

HER VIEW: No need to go back for 50th reunion

By Jean Wardwell

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This past weekend my classmates had our 50th reunion. Since I come from North Dakota, this was in Bismarck.

I had a choice of going to see past acquaintances or staying on the Palouse, enjoying a visit with my beautiful blue-eyed, blonde granddaughters. Even from a purely objective grandmother, they are truly beautiful. It is hard to beat big blue eyes, blonde curly hair and peaches-and-cream complexions.

My classmates had to do without me. I wish them all well.

I managed to go to my 25th reunion. By that time four of my classmates were recovering alcoholics. I pray they still are recovering.

My mother was still alive then and I had more ties to Bismarck. My experience with a reunion is: Hi, what are you doing now? Where are you living? Just where is Pullman? Mostly they are well-meaning, but they want to show you pictures of their children, now grandchildren and surely some great-grandchildren. I have been on a different track since the day after graduation. I remember going to all-night parties, painting SMCHS '59 on a huge fence in huge letters. It stayed there for at least five years. But the next morning I was the only one of us at Mass. I've always thought that was significant. The different track had begun.

We were to have a bus tour of Bismarck to see all the wonderful changes. I'd seen them over the years. Wonderful? Maybe.

Before high school, we neighborhood kids played in a slough. It was a fairly big slough bisected by the Northern Pacific Railroad.

One summer in late July we built a dam to make the water deeper in one place. Why we wanted the water to be deeper I'm not sure I ever knew. We certainly never intended to swim in it. It was yucky slough water. This dam was no threat to either beavers or the Corps of Engineers. But we thought it was great.

After about three days we found the dam totally destroyed. The kids up the hill (the others) had been jealous of our dam and destroyed it. The rocks were thrown fairly far from the dam site. At 11 or 12 one doesn't know much about hydrodynamics. In hindsight, the water pressure behind our wonderful dam built up to the point that the water destroyed our dam. No malice! No jealousy! Just plain water pressure. We never tried to rebuild it.

The dam site now? A four-lane road. The whole large, beautiful wetland all concrete for better traffic movement feeding into the bridge across the Missouri River that is still to this day a two-lane road. A four-lane road and houses in the name of progress over the wetland? What about all the children now who don't get to play in the slough? Or watch the birds in the cattails - mallards, American coots, red-wing and yellow-headed blackbirds. Frogs, toads, tadpoles and the occasional garter snake. Even little shells and the snails that had inhabited them. It was a lovely place to have in one's childhood.

What does it have to do with reunions? A lot. You truly can't go back. The classmates who stayed in Bismarck or North Dakota have continued in the same cliques, with the same jealousies. Now those of us from afar are not quite newcomers or strangers either. We don't fit in any more into the old patterns that have remained. Only if we stayed could we slowly be reintegrated into the crowd - or not. We have new ideas, new talents or new values. We are different from what we were. Neither better nor worse, just different. But those who have remained behind expect us to behave in the old ways and we can't. We've changed.

They still expect the shy classmate who could barely talk to her peers, not the woman who went to the state Legislature to change Washington water law on withdrawal of ground waters for the first time in 58 years. The gulf between what I was and what I am is huge. I expect that is true for most of us who have lived our life away from North Dakota.

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