

## **Some Memories of Old Pacolet High School**

I don't know when Pacolet High School was built. My Mother, Zara Loftis was born in 1921, and she attended PHS. Her class included Howard Blackwell who was principal when I attended, also Erskine Lee's father. Mom graduated in 1937, and was valedictorian of her class. She was awarded a partial scholarship to Limestone College.

Her family was very poor. PaPa Loftis told MaMa Loftis, "We just don't have the wherewithal to send her to college." To which, MaMa responded, "Earl Loftis, she is the first one of our kids (she had three older brothers) that has had a chance to get a college education, and she is going!" And she did. MaMa would pick bushels of salad greens, and PaPa would take them to the commissary at Limestone to pay toward Mom's tuition. In addition, she would raise chickens and kill and dress out 25 at a time and PaPa would take them to Limestone for credit. MaMa also had two cows and some laying hens and she sold milk and eggs. On top of that, Mom worked about 30 hours a week in the Limestone library.

She did finish and get her degree. Many, many thanks to MaMa Loftis, who had only a barest education. She finished the third reader, not the third grade, but the third reader! She valued education and passed that value along to my Mother.

At any rate, I was sent to Pacolet Grade school which at that time was in the same building as the high school. I attended there except for 6 weeks in the third grade when I was sent to Pacolet Mills Grade school. I also did the entire year in the 5th grade at Pacolet Mills. Mrs. Weeks was my 5th grade teacher. She was a great teacher. I also made some good friend at Pacolet Mills grade school, Nick Jones, Mike Ellison, Mike Hodge, Garland Banks, and others. I would be reunited with them in the 7th grade, as Pacolet Mills was a grade school having the first through the sixth grade only. The kids from Glendale school would also join us in the seventh grade.

The faculty at PHS was a wonderful group. Mr. V.M. Epting was the superintendent. His first name was Voight, and I remember one morning before school, several of us boys were tossing a football around and Mr. Epting intercepted one pass, and told us it was his football. "See, it even has my name on it!" It was a Voight Sporting Goods football! He was just teasing us.

Mr. Howard Blackwell was Principal. He was a big man, and had an imposing presence. He was a wonderful man, and very interested in his students' welfare.

Paddling was one form of discipline. Mr. Epting had a paddle that he named “the Judge”. Mr. Blackwell’s paddle name was “Sam”. Coach McNeil also had a paddle as did Mr. Jack Corn. I don’t think the latter named their paddles, If they did I don’t remember their names\_though I met both of them!

Mr. Corn was the vocational agriculture teacher. I would say that other than my Dad, he was the most influential man to me during my teenage years. He was a Clemson graduate, and was probably the reason I chose to go to that school. He also was the most knowledgeable man I ever met during my formative years. He knew something about nearly everything. In addition, he was as stout as a mule. I once saw him pick a 300 lb anvil off the floor and set it on a waist high table. There was a smaller anvil that weighed about 85lbs out back of the VoAg building. He could press it over his head with hand! All of us boys tried to do that on multiple occasions, and I don’t remember any of us being able to do that. When he applied his paddle, he never took it back more than 90 degrees, but even with that short swing, he could just about lift you off the floor. He never used profanity, and when you did he would remind you that use of profanity was a symptom of a limited vocabulary! Mr. Corn was a wonderful role model for us teenage boys.

Our head football Coach was Mr. Neil McNeill. He was a Wofford College graduate. He played football there under Coach Phill Dickens. He played guard, at about 165 lbs, and made little all American. His nick name was “Chief” as he had Indian blood and it showed. He was on the same team as Willy Varner who coached at Woodruff, and the great Gaffney Coach Bob Prevatte. Coach Prevatte produced many state championship teams at Gaffney. I think those guys were on the 1953 Wofford Team.

I remember a PHS class reunion. Coach McNeil, Coach Wilcey McDonald, their wives, Mr. Jack Corn and two or three other were sitting at the same table. My son, Clint , who played at Furman had just been named to the all-Southern Conference Team. Coach McDonald asked Coach McNeil ,”Did you hear that Crocker’s boy made the all-Southern Conference Team at Furman?” McNeil pretended to be shocked, and looked at me and said “that boy must have someone else for a father!” I was stunned and groping for an appropriate response, when JoAnn McNeil responded for me. She turned to coach McNeil and said sweetly, “ Dennis’ son probably had a lot better coaching that Dennis had!” I loved her!

We had some other great teachers too. Mrs Ruth Brown taught South Carolina History. Mrs. Guynell Jones was beloved by most everyone. I was never privileged to

be in one of her classes. I can remember meeting her in the hall and she was always smiling and friendly. She and her husband died tragically in a car crash at the intersection of U.S. 9 and the Whitestone –Glendale road. I think she had already retired, but it still was a great loss to the community and to the PHS world.

Mr. John Smoak taught Chemistry and Physics. He had a droll sense of humor. He also coached basketball and was an assistant football coach. I really liked him. He sure didn't like his athletes getting really serious over some girl. He felt that it took their mind off their sports. I recall once when I was chatting with him after school, and Taylor Varner came in. He looked a wreck. Taylor was a really good running back, and was going steady with a girl that I won't name. Coach Smoak looked at him and said, "Good gracious, what in the world is wrong with you?" Taylor

responded, "\_\_\_\_\_ just broke up with me!" Coach Smoak immediately came back with "Did you thank her?" If poor Taylor was looking for sympathy, he had come to the wrong place!

Speaking of coaches, I must go back to Coach McNeil for a moment. One day during practice my junior year, fall of 1958, I was on the offense playing tackle. I missed a block, and Coach McNeil snarled "Crocker, You couldn't block my grandmother!" At that time I had a smart mouth and an exalted opinion of myself. I retorted "I tell you what Coach, you just get down here in front of me and we'll see!" He did, he got down in a 4 point stance, and when the ball was snapped, before I could even move, his two hands hit my shoulder pads, stood me straight up, then his leg drive followed on through and knocked me over on my back!! I got up, embarrassed all to pieces, knocked the dirt of me as best I could, and asked him meekly, "Coach, can you bring your grandmother to practice tomorrow?"

There was another incident that year that I am ashamed to report. Coach McNeil got down on Frank Vinson. Frank was attempting to play tailback. Coach came to the line of scrimmage and told the offensive line not to block, to let the defense through. He told us defensive line men to all charge through and to hit Frank en masse. I knew that was wrong, but I did it anyway. About 5 of us hit poor Frank at the same time. McNeil had us do that two more times. I wish I had had the courage to say to McNeil that this is wrong and I am not going to do it. But I didn't. After the third, poor Frank was crying. He pulled off his helmet and walked to the gym. He quit the team. I don't blame him. Poorest demonstration of coaching I have ever seen, and I really liked Coach McNeil. But that was terribly wrong. McNeil left us at the end of that school year, and I hated to see him go.

My senior year we had the makings of a great team. However, we were poorly coached and went 5 and 5! We really had two really good teams. We had Bobby Tessnear at QB on one team, Taylor Varner at running back, Garland Banks at running back, and Jackie Hodge at Running back. Some of the linemen were Fred Whiting, Tony Reece, Nick Jones, and Wayne Edgins. Erskine Lee was at one end and "Leashi" Hollifield at another.

Then we had another team with "Star" Bryant at QB, Jackie Collins, Olin Smith and Tim Crawford at RB's, Mike Hodge and Russell at the ends , and Jack Belk and Kenneth at the Guards and me and Kenneth at Tackle, with Paul Ravan playing center. I played defense on both teams, at an inside linebacker position. We should have won all our games. A deputation of us went to Coach MacDonald before the season started and told him he wasn't working us hard enough. We usually started practice by taking 2 laps around the practice field. At the next practice, Coach MacDonald blew his whistle and said, "Take 25 Laps!" what a wise guy, I doubt any of us could have run 25 laps around that field! I don't think he knew a lot about football-at least he didn't teach much to us. A wasted season.

Some of the outstanding players were Bobby Tessnear, Taylor Varner, Fred Whiting, Tony Reece, Wayne Edgins, Star Bryant, Erskine Lee, Nick Jones, and Tim Crawford! Tim went to Furman on scholarship and made all Southern Conference. He was tough as nails. I believe Jackie Collins could have played college ball if he had been given the opportunity. I believe that Tim was the only one off the team to play college ball. Sadly, he has since passed away as has Tony Reece and Jack Belk. Others probably have too, I am just not aware of their passing.

As long as we are discussing football, I must comment on our dressing room. The boys dressing was under the gym bleachers, on the right as you entered the front door. The girl's dressing room was on the left, also under the bleachers. We guys had a group shower, and our "lockers" were planks about 24" long nailed to the wall in a vertical position, with a number of nails drive partially into the plank so you could hang your uniform pieces on them. When it rained, There would be 2 to 3 inches of water on the floor, so you had better hang your pads and jersey and pants up, or they would get soaked! The locker room was certainly no place for shy people, as there were no modesty panels anywhere!

The same held true for the boy's basement bathroom. On one wall was a urinal consisting of a trough about 6 feet long, which would accommodate about three, maybe 4 boys at once. On the opposite wall, there were about 10 commodes lined

up. All out in the open, no modesty panels at all. Old PHS was no place for modesty!

Our class of 1960, which numbered 39, produced a number of folks that went on to accumulate advanced college degrees. Among these were Sylvia Littlejohn, Gayle Littlefield, Jackie Hodge, Sally Wood, Taylor Varner, Chad Messer (?) and your writer. About 18% of the class! Speaks well for old PHS and our parents.

I think the class of “61” may have done even better

As you drive through Pacolet now, there is not a vestige of the school remaining. If you know where to look, you can see a bit of our old football practice field remaining. That is about it. It saddens me to drive through there, but time moves on, things change, and we age. But, we have many, many memories of the wonderful years spent at old PHS, with some splendid teachers, and some great classmates. I think the night of our 1960 graduation was one of the saddest nights of my life. I knew we were going to scatter like a covey of flushed quail, with the difference being we would never assemble again. An epoch was over and we faced a new beginning. That is why it is called a “commencement ceremony”.

Dennis Crocker - May 18, 2023

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