

## **“THE CLASS THAT NEVER GRADUATED”**

**By Frank W. Santucci**

St. Joseph’s Grade School in Verona was a very special place, known for its great curriculum and outstanding graduates. The class that began in 1941 became known as one of the brightest groups of students that were together in the same grade. School introduced and matured these young boys and girls to a new way of varied cultures and names during their eight years of St. Joseph experiences.

I was very lucky by living only 100 yards away from the wooden floors that were oiled periodically to keep them supple. Each room had a pot-bellied coal stove at one of the front corners with two outside coal bins, one at the eighth grade steps and one at the fourth and fifth grade building. Since there was no indoor plumbing, an outhouse was provided with one side boys and girls the other. Some girls opted to wait until they got home rather than utilize the outhouse. During that era, we had the choice to go home for lunch. The students who lived in the Sylvan area of Verona had close to a mile walk home, eat then return for the afternoon schedule. A brass hand bell beckoned the students back to class. Ringing the bell was a privilege extended only to distinguished eighth grade boys.

Once inside a prayer was said followed by the pledge of allegiance before we could sit down. At times, some mischievous boys would place a fire cap on the metal bend of the desks. When everyone put their seats down, the caps would loudly crack in unison disrupting the class.

The instructors were from the School Sisters of Notre Dame with their motherhouse located in Hagerstown, Maryland; Sister Anna, Sister Eva, Sister Florencia, Sister Angelia, Sister Justin, Sister Desaderia were excellent teachers in the 1940’s. They were scary appearing as if they were floating as they sashayed across the school yard, no legs or feet visible. Their demeanor was strict, all movement stopped on the first bell ringing, when the second bell rang, each class then moved to their designated area.

First and second years were devoted to learning new songs and prayers for First Holy Communion. When our First Holy Communion Day finally arrived, we processed onto Second Street to Center Avenue and then into church. The girls were all in white wearing veils, the boys in dark suits - I had knickers on. A beautiful sight to behold watching the young communicants walking into St. Joseph Church.

In third grade the boys began receiving altar boy instructions learning prayers in Latin, even to this day, 70 years later, they still resonate in my head.

Most of the nuns were of German decent and at Christmas time students were taught German Christmas songs, I can still remember the words and music. World War II war news dominated the first four years of school, and weather permitting, we all sang patriotic songs outside in front of the twenty foot flag pole.

One October day in 1944 while in class, word came that one of our classmates had been seriously injured by a milk truck on Center Avenue, three days later he died. Our class attended his funeral with the older boys as altar servers.

By 1945 the school had some indoor plumbing installed under the eighth grade room. What a relief!

During the month of May each room would set up an altar displaying beautiful home-grown flowers brought in daily by students to honor and venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Sister Florencia had a large garden next to the convent facing Center Avenue next to the Church building planting corn, beans and tomatoes. Each evening, during the growing season, you could find Sister Florencia in the garden. As the plants grew, so did the weeds. Sister’s answer to the weed problem was instead of indoor detention, those students were assigned to work in her garden. Weeding and hoeing took the place of doing math problems. There were times when I was subjected to this labor out in the open garden. To add insult, my dad had given the plants to Sister Florencia. My dad had a large garden and a hot bed that Sister would frequent and ask for the small seedlings. A credit to Sister Florencia, she would be right with us weeding and digging. Another item my dad shared with the nuns, was our home made wine.

Although living close to the school and church had its advantages, at times it caused my brother Ralph and me some distress as we were always available as substitute altar servers. During the summer months, whenever someone missed their serving assignment, one of the nuns would run down the back alley to our yard and call for my mother. Many, many times we were drafted. A real problem for Ralph and me was Friday night benediction would interfere with our movie night.

One monumental event took place in 1948 when Father Williams was to be transferred out of St. Joseph parish. Our class, which was one of the top academic groups that had attended St. Joe, was also the most vocal and resistant to the old order. As a group we protested outwardly about Fr. Williams' transfer. To a person, our class was involved. Other students joined us, but we were in the forefront. The Pastor at this time, Monsignor Soxman seemed to have a sympathetic ear to our concerns, but explained he had no input into the transfer. The Bishop had made the decision and it was final. Our protest may have set in motion an act that later would involve our class.

Around 1946 while in the sixth grade, the ball point pen was introduced to St. Joseph's. In the past we learned to write the cursive Palmer Method with wet ink pens. Ink wells were on the upper right side of our desks holding black india ink and sometimes things got pretty messy.

In 1948 a new school building was being built with the front of the new school facing Center Avenue. The class that would graduate in 1949 was to be the first from the new school. Our excitement was at an accelerated level all year. We constantly pulled more jokes and pranks than all the rest of the students. Gender made no difference, we were all in trouble most of the time. Periodically Monsignor would come for a religious class and also to pass out our report cards, often he even lectured about class behavior that Principal Sister Anna had reported to him. We laughed a lot, mostly at the wrong times, even getting slapped, but who cared, our time at St. Joseph's was getting short. Our parents didn't have a clue about what was going on. Our report cards had space for a word – department, which my parents had no idea of its meaning, the A's were there and that's all that really counted to them.

Anticipation began to swell in the beginning of May 1949. Families were busy planning graduation parties for June and then the bombshell hit. There would be no graduation ceremony for this unruly, disrespectful, mouthy, but good-looking and academically keen, eighth graders. My family was stunned along with other families. I gave my mother some phony reason for the elimination of the graduation ceremony, but no matter, she still found out. On the last day of school, we just departed and the doors closed for us at St. Joseph. No goodbyes, no have a good life, no graduation papers, just a final report card with a lot of A's on it. It did not hurt then, but as years passed it became more important to us that we were denied our graduation certificates.

During our reunion, forty years later, at Vescio's Restaurant in Oakmont, we received our certificates of graduation. Rita Kelly, the school nurse representing the parish administration, distributed our elusive papers. Monsignor Soxman, who was now 91 or 92 years old, sent a letter of congratulations to our class.

A few extra pounds coupled with white hair was evident on these 54 year old grade school graduates, but our attitudes never changed.

November 17, 2015