

Marquette, A River of Memories

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by Jim Peiper

“Yesterday’s gone on down the river and you can’t get it back.”

– Capt. Augustus McCrae in Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove*, 1985

The river of our youth, the Mississippi, flowed past in its timeless majesty as we gathered in Alton, Ill., for a reunion of Marquette High School’s Class of 1960.

When I was a callow youth of 17, about to graduate from that high school named for an explorer of the Mississippi, Father Jacques Marquette, that river was a highway to a broader world beyond Alton and the Midwest.

The school sits high on a hill overlooking the Mississippi. As I gazed at it day after day, I sometimes entertained a fanciful notion of finagling a job as a deckhand on one of the towboats that plied the Big River and making my way to New Orleans. There, I figured, I’d sign on to a freighter bound for who knows where.

A song from the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* summed up my aspirations at the time. And it rattled around in my head throughout the summer of 1962, when I and a Marquette classmate flew to London on a Southern Illinois University charter flight and

traveled throughout Europe on Mobylette mopeds bought in Brussels. We got as far south as the Amalfi Coast of Italy on those underpowered beasts before abandoning them in Bordeaux, France, in favor of hitchhiking to Paris.

Moon River, wider than a mile,
I'm crossing you in style some day.
Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker,
wherever you're going I'm going your way.
Two drifters off to see the world.
There's such a lot of world to see.
We're after the same rainbow's end –
waiting 'round the bend,
my huckleberry friend,
Moon River and me.

I did get to see a chunk of the world since that magical summer, mostly as a foreign correspondent for The Associated Press for 16 years.

But that seemed like a lifetime ago as members of the Class of 1960, including my 1962 traveling companion, Jim Schwegel, congregated on the Mississippi River just above Alton for the first event of our reunion. It was a walk of about a mile, through a wooded park, from the Great River Road to the high ground on the limestone bluffs above the river, and back down the trail to the start point.

From there we went to lunch on the deck of a winery on the river. A highlight of the luncheon was the attendance of our former varsity football coach, Ron Holtman, now 81, but looking younger than many of my classmates. During his 11 years at Marquette from 1955 to 1966, his first job as a high school head coach, Holtman molded young minds and bodies in his world history classes and on the football field before becoming a coaching legend at Country Day School in St. Louis by winning seven state football championships.

I described Holtman as “a real-life Mr. Chips” in a story I wrote in 2005 for the Star-Telegram in Fort Worth, my employer before I retired in 2008.



“Winning, of course, was important to Holtman, but not paramount,” I wrote in that 2005 piece. “His real legacy is a multitude of once-impressionable teens who heeded his example in the classroom and on the playing field and went on to lead decent, productive lives. To us, he’