when he wasn't on the tractor; my Ontario born school marm grandmother was full on flapper in the '20s and kept them stylish all their lives. That's my Aunt Myrtle on the far right. It was said you could turn both Schoonover girls upside down and they'd still look good.



Ed, a son of the agricultural genius Henry Neufeld of Nipawin (Newfield Seeds) who developed the rapeseed that flourished in our cold corner of the prairies, married her. Northeast Saskatchewan is famous for its swaths of beautiful, bright, golden fields of rape (canola), fields that now light up the entire prairies. Van Gogh would love this country. Ed became an economics professor, VP of the Royal Bank and a senior economic advisor to Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. It's a small country. I would take a Romantic poetry tutorial at Simon Fraser University the summer of '68 with Margaret Sinclair who would become Pierre's dope smoking, air-headed, outrageous, if beautiful, wife.



I actually started Grade I in the tiny Ukrainian village of Yellow Creek (finishing in Barrie Ontario near Camp Borden) where my mother hails from. Her dad founded the village when he established the general store and post office here when the railway was being pushed through in the late 1920s towards Carrot River (1932) and he's written up in a Saskatchewan history book for doing so. They also survived the Depression in comfort, the six well dressed daughters blissfully unaware of hard times, while supporting many families on relief. I loved this place and still do although it's a skeleton, if not quite a ghost town, today. I can still hear in memory the "clank - clank - clank" of the blacksmith's hammer carried on the still air of the village. And I love being part of Bohunk culture. There's an earthy warmth to it, something totally absent in its Limey and Kraut counterparts. And the food!



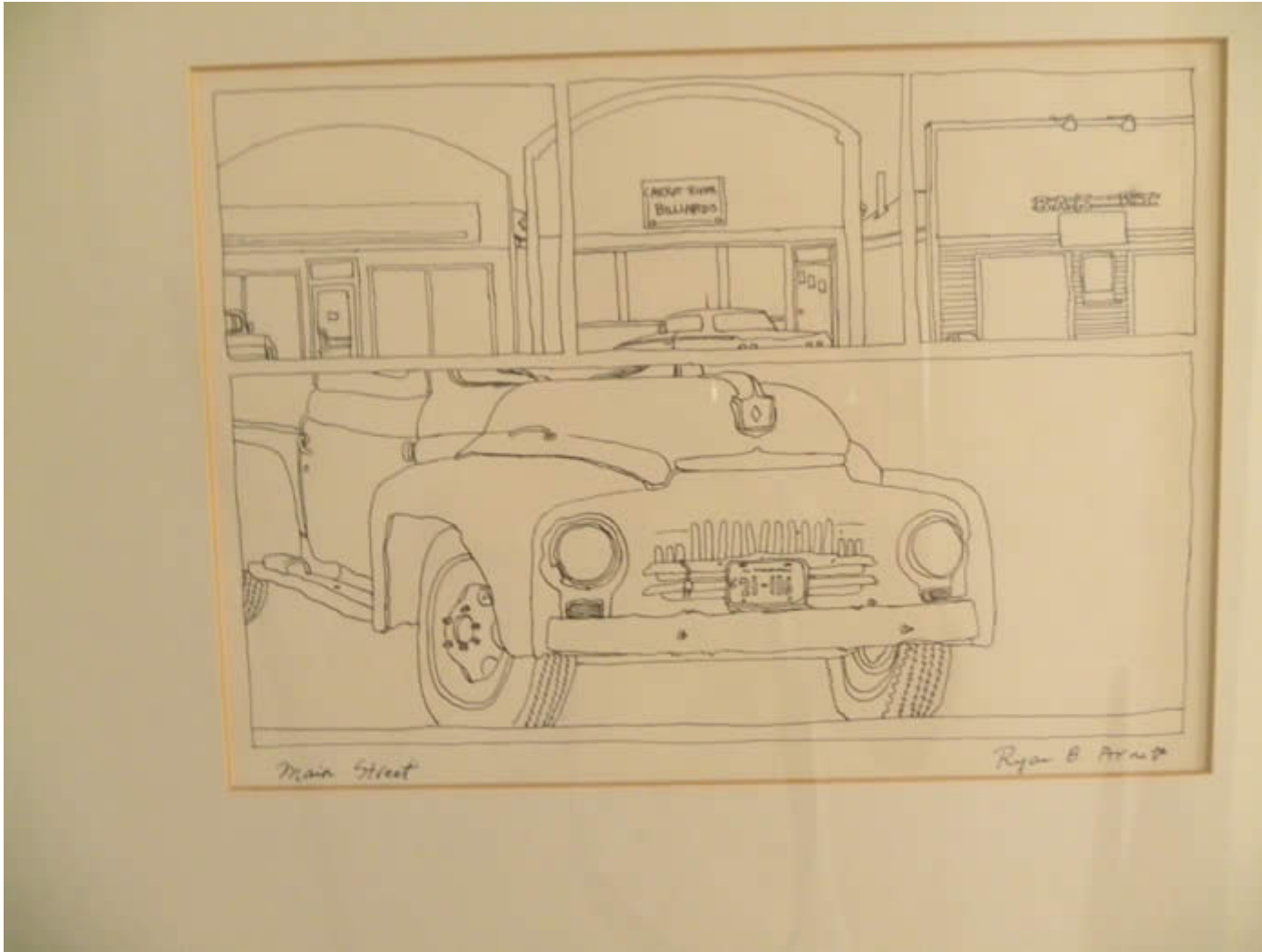
The end of that nostalgic cruise is Carrotville itself where I was subjected to Grades II to XII. Actually, as much as I hated school, I readily agree that we were extremely lucky in having many outstanding, even brilliant teachers, such as Henry Braun, everyone's favorite. (He even has a Regina school named after him.) My all time favorite was Lois Button, who wore kindness and care for her students on her sleeve, in Grade VI. Another, my old pal Jim Penman in Grades VII and VIII, a published playwright, gave me the entire toolkit for writing and it was at the age of 12 I had an epiphany that I wanted to be a novelist. However, with his humourless Scottish and military background he ran the Public School like an SS boot camp those two years. Unfortunately for him, trying to carry that kind of discipline into civilian life didn't translate and, after he moved to Swift Current and another principalship, his marriage disintegrated and this brilliant, if militaristic jerk, drowned prematurely in a bottle.



The spongy muskeg and mud of Main Street are gone but we're still proud rednecks.



There's a hole in my heart as big as this vacant lot for here used to stand my beloved poolroom. I was the pool shark of my generation. I had so much pleasure here wasting my youth I can't tell you.



Fortunately, it still exists in art. The car parked in front of Carrot River Billiards is a '62 Chevy, one of the years I ruled the snooker tables.



"Goin' down the tracks" was something we did a lot of as kids, and this was also the route to the gravel pit - our ol' swimmin' hole. The wall of trees at the end literally represents the end of the line - the end of steel as we say. That bush doesn't peter out until the tree line in the Arctic. This was major logging country and there's still a big mill here. I grew up building huts, snaring rabbits, playing hockey and Little League baseball (I was a pretty snappy shortstop) and freezing my skinny ass off in winter, which is why I escape annually to the Thai tropics. Chopping wood and hauling coal in for the McClary stove, carrying in snow to melt for wash water, pumping drinking water, carrying out the

slop and the "honey" pails. It was all part of growing up in the 1950s. All fondly remembered. I still love chopping wood while canoeing and I'm damned good at it.



This humble bungalow Mom purchased in 1956 from the last and only dentist to practice here. And it was on this very patch of lawn where I had the two epiphanies I write about in the introduction to *Adventurous Dreams, Adventurous Lives* after I read an article in Reader's Digest about The Explorers Club. The first was that I wanted to join that exclusive club of adventurers! (And I was elected as a Fellow 25 years ago.) The second was that I vowed to live the most adventurous life I could. It was the summer of '58 and I was 12. I can still feel in memory the warm summer breeze on my cheek that day....



Registration for the reunion was Friday. I was sure I'd accidentally walked in on an old folks' home tea and I turned to leave, but then someone called, "Harv! I mean Jason!" I turned and there was some ancient creature like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*. "Just call me Skin," I replied, shrinking away. I don't care what people call me. I never felt like a Harvey. I'm tired of Jason. I'd switch to Rivers, one of my legal middle names, except that I have too many books out. I haven't seen so many geezers since I visited my Aunt Margaret at her retirement home in Watson. Where the hell did all the girls I used to lust after disappear to???



Judy Trombley in blue. Blake Mooney and Ray Mazurek in foreground. Gord Pennycook talking up Diane Lockhart behind them. Or is that Linda Griese? Not sure who the other codgers are.



Talk about old friends. Jean Bradshaw (I'm using maiden names) on the left. Gord Pennycook - the Viking - on the right was my best friend through high school. Rivers of Bohemian beer flowed under our bridge, I'll tell ya. And then there was Myrt Pomeroy, in black and white - my first girl friend way back in Grade II! (Yes, we started young in Carrotburg. The aroma of muskeg is a powerful aphrodisiac.)



Isn't she a cutie? We used to tuck ourselves under coats in our Grade II cloakroom and neck away like crazy. When I got back to Toontown I tried to get The Dragon Lady jealous, flaunting this photo and bragging about our lascivious ways, but it just didn't faze her. "Yes, she's cute," was all Su said before sighing and going back to her book. (Another "It's a small country" moment: Su's brother Gene Hattori, the photographer of the Queen several times and the official Rideau Hall book, is married to Judie Rutherford.)



The next day was the banquet and dance. That's Carman Drury in the center at the buffet table with Marilyn Lefebvre, with her frog's legs showing and in amphibian green naturally. The frogette was Das Fuhrer of the event.



The guys are Allan Malfair and Larry and Richard Wilm with the former two's sister-wives, Aline and Laurie Perrault of Zenon Park. Larry recalled when Wes Clark, infamous for throwing chalk, car keys and brushes at students, almost twisted his ear off. I never had Clark as a teacher but I was so disgusted with his bully reputation that I refused to acknowledge him. There were a couple of times we ran across each other in Saskatoon over the years and I left him puzzled when I just walked by, ignoring him. So we had the odd asshole for a teacher too (Hop-a-long among them, her greatest lesson teaching one to despise the learning process). I learned over the weekend that Wes kicked the bucket a couple of years ago. Being skinny, I was picked on incessantly by the cowards that bullies essentially are, particularly by one guy in my class. He took a perverse, sick pleasure in making me miserable for the ten years I was in Carrot and as much as I have tried to forgive him in my heart, I find that I just can't and have given up. And that's because he can't acknowledge what a fucked up, mean spirited kid he was, and apologize, for I see that he's changed. It's hard to turn a sincere apology down.



There's good old friends and then there's great old friends and these three old broads fall into the latter category. Course, I still look like I'm 17. I'm sure you can see at a glance that Gloria Helstein and Jane Ruda in the middle are just a barrel of laughs.



During the program MCed by Ken Clancy and Danny Oakes I played a tape recorded greeting from my mother who taught Grade II. That's why several have their hands up. I asked past students of Mom's to do so so I could show her.



That's Joe Johnston with his hand up on this side. Yes Joe, you can go to the little boy's room.

Our last reunion was in 1977 and I was asked, as a DJ, to MC. There wasn't a decent rock n roll band around but since I also ran Rolling Thunder Sound in Saskatoon, entertaining at dances with taped music and knew I could do the best job, I stupidly volunteered to also provide the dance music for free. I shouldn't have. The result was that I landed tuckered out at the end of the night without having been able to talk to anyone and was left feeling hollowed out. I'll tell ya, I made up for it this time.



There was a silent auction and show and tell. For the former I donated a copy of *Adventurous Dreams* and was pleased when it attracted a top bid of \$55 from Elaine Gulka.

For show and tell, I had some old *Torches*, the school newspaper. On the back of one I was startled to find a signed IOU from Maryann Samulak, another old girl friend, for something like 2006 kisses. The math in my handwriting beside it calculated that that would work out to about 6.5 hours of steady necking. (I naturally gloatingly pointed this out to John Lefebvre who had a crush on her at the time.) I also brought my Grade 8 art

folder which was covered with signatures, a last day of school ritual, that day being June 28, 1960; my graduation invitation and napkin; and a card from the Skibinski's, where I was staying, congratulating me "and now sober up and get a job." The geez in the foreground is Bob Ralph, Gladys Martens' husband, and the next old fart is Robert Moelhoff, Elaine's.



I didn't bring many books, considering it tacky to flog them here, but so many people came up asking to buy one (or two or three) that I was emptied out of the small box I normally keep in the truck. In retrospect I guess I should have brought more, but I sure didn't want to turn this into a bookstore. Beside Myrt, that's Anna May Baird, Elaine Gulka & Diane Lockhart.



I have said for decades, "When Evelyn Sauder stops looking good, it's over for the rest of us" for she's as softly lovely outside as in. Whew. We're still okay. That's her on the right with her coterie of best girl friends, Diane Lockhart, Linda Griese and Shirley Philipow, with Ray Pennycook. Later I observed to Linda, "I'll tell ya, this town sure turned out more than its fair share of good lookin' girls." She retorted: "It's not just the girls! It's the guys too!"



I thought the dance might be a bust with this herd of creaky old dinosaurs but I was wrong. With Les Milligan singing and playing electric guitar before a wall of taped backup tracks - and all rock n roll - the dance was a huge hit. Forefront that's Jim McRitchie and wife Anne Shewchuk. The old Bohunk buba is lookin' damned good. We had crushes on each other at different times. Hell, we've always had a soft spot for each other. She's always had a sweet heart. We were in Drama together, along with Elaine who paid that fortune for my book. Matter of fact, look what I have on the wall of my memorabilia crammed Fishing Room....



April 26, 1963. The Shale. A Drama Club party. Taken by Molly Orchard. The 16-year-old geek on the left with a Boh is me, with my long time high school girl friend Liz Penner (now sadly deceased, car accident). She was also beautiful inside and out - and also had a great ass and legs and was the best kisser of all (Su - you reading this! Even better than Myrt and Maryann!). That's Blake Mooney next to her - he was at the reunion, a less slender and hairy version. Then Larry Robinson, Jim Fitchner (killed in Thailand, motorbike, I regret telling him about Thailand's attractions), Billy Stadnyk - and Anne has a beer to her mouth at right (we won't go there....), and next to her is Elaine (who thoughtfully sent me this picture for my 50th birthday years ago).



The hottest jive dancers back in the early '60s were the Drury Twins and they generously treated us to a demonstration, to Chuck Berry's *Johnny B. Good*.



Marilyn Lefebvre grabbed the display hula hoop off the wall and let 'er rip. Several others tried but their, uh, "waists" were on the wrong side, so as to speak.... But the frogette sure got that thing spinnin'.



I actually made it til 11:30pm before packing up and heading back to Brian "Ol' Griz" Gentner's. The next day everyone gathered for brunch and goodbyes. That's Blake again staring at the camera, with wife Bernadette. To his left is Eva Lefebvre. She and Norm Ens were the only teachers that attended although Henry Braun graciously sent his regrets. Florence Oslund/Sjoli is in a home in Calgary but my mother, who used to visit her regularly, with heartfelt disappointment gave it up because Florence's alzie sadly reached the blank stage. She was my Grade III teacher. I remember how with such great humour Florence treated her diminishing memory and mental powers. And how locals kindly gave her space, aware of her abstract, let's call it, driving. I'm proud of a community that does that.



Iris Skibinski on the left. Linda on the right eying the men. It was Linda who brilliantly organized the last reunion, in '77.



Class picture time! Mine, of 1964. 47 years ago! Dead centre in pink and white is Elaine Campbell, a grandmother at 37 and now trailing something like 23 or 26 descendents. Hey Mike - that's Caroline Poty in red beside her, still with great sparkling eyes and smile. Everyone in this herd is rolling over 65 this year - becoming officially Old Age Pensioners! (For once I'm happy to be one of the youngest in the class, I don't geezerize for another couple of months.)



1965. Jim Hendry of The Rockin' Rebels with thumbs up. And The Twins, Connee and Bonnie.



'66. In peach is Joan Kitley who gave a delightful remembrance in those precise, practised tones of hers. She was one of my mother's favorite students and Mom followed her public speaking career with great interest through school. That's Tim Barry sucking it in.



And that great, magical Centennial Year - 1967. Born again Phyliss Senkow at far right has the gals just where she wants them: on their knees. (But so do the guys, har, har, har.)



It might sound corny, but I was just about hugged out, if that's possible, by the end of the gig. It was just fabulous seeing so many, uh, "old" and wonderful friends - many of whom I hadn't seen in almost half a century! Whew, what a weekend. 155 turned out. But at the rate we're having these things, at the next reunion there'll be just two survivors. And they'll be so alzied out they won't know who the hell they are, much less who the other is.... (Just as long as one is Evelyn and she's still lookin' good.)

Great, great weekend and my deepest thanks and congratulations to the organizers who did such a fabulous job - particularly to Marilyn Lefebvre/Drury who spearheaded everything as well as organized her year; Janette Lockhart; Connee Drury; and Linda Griese. And there were many others assisting. I know how much work goes into these things. Thank you. Thank you. And thank you again all.