

NEWS

Newsletter connects classmates from the 1950s

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Updated Sept. 18, 2015, 6:42 p.m. CT

Two classmates served as team managers for all sports at Washington High School in the late 1950s: Sam Fantle and Bob Bottge. Fantle was viewed as the easier touch, and the one athletes turned to when they had an equipment request, classmate John Simko said.

Peggy Servold Teslow had known Fantle since they were classmates at Mark Twain Elementary School. In fact, he was her date for the first Job's Daughters formal Teslow attended. His mother called to inquire about the color of Teslow's dress, and the corsage of two huge gardenias was chosen with that in mind.

Small stories, right? But to Sam Fantle's daughter, Melissa Davis, whose father's early death left her with no memories, those anecdotes and others were priceless. Samuel Fantle III had died Jan. 5, 1968, after he was ejected from the F-105 he was co-piloting during the Vietnam War.

The man who made it possible for Davis, then living in Germany with her family, to reunite with her father's former classmates is back in Sioux Falls this weekend. A member of Washington High School's Class of 1954, Jack Phillips for six years has kept his fellow graduates from the 1950s in touch through an emailed newsletter, the Alumni Orange & Black.

Not only that, but his support has been invaluable to the All-School Reunion planning committee, said Marlys Hohman, who has organized five of the last six group reunions.

In an email in June, Hohman wrote, “I don't think this reunion would be happening without his O&B's.”

Phillips, now 79 and a Las Vegas resident, is unwilling to take that much credit. He will admit to being delighted, however, at his role in bringing a diverse decade of students together through a newsletter that takes up so much time it almost could be considered a full-time job.

“I don't mean to brag, but I think the newsletter keeps them connected,” Phillips said of a decade that ranged through childhoods that began in the Depression to those with only vague memories of World War II.

What ties them together, Phillips said, is a decade unlike any other.

“What connects the class of the '50s was what happened: The music, the cars, the dress,” he said.

“I dress so much better than my kids do,” Phillips said. “We spent a lot of money on clothes. Kids today spend a lot of money, too, but on jeans with holes in them.”

Another connection from the 1950s? “They all loved high school. They valued Washington High, our teachers, the whole period,” Phillips said.

He has run into those who found high school difficult, however. Phillips solicits personal stories from Washington graduates, and he was taken by surprise when a former classmate revealed he was gay. Phillips assumed that would remain a secret, but three months later he received and printed the classmate's life story.

Not a single feather was ruffled, he said.

“I get funny stories, I get sad stories, I get all interesting stories,” Phillips said.

He first started hearing his classmates' stories in early 2009 when he asked the reunion planning committee how he could help from afar. The committee gave him a list of missing classmates, almost one-fourth of the 425 graduates.

He turned to search sites on the internet, and by the time the reunion took place, he had located all but five. He left the reunion with two more names and returned home determined to keep going.

“Not all were alive, some were deceased,” Phillips said. “When I found somebody I would call them to confirm they’d gone to Washington High and been in our class. They were always glad to be found.”

The thought that no one else would hear those stories distressed Phillips, so he took the email addresses, put together a newsletter and sent it out. His mailing list has expanded from 200 to more than 1,000 as he started including other graduates from the 1950s.

He receives dozens of emails a day, and in addition to 16- to 20-page newsletters that go out every three weeks or so, he sends out special editions when someone dies.

As his cohorts die, the special editions sometimes come way too often.

“I had to send out three special editions in one day once, and sometimes two a day, but usually it’s one a week, two a week,” Phillips said.

In the last five years, he has collected yearbooks for every year in the 1950s, half of the 1940s books and one for 1960. When he publishes the information he receives, he likes to include a senior picture, a current picture and anything else that might be of interest.

Melissa Davis isn’t the only person to ask about a deceased parent. A woman named Gentry Stanley wrote asking about her mother, Anita Prillwitz, who had died when Stanley was 12.

As with Fantle’s classmates, Prillwitz’s friends responded with warmth.

“I was so happy when I got responses to both of them, and I was able to pass that on,” Phillips said.

Phillips' own high school story revolves around football. He played football all four years at Washington High School and was part of a record-setting national winning streak under the coaching of the late Bob Burns.

"I had to go to college to learn what defeat tastes like," he joked.

It was a difficult time for Phillips, who was injured his freshman year at the University of South Dakota and attended six other schools before returning, trying to find someplace he could pass the physical and return to the field.

Today he is retired, if you consider maintaining and managing 13 residential properties and owning a nightclub, the mall where it is located and a computerized sign and engraving store to be retired.

Along with the newsletter, though, it was getting to be quite a load. The newsletter, Phillips decided, would have to stop. He said as much in his 10th newsletter of the year, sent out earlier this summer.

In one day, he received 166 responses.

"Every single one of them said, 'We understand, but we're really sorry,'" Phillips said.

He was sorry, too. In his next newsletter, 11-15, he said he would continue for a while longer.

That pleases former classmates and Washington graduates Phillips has never met.

The newsletter is "the agent of reconnection for many of the classmates during the decades," Mary K. Moen, also from the Class of 1954, wrote in an email.

"Jack is a sentimental, unabashed promoter of South Dakota, Sioux Falls and the old WHS. It would be great if you would tell 'the world' what he has done and is still doing to further goodwill and to honor Sioux Falls."