

I Remember Don Winter

The 27th of January, 2003, will mark the 59th anniversary of my high school graduation. Unbelievable. Several of us from the Herbert Hoover High School class of 1944 in Glendale, California, celebrated our freedoms at the Florentine Gardens in Hollywood. It no longer exists as a night spot, but in those days it was a favorite hang out for movie stars and other celebrities. I have a dog-eared black and white photo of our table with our fresh, frozen faces smiling as I reached across and shook hands with Don Winter, my best friend of the previous three years internment.

Don and I had little in common other than our love for the beach, big band music, and movies. I wasn't into sports, but Don was a jock; he lettered in football and baseball. His girlfriend wore his varsity sweater with the big purple H with pride. As I remember, Helen Foy was the only girl Don went with as long as we were in school.. She's sitting next to him in the photo. There wasn't a wrinkle or a gray hair among the young faces, grinning at the camera.

A couple of weeks ago, I happened to see a rerun of the baseball film, "The Pride of the Yankees," and it brought back a flood of memories. Don and I drove over to Hollywood in his 1935 Ford coupe to see Gary Cooper's performance as Lou Gehrig. The New York Yankees was Don's favorite team, and the film was a must see for him. It was a Friday night in early 1943, as I recall, and neither of us had a date. We sat there in the darkened theater with our popcorn and coke staring up at Cooper, Teresa Wright as Gehrig's wife, Walter Brennan as Gehrig's pal, and Babe Ruth who played himself. It was a great movie and I thoroughly enjoyed it then as well as the second time around. I guess I was a little surprised at Don, however. In the last scene of the movie, Cooper does a fine job of depicting Gehrig's farewell speech at Yankee Stadium, and as the scene faded out, I looked over at Don and the tears were steaming down his face. He was bawling like a baby. I had no idea my friend had such a tender heart, being a varsity jock and all. I didn't ask him about it. I just let it go.

Shortly after graduation, Don and several others around the table in the photograph entered the service, mostly Navy. I wanted to enlist with them, but alas, my poor vision kept me from joining outright. I had to wait until the following November, when I was drafted into the Navy. Don became a radioman aboard a small ship, while I remained stateside as a corpsman in the Naval Hospital at Camp Lejeune and a dispensary at Little Creek VA. After the war, Don and I lost touch. I married and so did he, and our lives changed.

I have never attended a high school reunion and I don't plan to in the future since I live over 2000 miles from Hoover High. In 1994, I received an announcement of the 50th reunion of the class of '44. I contacted the fellow in charge and asked that even though I wouldn't attend, could I at least have a program and possibly a video of the

happenings. He complied a few months later. I couldn't recognize very many of the old people in the video; I'm sure they wouldn't have recognized me either. I tried to find Don Winter's name in those who attended, without success. Maybe, like me, he decided not to show up. However, on the back page of the program, under the title, "In Memoriam," there was Don's name. I must admit I was somewhat taken aback. It didn't mention when he had died or of what illness. I still don't know; I wish I did. Every so often, I take out the old dog-eared graduation night photograph and I wonder how many of my high school friends, like Don, are no longer around. Chuck Clithero, another football jock, and president of our senior class, was also listed, "In Memoriam."

It was said of Gary Cooper that he was the perfect actor to represent Lou Gehrig. Both men were quiet and shy, and both faced their impending deaths with dignity and grace. I wonder how my friend Don Winter died. I wonder if he was a Christian. If he was, perhaps we'll shake hands again across another table. And I wonder when my time comes, and it's closer with each passing day, will I meet my Jesus with as much dignity and grace?

Tom Harvill, January 16, 2003