

Class history

Critics thought we could not or should not do many things, but we showed 'em.

By Roger Stuart

Some of us among Class of 1957 graduates of Laurel High School were conceived or born in the small city of the same name halfway between Baltimore and Washington along U.S. Route 1 as it follows an old stage coach road. Others were together from kindergarten or first grade, while still more joined us in grade school and right up to our senior year.

It didn't matter, though, whether we were natives or transplants. We grew and knitted as family. Take it from senior class president Ed Williams, an "Army Brat" transfer student in our sophomore year, who said at our last big reunion eight years ago:

"Lo and behold, I got into this class, and I want to tell you it was the best experience I ever could have had in high school. What really made it was all of you. Here I was an interloper from Oklahoma, Germany and wherever and I was accepted. I know that among us who came later there never was any question but what we were part of this class. I appreciate it and thank you. We had some fights, yes, but everybody just kind of got along, helped each other out."

Mourning our losses

So we mourn the deaths of Navy Lt. Cmdr. John Poe 37 years ago during his third Vietnam tour; Peggy and Mark Stephens; Lee Merson; Norma Smith; Florence Prince; Jim Bozik; Lee Israel, and Richard Schluter. And we long have wished in vain to learn the whereabouts or other news about John Wedderburn, Janice Cecil, Wayne McRobie, Judy Olmstead, and Chester Weir.

Never mind that when we got to high school English teacher Virginia Stanton identified us all on occasion, but mostly the boys, as "rude, crude and unattractive." Never mind that we were so poorly regarded as juniors that no one in our class was inducted into the National Honor Society. We always figured Helen Sullivan instigated a faculty plot against us after French class members rose to defend a classmate she threatened to punish. "If you don't straighten out, none of you will get elected to National Honor Society," she said. Bill Stuart shot back, "So we should lose our self-respect for a club?" thereby assuring no NHS induction that spring. And never mind that principal Lionel B. Howland and faculty members thought we lacked smarts and aptitude to produce a yearbook.

Onward, upward...

Somehow we grew and prospered, becoming the first senior class in our experience to bequeath a financial nest egg to the school. Eleven of us were tapped as seniors for the

Honor Society, and classmates starred on football and basketball teams that set records still unequaled for Laurel.

Some of us remember singing “*Marching along Together*” as grade school principal Catherine Gough played that tune during assemblies and learning to identify classical music from music teacher Ivy Snyder. In high school we joined with feigned or real gusto in singing:

Onward, upward,

Be our watchword.

Conquer and prevail.

Hail to thee our alma mater,

Laurel, hail, hail, hail.

Yes, there were still 57 of us in the class of '57 when graduation rolled around. But we all know that we were joined by ever-so-many more classmates who came and left during the course of our elementary, junior and senior high years. Now it's a half-century later, and those of us still alive and able to return are here within the “*hallowed halls of Ivy,*” of which music teacher Bertha Curtiss used to have us sing so ardently and wistfully, to celebrate a golden anniversary.

We're not that old, are we?

Was it really 50 years ago that we asked ourselves if we could ever look as old as the elderly folks with white locks, bald pates – some with crutches and canes – who gathered for the alumni reunion? We all know the answer to that, so let the nostalgic anecdotes flow.

Laurel remained a small post-World War II community with roughly 3,000 residents when the first of us entered first grade in September 1945, and our high school remained “C” league in the scholastic sports realm when we graduated.

We attended the oldest public high school (later to become the junior-senior high) in Prince George's County, built in 1898 at the behest principally of Edward Phelps, who served seven one-year terms as mayor before 1900. The original center section was equipped with the first water system put in county schools (1908) and first indoor toilets installed in a county high school (1916). The school closed in 1963. It is for Mayor Phelps that the auditorium, the current senior center, is named and in the same building that we gather this weekend to celebrate our own past.

My own yarn began to unfold during recess on the first day of school in the first grade on the hillock above the elementary school where pupils fell in line to grab onto the tire

swing dangling from a mighty oak. I turned while waiting to ask the kid behind me, “Who are you?” It was less than an auspicious start. “None of your beeswax,” he said. I asked him at our reunion eight years ago whether he remembered that exchange. “Yes,” Ed Dawson said. “But I thought it was Bill, not you, who asked me.” He remembered that he was a shy rural youngster who hadn’t had many dealings with other kids up to that point so didn’t really know how to relate to them at that time. Time proved to be a wonderful blessing, because Ed went on to become our junior class vice president, serving with Jim “Ace” Athey as president, Carol Marquardt as treasurer, and Edith Lucas as secretary. Ed also became our class valedictorian just as his sister Ruth had been several years earlier.

In the beginning...

But those tidbits are racing too fast forward in our timeline. In first grade, half of us were assigned to Mrs. Starkey’s class and half next door to Mrs. Strasser’s. Faye Beall Green recalls sitting in Mrs. Strasser’s room in front of Donald Sarles, her first of an untold number of school friends. With her immense grace, charm and sociability, it’s no wonder she remains the undisputed heart and soul of our class.

Don starred opposite Bill Stuart as Mr. MacGregor and Peter Rabbit in a first- or second-grade play offered to everyone else in school. Others of us were adorned as bluebirds and flowers and such. Don also was a first-rate vocalist with a voice equivalent of a Vienna Choir Boy and on at least one occasion got off school for a day to sing “*Ave Maria*,” as I recall, on a radio show broadcast from Silver Spring.

Then along came Dale Krider in the fourth grade, with the great natural ability he cultivated and refined to obtain a doctorate and serve for years as a splendid organist and church music director – one who has played at the weddings of at least two classmates. Dale and Don often shared piano accompaniment of the high school glee club. And with their great dexterity on any keyboard, they put the rest of us to shame in Josephine Bright’s typing class – with Dale reaching 90 correct words a minute and Don just a few strokes away, while the rest of us pecked away toward the 40-word minimum required of prospective government typists.

From age to age, it’s not the same

Faye recalls elementary school as being much different for the girls in our class than for her granddaughters now: “We had to wear dresses. What a challenge to run and play and keep the skirt down. We had to sit carefully and watch out when on the playground. We didn’t want the boys to say, ‘I see London, I see France, I see your underpants.’ My shoes were brown oxfords. They were awful. We had them fitted at Light’s Shoe Store by looking in the x-ray machine to be sure all the bones were within the lines. If we bought clothes, it was at Block’s Department Store and Aunt Marie Poe always waited on us. I remember wearing shorts only on field days. No one saw my shoulders, or belly all through elementary school. I didn’t wear earrings or have a watch.”

Brothers among our class chums were David and Paul Clevenger, Herbert and Richard Phelps, Rod and Bill Stuart and, for a short while, Amos and Wayne Souder. Mark and Peggy Stephens, though not true twins, were considered so by lots of us. Faye was a cousin of Johnny Poe, Norma Smith and Amos and Wayne. Linda and Sally Donaldson were cousins as were Joyce and Norma Smith.

Field days and field trips

Our elementary school days were marked by annual field days between blue and gold teams. Bill Stuart was the fastest runner, with Rod generally a few steps behind. “But,” as Herb Phelps recalls, “Verna Lee Mills could damn near catch you both.” Bill was faster than Calvin Grauel, who was a year ahead of us, and could outrun Fred Severance, who went on to score a record 108 points for Laurel during the undefeated football season. In high school, Elwood Heck generated enough speed in gym classes to beat Rod to the finish line and figured he might be able to beat Bill, too.

Field trips became a grade school staple – with forays to Washington to visit the capitol, the Smithsonian and various monuments and memorials, to Annapolis to tour the capitol and the Naval Academy, and to the University of Maryland for National Symphony Orchestra concerts directed by Howard Mitchell.

Participation in Patrol Boys and GOLES (Girls of Laurel Elementary School) taught us civic responsibility. Jim Athey and Richard Cole were elected the patrol captain and lieutenant during the sixth grade. We carried our lunches to school and bought milk or walked home for lunch until the cafeteria was added to the school two or more years after we started.

Small town oasis

From Main Street on the north to Gorman Avenue on the south, Laurel covered just a few square miles as an inviting oasis for us while growing up. The men’s softball league beckoned every spring and summer night, with games played under the lights and Mr. Sullivan calling the play-by-play over the PA system. Those were the days in postwar America when a town as small as Laurel could field so many teams, each one sponsored by a different local business. Herb Phelps recalls running the scoreboard and earning a Fudgesicle each game for doing it. “They wouldn’t give you one until after the fifth inning, I think it was, so that you wouldn’t just get the Fudgesicle and walk off.” There were the annual firemen’s parade and carnival. The lighting of the Laurel Christmas Tree downtown was always a joyous time.

Boys and girls tramped safely all over a town that began to swell in population as new homes and apartments popped up along Thomas Drive, across “the branch” in Fairlawn, beyond the railroad tracks in Steward Manor, above the fire department on Park Avenue and out Brooklyn Bridge and Sandy Spring roads. The Laurel Shopping Center opened our senior year and wrought dramatic changes in Laurel’s commerce. The opening featured among other things a 100-yard dash on the new macadam parking lot. The

Maryland state champion was there to defend his honor; alas, Bill Stuart challenged and beat him in a respectable 10.0 seconds. From such roots have flowed rivers of blessings that spawned torrents of nostalgic memories.

The gravel playground

We played and skinned our hands and elbows, shins and knees on a reddish, all-gravel playground equipped with swings and slides, Jungle Jims, horizontal ladders, rings and trapezes and shinnying poles that would never pass safety muster today. The playground was bordered at the top by the vacant, off-limits, gray-frame shirt factory until it burned and at one side by the swamp into which we ventured in the winter when it froze over and we could skate, slip and slide happily.

Brownies and Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts occupied our attention (Johnny Poe made one Boy Scout meeting particularly memorable by showing up at the old fire hall after being sprayed by a skunk along the Patuxent) as did softball and baseball leagues, church picnics and working at babysitting, delivering papers and weekly movie-theater bulletins, soda-jerking, waitressing, pin-setting at the bowling alley and mowing lawns. And who can forget the Laurel Swimming Pool off Ninth Street, by the Patuxent River? It served the town for roughly two decades until the 1972 Hurricane Agnes wiped it out. Many were the kids who ice skated each winter on the frozen Laurel Lake. Each spring, some of us foraged through the marshes at the edge of that pond for skunk cabbages, tadpoles and such as part of our nature training homework. Lloyd Baker and Bill Harmeyer used to trap small animals along “the branch” and in the woods out Cherry Lane Way. Bob Bounds created a stir in the cafeteria when he released a garden snake in the cafeteria beneath a table full of girls who screamed predictably and deliriously.

Then, too, there were junior high kissing games at Laura Lee Bayles’ home where some of the girls’ and guys’ braces were apt to get entangled. Katherine’s Shoppe and the Fireside in town and the Texas Bar-B-Cue and Seibel’s out of town were favorite drawing places. And we dare not forget the post-prom parties, horse riding, Methodist Youth Fellowship retreats, birthday bashes and such at the Stephens Farm, thanks to Mark and Peggy’s parents. Their dad, who owned High’s Dairy, provided a number of us summer jobs at his ice cream plant in Southeast Washington. He also owned the Olney Theater and twice furnished new flats for the school auditorium stage. The second time came after vandals destroyed the first set.

Toughing it out

Atom bomb drills augmented fire drills in school as the Cold War heated up and the country entered into the Korean War. Penny Caulkins’ mom gave us annual eye tests. We experienced regular polio scares and shared such commonplace maladies as broken bones, appendicitis, tonsillitis, measles, mumps, chicken pox, pink eye, and ringworm. The boys who had ringworm got their heads shaved and had to wear stocking caps or sailor hats.

We memorized poems, competed in spelling bees, picked sides for dodge ball, and choked the bat to make the same choices for softball. We bought U.S. Savings Stamps each week, filled CARE packages and packed Red Cross boxes for needy folks overseas, sang together in school assemblies, and played sticks, sand blocks or triangles in class bands. We rose at our desks every morning to recite The Lord's Prayer, pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and join together in saying "The Americans' Creed."

The American Legion drew us to Halloween parties and Cub Scout pack meetings. It was in that hall that a bunch of boys discovered red-plastic bingo chips some of which we pilfered and fed into parking meters along Main Street and into Lions Club-sponsored gumball machines. That is, until somebody got wise and square chips soon replaced the discs we so delinquently stole. The miscreants among us were identified, caught, and required to assist in putting things right.

Laurel had the Yellow and Bob's cab companies in those days when many families still had no car or just one. Shoppers parked diagonally along Main Street. Many stores and barbershops closed at noon on Wednesdays and Saturdays and all day on Sundays. Laurel still had its own water treatment plant on Carroll Avenue, with water drawn from Laurel Lake and treated by Peggy Gosnell's father, Francis, and grandfather, Albert. It was a big deal when the movie theater was closed all one summer for expansion. Saturday matinees, featuring two films, cartoons and shorts, cost 15 cents. It also was big news when Polan's five-and-dime store opened and a new fire hall replaced the old one across Montgomery Street.

"Diamond Lil"

We boys became enamored upon moving up Montgomery Street to the junior-senior high school by Lillian Larrimore, a stunningly blonde eighth-grade teacher we called "Diamond Lil," although not in her presence. Her husband, Jack, was a police lieutenant on the Laurel force. But we still idolized her when she sat on the edge of her desk and crossed her shapely legs.

With bodies and voices changing and hormones raging, we were introduced during the mid-'50s to dating, white bucks, saddle shoes and penny loafers; bobby socks, hoop skirts and crinolines, peddle-pushers; blue jeans, Ivy League and pegged pants, flipped collars; pink and black shirts, blouses, pants and skirts; flattop and ducktail hair cuts and ponytail and ducktail tresses; leaded and lowered cars; drive-in movies, furtive parking and necking in area gravel pits and other out-of-the-way spots.

High school highlights included school integration our senior year, a full year before federal troops were dispatched by President Dwight Eisenhower to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. We enjoyed sock hops and formal Junior Prom, Christmas and Class Night dances as well as "Jane Eyre," a production of the Library Club, of which Faye was the president; and "The Family Nobody Wanted," the senior class production. Some daring classmates made regular forays to Blade's on Bladensburg Road and other taverns in Washington where they could drink at 18. And, could it be true, there was the

time at one of our sock hops or proms that the boys rented a TV for watching a heavyweight boxing bout, much to the girls' distress?

Although girls could well have outnumbered boys earlier in our school days, boys outnumbered girls in our senior class. There was a time, though, when the girls voted as a bloc to elect virtually all girls as class officers. That is, until the boys disjoined the class to elect their own "rump" ticket of class officers. A bunch of the boys enlisted or were drafted into the military service soon after graduation. Others among us headed off to college, while still others moved into full-time jobs and careers. Among us are Ed Dawson with a PhD in electrophysics; Bill Stuart with a PhD in anthropology; Dale Krider with a doctorate in music; graduates of law school (Carey Brady and Ed Williams), med school (Genie Zacharias); industrialists; entrepreneurs; contractors; and other business folks of various stripes; artists; governmental employees; housewives; a forester; letter carriers; truckers; a retired journalist turned lay pastor; and more.

Truth to tell?

We had so many happy times and pleasant memories that it's impossible to keep track of them all. Sometimes it's even hard to distinguish truth from falsehood, because we don't all remember events all the same way. But consider as exemplary these "star-dash" style anecdotes as newspaper people are wont to call them:

Peggy Gosnell Kelly recalls a field trip a number of us took our senior year to the United Nations Building in New York City. "On the way back home on the train, Bill Stuart wrestled away from me a white rabbit fur neckpiece that I wore as a collar for my coat. He ran/walked through the coaches of the train with this white fur piece, which had an animal's head on it, clipped to his ear, and yelling as if in pain."

Among our latter-year arrivals besides Ed Williams, whom we elected senior class president, were: Jim Bozik, whom we elected vice president; Sylvia DeFriece, who became Miss Laurel High; Cindy Rhodes, whom we made senior class treasurer; Charlie Neff, who starred as a football tackle and punter and regular high scorer together with Jim Athey on the basketball team that was first runner-up our senior year in the state finals at Cole Field House at the University of Maryland. The Spartans lost in the final game to the Crisfield "Crabbers," who arguably were the shortest champion team, but one with remarkable outside shooting. They also had a reputation for practicing all year; they were perennial champs; and our guys were taken aback by the clear plastic backboards and sheer size of the Maryland field house.

Our senior cheerleaders were Peggy Stephens and Carol Marquardt. Peggy edited the "Rambler" and guided the staff to gather a record 220 patrons and 91 advertisers to more than defray publication costs. Cindy Rhodes and Rod Stuart were senior editors of "The

Tatler.” Bill Stuart became Student Council president after an election campaign featuring such slogans as: “The teachers have a smoking room, why not the students?” and posters featuring Marilyn Monroe saying, in campaign manager Jim Bozik’s words, “I’d get out of bed to vote for Bill Stuart.” Mr. Howland took to the public address system on the eve of the election to decry such tactics, thereby guaranteeing Bill’s victory.

Faye finally learned at the reunion eight years ago the identity of the long-secret villains who purloined and transported the lovely blue spruce that adorned the auditorium for the Christmas Dance our senior year. Bill Harmeyer set the record straight on that: “A certain member of our group, who shall remain nameless, said, ‘I know where there’s a bunch of them.’ I said, ‘Where?’ He said, ‘There’s a nursery.’ Al Joe said, ‘That’s sounds pretty good. Let’s get a truck and go get one.’ So we went down and cased the place. Then they threw me out of the pickup truck with an axe and said, ‘Call us when it’s down.’ Al Joe offered to be a limb-holder. That’s how you got your Christmas tree.”

Our senior sports stars besides Al Hobbs, a four-year, three-sport athlete, were Davy John, or “Crockett,” who lettered four years in football, and three years in both basketball and baseball and was accomplished in the latter as a switch-hitter; “Ace,” basketball and baseball; “Shorty” Neff, basketball and football; Richard Cole, football and baseball; Ed Williams, football and baseball; Lloyd McGill, football and baseball; Herb Phelps, basketball and baseball; Richard Phelps, football, basketball and baseball; Joe Thomas, basketball; Frank “Pee Wee” Thompson, baseball, basketball and football; John Tyler, football; and John Wedderburn, basketball. Bill Stuart was a football manager and Rod Stuart was a football and basketball manager. Ace and Charlie tied as basketball seniors for the single-game scoring record with 30 points apiece.

Sallie Donaldson excelled and is remembered best as a perennial Glee Club member and soloist, as the artist and art director for the Rambler, and as the “Deep Purple” and “Hawaiian Sunset” themes designer for our Junior and Senior Proms. Peggy Stephens made good on her plan to meet her future husband, her “Knight in Shining Armor,” the first semester at Dickinson College, be pinned by Thanksgiving, engaged by Christmas and married by June. Rod and Cindy Stuart were the only classmates to marry each other.

Jim McAvoy was notable for his haircut and Chevy convertible and Al Hobbs for his Mercury. Jim Athey and Ed Williams owned 1939 and 1940 Fords, respectively, which they once drag-raced, smoke billowing from the floorboards, on Brooklyn Bridge Road. “Ed had a better first gear I had a better second,” Ace said. “He beat me three times.” He

also remembered, as so many of us have, going to get our driver's licenses at Hyattsville, where we had to park between cars on a hill, or in Rockville or Kensington which had flat courses.

A bunch of us would-be drivers were seriously challenged in the learning or testing. Rod Stuart, for instance, mistook the gas peddle for the brake on his dad's Pontiac on his 16th birthday and backed over neighbor Wyeth Alberti's fence. Ed Dawson crashed Ed Williams' '40 Ford into a post or a tree while practicing his steering in the Williamses' driveway when the hydraulic brakes failed and he decided the better part of valor was to avoid careering onto Gun Powder Road. Cindy Rhodes turned from Gorman Avenue into Fifth Street and hit an off-duty police officer's car while practicing her driving with her Dad present in his big, green Buick. Ace had to go back for a second time to get his license after being flunked by an inspector the first time, not for his driving but for the smoke pouring up through the floorboard of his '39 Ford.

Sometimes it was funny how we stayed in touch over the years. Take the time Bill Stuart appeared at the door of Peggy Gosnell with wine bottle in hand ... and a salutation of "Greetings from Colombia" in the high Andes where Bill met up one day with a villager who proved to be the brother of Peggy's boyfriend – or "fiancée, as Bill recalls being informed.

Then there was the time last fall when Linda Donaldson Ake ran into a former classmate who didn't graduate with us. There she was "at a local establishment having an adult beverage" on Sunday afternoon, while waiting for Sallie, and talking to an acquaintance who mentioned a friend named Dale Christensen. "I said, 'Is he real tall and about 66 years old?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Did he ever live in Laurel, Md.?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Wow! I went to school with him and remember him well. What a scamp he was.' And he said, 'He still is.' I said, 'I would love to see him.' And he said 'I'll call him right now.' Well, he did, and Dale made arrangements for him and his wife to meet Sallie and me at the Shanty last night (closing for the winter) and we sat and talked for hours. He remembers everyone fondly and would love to be included on our e-mailings and, if possible and everyone agrees, he would love to come to our 50th function.... You may send this on to whomever you think would be interested. I no longer care who knows that I go to local establishments and drink adult beverages."

Herbert Phelps, great raconteur that he is, matched one story with another at our reunion eight years ago:

First story

“I had a ’49 Chevrolet when we used to work the summer after we graduated in Washington down at High’s Ice Cream plant on Half Street, Southeast. Lloyd McGill and I used to ride together. A lot of days there were just the two of us. We’d have to go to work at like 5 o’clock in the morning. One day I said, ‘Lloyd, how about you driving today and letting me get in the back to sleep?’ He said, ‘Sure.’ So we’re going down the Parkway and all of a sudden, boom ... boom ... boom. I wake up. He fell asleep. I said, ‘For Christ’s sake, Lloyd, what’s the matter?’ He said, ‘I’m alright, I’m alright.’ I said, ‘Okay,’ and I went back to sleep. We get down to Washington, and all of a sudden: Boom! He fell asleep and ran up on a streetcar island.”

Second story

“Roger had never drunk beer until he was riding home with us. We used to stop at the Parkway and everybody got a quart of beer. That was the first time he ever drank beer and ...”

Third story

“We’ve talked about John Poe and Mark Stephens. Well, one night my brother and I and John and Mark got in the car and we went riding out through the country and we stole signs – “Eggs for sale,” “House for rent” – stuff like this. We came back to Laurel and we went to the school and we put signs up along the half-moon driveway. And all of a sudden we looked up and here comes the police. Well, my brother ran. They took the rest of us to the police station and called our parents who had to come and pick us up. My father came up. He wasn’t too happy. They told him what we had done. They turned me over to him. He said, ‘I might better stay around for a while, because I still have another son out on the street somewhere.’ Sonny had run all the way from the high school down to the Little Tavern before the cop got out of the car.”

Wrapping it up

“It’s been a wonderful time,” Herb said. “But I don’t think we should wait another 27 years for another reunion. They were talking this morning up at the golf course about a very big earthquake expected out in California in 2030. I told them, ‘Well, I hope I’m around to see it. I hope to see more of you.’”

And here we are back again – in 2007 – 62 years after some of us started first grade at Laurel Elementary School and 50 years after our high school graduation. Indeed. Praise God. So let it be.