

Claire Hirshfield Remarks from the GHS 55th Reunion

Thank you so much for inviting me to share in the celebration of our fifty-fifth reunion. The Germantown High School of 1960 retains a very special place in all of our memories, I am certain. And though we long ago moved on, the emotional ties binding us to the school have survived intact.

Your class arrived in January of 1957, a period of relative innocence and stability before the upheaval of the sixties. Germantown High School in the late fifties was quite typical of a time which still in retrospect reflects a golden glow. Though you graduated early in 1960, you were more accurately children of an era typified by the comforting presence of Dwight D. Eisenhower at the head of state. Life was soon to change. Ahead lay the convulsions of the 1960's, the assassination of JFK, the Civil Rights movement, the murders of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the anti-war movement and the rise of feminism—a social and economic upheaval which vastly altered the culture and transformed life as we had earlier experienced it.

But though we did not know it at the time, you were the last cohort of a vanishing age, with your feet still planted in the stable world of Father Knows Best, even as the tectonic plates beneath them were beginning to shift.

As I look back over your yearbook, I am struck by the innocence of the period. Neatly dressed young men in jackets and ties and row upon row of girls in shirtwaist dress or white blouses and plaid skirts look out from those faded pages, unaware that they were soon to enter a new and vastly different time. Therein lay the future.

But the Germantown High School of 1957-1960 was itself an extraordinary place, offering a world of opportunities and choices to its students. For the scientifically inclined there was both a Chemistry and Biology club, for the mathematically gifted a Slide Rule and an Engineers Club, for the foreign language enthusiasts a Latin and a Spanish club, for the musically inclined an Orchestra, a Dance Band, a Glee Club, and an A Capella Choir and even an Opera Club whose members “listened to records and then discussed the music.”

There were sports teams galore—volley ball, tennis, swimming, baseball, track, cross country—as well as a modern dance group and a ballroom dancing club which taught “everything from the waltz to the cha cha”

And then there were the large organizations—the local chapter of the National Honor Society, the Angels in Bobby Socks who volunteered in area hospitals, the Future Teachers of America, the Future Nurses of America and even a Future Homemakers of America, “composed of girls interested in the subject of home economics”, its members meeting weekly “to discuss problems in homemaking, (to) learn the qualities that make a good homemaker” and to “practice the skills.” (You see what I mean about bringing up the rear end of the 1950's—the voices of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem were as yet unheard in the land).

My own favorite was the Honorary Historical Society, sponsored by the incomparable Henry Wagner, who somehow managed to persuade more than sixty students each year that it was fun to meet weekly at 8 AM to analyze historical documents and to reflect on the U.S. Constitution.

From the Junior Class Trip to Washington and the Senior Class Cruise to Bear Mountain and West Point; from Move-Up Day when the Senior class presented red and white carnations to the Juniors, now assuming the new role; from the Sweetheart Ball and the Senior Frolic to the annual Spring Festival and Senior Prom, what a treasure of memories have been bequeathed you-a vanished world perhaps, but one that in its sunset was still beautiful to see.

You all moved on of course-to a variety of college, universities, apprenticeships and job opportunities. Little could anyone foretell the cataclysmic events of the next fifty-five years-the Vietnam War, the fall of Communism, the horror of 9/11, the invention of the computer, the internet, and yes, the Phillies winning two world championships in 1983 and 2008.

To interject a personal note, I left Germantown High School in 1966 for Penn State Abington, where I taught very happily for the next thirty years. But those ten years at Germantown were for me the happiest of my long career. I have been fortunate enough to maintain contact with a number of GHS students over the decades, thus retaining a connection over the distance of time to what in memory appears to be the golden era of an American high school-before it was buffeted by the winds of change and the storms of the present.