

**Revisiting Rolfe High School in 1990:  
A 1963 Graduate Reflects on Rolfe's Last Graduation**  
written circa 2000

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**The Setting**

In May of 1990, Rolfe High School held its last high school commencement exercises. The fourteen senior students stepped proudly yet awkwardly the length of the gym, through the center aisle that divided the rows of folding chairs. The basketball hoops were cranked high to the ceiling, supposedly out of view, yet with a vantage point where they could observe this final event. They would see a gathering of students, parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, other relatives and friends, in fact, a cross-section of the Rolfe community, including younger kids who would never march to "Pomp and Circumstance" in that gym. The following fall, things would change and the high school students would take a bus to Pocahontas and attend school there, an idea many Rolfe people had cringed at for a long time. Pocahontas was a chief rival and, years ago, had stolen the county seat from Rolfe. It was hard for Rolfe diehards to come to terms with the dwindling size of their school, yet even harder to contemplate a merger with Poky. But the arrangement, which initially was called "whole-grade sharing," seems to be working well. Rolfe lost a high school, but retains its own elementary program as well as an expanded middle school that includes students coming from Pocahontas.

**Change**

A similar merger happened in 1959 when I was a freshman at Rolfe and our district assimilated the Des Moines Township School. It wasn't long before DMT was closed and sold to a fellow who made it into a ballroom. Now even the ballroom is history, and the main part of the DMT building has been demolished with the gymnasium scuffed up and abandoned.

Sometimes an event happens, and even though local people may understand it to be a milestone in their history, they don't take the time to document it. The years go by, events accumulate, and an era or institution fades away with little record left behind. Fortunately, I was able to be in Rolfe and videotape the school's last graduation. I also was allowed to visit the school for several days prior to commencement, getting to know the senior class, interviewing them and younger students as well as gathering candid footage. I was surprised at the amount of freedom the administration and faculty gave me, and am particularly grateful to Superintendent Fred Muth and Principal Fred Columbus for sharing some of my vision and opening doors.

**Time Travel**

I felt like I was in a time warp when I visited the school. Some features were familiar. The building was still the nearly square, brick edifice with gymnasium addition that had been built when I was in third grade. Mrs. Eden Spencer continued to teach elementary school across the hall from where I had her as a fourth-grade teacher the second year of her teaching career, and the lunch room still had its familiar smell of institutional, string-beans. But there were obvious changes. Many parts of the building had been remodeled, and the functions of many of the rooms

had changed. There was a new locker room, band room, and shop for industrial arts plus plenty of well-used computers in several departments. However, the wall maps in the government classroom were torn and out-of-date.

In some respects, the discipline was more relaxed than in the forever-and-ever era when Miss Edna M. Marcum was principal. She retired in 1966 after serving more than half a century in the Rolfe schools, teaching English Literature and Latin. To the seniors of 1990, Miss Marcum was a relic of ancient history, and their only connection to the school marm was her stern portrait on the library wall and the stories they had heard from parents and other folks who had passed under her tutelage.

### **A Generation Gap**

As I began to meet with the senior class, telling them about my plans and making arrangements for interviews, I was nervous. We didn't know each other. There was a generation gap as well as the fact that I hadn't lived around Rolfe for several years. On the other hand, four of the seniors had parents who had been in my class, and others had parents in grades just ahead or behind me. This could work in my favor or be a detriment. Not many high school students reveal their true selves to parents or to someone they feel has the same mind set as their folks, but I hoped the seniors would see I was seeking original thoughts and not ones they would self-censor because they thought their parents or the administration would disapprove. I wasn't bound to the myth system of either the school or town and didn't have prescribed notions of what was proper for them to say. However, I had to realize that the students did not have reason to trust me, regardless of my intentions.

### **The Seniors**

The most interesting aspect of this class was its cohesiveness. Most of these seniors had been in school together since kindergarten which is not uncommon for classmates in a small town. For instance, in my class of 36 students that graduated from Rolfe in 1963, many of us had known each other not only for the 12 years of our public education but had met as toddlers in Sunday School. However, these seniors of 1990 had a special bond based on more than just a long history of being together. They had supported each other during the illness and death of two of the girls' mothers on separate occasions. The seniors had also grown up in the midst of a new era of rural Midwestern issues. They had adjusted to the farm crisis of the 1980's and to the town's experimental mergers with other school districts. First, there was the arrangement with Havelock-Plover, then Gilmore City-Bradgate and finally, Pocahontas. The athletes had begun high school wearing the school's traditional colors of red and gold and playing as the Rams and Rammettes. Next they dressed in blue and white and were named the River Valley Rebels. Then in their senior year, even though Rolfe maintained its own academic program, the athletes competed on Pocahontas teams and adapted to Poky's red and white uniforms and the nicknames of Indians and Maidens. It was interesting to see the many colors of T-shirts, sweatshirts and jerseys the seniors wore that represented the different sports alliances they had been involved with during high school.

The seniors were aware of being the last class to graduate from Rolfe High School but were not hung up on the fact. Instead, they were focused on academic deadlines, sports events, and other activities like putting finishing touches on the school annual. Some were also waiting to hear if they had been accepted into colleges and trade schools and were concerned about finding summer jobs if they hadn't already lined up work. Of course, there was an undercurrent of feelings about separating from friends, but what seemed most important was that this would be their graduation and a milestone marking their accomplishments.

I sat with the entire group one day in Mr. Richard Gruber's government class. The conversation went around the circle, and the students told how long they had attended the Rolfe schools and whether or not their folks had also gone to school there. Then they talked about the pros and cons of small schools, and felt for the most part that there was an advantage to a school the size of Rolfe. They also talked about becoming a close-knit class in the face of all the changes the town and school had experienced.

### **Responding to Death**

I asked whether there was a sense of death in all these changes and wanted to know about their feelings and how they dealt with their emotions. I referred to Pam's mom who died in the late 1980's, explaining that Shirley had been in my class and was a good friend. I added that even though I lived at a distance, I was touched and sad upon hearing the news of her death. The tone of conversation changed. Many of the seniors sat poker-faced. Pam seemed uncomfortable. I neither backed off nor pushed ahead. In the pregnancy of the silence, the students seemed hesitant yet willing to talk about their feelings, even if it took them awhile to build confidence. Phil jumped in to say that the best advice is to move forward, focus on the future and not look back. Although I respect him and believe he was well-intended, Phil sounded like a spokesman for rural Iowa stoicism. His advice wasn't the insight I was seeking, but I realized it was good to be reminded of the mentality I grew up in. I also acknowledge there are life situations when his advice is the best strategy, but this was a fragile moment, and I hoped his remarks would not quell the conversation. Fortunately, a few other students dared to speak.

I particularly remember Melanie and wish the very best for her. At one point, she left the room to cry but came back and spoke through her tears about her own mother's death, also in the 1980's. Melanie spoke about the support of friends, the value of being in therapy and the importance of dealing with feelings. She was articulate, wise and courageous. It's hard to find people in rural Iowa who will reveal this kind of depth, and her remarks were precious. I watched out of the corner of my eye, observing others who were quietly listening, either in tears or simply attuned to what Melanie had to say and dropping some of their everyday persona to reveal tenderness and compassion.

### **Dreams**

Earlier in the interview, I had asked the students about their plans for the future. They responded enthusiastically but with general language and some cliches about going to college, achieving in the field of their choice, and making money. All of these are important goals, but the answers didn't reveal much detail about their dreams. I wanted to know the specific career fields they had

chosen. I wanted to hear what it was that excited them - what they loved to do and wanted to carry into the future. It was difficult for them to respond in more detail. I let the conversation move in other directions but later circled back to see if they had warmed up to the notion of talking about the heart of their dreams. I asked what it was they were passionate about. I pointed to Mr. Gruber as an example of what I was trying to get at. Earlier, this veteran teacher and football coach had told me he had always wanted to pursue art, but he never did because he was channeled into sports and other "acceptable" activities for a man. I asked the students if there was some interest or skill they really liked and wanted to develop as part of their career or personal lives, even if it wasn't part of the norm now.

Dennis, a hefty, athletic-looking student with crew cut, who planned to enter the Air Force, spoke somewhat tenderly about how he enjoyed working with baby pigs on a farm where he had a part-time job. He hoped some day to have a place where he could raise his own hogs. Jason talked about drawing airplanes and wanting to work in aeronautical design. Brett liked to tinker with cars and said that even though he would go to vocational school and become an auto mechanic, he dreamed of designing cars. Barbara spoke about creating house plans but added she would go to business school since she didn't have the academic skills or other background to become an architect. What a classic form of thinking for a high school girl! I remembered Chris, a girl a few years behind me in school, who first became a beautician then later studied mechanical engineering and got a design job with Ford Motors in Detroit. I hoped Barbara would find a way to become an architect or work in a related field. Finally, Melanie talked about writing and her desire to have her own advertising firm. I asked if she ever wrote about personal experiences. She blushed but acknowledged that writing had helped her through difficult times. The twinkle in her eye and the way her bashful smile turned to a grin were clues that she was in touch with her passions and had as much chance as anyone to make her dreams become a reality.

### **The Senior Girls**

Later that day, all five senior girls volunteered for a group interview. We had covered many topics with the entire class, so I asked them what they felt was most important to talk about. Their immediate response was, "Boys." I was caught off guard because "boys" as a discussion topic was the last thing from my mind. I was afraid the girls would want to talk about dating and proms or other such events - the kinds of activities that can be the source of sore memories for some students and that have not been a priority in my life. However, the girls were the ones who had taken the initiative to meet for the interview, and it was important that they choose the issues to discuss. So I simply asked the open-ended question, "What is it about boys that you want to talk about?" Their response was again immediate and unexpected. They were upset by the put-downs and the sexist jokes the boys told in government class.

How much did the girls know about sexism? I asked if they were aware that in the career world, a woman with a high school degree makes an average of about 60 cents compared to every dollar earned by a man with a mere eighth-grade education. The girls were a bit stunned, but also willing to discuss the issue. One girl suggested that times were changing, and the situation might be different when she and her classmates got out of college. I also talked about how culture socializes us from the time we are born and asked the girls if they noticed any differences

between themselves and the guys when it came to basic feelings of self-worth. They weren't sure. "Yes. No. Maybe." I wished there was more opportunity for this kind of discussion in the Rolfe schools. I also wished these girls had the necessary skills and support for ending the sexist remarks dished out by their classmates. That was not the case, but fortunately, the girls were beginning to recognize sexism in their own situations.

### **Gender Matters**

No one used the word "sexism" when I was in high school even though there was a lot that was wrong with the system. I particularly remember my frustration, anger and despair as an elementary and junior high student when we girls had no athletic programs nor any to look forward to in high school. Sure, we could go out for cheerleading, but I never have considered that a sport. During seventh grade, some of us girls circulated a petition requesting the school to offer girls basketball. The seventh and eighth boys taunted us, luring us into giving them our petition, assuring us of their support and saying they would sign the form. Because we wanted as many signatures as possible, we finally gave in, handing the boys our petition. Just as we feared, they tore it up, but we started over and wrote another. Mr. Ralph Mortensen, the principal, called me into his office to inform me that the school board had received our petition but that it had taken no action. He ended our one-sided conversation saying that some day, when I got older, I would probably realize there were good reasons why girls should not be allowed to compete in sports. That was the end of the petition drive. However, when I entered ninth grade in 1959, Rolfe and the Des Moines Township school were consolidated, and DMT, which already had a girls team, insisted that the newly-merged district offer girls basketball. Fortunately, my classmates and I were able to compete in basketball, but it was a slow and humiliating beginning. We won only a handful of games in four years.

Times change. The word "sexism" is now common and had found its way into the vocabulary of the Rolfe senior girls of 1990. They had their own window on the issue even if they had not known what it was like to be denied opportunities in sports. Instead, the school had provided girls' athletic programs for 30 years and known its share of outstanding individuals and winning teams.

I attended softball practice at Poky and watched as Patti and Sandy went through the drills of batting, pitching, fielding and diving to the dirt as they practiced stealing bases. The two were young, svelte, competent, and eager with smug, impish attitudes that only graduating high school seniors would dare have. It was bittersweet. I was envious of what they had going for them, yet sad, realizing that the years would accumulate and soon these girls would be immersed in adult responsibilities. This fresh, spring day would become part of their past. Not only that, but it was poignant to know that Rolfe no longer fielded its own athletic teams.

Vocational agriculture was another area where there was rigid gender discrimination when I was in school. Girls could study home economics while boys had programs in agriculture and industrial arts. I remember as a 10th grader, fantasizing what it would be like to break that mold. One day, when walking through the school hallways, I mused out loud to classmates that I was thinking about signing up for shop. I forget their exact words, but my friends made my interest in

shop sound ludicrous. If they thought the idea was absurd, I knew I wouldn't be able to get anyone to support me and dropped the idea.

On my visit in the spring of 1990, it was no surprise to find girls and boys working together in eighth-grade shop class. It was part of the trend affected by affirmative action. I stood in the midst of table saws and welding equipment and observed the girls and boys wearing their industrial goggles and making wooden tool boxes. They looked like authentic shop students, yet didn't seem enthusiastic about their projects or confident with hammers, screw drivers, glue or spray paint. I would have taken the work much more seriously because I like shop work and because I had been denied access to this bastion of past years that had been reserved for the high school boys.

The industrial education and vocational agriculture programs still had vestiges of being a male fraternity. The senior boys said I could come and videotape their "steak-out." It was a feast the ag boys held one afternoon during the final week of classes. They had rolled up the over-sized garage door at the back of the shop, heated up charcoal coals in a large, portable barbecue pit and stood around cooking huge cuts of beef and venison that they had brought from home. The rest of the menu was pop, potato chips and good times. Not many of the boys attending the party were actually enrolled in the ag program. In part, this pointed to the fact that there wasn't much of a future in farming for this generation. In another respect, the steak-out was not an ag-specific event but an excuse for the high school clan of males to get together for a party that excluded girls. The invitation was extended through the grapevine to the men teachers, some who would stop by on their lunch breaks and enjoy the camaraderie. The irony was that I was well-accepted. Not only was Phil responsible for the event's success but he was a model of hospitality and made me feel welcome. I could see many of Iowa's rural virtues in this honest, hard-working, affable leader and believed he would do well in his chosen field of dairy industry. It was also ironic that I was nearly a vegetarian in 1990 and consumed more red meat at the steak-out than I normally did in a year. The beef was very good but the venison was great.

Meanwhile, during the last week of school, the Tuesday Club, a local women's organization, held a tea to honor the senior girls. Pam, Melanie, Sandy, Patti and Barbara dressed in their best for the occasion. I am not sure how long ago the annual event had been initiated, but the girls' attire was quite different than ours in 1963 when Miss Verla Mae Huston, the Home Economics teacher and our faculty chaperon, insisted we wear hats and white gloves. I went without hat. My behavior was partially an act of rebellion against out-dated standards of dress but was also a practical matter. I had no desire to spend money on a hat besides it was hard to find one that I liked or that fit my head which takes a 7 3/4 size in men's headwear. Actually, when we arrived at the tea, several of the adult women had neither hats nor gloves, and those who were to be in a skit were wearing sweatshirts.

I was surprised when I revisited the school in 1990 that the tea party for "girls and women only" didn't bother me. I suppose it could have. If I had been one of the girls, I would have wanted the choice of whether to go to a steak fry or a proper tea. And conversely, had a senior boy wanted to attend the tea, he should have had an opportunity to do so. But what shapes my tolerance in

regard to this event is the image of the women in sweatshirts, including a farm neighbor, who put on the skit in 1963, and I realize that the women were simply doing their best to provide fun and a ritual to honor senior girls as they made their transition into post high school womanhood. The older I get the more I realize the importance of women supporting other women. And conversely, I acknowledge the need for men to support men. However, there are also times when it is important to challenge bastions of privilege and exclusivity.

### **Photos of Predecessors**

On the last day of senior classes, I stopped to see Mr. Gruber and got permission to return at the end of government class to talk with the seniors. Among other things, I needed to make sure they had all signed their "model releases," giving me permission to use the video footage that I had taken of them.

In the meantime, I videotaped the portraits of former senior classes that hung above the red and gold student lockers on each side of the second floor hallway. Each was a composite of individual portraits, the older ones taken in black-and-white and better preserved than those done in color. Photos used to hang on all three floors of the building, with nearly all classes in the school's history represented. I remember as a grade school kid, looking up in awe at the "old-time" pictures and seeing my dad's portrait, framed with the class of 1935 that hung high on the wall of the first floor hallway. He and his classmates seemed handsome and mature, yet pure and innocent. I also remember visiting the high school shortly after my class had graduated and seeing our composite photo on the wall. It was a weird confrontation with the movement of time to have the visual reminder that our class of 1963 had entered the past tense in relation to Rolfe High School. Eventually, photos of succeeding classes would join ours on the wall, including those of youngsters who had been in the elementary grades during our high school days and children not yet conceived by the time we graduated.

Earlier in the week, I held a video session in the hallway with the current seniors as they milled about and pointed to portraits of parents or other relatives. By 1990, the school had confined the gallery to the second floor. There wasn't enough room to hang all the classes, and each year, the oldest photo had to be removed to make room for the newest one. Phil's dad was one of those whose class picture had been bumped off. He'd been in the class of 1953, and the gallery went from 1954 to 1989. The class of 1990 never was added to the hallway gallery. Its photo was completed in time to be displayed at the school's alumni/ae banquet in June of 1990 with the other class photos that had been taken off the wall or brought out of storage. None of the photos were put back on the hallway walls. Instead, the Rolfe school board talked about taking the entire collection out of the frames and displaying the photos in a fixture that would stand securely in one of the rooms near the entrance of the building. The building would have no more high school nor would there be any opportunity for future youngsters to look above their heads, as they walked through the corridors, and see the generations of young people that once upon a time had graduated from Rolfe High School.

I finished videotaping the hallway photos and joined the seniors for the last minutes of their government class. There was a casual repartee and good-natured sparring as Mr. Gruber and the

students finished reviewing the final exam and taking care of other details. They turned in their model releases and were waiting for the tick of the clock and the sound of the bell so they could be "ought of there." There were ten minutes left, and Mr. Gruber wanted to know if there was anything else I wanted to ask the class.

### **A Question of Judgment**

I had not planned to bring up the issue of sexism but realized there plenty of time to ask the entire class about the matter of put-downs and sexist jokes. Mr. Gruber chuckled. He knew what I was talking about and was a little sheepish or embarrassed. He knew the sexist remarks were wrong and yet had not prohibited them. The girls didn't say much but stared at Mr. Gruber and the senior boys with a look that challenged them to be accountable. Phil had no sympathy and even told a joke - one that he claimed to be clean. The joke went like this. First, there was a girl who had gone to the "genie" and asked to be made 10 percent smarter, and swoosh, the genie waved its wand and fulfilled the girl's dream. Then a second girl asked to be made 50 percent smarter, and swoosh, her dream came true. Then a third girl asked to be 100 percent smarter, and swoosh, the genie made her into a man. Sure it was a "clean" joke, but the question of whether a joke is "dirty or clean" is not the same as the question of whether a joke is "sexist or non-sexist." The two spectrums are as different as apples and oranges. Sure I have heard the joke told the other way around with the genie turning a man, who wanted to be 100 percent smarter, into a women, but either way, humor often reflects underlying biases even when a joke seems innocuous. Phil was unflappable, not willing to admit wrong-doing. It's not that I wish to vilify Phil, because as I mentioned earlier, there is much I respect about the young man. Perhaps the issue is as much one of timing and tact. However, in the context of a classroom discussion about gender bias, Phil's response was symbolic and points to deeper issues. The incident confirmed there was substance to the kind of behavior the girls said had occurred in the government class. (Note: A person listening to a tape of the graduation talks given by representatives of the senior class in 1990 will note a reference to issues of tact.)

Mr. Gruber was open to dialog. He said that he and the rest of the faculty had recently participated in a workshop dealing sexism. He also said he was aware of the issues, yet wondered if the oppression of women in our country was really all that bad or if the feminists were simply overstating the case. He also wondered how much of this sort of thing should be taught in the schools. Fortunately, he was willing to listen as I attempted to answer his questions. Unfortunately, there was very little time left in the class period.

The bell rang. The seniors were out the door as if they had been fired from a canon, yet with a quick "good-bye" to Mr. Gruber. Government was over. In a few hours they would complete their other classes, get a final check-out from Mr. Columbus, the principal, and burst out of the building to their various older model cars and drive out of sight.

### **The Passage**

This class of seniors would gather again on Sunday afternoon for the school's last commencement exercises. The boys dressed in red caps and gowns while the girls wore gold. I tried to look past the difference in colors and not get caught up on the fact that it was a form of



differentiation. In 1963, my classmates and I wore traditional black which was not as colorful, but at least presented us uniformly, regardless of gender.

What was it in the nature of this day that had lured me halfway across the country from California with video gear to document the event? During the years preceding Rolfe High School's last graduation, I had recurring dreams of failing to meet the requirements for graduation. In some, I was playing hooky from sixth grade. In others, I was skipping sophomore English or world history. Fortunately, there was one dream in which Mrs. Barbara Olerich, one of my high school English teachers, told me that the faculty had discussed my situation and decided I should choose an inter-disciplinary project in lieu of the standard curriculum. She suggested the project would not only help me meet my graduation requirements but would be good for the school itself. What was it that my inner eye was seeking? I wasn't sure, but hoped a part of me would graduate with these students.

What was the essence of this last graduation? On one hand, it was specific to that afternoon, that gym and stage, that class and community. It was also universal - a "coming-of-age" ceremony experienced by various tribes and clans across time, albeit in a variety of versions.

Simple and basic - the cohesiveness of a small class that had grown up together in the midst of considerable change in the rural Midwest and the deaths of two of their mothers. It was the pride and tradition of young adults, walking across the stage to receive their diplomas. It was the support and compassion of families, friends and other citizens. It was an event where there were tears, yet the sense of celebration outweighed the issues of loss. It was the sound of the piano playing "Pomp and Circumstance" one last time while the graduates recessed through the center aisle, escorted by their parents, to the back of the gym. It was the camaraderie of the receiving line and the buzz of generations of people engaged in casual conversation with no hurry to leave. It was a rite of passage. However, in the mix of evident changes and the mystery of what is yet to change, along with dimensions that may never change, the full significance of the last graduation may take years to unfold for 14 seniors, a community, and an independent video producer from its class of 1963.

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