

Mt. Olive High School - If These Walls Could Talk

by Roger Kratochvil
February 12 2022 7:15 AM



MT. OLIVE - Mt. Olive High School was built in 1924 and torn down on March 13, 1993. During that time, the vice president of the New York Stock Exchange, a starting running back in the Rose Bowl, many authors, Hall of Fame members, etc all passed through those hallowed halls.

Old high schools in the area all looked alike - a rectangular building made of red brick. All had a very small gym. The teams sat on the stage because there was no room on the

floor for team benches. When entering a game from the bench, you either jumped off of the stage or swung out with one hand on the supports for the basket.

All of these brick-and-mortar buildings held numerous memories of mostly good times. We all had to go to high school until at least age 16, or in the modern times, until you got your driver's license. The less interested students would quit at that point. High school wasn't for everyone. You can all remember your own stories of what happened during those very important four years of your life.

One of the most important characters in your high school was the janitor. The janitor was a very powerful fixture and was usually backed up by the principal. Janitors took their job seriously, and you had better too. In Mt. Olive, it was John Yancik. John was addressed by the students, teachers and administrators as Mr. Yancik. He guarded the gym like it was his very own. Many can remember not being allowed to walk on the gym floor or sit on the stage in your street shoes because they would leave marks. But he also was the friend of the students and supported all that they did. Sometimes several students would help him clean up after school. It gave them a new perspective about throwing trash on the floor.

In these old buildings, the teachers' lounge was usually the furnace boiler room or some small room in the basement. It seemed like everyone smoked cigarettes at the time. Students, when asked to go to the lounge to talk to a teacher, always remembered how thick the smoke was in that room. Those lounges were in an area with exposed heat pipes in the ceiling. This was dangerous as most of them were insulated with asbestos. Many teachers would eventually be diagnosed with cancer - and it is very true about many of the Mt. Olive teachers.

The first gym in the Mt. Olive High School had walls made of brick and when there was a prom or homecoming dance, the band music would bounce off of those walls. It was affectionately known as the "cracker box." A very well-known area dance band was the Bob Klocke band out of Gillespie and there were several local bands such as Serra Leigh and Freebird. As I recall, members of those bands were Larry and Rick Rayburn as well as Pete Laucis of one and Nick Kostich, Ernie Kierbach, John Mihelcic, and Bill Viehweg of the other. Another earlier local band from the 30s and 40s was the Malodians with Red Folkerts, Buddy Earnst, Russ Soulsby, Walter Ackebauer, Armin Dohm, Carl Kruse, and Carl Jaeck.

I can remember rock bands performing in that gym and it was so loud you could hardly stand it. The students didn't mind, but many of the teachers did and spent as much time in the teacher's lounge as they did on the floor chaperoning.

Of course, incoming freshmen were not treated with a lot of respect. Today, that has changed and initiation for freshmen has been banned as it is defined as bullying. I remember as an incoming freshman going to my cousin Janice's house and asking her and her friends what to expect. They did not paint a very rosy picture, so I was scared and committed to being nice to all upperclassmen. Little freshmen were often put into a hall locker. There was a huge bush behind the school and freshmen were often thrown into it from the top. To get out of it, you had to climb out the top. It was very difficult to do and if you were late for class because of it you had to face the principal too. And of course, you couldn't tell why you were late. The freshman year was always very long. The sophomore year was better, but it was best when you became a senior and you were at the top of the heap. Unfortunately, the senior year went entirely too fast. Then, you got a job, joined the military or you were a freshman again, in college.

Teaching and administrating are tough jobs. Many parents could not wait until the summer was over, so their kids would be back in school. The same was true of school teachers when summer came because they had 25-30 children in the same room every day. A good teacher should not only be qualified and dedicated, but just as important, should have a sense of humor. Teaching is too tough an occupation to not have a sense of humor. Every high school is like a little city. It operates behind the four walls and there are so many humorous things that happen. These humorous things keep you going. I remember one teacher unknowingly kept setting off the fire alarms because he was smoking near a smoke alarm. Another was sponsoring the prom. He took the cake out of his car trunk and used his rear end to close the trunk. His coat caught in the trunk lid and he could not move until someone came to his rescue. Another teacher came to school with his pickup truck loaded with firewood. When he threw his cigarette out the window, it landed in the back of the truck and caught the wood on fire. The principal requested that the fire department not come with sirens blazing because it would scare all the parents bringing their kids to school into thinking that the school was on fire. They came in anyway, sirens and lights blazing away. But it was just a small fire and had already been put out by the time they arrived.

Many students were naturally funny. I always dressed up in a suit and tie while teaching and I had a number of female students who would critique my attire. They said, and rightfully so, that "my wife dressed me" and that was very close to the truth.

But there were tears as well. I lost five students in Vietnam and at least twice that many to car wrecks, drownings, and disease. The speeding passenger trains going through town took their toll on student lives also.

When you are with students that much, they are almost like your own kids. I will always remember Larry Schuette, John Shreve, John Klepper, Kim Nowell, John Niemann,

George Ferketich, Charlotte Kosowski, Fuzz Miller, John Lotter, Stacy Probst, and others. 33w21 State law says that we act “in loco parentis,” which means in place of the parents. We act as their parents when they are in school.

Schools are about memories. In time, you learn to forget the bad ones. It takes a unique person to maintain discipline and get the students to learn like teachers do. There is no single method to that and whatever works for you, is usually acceptable.

When I started in 1960, the older teachers used to recommend that you not smile for the first six weeks to establish yourself. It has since become sort of a joke. When I started, the older teachers had been my own teachers in high school. I could not get out of the habit of addressing them as mister.

What do you remember about your teachers? The easiest teacher you had when you were 16 may not be the best teacher to you when you look back at age 50. The key is what did you learn? Learning is too important to have a bad teacher. Every student has one chance to go through the education process, and there were no second chances, unless you wanted to go through the GED process.

Teaching is so rewarding if you are destined to do it. But it's not for everyone. One of the toughest jobs I had to do as a Principal was to inform a teacher that they could not do the job and they would not be hired back. An interesting point about that is that when they were told that, it looked like a sense of relief to them. Perhaps they knew teaching was not for them. One female teacher who I had to tell that her contract would be terminated, told me thank you, and that night at a retirement party, she gave me a flower to wear in my lapel.

Every day of my life I have fond memories of the more than 2,000 students that I played a role in helping educate. It is not an easy job, but there are so many good memories of all of the people you come in contact with. I had a teacher colleague one time that came to us after teaching in East St. Louis. He was so happy to be in Mt. Olive, had a great career here, and retired from the school system.

I remember a track coach who was once standing in the locker room with his arms folded. I asked him how he was doing and he looked concerned. He unfolded his arms to reveal that he had a relay baton from his track team stuck on his index finger and he could not get it out. His index finger was about a foot long with the pipe stuck on it. After I was able to free him he was ever so thankful, but I never let him forget that!

Another time a loud explosion came out of the Industrial Arts classroom. I ran in there from the locker room where I had a Physical Education class and found out a student had filled a balloon full of oxygen in a welding booth, and inserted a penny. He

proceeded to shake it and the penny created a spark to explode the balloon. He was alright but had a large number of sawdust particles embedded in his face. If nothing else, the explosion had blown all of the shop dust out of the rafters. Probably the cleanest the shop ever was.

The school usually had a junior carnival when the junior class would create little skits for the enjoyment of the audience, and it would serve as a fundraiser for the senior trip. One of the funniest ones I ever saw was when Glenn Polovich and Frank Goldacker created their own ventriloquist act with Glenn sitting on a chair and Frank as his dummy. They wrote their own script and Frank even had lines drawn on his mouth to look the part. It was hilarious.

In my second year of teaching, I was the sponsor of the Junior class. At the end of the night, you would have a drawing for a number of prizes, including turkeys. I decided that I would draw the winners out of the barrel of tickets. In the drawing for the first turkey, I announce, "the winner of the first turkey is me." I had drawn my own name out. Of course, I threw it back into the barrel. I was living at home then and my mother was mad for a long time that I had declined the turkey.

Noted Star Trek star William Shatner and Indy race car driver Janet Guthrie were among the celebrities who appeared in our gym for the students in assemblies.

When I started out, I once bought myself a coaching jacket. Since it was so expensive to put lettering on it, I only bought the letters C and O to put on the coat, as an abbreviation for coach. My coaching buddies in good humor said that I must be only two-fifths of a coach. That joke existed a long time, and probably if my team had a losing season, some thought two-fifths was two high.

Many years later, as the high school principal, I was elected to the Illinois High School Association Board of Principals. I was telling the head of the association, Liz Astroth about the two-fifths joke. About four years later I retired from the Board and during Mr. Astroth's speech about me, he awarded me three more letters, A, C, and H in front of the membership. Here, I was near retirement, and I was awarded the remaining letters to make me a full coach.

We can't forget the 100's of choral and band concerts that were performed over the years behind those walls. I still remember the 100 students in the choir led by Oscar Fernhaber, choral director. The Christmas program singing of Silent Night by Pat Gorsich and later her sister, Theresa, performing the descant, brought chills to your spine. The descant is like an echo of the music, but outstandingly beautiful, and memorable.

In 1989 I was invited to give a tour of the old high school to former members for a reunion of the class of 1949. You could see the glow in the former student's eyes. Here they were in their late 50s and they were reverting back in time to when they were in their teens. Several girls immediately went into the tiny gym to sit together in the balcony because they did that every day eating lunch together. Another young man wanted to know if the principal's office was in the same place. He said that was where he spent most of his time. He had grown up since though. We all grow up because being a parent and husband or wife makes us do that. There have to be some adults involved in families, and your education helped prepare you for that.

Behind those walls and in those hallowed hallways, walked many young boys and girls in their formative years. Someone once asked me after I retired in 1994 if I would miss the job, and I said no. It was not an easy job, but a very fulfilling one, and you had an opportunity to make a difference. What I would miss though was the people, because that was what the job was all about. As a teacher, I had great colleagues and administrators. As a Principal, I had a great staff and a great secretary, Carole Berg. Her efficiency made my job a lot easier. I still have a lot of memories from those 34 years that will carry me over until my last day on this earth.

When you look in a class yearbook and compare your freshman and senior photos, not only are they different physically, but they are very different mentally. I grew up in college because in high school you are always concerned about how your classmates view you. In college, they basically are all strangers, so you get to sort of start over. If your nickname in high school is "Stinkey," then you will always be known as that by your classmates even though you may be President of the United States now. Former President Harry Truman, one of our greatest, is known for ending World War II, dropping the Atomic Bomb, and many other major decisions. But, when they asked some fellow Missourians who knew him when he was a township official in Independence, Missouri, what do you remember about President Truman? They responded, "He fixed our roads."

If these walls could talk about me during my four years of high school, they would start with a 5' 9" inch freshman weighing about 150 pounds who developed into a 6', 196 lb senior who would go on to play college baseball, and end up in their Athletic Hall of Fame. They would talk about a young man who valued grades and sports equally. A young man who played football, basketball, baseball, and a coerced track for four years and ranked 8th in his class. A leader in his class, only by example. He never ran for an office, and he never developed his real personality until well into his college years. Though he attained several advanced collegiate degrees, he only made the honor roll twice in high school. Any honors earned in high school were strictly athletic.

These walls probably remember my favorite history teacher, Mr. Wilbur Green, and his encouragement that helped me decide my career choice. I was awarded a teacher's scholarship from the county, but only after someone else turned it down. That was Godsend and eventually, I became a teacher, coach, and principal for the rest of my working life.

These walls would say that I made the most out of my high school experience, bound by my own ethics and life guidelines, established many years before that by my loving parents, Louis and Norma.

If you worked in a school you can relate to what I am saying and you have great memories too. Do not forget these memories because they will live on forever. And these walls are full of them.

Roger Kratochvil is a former teacher, high school principal, coach, and scout for the St. Louis Cardinals. He now writes about his life experiences. You can contact him at kratz@madisontelco.com.

This story originally ran in the February issue of The Prairie Land Buzz Magazine. The Buzz Magazine is distributed free each month to over 400 locations, in 60 cities, in 11 Illinois counties. For more information visit <http://www.thebuzzmonthly.com>.