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3R's+1=

Reunion

—By Ida Vowell Robertson

It is the afternoon of September 2, 1990. A white-haired lady, leaning on a walking stalk, approaches the desk of the Holidome in Elk City to check on her reservation for the Port High School Class of 1940 reunion. The desk clerk pages "Come to the front," and promptly two smiling senior citizens, one in conservative business suit and the other in striped overalls, white shirt, and big red bow tie, step up to greet the guest.

They quickly park her car, collect her luggage, and take her to her room. From there they take her down the hall to a party room. There she is greeted with laughs and hugs by a room full of her "kids" and their spouses who are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of their graduation from Port High School—the school that at one time rated as the largest, strictly rural consolidated school in Oklahoma.

The reminiscing begins and the celebrants start a long weekend of jogging down Memory Lane.

It is a hot August morning in 1936. Forty-five boys and girls, dressed in their new school clothes of striped overalls and bright percale dresses, fidget and giggle in the freshman section of the auditorium of the old Port High School. Their big day has arrived—the day they have looked forward to since four years before when they moved over into the lower floor of this big building from the adjoining grade school.

Their fluttering and chattering instantly subside as a dignified gentleman in his late thirties steps onto the stage. To these youngsters, he seems almost a patriarch as he has headed their school system most of their school days. This gentleman is Jesse M. Welch, a man of vision—a man to whom an education is a must for every child, a man worthy of the title Educator.

Mr. Welch addresses the patrons, teachers, and students explaining his plans and expectations for the new school year. Then he instructs the students to pass to their first-hour classes. This will be a full day of school—no time to waste.

Hurrah! At last these freshmen get to go up the stairs to the new world of the high-school department. With them goes their young, new English teacher. Her goal is to teach them the fundamentals of grammar, the correct forms of oral and written expression, and an appreciation of literature. In addition to these big curricular goals, she is also to sponsor their extra-curricular activities for the duration.

It is now May of 1940. Twenty-two of the original group stand expectantly at the head of those now familiar stairs. Their striped overalls and percale dresses have been put aside for formal gray caps and gowns. In the joy of this moment as they wait to start their long march down the stairs to the auditorium to the solemn strains of "Pomp and Circumstance," they miss

many of their friends. Because of the great economic depression of the thirties, some students had been forced to leave school to help on the farm, take low-paying jobs, or move with their families to greener pastures. But these twenty-two have made it.

As these seniors, the last class to graduate from this old two-story building constructed in 1923 and now outgrown, they carry memories quite unusual for students of the era. High school had not been a run-of-the-mill experience because Mr. Welch had set a high goal for them in their sophomore year. Now they had achieved that goal—a senior trip to their nation's Capitol through thirteen Southern and Eastern states.

Mr. Welch had both admonished and promised: "Work hard." "Make your grades." "Stay out of trouble." "Make your money and we'll take a trip you'll never forget."

They kept the faith and so did Mr. Welch. Three years of selling magazines, providing many forms of paid entertainment, staging the biggest school carnival ever, and, most of all, pulling cotton for the cause several days each fall—they had earned the money; and now Mr. Welch had the big yellow busses ready to roll south come next Tuesday morning.

"Goodbyes are said and with promises of 'See ya around,' these classmates part"

Their three years of planning for this trip have been coordinated with their class work. In history they have become enthralled with digging deeper into the historical events of the Southern and Eastern states because they are going to see many of the cities, the historical shrines, the mountains, the rivers, and forests. In English they learn to write business letters to

Chambers of Commerce asking for brochures on the regions and for guides for sightseeing. In business classes they learn to type these letters, set up a budget, and plan an itinerary. Best of all, in Home Ec they learn to plan a tour wardrobe. From all this learning and working together, they have become a closely knit group—"friends forever."

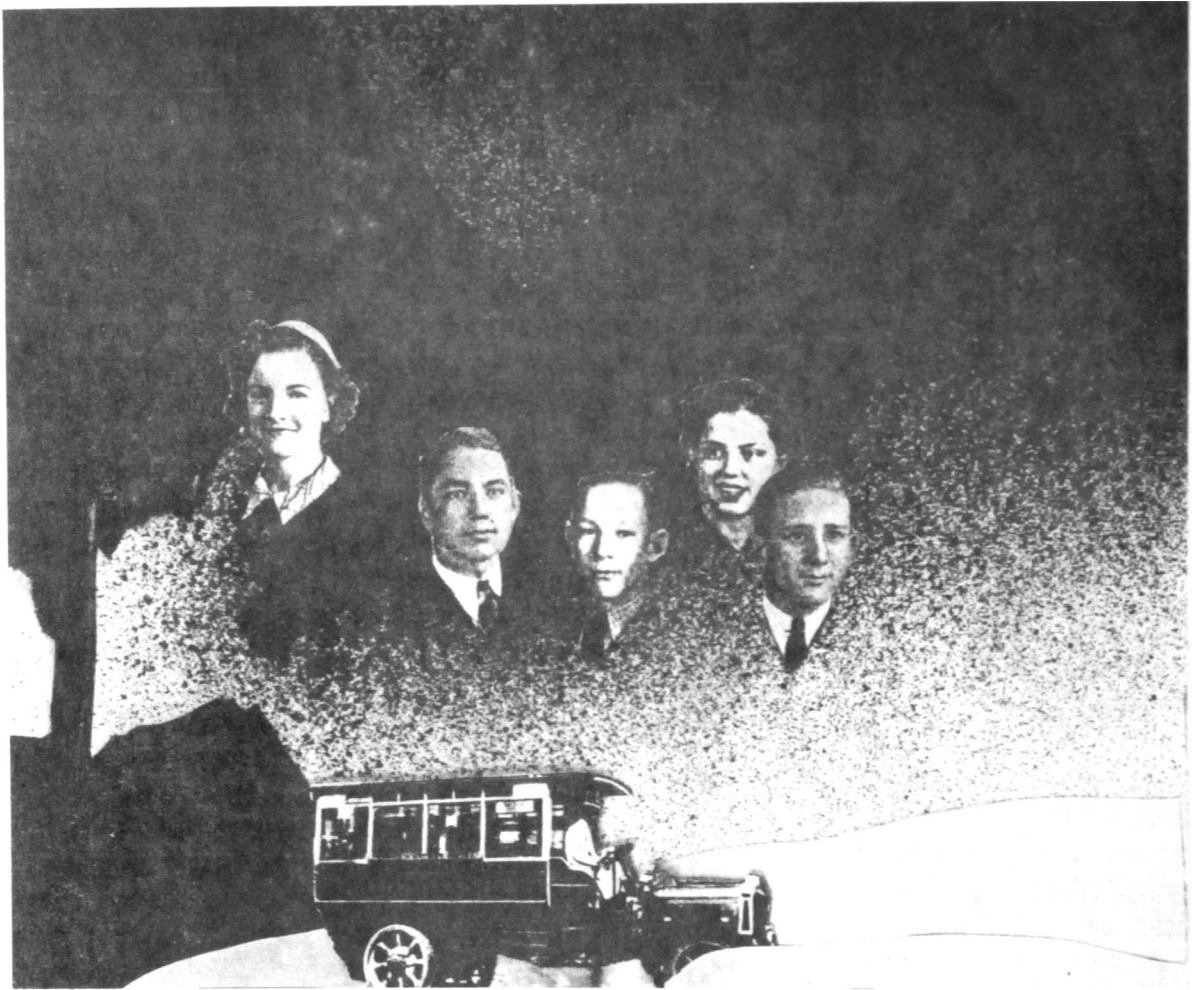
It is June, 1940, almost four weeks later when the graduates, well-seasoned and well-tanned travelers, get off the bus onto the home turf of old Port High. Happily they rush into the arms of their parents, but sadly they can see only a bare plot where once that dear old building with the inchoated upper level had stood. It has been razed to make way for progress in the form of a new modern building.

Goodbyes are said and with promises of "See ya around," these classmates part—some to meet now and then through the years, some to meet at this fiftieth-anniversary reunion, and some never to meet again in this life.

It is September, 1990; swiftly and eventfully a half-century has passed. A small remnant of that band, so closely knit in their youth by shared experiences, gathers for a weekend of togetherness. Through the afternoon, a dinner, and until midnight, they relive their long-gone youth at old Port High. Also, they relate various careers—as ranchers, teachers, postmen, beauticians, businessmen, Bell Telephone operators, and military personnel. Most of the males served in the military during World War II, and one is even a retired Colonel!

The most vividly remembered and most discussed event during our reminiscing was the unexpected, terrific, and devastating blizzard and snowstorm which struck on the afternoon of April 8, 1937. It came suddenly after a full week of warm, balmy spring weather. Everyone recalled a near tragic experience, and many stories circulated.

"It was nice and warm that morning, and I wore my brand new toeless sandals. I ruined them and nearly froze my feet getting to the house from the bus."



Design by Mike Sigurdson

Illustration by Robb Kopp

"I think we were running twelve busses back then, and only a few were able to complete their runs that day. Our bus got stuck just a mile and half from school. The driver, a teacher, and the biggest kids managed to get us up a long driveway to the Wrights' big, two-story house. Mr. and Mrs. Wright took all thirty of us in and kept us warm and fed from that Tuesday until Saturday morning. Only a few parents learned where their kids were and came after them."

"My sister and I were among the five children left on our bus when we could get no further. Our driver's clothes were frozen to him from having worked so hard to get the bus started, but he got us to a little two-room shack and saved our lives. The family had only a little food and not enough fuel for much heat.

Snow drifted through the cracks onto our bed. Daddy found us after two or three days."

(today a gentleman who had been the school-boy bus driver sat silently with no comment)

"I was on one of the five busses that turned around and came back to school. Mr. Welch took care of all of us in the gym. He kept us busy playing ball most of the time. He made stew for us with supplies from the school lunchroom. The girls were taken in at nights by families on the campus. It was really one big picnic for us. Then on Saturday the sun came out; Mr. Welch and four teachers walked seven miles with us over to the highway where fathers on horseback and tractors picked us up. No one but Mr. Welch could have handled all that."

"Just think—all the phone lines were down and many parents couldn't find out where their kids were! But one good thing came out of it all; always after that if Mr. Welch saw a cloud in the sky as big as a hanky, he'd roll those busses and we'd get out early."

After a night's rest from visiting, the group gathered at a long table for a real, old-time farm hands' breakfast accompanied by much horseplay, visiting, and picture taking.

Later, they went back to the party room for "church"; these are sons and daughters of rural Methodist, Baptist, and Church of Christ families. A once-shy boy offered a prayer of thanksgiving, and another not-so-shy led in meditation. Then there was real old-fashioned hymn singing which revealed that some high-school voices had matured beautifully.

Then there was lunch, followed by the only really organized event. It was emceed by the person who been head of the arrangements for this big weekend. Following an invocation, the emcee read a touching memorial tribute to Mr. Welch. The tribute was written and mailed in by the class salutatorian who was unable to attend. She was one of Mr. Welch's students who later, after finishing college, returned to teach with him at Port.

A tribute to the eight deceased members was presented by the class sponsor, who closed with four lines from "The Gift":

*There is a harmony in things
That only growing older brings.
Happiness is learning how
To value what is here now.*

Letters touching the high points in their lives since Port High were read from three absentee members; and then, one by one, each of those present came to the microphone and gave his or her resume of the past fifty years. Laughter and tears were shared as they once again felt that old camaraderie of their youth. Each had experienced the struggle of "getting started," love, marriage, and death of loved ones. Now they are still close, confiding friends; and if one burst into tears at the mike, arms enfolded him.

The mood changed to fun as the class cut-up gave his version of how they made-do for the lack of today's wonders.

"There was no McDonald's, but Williams Store had great five-cent hamburgers."

"Our drive-in theater was a drive-in into Sentinel in the family Ford to the Rex Theater."

"No teen town or youth centers, but we had better. There was never a place like the back room at Pat's Cafe where we jitterbugged to a nickel nickelodeon."

"As for the Atom bomb—the blast that came from our English teacher when we neglected our memory work would have made an A-bomb seem a mere toy."

After he had made an appropriate toast to the sponsor, he presented her with a big red apple of potpourri from the class. "An apple for the teacher." They could never have afforded even a green one "back then."

The meeting closed with the talented one singing "This Is the Day" even more beautifully than they remembered.

Climaxing the weekend was the showing of the hour-long color film Mr. Welch made of that famous senior trip. It was a silent version, but the "stars" present kept a running commentary of "I remember that," "Oh, there's Huey Long Bridge," "There we are at Mt. Vernon"—and "Oh, there's Mrs. Welch upchucking on our deep-sea fishing trip." Ad infinitum.

The film ran out. . . the spell was broken . . . goodbyes were said. . . promises were made to meet again at the all-school reunion next July Fourth in Sentinel.

Yes, the Port High Class of 1940 had had its fiftieth. The class members had mastered the three R's of life. They had come back for a reunion spelled with a big R. *

(IDA VOWELL ROBERTSON, 81-year-old resident of Clinton, is a retired teacher and social worker. Her hobbies are her volunteer work at a retirement center and the training and nurturing of a Calico Cat. Mrs. Robertson, the Port English teacher referred to in the above article, makes her second appearance in WESTVIEW; her first submission appeared in the Fall '89 issue.)