

And David Sang Beneath the Ark

In a small context, small triumphs loom large. Such was the case the year my high school won the County Tournament. The school had approximately 180 students, about 40 in each of the freshman through senior classes, and 20 in what was called the sub-

freshman class. The sub-freshman combined 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades in one year. It may sound as if the school were a rural one which had barely gotten beyond the one-room schoolhouse stage. In fact, the school was located in a moderate size Midwestern city, and was part of the College of Education of the local university. Hence, the name was University High School, or Uni High for short. The teachers were University faculty; the curriculum was high level. Nearly every class was taught for 2 or 3 weeks out of the year by what were then called "practice teachers", students from the College of Education getting practical experience as part of their B.Ed. degrees. Practice teachers whom we sensed as lacking in confidence or competence were considered fair game; and I can recall two whom we probably hounded out of the profession before they ever entered it.

There were two other high schools in our city. Both were immeasurably larger than Uni High, and in our view, immeasurably inferior academically. That latter compensated for our lowly athletic status. We weren't in the same league, either legally or figuratively, as the other two schools. They competed with schools from all over the state. Uni High competed with schools from what were then essentially small farming communities within the county. Our competition was only in basketball and track. Neither Uni High nor the county schools had enough males to field football teams. For a couple of years, six-man football was tried. It didn't last except as a phys ed activity. We had ten or eleven basketball players each year, however, with enough ability to win a decent number of games. I was not a basketball player. I remember vividly the two baskets I made in high school. Both were in gym class and both were accidents.

My class was that of 1944. In 1943-44, the basketball team was unusually good. Eight of the ten were in my class. They had been the team the previous year along with two seniors, and were now combined with two juniors. They were under the tutelage of a coach

who stressed fundamental skills, particularly passing, making free throws, and knowing constantly where the other players were on the floor. As a consequence, they played as a coordinated team, not as a collection of individuals. And, in January of 1944, they won the County Tournament for the first, and perhaps only, time in Uni High history.

To us students, it was as if the glory of God had descended upon the school. Even some of the teachers seemed happy. The two local papers published pictures of the team, something the papers had never done before. There was an assembly honoring the victory at which the tournament trophy was officially presented. The trophy was the conventional statue of an all-purpose basketball player on an inscribed base. It was only about a foot and a half high. After all, it symbolized the County, not the State, Tournament. But it looked large and beautiful to our enraptured gazes. The trophy was eventually put on display on a shelf in a corner of the gym. A color photograph of the team, the coach, and the manager was taken, enlarged to one foot by three feet size, and framed. It was hung in the main hallway of the school, there to remain eternally, reminding future student generations of their heritage.

My class, the class of '44, was particularly proud. As mentioned, most of the team were us, so we had a hard time thinking that "we" in "we won" referred to the school rather than to ourselves. That had an effect a few months later at our graduation. It involved one of the guards on the basketball team named David. Dave was an extroverted seventeen year old. He had a quick imagination for our new possibilities in customary situations. He also had the best singing voice among the boys. It was halfway between tenor and baritone, the plateau where male voices tend to settle for a while on their way from soprano to one of the lower ranges.

The actual graduation ceremony was preceded by a practice session a week before. Those in charge wanted to make sure that we knew how to walk in a procession and climb the stairs of the stage. I think another purpose may have been to clear out systems of some of the self-conscious insecurity teenagers feel when they suddenly realize that they are to be objects of public attention. We were lined up alphabetically in the corridor outside the auditorium in preparation for the practice march down the aisle. Nobody gave any notice to the bag Dave was carrying. As the procession moved into the auditorium and reached a point about two-thirds of the way from the door to the stage, Dave darted from his place to the head of the line, discarding the bag as he went. In his hands was the tournament statuette. He held it aloft as he led the way forward. As he went, he sang a capella a song which, it turned out, he had made up for the occasion. He wrote the words, that is; the melody he used was the Michigan fight song, "Hail to the Victors". The words soon became embedded in our minds.

Lift high the trophy glorious;  
Hail Uni High victorious,  
Standing atop the world from now evermore.  
Singing in jubilation,  
We march to graduation,  
Proudly, for we're the best, the class of '44.

We graduates broke into applause and cheers, of course. The school principal and teachers were initially taken aback. Fortunately, they were either tolerant or good sports; and probably soon realized that the class had relaxed, replacing their uneasiness over the ceremony with enthusiasm. In the succeeding week, we all learned the song, and our singing it together, as Dave held aloft the trophy, was inserted into the graduation march.

Dave told us that he had actually written two stanzas. He intended to keep the second secret until our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion. That effectively meant

forever, so far as we were concerned. Fifty years in the future is not a part of reality to a graduating high school student.

The enveloping reality in 1944 was World War II. The impact of the war on our class was not awfully deep, however. Because most of the males had been sub-freshmen, they like Dave, were only seventeen at graduation. Hence, they were not subject to the draft for another year; and, by the time they were eighteen, only a few months of the war remained. Dave volunteered for the army immediately after graduation. He got to Europe in time for the Battle of the Bulge, where he was mortally wounded and died in a hospital in France. He is buried there in a military cemetery. He was the only loss from the class.

As the years passed, we had four class reunions. That was different from the other Uni High classes both before and after us. Some have had a single reunion, others have had more. It was our pride in ourselves, resulting from the County Tournament, which made us different. Our first reunion was the 25<sup>th</sup>. That was followed with one at 35 years, one at 43, and then by the 50<sup>th</sup> in 1994. By the 25<sup>th</sup>, the trophy was gone from the gym, and the team photograph had been removed from the school hallway. Nobody knew what had been done with either. We celebrated then by standing and singing Dave's song. We all remembered it clearly. After the first stanza, we hummed the "Hail to the Victors" melody in honor of Dave and of the second stanza which we were never to know.

We repeated that little memorial ceremony at each succeeding reunion. By the 35<sup>th</sup>, the basketball team captain had died of brain cancer. By the 43<sup>rd</sup>, two other class members were gone. The 43<sup>rd</sup> was remarkable for something else. One member of the class and one of the starters on the team, stayed in the city. He rose through the ranks of the Physical Plant department of the University. One day, while checking on something in the steam tunnel under the high school, he came upon

the trophy and the photograph. He brought them to the reunion. For the first time in four decades, the trophy was held aloft as we sang. The photograph looks somewhat archaic, since it was taken long before basketball teams began wearing 19<sup>th</sup> century ladies' bathing bloomers. Arrangements were made to have copies of the photo made, which most people ordered and eventually received. The member who found the two items took them home and still has them, on the ground that the school doesn't want them. That is no doubt true. The school is only dimly aware via arithmetical calculation that there was a class of '44, much less anything about it.

I now come to the point of this perhaps tedious reminiscence. As usual, we raised the trophy and sang Dave's song at our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion. I'm sure everyone else was remembering, as was I, Dave's intention of giving us his second stanza that evening. As we hummed in replacement of the stanza, words that fit the music began to sound in my mind:

When passing years remind us  
Triumph lies far behind us,  
And the uncaring world recalls us no more.  
We'll meet in celebration,  
Trophy in elevation,  
And sing the glory of the class of '44.

As the words were coming to me, a classmate named Louise started singing, ever so softly, the same words. Gradually the other class members joined in, and we finished in full chorus. When the singing died out, there was silence. Finally, Louise murmured, "Dave was here, wasn't he." We all turned inward to our own thoughts.

Rollin W. Workman

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