

“BLOWHARDS BLEW, BUT THE UMBRELLA WON”

In the fall of 1951 high school football was the topic in Verona, and the football rivalry between Oakmont Oaks and the Verona Panthers was the focus. This was the era of corner drug stores and snack shops, ice cream sodas and cherry cokes. Verona had four drug stores in the early 1950's. We, the boys, would usually hang out at Family Pharmacy drug store at the bottom of South Avenue and Allegheny River Boulevard. It had a great soda fountain counter and a telephone booth that was always busy in the back. We would call the girls from this location. The girls would hang out at their girl friends' houses and rarely ventured down the main street at night.

On the warm evenings, we hotshots of the school would hang out on the street corners. Like us, the boys in Oakmont would do the same on the main street in Oakmont. Of the three drug stores there, the most popular was Bud's Drug Store on the corner of Washington Avenue and Allegheny River Boulevard. Occasionally we would walk across the viaduct into Oakmont, car rides were scarce then. Conversely, the Oakmont boys would cross over coming into Verona.

One particular warm September evening, the Oakmonters ventured into Verona territory. We were standing on the corner of Center Avenue and Allegheny River Boulevard, by Liberto's home-made ice cream and paper store. We knew most of the invaders by their first names, Chuck, Peanuts, Pinky and others. Some of the ten that showed up, we did not know.

We were about 12 – 15 strong and as word got around Verona, more showed up. Frank Falso and other upper class boys were in the forefront and verbally noticeable. I was an underclassman and the smallest of the group, but the fastest runner, just in case. It got noisy when Chuck W. who was a fantastic Oakmont football player, tremendous speed, and Frank Falso started jawing at each other. Some of the comments were “What are you doing in Verona?” Reply “We can walk anywhere we want to!” Their bodies got closer, the backups formed sides. Verbal accusations got personal and louder. I can't say who reached out first, no punches, good thing I wasn't going to stick around. They got closer and it was like a stand up wrestling match until they fell to the sidewalk. We all stood back and extended our arms outward to keep all others away. We were like cheerleaders, but no physical involvement. Then, out of the blue, someone parted our protective circle. A woman started to prod the two gladiators with a closed umbrella. As she was prodding and swinging the umbrella, she was also giving a sermon and a scolding. “Fizzy Liz”, the local 70 year old bag lady was the mediator. Everyone in town knew of this eccentric woman always dressed in an oversized dress, old jacket and her signature dark wide-brimmed hat, plus her umbrella. To paraphrase what was said, “There are no winners, all you are doing here is disgracing your good family name, now get up

and shake hands.” At first it was funny. We were all laughing, even the combatants. She was relentless and everyone took a step back. It was over when Frank and Chuck stood up and shook hands. The bag lady had extinguished the flames. We Veronians knew her well, but the Oakmonters were wondering who she was. The conversation turned to levity and a nasty situation was ended by the influence of an umbrella and a wide-brimmed black hat.

Frank W. Santucci, November 18, 2014