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Fifty Years Ago . . .

By now, a year is not such a big deal. We're just finishing one up after all. The last decade was full of them. Well, ten, anyway.

Long ago, it was different. A year could change everything.

Recently, I was visiting Mom in Grand Junction, and while I usually try to spend as much time with her as possible, this time she gave me dispensation to take a drive by myself over the Monument, which she finds too tiring to do. (Ok, she is 95 years old, after all, so she's allowed to feel tired sometimes.) On the way there, just for kicks, I stopped off to walk around my old School— Pomona Elementary. It was the Saturday before Christmas, so there was no one around—except of course the ghosts of the people I remembered from long ago.



I spent the first five years of my grade school career at Tope, which, in retrospect, I would characterize as a middle class suburban school—even though at the time, we had no concept of such classifications. The original Pomona had been clearly a rural school, out in the

country on G Road and 25 Road. The new one was on Patterson and 25 ½ Road, calling on students from both Tope and the old Pomona schools.

So, my sixth grade was in a brand new school, with a bunch of kids I didn't know before from a different (well, more rural) culture. Mind you, I've met lots of people in the intervening years whose parents moved when they were young—a lot. So they knew all about going to a strange school and having to meet new kids all over again. But this was new for me as a 12-year old.

What was interesting, as I walked around the school now (and realized that it's now been 50 years since the 1959-60 school year!) was that the first memories of that year that came to my mind were, shall we say, unpleasant:

These included: getting beat up by bullies that one time; my mother making a fuss about our watching the World Series in class; my humiliating experience of peacefully daydreaming when I was supposed to be a goalie for the version of Soccer that we called "speedball"; and my being insanely jealous of Mike Justice's musical ability—among others. We had a male teacher, and the class had a decidedly jock orientation, which didn't help.

With two exceptions, which I'll tell you about below, those were the only specific memories I could dredge up. The thing is, however, that I remember it as a very good year. Go figure.



One nice thing about Pomona is the way it is laid out. It is completely oriented towards the outdoors. The classrooms are all directly accessible to the outside. Except for the bit with school offices and the lunchroom, there are no hallways.

All I remember is the classroom itself and being outside on the walkways or on the playground. Some of that outside time was in the cold and the snow, of course, but we were pretty tough. And it was outside, which was just fine! This meant that there was an openness about life that, while I took it for granted at the time, I realize now was probably why I never really got depressed or discouraged. You could always go outside, run around, and blow off steam.

My classroom was the one on the end:



(The following three years at Grand Junction Junior High *were* depressing because of the creaky old buildings and the narrow hallways—although they were also depressing because we were entering adolescence.)

Truth be known, in addition to the bullying episode I mentioned, I did get into one proper fight. Sammy was, shall we say, not a stellar student, and he fancied himself a tough guy. I, on the other hand, was—let's be honest—the class nerd. (We didn't have that term back then, but everyone will recognize what I'm talking about: I was good in school. I was not an athlete. And I was not a musician.) But Sammy'd gotten on my nerves, so I challenged him

to meet me after school. He was puzzled that I should do that, but thought (I am sure) what the heck? This could be amusing. (What *I* was thinking I have no idea.)

Now understand that the only kind of aggression I had experienced to that time was being hit in the stomach. And I wanted to get to him before he got to me, so I gave it my best shot.

Apparently I wasn't very good at it. He just stood there. My first blow apparently had absolutely no effect on him.

So he socked me in the jaw.

OUCH! I'd never been socked in the jaw before. That hurt!

Suddenly, it seemed to me that perhaps instead of boxing, we should wrestle. With my sore jaw, I proposed that. Fortunately he agreed, so we went at it.

The good thing about wrestling is that, if you're about the same size, it isn't immediately obvious who is winning. OK, I was beginning to get the idea, but I held my own well enough until finally a teacher came out and broke it up. As I recall, at that point we shook hands and parted company amicably. I felt satisfied that my honor had been upheld, and he'd had an entertaining afternoon of it.

The next day, as was typical, Sammy didn't have his homework ready. Mr. Bennett asked him why, expecting yet another creative excuse. He wasn't prepared for what he heard:

"Oh, I got in a fight with Hay last night, so I couldn't do it."

The class went silent.

"You were in a fight with Hay?"

My stock went through the roof.

So maybe I wasn't the wimp everyone had assumed I was.

Needless to say, that was one of my better moments that year. It pretty much made up for all the others.

Actually, that wasn't the only good thing that happened. I should mention my girlfriend. Yes, I actually had a girlfriend in the sixth grade! It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but in retrospect I guess it was something. Hey, who among us can say they had a girlfriend in the sixth grade?

Daril and I were good friends from the beginning of the year. But more than that, she was, well, interesting. I was too young to really understand what was going on emotionally, but I

did pick up right away that she was, well, a girl, and that that made her particularly nice to be around. (She was really cute!) I didn't really put two and two together, though, until she gave me her picture. It was one of the 5X7 school pictures. And she autographed it "Much love, Daril". I was totally blown away. That a *girl* should actually write such a thing down was unbelievable to me! I was pretty much putty in her hands from then on.

Well, it's not that we actually *did* anything, mind you. Other than spend a lot of time talking together there on the walkway outside the class.



I really liked talking to her. What an enjoyable time that was!

It turned out her mother was a musician, and during the summer, she had a gig playing flute for the Central City Opera Company. For not the last time in my life, I was stuck to have a relationship via the US Mail. She was living in a town with the strange name (to me) "Blackhawk" and her mother was performing in an opera called "Die Fledermaus". I thought that was a wonderful name. I liked the sound of "The Flying Mouse". Ok, it means "The Bat", but "Flying Mouse" seemed like a better title to me.

She came back at the end of the summer, and I did lure her into my tree-house one

afternoon. I actually got up the nerve to ask her for a kiss! But she said we were too young. (Sigh! Alas, it was probably true.)



That fall Daril and her mother moved to Denver. So I went to Junior High with, if not exactly a broken heart, at least a tenderized one—and some fond memories.

As Frank Sinatra sings, it was definitely a very good year...

So, in 2009, I walked along the places from that fateful year. The building, of course, hasn't changed a bit. (That's one of the few things in Grand Junction about which that can be said.) It has gotten smaller, though. To stand on that spot on the walkway outside my class—the angles are all different!



And, well, yes, it has aged a bit. It's not quite the pristine structure I remember. But then it is true that I have aged a bit myself. And I don't have quite the structure I remember, either. And it's true: some of my putty is coming loose as well.



A bit of a post script:

Many years later, on a Sunday morning in 1971, I was walking down Third Avenue in New York City with a young woman I was trying to impress. We stopped by a newsstand to pick up the Sunday *New York Times*. As I was looking through the various sections of the newspaper, I spotted a strange-looking picture on the back page of the editorial section. For dramatic effect it had been printed as a negative. I was taken by the picture because the building looked strangely familiar. It appeared to be a school of some sort. Indeed, it looked *my* old school—Pomona Elementary. But of course it couldn't be that! This was New York City, after all. And that was *The New York Times!* But that's definitely what it looked like.

So I read the caption. Sure enough—it was Pomona School! It seems that—along with many Grand Junction houses from that period—it had been built on radioactive tailings. The attached article was most interesting.

I had heard about the radioactive tailings problem, but here it was, written about in a New York newspaper. I showed the picture to my lady friend and said, hey, that was my school! So she read the article with me, and we both wondered what sort of radiation damage I might have been subject to. Finally, she concluded...

“Gee that could explain a lot.”

(!)

Yes, it was a very good year, indeed.

Dave