

To my classmates of the class of 1960,

from Dennis Bourret

I greatly regret that I cannot attend our 50th Class Reunion. This is the first one I will have missed. My reason is that my wife and I run a music camp in the mountains above Tucson for about 90 people and the date was set with the camp owners before I knew when the Reunion was, and the date couldn't be changed. Therefore, I cannot be with you. However, you, my classmates, have meant a great deal to me, as has my growing up in our home town of Sheridan. Since reunions are for sharing memories, I'd like to mention just a few of the fond memories I have of growing up there with you. I cannot list them all, but will hit some of the good ones. My family moved to Sheridan the summer before our sixth grade and we moved into an apartment upstairs just across the street to the west of Linden School. This is what I remember:

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Cecil Halstead and Don Thrush inviting me to come and play with some of the other neighborhood kids on my first day in the neighborhood.

Getting to fish for real trout off the Burkitt Street Bridge, and having one of the kids there take me all the way down the creek showing me all the good fishing holes clear to the Sheridan Brewing Company. I later wrote a short story about that and a big fish that was caught there.

Playing dodge ball at recess, and later sledding down Linden Hill in the snow. Throw in a few thousand hours on the Linden outdoor court trying to get good at basketball, my new found favorite sport (It didn't work). There was also learning to square dance in the basement of the school with all the pretty girls, and singing "We Three Kings" in the school Christmas show (my first public music performance).

Having Doris Engstrom, our sixth grade teacher, finally convince me that I wasn't a dummy and that I really could do well in school and her staying with me until I learned to read adequately.

Having to fight Steve Arnold after school one day just to show that I'd stick up for myself, and then sitting behind him in orchestra so I could follow him because I didn't read music too well.

Joining Boy Scout Troop 112 and being in a patrol with John Gillespie, "Weeoh" Cook, and the guys. (I have a funny story about one of those meetings I'll tell someday.) I also remember doing scout camp-outs with our scout leader, Jesse Yeager. (a funny story there too)

Then there was the "Junior Poachers" gun club, run by Vernon David's dad where I met Vernon and Chip and Chunk Arbogast and their dad, and where I learned to handle guns and to shoot.

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JUNIOR HIGH

Doris Rhine's home room class where I met one of the best friends I ever had, Ben Dunning. Ben liked to fish and play basketball, and he was a nice guy. A lot of good memories from this point on are tied up with him. We fished the Goose Creeks until we knew every hole. We rode our bikes out to the ponds south on the Big Horn road. We played basketball after school and on weekends at Linden, Taylor, and Coffeen schools and at my house out on Beckton Ave. as well as in gym class with "Scoop" Shovelain (sp?) A lot of other guys were in with us for basketball—Jack Keckich, Alfred Madrigal, Charlie Eakis, Gene Shreve, sometimes the Arbogasts, and Marvin Bowkitt. None of us were great, but we sure had fun. Our one claim to fame was that when none of us made the 8th grade All-Stars, we decided to show that we were better than Scoop thought, so we bought a book on basketball plays and worked ourselves up into a real team. Then as ninth graders we challenged the current 8th graders to a scrimmage. We went down to Central and beat the pants off of them, at least until Scoop got mad and threw us out. (another story there)

A highlight of junior high was the school dances. That's when we found out that we actually liked to be around girls for social purposes. I still feel a little sorry for the girls that had to put up with my dancing. I will be eternally grateful for their graciousness and tact. Dershie was particularly good at this on what was my first date ever. (our only date, I might add)

School orchestra under Eric Becker was where I learned to really like playing the violin. Steve Arnold, Karen Aksamit, and I became good friends sitting through those rehearsals in the gym. Little did I know that music would become my profession, and little did I know that after eight years of college and three degrees in music I would conclude that Eric Becker was probably the best teacher I ever had.

My eighth grade teacher, Virginia Wright-Dunlap had a significant effect on me as a student. She challenged me on spelling and social studies and encouraged my fledgling attempts at writing. She also knew how to handle boys and their sometimes lack of focus. Many of us probably owe her a lot for that. Her daughter, Martha, also showed me that girls could be as outspoken in class as I was. We became good friends.

Junior high was also where I got into going to sports events to watch the Central football team and the Sheridan Broncs. Being able to yell my lungs out and get away with it was a lot of fun, especially when done with my friends.

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HIGH SCHOOL

For me, like most of us, high school was a blast—good friends, a driver’s license, my first car, real girl friends, classes in school that were interesting in areas that I was interested in, and special activities that helped me find out who I really was.

Since our family had bought a home out on Beckton Ave. in one of the oxbows of Big Goose Creek, my fishing efforts intensified. I vowed to fish every day of the first twenty-one days of fishing season, and did so for all four years of high school, through rain, snow, and sleet. Ben was a great companion for this. I also learned to ice skate on the gravel pit turned pond in winter and met a lot of kids from that end of town.

Getting my driver’s license definitely changed my life. Ben Dunning’s dad helped with this. Ben lived out on the other end of town and there was field out beside their house. When we were old enough, his dad drove his old Plymouth coup out into the field and showed us how to work the clutch, gear shift, and brakes. Then he handed us the keys, and said “Front fenders are \$25, doors are \$50, and rear fenders are \$75. Have fun.” Then he walked away and we learned to drive. I’ll never forget how proud I was when my dad took me down to the Highway Dept. Office on the north end of Main Street, and I passed my Driver’s Test.

From that point on I became a car freak. I bought a couple of old wrecks and messed around with them—taking the mechanical stuff apart and trying to do various kinds of body work. Needless to say, neither of them ever left the yard except behind a tow truck, but I did have fun and I did learn a bit. Finally I got a chance to pick up a 1934 Ford three window coup that already had a “48 Ford engine in it. It was pretty rusted out in places and needed upholstery, etc. I got pretty good at doing fiber-glassing and body work. Then I put a Lincoln-Zephyr transmission in it, and was on the road. Several of us, Ben, Vernon David, Jack Kekich, Bill Gracey, the Arbogasts, Del Church, Dick Carmine, Allan Deems, John Schonberg, and a couple of other guys wanted to form a car club. Some of the older guys in town already had the “Conquistadores” club and we wanted to have a special name too. Jack and I were both taking Latin from Marne Owens, so we decided to have her help us put the name “Masters of the Road” into Latin. She laughed, but came up with “Viae ob Dominae” or something like that, and we had some aluminum pistons melted down and cast into club license plates with that name on them. We even rented two different empty buildings to have our own garage. The only problem was that the only one among us that actually knew anything about cars was Vernon, since his dad and older brother were both mechanics. So the outcome was that the rest of us ended up driving our parent’s cars or doing very little modifications on our own vehicles. We sure had fun, however. That included going out to the straight quarter mile out by the Girls School and having some impromptu drag races. (a couple of good stories here)

The major turning point in my life happened in school orchestra, however. Eric Becker retired after our freshman year, and the school district couldn't find anyone right away to take the job, so it was announced that orchestra would be canceled. At this point I decided to quit violin. Ben and his mom had taken an apartment down on Main Street above the magazine shop. My mom had moved out and was teaching in another town, and my dad didn't get off work until late. So Ben and I started to hang out down at the Ritz and worked on our pool games. Then I got a call from a new teacher named Gerald Wheeler. He said that he was the new orchestra director and that he needed me to get the orchestra going again. No one had ever told me that they needed me for anything before in my life, so I said "Sure", and we were off and running. Steve Arnold had decided to go for sports and quit orchestra. That left Karen Aksamit, Tony Johnson, Clarence Myer, Myrna Dawn Grotz, Joan Laxon, and myself to head up the orchestra and see what we could do. Wheeler didn't even play a string instrument, he was a singer, but he loved orchestra, and he seemed to like me. He made sure that I got signed up for Regional and All-State Honor Orchestras and Solo and Ensemble Contests. He got me into the All-Northwest Music Educators event in Seattle, Washington, and got me scholarships to a summer camp in Montana. This was all it took to get me to realize that I really loved music and wanted to go into it for a profession. He then talked to the Director of our senior year All-State and got me a chance to audition for a scholarship at the University of Colorado. He literally got me launched on my career. I owe him big-time. Later in life I looked him up, first in Idaho, and later in Tennessee to thank him and we became good friends. He just passed away this spring.

There were other good times. There was being Colonel McKenzie in Kern Brown's production of "Ten Little Indians" and watching Ted George do a fantastic job as the villain. There was writing for the Ocksheperida in my senior year under Mr. Johnson with editors Marsha Russell and Wanda Woodhead. There was National Honor Society, Thespians, and Quill and Scroll. There was intramural basketball (I never gave up trying) and wrestling. I'll never forget wrestling Dave Goswick for our weight class championship and losing on a technicality.

I did get into golf pretty heavily the summer after our freshman year, and played nine holes a day five days a week for four summers in a row at Kendrick Municipal Golf Course. I never got to be too much better than a bogey golfer, but like the rest of us, that occasional birdie kept me trying.

My fishing drive only intensified as I got access to a car. Tongue River Canyon became my favorite place of all time. I could leave the house at 7 am, be at the turn-around by 7:30, have my limit by 8, and be home by 8:30. I also got to know Little Goose Canyon pretty well, although I tore out the oil pan of my dad's car going up once. I also motorcycled across the ridge to drop down into the Big Goose Canyon a time or two, and hit Sibley Lake, Shell Creek, Red Grade, and Lake Desmet, with some regularity. Ben Dunning and I had a couple of good

camping trips up on top, including fishing Shell Creek early one day, catching our limits, and heading on down to Greybull to see what girls we could find. We found the girls, but forgot to inform our parents that we had gone on over. We managed to lose track of time, and on return home were grounded for some time.

There was, of course, dating, school dances, making out in the back rows of the Wyo Theater or the balcony of the Orpheum, or out at the drive-in, or getting our car window knocked on by a city policeman up on Lover's Lane on Kendrick Hill when we'd steamed the car windows up a little too much. There was "dragging Main" and hitting Hersh's Drive-in or the A & W. There was drinking a "zombie" at the Palace Café after a football game or a lunch date at Brown Drug. The list goes on, and so do the memories for which I am forever thankful

LIFE GOES ON

After high school I went on in music—a Bachelor's Degree in violin performance and a second in music education, and a Master's in viola performance. Then I got drafted and sent to Viet Nam. I was fire direction controller for an air-mobile 105 howitzer battery assigned to protect a Special Forces reconnaissance unit going into Cambodia. I saw some significant action, lost some good friends, and got shot up a little. I also got a heavy dose of Agent Orange. I made sergeant rating in combat, and staff sergeant stateside afterwards for remaking some Army policies (another good story).

I got out of service and ended up going for a Doctorate in viola performance at the University of Arizona. I've been a first chair of the Tucson Symphony, Tucson Pops Orchestra, and the Arizona Opera, and been a member of an international touring string quartet. I have been a guest conductor for high school, college, and professional orchestras and clinician and competition judge all the way from Washington State to Florida. Mostly what I am, however, is a teacher. I have been the director of a kids' non-profit string orchestra program for an even forty years. My wife and I have built it from two orchestras with fifty kids, to ten orchestras with two hundred and fifty kids. Our top orchestra tours all over the United States, Canada, and Europe and is nationally famous. We have also run a summer chamber music camp in the mountains for kids through college age for the last thirty-three years. I teach about 40 to 50 private violin and viola students a week. A number of those have gone on to major in music at big time schools, play in major symphonies, and teach at big time conservatories and universities. That's kind of a pay-back for Eric Becker and Gerald Wheeler.

I am still a fanatic fisherman and am writing a book about fishing. I make it back to the Sheridan area to fish as often as possible. Ben Dunning is still my best friend. I am, in fact, trying to become a writer, and have four books in progress at this time. I am now suffering the effects of Agent Orange exposure, and only hope that I will be able to make it to our 55th reunion.