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THOSE WERE THE DAYS MY FRIEND, I THOUGHT THEY'D NEVER END:

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE HIGH SCHOOL REUNION

By

Cheryl A. Hall

B.A., University of Massachusetts, Boston 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

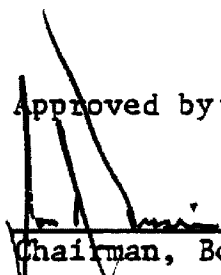
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Master of Arts

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1980

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Sociology

Those were the days my friend, I thought they'd never end: A sociolinguistic study of the high school reunion.

Director: Jon J. Driessen 

The purpose of this study was to conduct a sociolinguistic investigation of the high school reunion, and as such, it was largely an exploratory, descriptive effort.

The primary research device through which data was collected was from conversational interviews. Each interview was tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and subjected to topical and comparative analysis. The emergent conceptual scheme was guided by the principles of grounded theory.

A prominent feature of the high school reunion was the way in which conversational involvements and the occasion itself created the experience of reliving the past in the present. This encounter with the past created a variety of practical problems for the participants and the strategies developed for managing this situation were presented.

The interpretive schemes and perceived outcomes of attending one's high school reunion included comparing the past to the present and engaging in a process of reevaluating self and others. For many, this experience had a cathartic effect--enabling them to release themselves from unpleasant memories associated with high school and allowing them to engage in reappraising the past and interpreting it more favorably. By directly witnessing the past in person, and by directly encountering those old friends, the high school reunion enabled the participants to see the world changed before their very eyes, and to discover first hand that they themselves and the times really do change.

The study concludes with a brief discussion of the possible contributions the study of reunions could make to sociology and sociolinguistics--particularly to theories bearing on self-changes, language use and status transitions.

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My warmest appreciation to Larry Culp and Dick Vandiver for their encouragement when the going got rough. Many thanks to Ruth Payne and Jan Milner when the going got crazy!

"And do you think you can go home again?" George was a little startled and puzzled: "Why--I don't understand. How do you mean, Judge Bland?" There was another flare of that secret, evil laughter. "I mean, do you think you can really go home again?" Then, sharp, cold, peremptory--"Now answer me! Do you think you can?"

Thomas Wolfe

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a reunion as:

The action of reuniting again, the state of being united. The fact of (persons) meeting again after separation. A meeting or social gathering of persons acquainted with each other, or having some previous link of connexion.¹

There are many different types of reunions. For example, there is a way in which coming together again after a days separation from spouse or roommate, parent and child, are informal reunions of sorts. Likewise, bumping into an old friend or coworker is an unplanned, spontaneous type of reunion. But when people think of a reunion, they generally think of some sort of planned, more formal type of affair "sponsored" by some major institution or association. Two examples of these more conventional types of reunions include the family reunion or a veteran's group reunion where people share common relational bonds or the bonds of say a World War II combat unit.

It is also interesting to speculate on how people perceive and interpret their reunions. For example, if you have ever attended a family reunion and you learn what has happened to Uncle Clarence or Aunt Jennie, one thing you come to realize is how little things have changed. In the case of the veteran's reunion, however, one might

¹The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, rev. ed. (1934), s.v. "reunion."

observe how many of the former soldiers don't want the world to change. But this study was not concerned with family or veteran's reunions, nor did it rely on mere speculation.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a sociolinguistic investigation² of the high school reunion, and as such, the reunion was regarded as a social fact³ constituted by narrative. Furthermore, this study was an exploratory, descriptive effort which, due to the lack of literature on this topic in the field, aimed to find the possible contribution the study of reunions might have in the domain of sociology and sociolinguistics.

This study had two primary objectives. The first objective was to investigate the high school reunion as an occasion⁴ and to identify and classify the differing kinds of conversations and stories in which people engaged in that setting.⁵ From this perspective, the high school

²John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, eds., Directions in Sociolinguistics (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972).

³Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller, ed. George E. G. Catlin (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. liii.

⁴Erving Goffman, Behavior in Public Places (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 19. According to Goffman, each class of social occasions possess a "distinctive ethos, a spirit, an emotional structure, that must be properly created, sustained, and laid to rest, the participant find he is obliged to become caught up in the occasion, whatever his personal feelings."

⁵To quote Jon J. Driessen and Julene Newland Pyfer, "An Unconventional Setting for a Conventional Occasion," Sociology of Education 48 (Winter, 1975): 111-125, certain forms of talk and particular conversational topics come to be "standard features" of particular settings. "Such conversation may be referred to as 'immediately recognized appropriate talk,' which is regarded by persons as customary to both the setting and the occasion."

reunion, like weddings, funerals and other forms of social gatherings, may be viewed as composed of and experienced through talk. To look deliberately at the high school reunion through the interplay of language and experience, suggests a sociolinguistic approach to this study.

The second objective of this study was to describe the members'⁶ different interpretive schemes as they were expressed in patterns of narrative, or put more simply, as they were displayed within stories of their participation. Thus through the topic of the high school reunion, the objectives of this study share a part in the larger problem of sociology, of searching for and describing the ways that members themselves, through talk in and about different kinds of social situations, are constrained to construct speech events⁷ in patterned and ordinary (i.e., culturally recognized) ways.

This study begins with a discussion of the methods used during the various phases of my research. Chapter II, on methods, starts with an explanation of the interviewing techniques that were employed and a description of the characteristics of the sample. In addition, it includes some comments on the supplemental research devices used, and the problems encountered along the way. It concludes with a description of the way the data was analyzed and how the conceptual scheme of this

⁶Gumperz and Hymes, Directions in Sociolinguistics, pp. 304-305, use the term member to refer to persons who understand and speak a common language and enter into experience recognized by other members.

⁷Ibid., p. 17. The authors refer to speech event analysis as focusing on the exchange between speakers or "how a speaker, by his choice of linguistic variables, adapts to others . . . or to his environment and how in turn others react to him."

study was developed.

For purposes of clarity, it was necessary to engage in some ethnography of the reunion and Chapter III sets the stage for the occasion itself. It begins with a brief description of the organizational activities involved in producing the event and describes the setting for a typical high school reunion. This chapter also provides some background on the reasons people gave for attending, their conversations and thoughts about it and the questions they had, and the way those conversations, recollections and questions helped to prepare them for the reunion.

Although the types of conversations in which the participants engaged at the reunion and their perceived outcomes weave throughout the remaining chapters, Chapter IV focuses primarily on the types of conversational involvements which dominated the event. When people come together again after several years of separation they must necessarily become reacquainted with former classmates and the high school reunion deliberately occasions this social activity. Chapter IV presents the naturally recognized topics of conversation and the stages involved in the reacquainting process. In addition, it describes not only the way in which people were constrained to make conversation, but also their reaction to it.

Chapter V describes the participants' encounter with the historical moment; that is, their reported experience of how their conversations and how the occasion created the impression of reliving the past. This encounter also created a variety of troubles for the participants, and Chapter V presents the strategies they developed to manage

this confrontation at the reunion itself.

Chapter VI describes the way people interpreted and perceived the outcomes of their high school reunion and highlights the relationship between who they think they are vis-a-vis their old friends. Along with the summary and discussion presented in Chapter VII, this chapter answers the question posed by Thomas Wolfe in the beginning of this study. That is, attending a high school reunion enables many people to let high school go and to break with the past. By directly witnessing the past in person, and by directly encountering those old friends, the reunion enables one to see the world changed before one's very eyes. The reality that "nothing remains the same," becomes an actuality that Nothing Remains the Same. On to the argument.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

This chapter will describe the methods used in the study, including a description of interviewing and sampling techniques, procedures for analyzing the data, and the development of the conceptual scheme.

Sociological interest in the high school reunion was sparked by a conversation. After a period of absence, a friend and I got together one afternoon to catch up on things over coffee and she began telling me about her high school reunion which she had attended that summer. Hearing her account stirred my professional curiosity in the topic, and I started initiating conversations with other acquaintances about high school reunions. One thing I noticed was that everyone I spoke with immediately began telling me the story of their own reunion.

The idea that the high school reunion is a "natural"¹ topic of conversation and a ubiquitous social occasion interested me, for it seemed that the experience becomes something to talk about and people have stories of their participation. After discussing this with my advisor, I decided to start exploring the phenomenon as a possible thesis topic. I began by obtaining an interview with a friend.

¹By a natural topic of conversation I mean that it occurs in the world without any prompting or occasioning by a social scientist.

Interviews

The primary research device from which my data was collected was the unstructured interview.² I began by drafting a few questions about high school reunions: "How were you notified about your reunion?", "How was it organized?", "What were the major activities?", "What were your thoughts prior to attending?", "Did you discuss it with others?" Then I asked the person to tell me about his or her reunion. Thus questioning assumed a conversational style and was open-ended in order to let the narrative develop itself.³ New questions were generated by the themes which emerged from the interviews themselves. The majority of these interviews were conducted in my office and averaged one hour in length.

The first interview was with a friend. Since I had never conducted an interview before, I felt doing it with a friend would be the least intimidating way to proceed, and it would give me the feel for what they were like. As it turned out though, the interview was con-

²The unstructured interview is flexible and open. According to Fred N. Kerlinger, Foundations of Behavioral Research (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), p. 481, it permits research purposes to govern the questions asked, and furthermore "their content, their sequence, and their wording are entirely in the hands of the investigator."

³Open-ended questions, states Jon J. Driessen, "Topical Analysis: A Method for Collecting, Classifying, and Developing Concepts and Models from Narrative Data," (Missoula: Institute for Social Research, University of Montana), p. 38, allow "meaningful experiences about social occasions and about oneself in such occasions to be reported without prompting, by informants themselves." In addition, Kerlinger, Foundations of Behavioral Research, p. 484, notes that the use of open-ended questions is advantageous because responses to them can suggest "possibilities of relations and hypotheses."

ducted in the presence of another person who had also attended several high school reunions. He remained quiet during the interview, but his presence made me wonder if I was getting the complete story. After we had finished, however, he made this encouraging remark:

I'm sure there is going to be a lot of similar stories. It follows in line with every reunion I've been to. Right down the line, with just a few personal things, but very similar.⁴

The second interview came about after asking for volunteers from a large introductory sociology class. At this time I was still feeling my way around, trying to develop some confidence in my ability as an interviewer.

The third interview became one of my most successful sources for gathering data. That is, a person whom I had interviewed provided me with the name of another person she knew who had attended his high school reunion and who would consent to being interviewed. I followed up her tip with a phone call and scheduled an interview with my next informant.

The fourth and final preliminary interview was arranged in a similar manner; that is, someone who was familiar with my thesis topic provided me with the name of someone he knew that had just attended a high school reunion. The techniques described by these last two interviews⁵ continued to be the most successful means of acquiring data

⁴Interview 1, p. 13.

⁵See Raymond L. Gold, "A Comparative Case Study of the Impact of Coal Development on the Way of Life of People in the Coal Areas of Eastern Montana and Northeastern Wyoming," (Missoula: Institute for Social Research, University of Montana, 1974), for a discussion of this method of sociological sampling.

throughout the interviewing phase of this study.

Sampling

Theoretical sampling was used throughout this study.⁶ This means that members' different experiences and interpretive schemes were sampled to find the naturally recognized roles and functions of stories talked about and during the high school reunion. Interviewing continued until saturation was reached.⁷

Ten formal interviews (and numerous informal conversations) formed the basis of my sample. Of the persons I interviewed, six were males and four were females. One person attended his fourth year class reunion, two persons attended their fifth, four attended tenth year class reunions, two attended twentieth, and one his fortieth year class reunion. Class size was reported and varied from as small as eighteen persons to one class with approximately five hundred students, but the average class was about 125 students. In addition, two persons attended private/parochial institutions. Four reunions were one-evening events and six were scheduled over a weekend.

⁶Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), p. 45; and Leonard Shatzman and Anselm L. Strauss, Field Research (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 38-39.

⁷Glaser and Strauss, *Ibid.*, p. 61, posit that the criterion for judging when to stop sampling is a category's theoretical saturation. They state, "Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated."

Supplemental Research Methods

Field Observation

Another device which I had hoped to employ was field observation of actual high school reunions as they were happening, and I began making arrangements to attend several during the summer. However, an unanticipated temporary relocation interfered with my plans, and attempts to establish contacts in the new area met with failure. Nevertheless, it was possible to attend a college homecoming which included a reception honoring the reunion classes of 1927, 1942, 1952, and 1967. As an invited guest, my field role varied from observer-as-participant to complete observer.⁸

At the reception it was possible to observe one form of a reunion and its setting, to watch the formation and dissolution of conversational involvements, and to listen to the kinds of conversations and stories taking place. In addition, the participants themselves, with minimal prompting (i.e., by simply introducing myself or by asking "Are you having a good time?") also told me who they were, what they had been doing, and told stories about the past involving themselves and/or former classmates. The experience was helpful in so far as it confirmed some of the impressions being formed from the interviews previously conducted.

Existing Sources

A final technique for collecting information was the use of

⁸Raymond L. Gold, "Roles in Sociological Field Observation," Social Forces 36 (March, 1958): 217-223.

existing sources. Specifically, these included the use of dictionaries, a search through scholarly publications and literary sources, and a collection of newspaper clippings of accounts of high school reunions.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles,⁹ and An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language¹⁰ were used for word definitions of key topics and for tracing the concept of the reunion to its historical roots, in search for additional descriptive characteristics associated with the occasion.

I reviewed scholarly and literary publications related to reunions in order to determine what had been written on the topic and for purposes of comparison. These articles included Schutz' essay "The Homecomer," Thomas Wolfe's novel, You Can't Go Home Again, and two recent journalistic novels to name but a few.¹¹ These sources provided additional imagery and insights into the nature of the homecoming and its bearing on the experience of the people involved.

A few newspaper clippings were found which reported on various local reunions in some detail. These articles were also used for

⁹The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles, rev. ed. (1934), s.v. "reunion."

¹⁰An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, 3d ed., (1898), s.v. "union."

¹¹Alfred Schutz, Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory, ed. Arvid Broderson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), "The Homecomer;" Thomas Wolfe, You Can't Go Home Again (New York: Sun Dial, 1942); Michael Medved and David Wallechinsky, What Really Happened to the Class of '65? (New York: Balentine, 1976); and Ralph Keyes, Is There Life After High School? (New York: Warner, 1976).

identifying typical activities and features of the event.

Finally, a journal was kept to record events, meetings, conversations, notes, ideas and my impressions throughout the research process. Besides providing a chronology of my work as it progressed, the journal was a helpful referent in various stages of data analysis, in the development of the conceptual scheme and in the actual writing of this thesis.

Along with the interviews, these supplemental research methods helped in establishing the parameters of my topic.

Analysis of Data

Interviews were analyzed topically and comparatively.¹² Each interview was tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and viewed as data. From the beginning, the interview transcripts were examined for categories and properties of conversations and stories about and in the high school reunion. Specifically, they were analyzed in terms of how the reunion was experienced and interpreted by members themselves. These categories and properties were revealed in the form of reappearing topics in the transcripts.¹³

Working with Data

Analysis began with the very first interview, and each successive interview thereafter was examined in the following manner: First of all,

¹²For a detailed description of these procedures see Driessen, "Topical Analysis," pp. 39-42.

¹³Important topics can be recognized by the ability to take the role of the member and become aware of and sensitive to his or her experiences. Ibid., p. 39.

I replayed the tape of the interview and made notes on what I was hearing. These notes consisted of important topics which appeared and were returned to or expanded upon by my informant. In addition, I made notes of any questions that may need to be reformulated, in light of that interview, or new questions that needed to be asked. I also made occasional notes to myself about further things I needed to do.

Usually the next time I heard the interview was during the process of transcription. Transcribing taped interviews was slow work but important because it provided an opportunity to hear points of emphasis through the emotional ways the informants told their stories. These ways of speaking can be referred to as "natural underlining," and may not be caught merely listening to the tape the first time.

When the interviews were in transcript form, they were xeroxed, and the copy was searched for properties as topics in the text. Furthermore, how these features were interpreted was isolated. Key terms were underlined and instances of reappearing topics were identified.

In order to differentiate between members talk in and about the reunion, attention was given to performative and reflective conversational practices.¹⁴ Members themselves often directly indicated talk in the reunion by repeating actual conversational fragments, identifying and reproducing dialogue, and/or typifying kinds of conversations that occurred on the scene. Talk about the reunion (peoples interpretive schemes) were identified by attending to the way members revealed to me how they reacted to different events, conversations and stories within their

¹⁴Jon J. Driessen, Personal Communication, Fall, 1978.

narrative of the reunion. The following remarks taken from one interview will serve as an illustration. The participant is describing his entrance on the scene:

I walked in there and they immediately, "Oh Chris, we were wondering when you would come." And, oh boy, I thought, holy shit! So anyway I walked in there, "Oh come sign up, you gotta sign the book, sign the book." So you immediately step into this thing.¹⁵

Finally, I wrote small summaries of each interview on cards, noting particular matters which stood out about each interview. For example, I wrote: "Rich in descriptive detail of the setting, see p. ___" or "provides a good insight into the meaning of the awards ceremony, see p. ___."

Through these procedures, which involved taking up each transcript time and again, the conceptual scheme of this study was developed, and sensitizing concepts and theories about the sociolinguistic character and experience of the high school reunion were inductively generated.¹⁶

The Conceptual Scheme

A working concept used during the preliminary investigation was "remember when." Initially, this concept seemed to capture the nostalgic

¹⁵Interview 4, p. 7.

¹⁶Glaser and Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory, p. 114, have this to say about the inductive method of theory development: "To make theoretical sense of so much diversity of his data, the analyst is forced to develop ideas on a level of generality higher in conceptual abstraction than the qualitative material being analyzed. He is forced to bring out underlying uniformities and diversities, and to use more abstract concepts to account for differences in data. To master his data, he is forced to engage in reduction of terminology. If the analyst starts with raw data, he will end up eventually with a substantive theory."

character of the high school reunion. However, as interviewing progressed, it became necessary to revise the range of application of this concept. That is, "remember when" was not the commanding feature of involvement in the occasion, but one of its components. However, reminiscing was a member-identified kind of conversation in the reunion. This was not immediately evident, and for a time, "remember when" became a gloss.¹⁷ It was only through remaining true "to the things themselves"¹⁸ as a hermeneutical procedure¹⁹ that this problem was overcome.

The conceptual scheme developed during this study was guided by grounded theory, consistent with the strategies for qualitative research described by Glaser and Strauss. That is, in struggling with my data,

¹⁷Harold Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 31 and 33.

¹⁸Robert Funk, Jesus as Precursor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1973) and Jon J. Driessen, "Society as Narrative," paper presented at the Ninth World Congress of Sociology (Uppsala, Sweden, 16 August 1978), pp. 6-7. According to Driessen, "to the things themselves" as a basic interpretive rule, "directs one to consider how any narrative slice should be permitted to propose its own unraveling." Its practice necessitates "looking at the text and finding the meaning as it is expressed in the recorded text of the narrative itself." Additionally, it suggests that one "describe formally, as well as one can, not only the essence of what is being said," but also the elementary assumptions used by members (as they constructed their story of the high school reunion).

¹⁹Richard E. Palmer, Hermeneutics (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 3-71. Hermeneutics is the study of understanding, especially the understanding of texts. Palmer, p. 10, points out: "Understanding a text, therefore is not a scientific kind of knowing which flees away from existence into a world of concepts; it is an historical encounter which calls forth personal experience of being in the world. Hermeneutics is the study of this later kind of understanding theory: the question of what is involved in the event of understanding a text, and the question of what understanding is, in its most foundational and 'existential' sense."

I was forced to develop and refine concepts on a higher level of generality in order to take into account underlying uniformities and diversities which were substantively grounded in the data and in the minds of the members themselves. Once this was accomplished, the "echoes" of interviews with person after person began speaking in unison. What follows is their story.²⁰

²⁰Two complete transcripts are reproduced in Appendix B.

CHAPTER III

SETTING THE STAGE

Before you graduate, you look forward to your high school reunion. At least you talk about it. The teachers talk about it. Yah, it's really kind of neat. At least in our high school it is.

They will be saying, "Now you will be coming back in five years and see all the changes everybody has gone through." "You will be coming back in ten years and see who is married, and who went where and what they did."

So I think in high school, people get the stage set for it. In our high school they got the stage set for the reunion and it was something you did look forward to, interestingly enough.¹

This chapter provides a prelude to the high school reunion. It sets the stage for the occasion itself and how it was experienced by the members. Included is a description of the organizational work involved in producing the event, the reasons people gave for attending, and the sorts of things they thought about prior to the reunion.

Organization

Over and over it was described how the responsibility for planning a high school reunion was assumed by a committee of local people from the class who remained in the area, by the senior class officers, or some combination of both. These committees began by trying to track down former classmates through others who had remained in touch with

¹Interview 3, pp. 1-2.

each other, through relatives who remained in the area, as well as through notices in local newspapers. Preliminary announcements were then sent out. Additionally, people frequently stated they were contacted again and asked to fill out biographical forms or questionnaires providing information about themselves, their marital status, number of children, occupation, or were otherwise asked to account for what they had been doing over the years. Finally, classmates might be contacted again prior to the event to preregister for dinners or other scheduled activities.

By letter, phone, or in conversation, people communicated about the reunion with one another until word got out about who was going to be there. One participant began his story by tracing these stages prior to the reunion itself and his remarks were typical of others that were interviewed:

About a year before I started getting announcements from this committee that they had formed. These are local people, housewives who didn't have anything else to do. So I started getting these, and I didn't pay any attention to them. You know, I just threw them.

And the first time they contacted me was to become part of the organizing structure. The second time they contacted me was to be part of a little booklet that they were going to put out. They wanted my biographical history for the last ten years. They wanted what I'd done, what I had been up to, who I'd married, things like that. And I didn't fill that out immediately.

Then I got a call. So in the process of twelve months to six months to the spring before last summer, I got a call from a guy who was heading it up. Local boy. And he wanted to know if I was coming. And then they sent me a thing that wanted me to register for all this stuff. That wanted me to pay, for yourself or per couple, or whatever--preregister.

Interviewer: Did you talk with anyone about going to the reunion?

Yah, oh yah. Since I was in town here, I would see people occasionally and they would say, "Are you going to the reunion?" And they would ask me or I would ask them if I'd see them downtown or somewhere. Some would say, "No, I'm not." And they would ask me, and I would say, "Well, I don't know, I haven't really thought about it." And then word started getting around about who was going to be there.²

At some point in the process of being notified about their reunion, people must make a decision about whether or not to attend. The following section describes the reasons offered by people in response to that question.

Reasons for Attending

The people I spoke with related a variety of reasons for attending their high school reunions. Their statements ranged from general remarks about "sustaining friendships" and "coming back together again" to intensely personal stories about the past. However, it was interesting to note that the theme of going back to the way things were in the past weaves through their comments.

The Homecoming

Some people told me they planned their vacations around reunion time to afford them an opportunity to see former friends and classmates as well as visiting with relatives who remained in the area. When asked why he attended his high school reunion, one person gave an account that was similar to that of several others I spoke with. He said:

I think in the instance of this particular school, and probably this is the case in a lot of high schools, even though people have moved away, quite frequently their family is still there.

²Interview 4, pp. 1-2.

And so they go back and, you know, set up a particular time when they can see everybody.³

Vacationing in the area where one spent one's youth also brought on associated thoughts and feelings of nostalgia.

Nostalgia

Feelings of nostalgia, that is, a longing to go home or return to the good-old-days, were explained in terms of "reviving old memories." One person, who wondered what it would be like to move back home, commented this way:

When you move away from home you always feel a little nostalgic. And you always have that question--maybe we should move back? Maybe we should go back to the people we knew and grew up with?⁴

Another feeling associated with nostalgia was an interest in seeing old friends again and finding out if you still held anything in common with them. As another person put it:

Oh nostalgia really. I think people are sort of anxious to find out if they have anything in common twenty years later, or however many years later. They, at one time, had really close relationships. Which, at the time (I see this in my own kids), they are all important. You know, like its going to last forever. And of course, you know after you've been at it awhile, that it--in fact, I think there were only two of my classmates in twenty years that I have seen, and then only briefly.⁵

This interest in finding out things in common with former peers after the passage of so much time was also mentioned in conjunction with curiosity.

³Interview 5, p. 7.

⁴Interview 2, p. 10.

⁵Interview 5, p. 7.

Curiosity

Curiosity was another reason that people gave for attending their high school reunions. In fact, curiosity was referred to in one way or another by everyone that was interviewed! People usually began their explanations in the following ways: "I was curious about what happened to them"; "Curiosity I think. I wanted to get back to see what everybody was doing"; "Curiosity. I was really kind of curious about what the whole group would be like." The two dominant forms of curiosity, however, were curiosity about old girlfriends or boyfriends or a curiosity about how former classmates had "turned out" compared to oneself.

Starting Over Again

One typical form of curiosity people identified was "a kind of curiosity about whether you can go back and start all over again,"⁶ and people's discussions included many stories about former girlfriends or boyfriends. One person said he was:

Kind of curious to see if some people who at one time did date, and maybe were single at the reunion, got back together again. You know, just out of curiosity.

In addition, earlier in that interview, when recalling his senior class trip, the same individual remarked:

We had a good time. I met a girl there that I didn't really know well in high school that was in the senior class, on the trip. And we kind of dated after that and that was kind of neat. So when I was going back to the reunion, I started

⁶Ibid., p. 7.

wondering, "I wonder what she's doing now?"⁷

Curiosity about seeing an old girlfriend again was also partly responsible for another individuals' attendance. He told the following story:

Well I was curious of course, and excited. There were two girls that I had dated pretty intensively. And this one, I'm not really sure why she stuck out in my mind more than the other one, because I think I dated the two girls about the same length of time, but this one girl though, I was really heavy into with in my senior year. And it was a very emotional sort of relationship. And my relationship with the other girl was heavy emotionally on her part, but it wasn't on mine. But I was curious about both of them, and trying to see where they were--where their head was mostly.

Interviewer: Starting over again?

Yah, that sort of thing. Although, you know, no long term kind of thing, but a curiosity about that whole business.⁸

In addition to these fantasies about past relationships, another form of curiosity that was mentioned frequently was described in terms of a curiosity to see how former peers had fared since graduation.

Showing Your Wares

People were curious about how others had done compared to themselves, and many people made statements of the following nature:

Its probably just a comparison. What has happened to the people you once knew--your peer group from a long time ago. At first I suppose its, "Am I going to be there and be the least successful person of the whole lot?" Or "Am I going to be this?" or "Am I going to be that?" I'm going to be comparing myself with everybody in the old class.⁹

⁷Interview 3, pp. 19 and 11.

⁸Interview 5, p. 22.

⁹Interview 7, pp. 1-2.

Indeed, others made remarks about "checking people out" or attributing peoples' motives for attending their high school reunions to a desire to "show off." One person expressed a theory held by several others when he said:

People go there--I think Bob said (we were talking about it this morning), "either to see and to be seen, or to show off something." They are interrelated I think. People go there to show their wares. Now you show your wares a couple ways: by your job, or how good looking you've been able to be. And its kind of like to see, well in high school we were just kind of in the oven, and now let's see how everybody turned out.¹⁰

Beyond feelings of nostalgia associated with the homecoming nature of the high school reunion and different manifestations of curiosity, several individuals also cited quite personal reasons for attending their reunions. These personal reasons related to the individual's past and were also mentioned as being influential in determining whether or not they would attend.

Unfinished Business

"Unfinished business" or other statements like it were used to describe the need to settle unresolved problems associated with the past in general and high school in particular. For example, one woman talked about her fear of being rejected by her classmates again as well as of her desire to impress them as one reason she attended her reunion. She said:

Ah but I knew I had unfinished business. And I think a lot of it had to do with how I looked. I used to stand in front of the mirror and think, "I look ugly." (I do not.) I'd think, "what's wrong with me? Why don't I get to go out like the other girls?"

¹⁰Interview 4, p. 9.

And I never came up with much. So it was really the same kind of terror about, well, I would go, and I would be all dressed up, and then I would still end up being rejected. But I wanted to look really nice and impress everyone.¹¹

Another woman told me she had blocked out a great deal of her high school memories because of the pain they caused her. She described her motivation to attend her reunion in terms of laying some of the "ghosts from the past" to rest. After mentioning that she had left her home town about a year after she graduated from high school, she added:

All those painful memories and difficult times, and the way I hated my home town. It was a small town and I couldn't wait to get out, go to the big city. But I felt this time, going back, looking around at this and thinking, "Yes, it wasn't such a bad place after all," it would allow me to lay some of the ghosts from my past to rest, which was why I went I suppose.¹²

Still another person, who had been coerced into attending by her parents, expressed similar sentiments. After telling me she had few friends in high school, she said she had wanted to "get even" with her former classmates and added that there was "still a little retribution" in her and that she "hadn't finished judging them."¹³ And yet, these people and others that were interviewed described themselves as being quite successful or having achieved a great deal since graduating from high school.

Feeling Good About the Present

A final explanation for attending their reunions seemed, in part, to be a function of feeling good about themselves in the present. For

¹¹Interview 9, p. 2.

¹²Interview 10, p. 3.

¹³Interview 1, pp. 6 and 14.

instance, one person who said he "really didn't know what to expect" about his reunion but that he had no preconceived notions about it, explained:

I really didn't worry about how I was going to react, you know? I was pretty happy with myself, too, see. I felt I had really done well. And I suspect that it might have been different if things hadn't gone very well for me. But I felt really happy with myself. And I think it made a difference about how I went in there as opposed to what I might have done if things hadn't been going so good for me.¹⁴

This attitude was echoed by another who said:

I felt very confident because I think I was, I had achieved kind of a degree of success. You know, like I hadn't, ah, what? become a failure in life or something like that, I don't know.¹⁵

Conversely, others theorized that people might make up stories about themselves if they hadn't become successful or lived up to past expectations. For example, as one person put it: "I mean even if you are on leave from the county jail, you wouldn't tell them that I suppose, or many people wouldn't."¹⁶ Another person speculated:

If somebody comes up to you and says, "The reunion is coming up," you immediately think: "God, all my old friends, I'd better get cleaned up a little bit and think up a good story about what I've been doing. People are going to be asking me and I have to tell them I've been doing something." You just don't want to tell them your a wino, you gotta show off your best. You don't show up there if your a homosexual bringing your partner.¹⁷

Furthermore, one person I talked to told me that in fact she did not attend her class reunion for this very reason. She said, "Why should I

¹⁴Interview 8, p. 4.

¹⁵Interview 3, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶Interview 7, p. 8.

¹⁷Interview 4, pp. 19 and 21.

go back? To tell them I have a masters degree and I'm earning \$3000 a year as a grocery clerk?"¹⁸

Whatever the reasons people found for attending their high school reunions, all of them told me they began to think about the forthcoming event, their old classmates, and the past, and in so doing, several questions entered their thoughts about the reunion.

Thoughts, Questions and Preparations for the Reunion

Well it was quite interesting because I found as the twentieth year approached, I started thinking about my high school. And I thought, "Gee, I wonder if anybody is going to do a reunion?" I found myself thinking of it, and I suppose it must be sort of a landmark time.¹⁹

As the reunion approached, people reported that they started thinking about their high school reunion and what it would be like. They expressed a variety of doubts and concerns. This section will describe those doubts and concerns, the questions they had, and how they prepared for the event.

Will I Have Anything to Say to Those People?

One question which appeared in the thoughts of the majority of people that were interviewed, was a wondering about whether or not they would have anything to say to their former classmates after the passage of so much time. That is, after the changes they themselves had been through or the things they had experienced, would they still find anything

¹⁸Personal communication, Fall, 1978.

¹⁹Interview 10, p. 1.

in common with their high school classmates and what would they talk about? This concern was characteristically described in terms of doubt and skepticism. For example, one individual who was about to attend his tenth year class reunion stated he already knew what would happen. He said:

You know, I knew what the hype, the trip was going to be. And I knew that I would probably not have anything to say to those people. Because I knew that, for where my head was, wasn't where their head was.²⁰

Furthermore, this concern appeared to be unrelated to the amount of time which had elapsed since a similar attitude was expressed by one gentleman who had attended his fortieth year class reunion. He described his feelings this way:

First of all, maybe it's this. I'm not a status seeker, but again, being in the field I'm in, I lose contact so easily with people who are doing other things. And so one of my thoughts was, "Well gee, how am I going to communicate with those people, other than reminiscing?" I would hope there should be something more.²¹

Concomitant with the question of having anything to say to former peers was another question that entered the participants thoughts--the question of how they would be received by others.

How Will I Be Received?

Wondering how they would be received by their classmates was another question of concern which was raised by the people that were interviewed. One person who had attended her twentieth year class reunion described her feelings in terms of apprehension. She also indicated

²⁰Interview 4, p. 3.

²¹Interview 6, p. 16.

since she had blocked out so many things about her high school days, that reviewing her old annuals (or yearbooks) helped her recollection of the past and that it had helped to prepare her for the event. She related the following story:

I suppose I was a little apprehensive and wondering how you'd be received and what everyone else had been doing. You know, who they were and so forth. And I found as the reunion approached, I had blocked out so much of my high school years, repressed it I think the word is (ha ha) that I could hardly remember. So I called my mother to see if she had my old school annuals. She dug them up somewhere (God knows where) and sent them to me. And I started thumbing through them to remember peoples names and stuff. And that started a whole host of memories going, just looking through those annuals. But it kind of prepared me.²²

In addition to concern with finding things to talk about and wondering how they would be received, another concern people mentioned was their hope that the reunion would not be a repeat of high school.

Reliving High School

Several people told me that part of their reluctance to attend their high school reunions was also due to a desire not to go back and relive high school. For many people, their recollections associated with those times were still painful to remember. For instance, one person spoke for many when she said:

I wasn't going to go in the first place, cause I didn't want to go back. Let's just say high school was not the happiest time of my life in that town, so I really didn't want to go back and relive it.²³

Still others, having decided to attend, stated that they went in fact, prepared for the reunion to be a repeat of high school and that nothing

²²Interview 10, p. 2.

²³Interview 1, p. 2.

had changed. One instance of this attitude follows:

I think probably all of us go thinking it's going to be the same thing as high school. And I was totally prepared for that. My high school experience wasn't the most positive which I also think is fairly common. So when I went, I was fully prepared for it to be a repeat of high school. The same kind of nit-picking, the cliques, and checking each other out.²⁴

As we have seen, people attended their high school reunions for a variety of reasons. But whether it was to return home or due to curiosity, to show off or to take care of unfinished business, they shared many similar expectations about the event. Furthermore, the act of thinking about the reunion and remembering high school, helped to prepare them for the occasion.

²⁴Interview 9, p. 1.

CHAPTER IV

REACQUAINTING

Ah, but the main thing was simply to talk. You know, get to know each other again.¹

One of the major features of the high school reunion was the way in which conversational involvements dominated the nature of the gathering. High school reunions, like other forms of social gatherings, can be viewed as being constructed and experienced through talk. Specifically, the high school reunion provided a setting for deliberately occasioned reacquainting² with former classmates after years of separation. This chapter then will describe the reacquainting process as it was revealed through people's talk in and about the occasion.

The Setting

So I walked in there. Everybody was standing there in their suits and gowns--just like the debutante ball. And you look across the room and here is your old girlfriend of ten years ago. She's standing there with some "Jewish lawyer from Chicago." You know, very Jewish, very gray pin-stripe suit and vest and gold watch.

¹Interview 5, p. 18.

²Jon J. Driessen, "The Trip" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 1969), p. 66. Driessen states: "Managing to get through everyday life often creates quasi-strangers of persons who at one time were acquainted. Because social relationships were at one time marked by familiarity, persons need not strike up totally new acquaintances, but rather must renew their identities (italics mine) to each other."

She came running over and I was glad to see her, I mean I was really glad to see her. That's really nice. She came over and threw her arms around me, "Oh how are you doing? Boy it's been so long, it's so good to see you!" And then she left and went back over to her little group.³

The high school reunions varied in length and scope of activities, but the most common and dramatic setting for the occasion was the banquet room of a local establishment.⁴ A cocktail hour was characteristically the first event of the evening.

So I walked in there and there is the old crowd of guys sitting at the bar. Getting drunk and having a good time. So there were different types of folks doing different types of things. We had a couple of drinks and saw some people. And it was very nice to just walk up and see a person you hadn't seen in a long time. Some of them you didn't recognize right off, other people you were amazed that they'd gotten nicer looking than they were in high school, after a couple of kids--and it was nice to see them.⁵

The cocktail hour was usually followed by a formal dinner and an "awards" presentation. These awards typically included prizes for the classmates who had traveled the farthest distance, had the most children, the least- and most-changed person, and so on.

So we got there and had a couple of drinks and I saw some people. Then we had to go sit down and eat. So I just sat down and we

³Interview 4, p. 8.

⁴This section provides a brief description of the setting for a typical high school reunion and is based on the Weberian notion of an ideal type. Max Weber, "Objectivity in Social Science Policy," in The Methodology of the Social Sciences, ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 90. To quote Weber, an ideal type is "formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct."

⁵Interview 4, p. 9.

ate. And then the old cheerleaders got up and led the high school song. There were two of them, the school song and the fight song. So anyway they did that and then they gave prizes for the person who had changed the most, the person who had changed the least, the person who got married the soonest, and the person with the most kids.⁶

The evening commonly drew to a close with dancing, drinking, and informal conversation.

After dinner we went back into the lounge and they started dancing. And it was terrible. They had some, you know, "The Blue Horizons" playing Alley Cat and all these crazy-ass songs. So I got up and was dazing around, walking around and bumping into people, "Oh gee hi, how are you doing?" And I wandered from table to table just seeing who was there and seeing what was going on.⁷

If the reunion was more than an evening affair, it was frequently followed by a family picnic the next day. Activities at the picnic often included a barbecue and games of frisby, volleyball or baseball, and people generally brought their children.

Naturally Recognized Topics of Conversation

The reacquainting process involved a series of naturally recognized stages. Among the first things people reported they did as they entered the scene was to seek out familiar faces of persons they were the closest to in high school and greet them. From there, they described how they began trying to recognize others in the crowd and typically asked the question "who's that over there?"

⁶Ibid., p. 10.

⁷Ibid., pp. 12-13.

"Who's That?"

That night. The first thing I did when I got there was to seek out people, especially those that I knew the best, and say, "How's it going?" Another impression from that night is that I was impressed by the number of people that showed up that I didn't remember that well. There were some people there I'd see and say, "I wonder what her maiden name was?" You know, whatever, and I would ask people, "Who's that over there? Who's that over there?"⁸

Many people referred to the difficulty they experienced in recognizing former classmates.⁹ The basic reason was due to changes in physical appearance. In fact, one person typified her initial conversations in these terms:

The first night was really "Who's that?" You know, because a lot of people had physically changed. Gotten fat, hair bald, or somebody like me dropped forty pounds. "Is that you?" Some guys had Afros when they used to have crew cuts. So that night was "Who's that?" "Well that's so-and-so's wife," and this and that--you know, trying to identify people.¹⁰

Another person who attended his fortieth year high school reunion told the following story:

There were several cars parked and fairly elderly folks getting out. Bald-headed, pot-bellied, and all the symptoms one has at my age I guess. My remark to my wife was, "Gee, there must be something else going on here with all these older folks hanging around." And when I got out of the car, "Why hi so and so!" They were my classmates!¹¹

The difficulty these people had in recognizing their classmates

⁸Interview 3, p. 9.

⁹Having problems recognizing others seemed to occur irrespective of the amount of time which had elapsed because it was reported by persons who attended their fifth and tenth year class reunions as well as by those attending their twentieth and fortieth.

¹⁰Interview 1, p. 8.

¹¹Interview 6, p. 7.

often carried an immediate emotional impact in which former friends appeared as having become physical strangers.

Being Among Strangers

People indicated that at first, they felt as if they were among strangers. For instance, one person described his initial reaction to entering the scene this way:

We walked in and the first thing that struck me was I felt like I was at a convention. Here was this row of women who I did not recognize (because of course they were ten years older) and, you know, you kind of knew them in high school, and now you didn't know them at all. You look at their name tags. They had their first name, then their maiden name (so you knew who they were) and then their married names. And I walked in and they immediately, "Oh Chris we were wondering if you'd come!" And oh boy, I thought, holy shit!

So anyway I walked in there, "Oh come sign up, you gotta sign the book, sign the book." So you immediately step into this thing. So I'm signing all this, and this is even before we even get in to the cocktail hour! This is in the entry way there. So then I walk around the corner with my friend and his wife and we walked in. I was half loaded, having a difficult time having anything make sense, and I turned to my friend and I said: "Gosh Skip, did we graduate in '66?" I didn't recognize any of these people!¹²

The same person continued by providing an example of this strangeness as he discussed the following incident:

One table where I was standing this girl came up to me and started talking to me. "Oh Chris how are you doing? I haven't seen you for so long." What do you do? That was worse than being strangers to one another. Because at least when your strangers to one another you at least have some understanding that your both strangers. But the problem at the high school reunion is that somebody is a stranger, but she knows me!¹³

Others indicated this problem was also accompanied by feelings of

¹²Interview 4, p. 7.

¹³Ibid., p. 13.

apprehension about meeting old classmates. However, one person said he felt the cocktail hour served to put people at ease:

I think there was a certain degree of skepticism or caution or wondering. I mean, "What am I doing here?" You look around for familiar faces and there are all these masses of people who were total strangers and only an occasional face you recognized, usually local people. And then pretty soon you began to discover others that were around. But ah, I think there was a certain apprehension, and a certain front that everybody put up. I think the cocktail hour helped a great deal. I had drinks given to me by people that I didn't think would even know me or talk to me!¹⁴

As people did in fact begin to rediscover their classmates, one of their first conversational involvements beyond simple greetings, focused on the question "What are you doing now?"

"What Are You Doing Now?"

"What are you doing now" was identified as a standard topic of conversation which facilitated the reacquainting process. In fact, the people consistently used that expression. They told me, "In the beginning, it was a lot of 'what are you doing now?'"¹⁵ Another person said, "It was mostly, 'what are you doing now? Where are you? What are you doing?'"¹⁶ Still another remarked, "Most of it was really talking about 'what are you doing now?'"¹⁷

¹⁴Interview 6, p. 14.

¹⁵Interview 9, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶Interview 1, p. 8.

¹⁷Interview 5, p. 26.

Unexpected Outcomes

As people gained information about their classmates, a common reaction was that people didn't "turn out" as they had been expected to. That is, people frequently remarked that they anticipated that their classmates had continued in the direction they were moving toward when they were still students in high school. As one individual put it:

Well it was interesting to me how some of them have gone on into areas that you would just not have expected at the time. A good friend of mine, Mark, went into teacher education, and at the time I would have thought, you know, knowing him from high school, he was definitely going into engineering. He was strong in math, and he was strong in physics, and I just assumed he was.

Another person, Tracy, was really one of the superstars academically in our clique of twenty-three. She got married and she never went into a career, but everybody assumed at the time that she would.

My mind set about people was changed. Mind set in the sense that I assumed that some people had gone on and done whatever they were tracking toward at that particular time. And that changed, kind of my thinking, well don't be surprised at what people end up doing.¹⁸

But people were surprised. Another person made the same point when he said:

A couple of ladies surprised me. One girl who is just, who I had gone out with for a year in high school, was very "apple pie, U.S.A. and Chevrolet." She got married and had been living in Norway for nine years. She spent half the time crying because she was so glad to be back. She had two kids that couldn't even speak English!¹⁹

One of the consequences of these unexpected outcomes was the emergence of new friendships at the reunion. One person told the

¹⁸Interview 3, pp. 7 and 17.

¹⁹Interview 4, p. 17.

following story:

A couple of guys that I wasn't friends with and really didn't seek out friendship, for a number of reasons, I guess, in high school, we became friends at the reunion. They asked me what I was doing, and I asked them what they were doing, and we kind of became friends there. Definitely more than, we weren't friends in high school.

In fact, I saw one of them since the high school reunion last summer and mainly because of the high school reunion. We went out one night and had some beers. Kind of interesting. We weren't friends in high school, but we became friends at the reunion.²⁰

"Catching Up"

Concomitant with "what are you doing now?" was the type of conversation characterized as "catching up" on what the members of the class had been doing in the interval between graduation and the present. One person, referring to her conversational practices at her high school reunion said, "and then it moved to, particularly with my closer friends, a real fast catching up on more serious business."²¹ Still another person used this topic as he mingled with others. When asked what he talked about, he responded, "oh just what we had done in the past. You know, where we had gone to school, how school had gone, what we were doing now. Just a brief update on where we had been."²² Furthermore, as people became reacquainted through these two topics, they indicated they began to observe changes that had occurred among past friends and former classmates.

²⁰Interview 3, p. 14.

²¹Interview 9, p. 5.

²²Interview 8, p. 4.

Change

Two forms of change have already been discussed; the first and most obvious form was physical change. Changes in appearance often created problems in recognizing members of the class and initially made people feel as if they were among strangers. A second form of change related to occupational direction which was often described as unexpected and surprising. In addition, people also mentioned that their classmates didn't talk or act the same.²³ One individual made the following generalization:

Changed. They had changed. Now that I reflect on it I guess its natural maturity-wise. But at the time it was just, "Wow! Look how he's changed, look how she's changed. She doesn't act the same. He doesn't talk the same."²⁴

The view that people didn't talk the same was corroborated by another person I interviewed. As he described a conversation he had with a friend, he noted that attending to the way his friend talked helped him figure this person out. He gave the following account:

Then Eddy arrived. And he had just gotten out of the Navy and his brother had just gotten married that day, and so he was pretty drunk by the time he got to the reunion. And Ed had been around a lot when he was in the Navy. I mean there was no doubt about that. ha ha And he had, he had developed a line. Before Ed went into the Navy he was a really nervous guy that was kind of uptight. And he had trouble talking to people. But he had sorted all that out I guess. Well anyway, he had a line, an angle, the way he handled people in conversations. And

²³Driessen, *The Trip*, p. 68. Driessen comments, "Strongly contrasted to acquaintance (where the strain on the relationship is in seeking and finding similarities or things in common) is the reacquaintance process where persons turn their attention to differences that may not mark their earlier relationship (italics mine)."

²⁴Interview 3, p. 13.

being half drunk it kind of accentuated it a little bit. And he still had a southern accent because he was stationed mostly in bases in the south. And that kind of shocked me. Cause here was a guy that I really liked, that was a really simple person. And he had done a whole hell of a lot of things that I just wouldn't have approved of. And was, I don't know, he had changed in a lot of ways it seemed like. And at the time it seemed like Eddy might have gone to hell. That's the feeling I had. I figured, oh Christ, you know? (sighs) I felt like the Navy might have ruined him you might say. You know, got him involved with things that really wasn't Eddy before.

Interviewer: What did you and Eddy talk about?

Oh kind of war stories a little bit. We caught up on where he had been and what we were going to do. But with Eddy we talked a little bit more about, since he had just returned home, we talked a little bit more about the Navy and what he had done. What it was like on ship-board life and leave, liberty, and getting drunk and getting laid. Eddy was doing most of the talking. In fact he was kind of bragging. And a couple of expressions he had kind of bothered me--"swave and deboiner"-- and ah, it was part of his line as he approached the girls. (Of course most of the girls were either ugly or married. ha ha) But that kind of bothered me a little bit. That was a change, a real dramatic change from the kid that went away to the kid that came back.²⁵

Shock was also registered when people observed that their classmates no longer acted the same, and the following type of comment was not unusual:

One thing that really shocked me was a guy in my class named James who had always been really shy and introverted. He and I used to talk occasionally, but we were never very close, but yet we were casual friends. Well I was sitting on a bench (they had some benches lined up where you were waiting to get your picture taken) and he came up to me and threw his arms around me and gave me this huge hug. And just thoroughly shocked me. You didn't expect this out of someone who had originally been so shy.²⁶

Furthermore, the process of reacquainting created some difficul-

²⁵Interview 8, pp. 5-6.

²⁶Interview 2, p. 13.

ties as people began to notice other differences that time and experience had created. According to a couple of people, this affected the way in which their classmates reacted to them. One person told me his relationship with his classmates had changed as a result of the differences they had in education. He said:

One of my classmates who helped organize the reunion made a big point several times to lots of people around, that I was one of two classmates (well, I was the only one there) who had gotten a Ph.D. And it was just my sense of observation that that made a difference to people. Like, "Gee, I wonder what kind of weird person he is?" First of all, I don't think there would have been a one of them that would have ever predicted that I'd go that far in school. (laughs) Ah, but I found that somewhat of a barrier. They looked at me like, "Does he have two heads? What kind of weird person is this now? Can we even relate to him?"²⁷

As people became aware of these and other changes in their classmates or themselves, people said that one way of overcoming the resulting conversational strains was to search for things to talk about that they still had in common. One thing they held in common was their past.

"Remember When"

Generally you almost resort back to the goofy things in high school. You know, the same old sayings, nicknames. Call somebody by their nickname and laugh about it. Just generally things about high school. It seems that other things we didn't have in common. I'd start talking about some of my things and I realized, wait a minute, they're not in my world, so you revert back to the high school things, the "Remember when?" kind of things. You know, "remember when we did this?"²⁸

As the evening progressed, people reported that they began to reminisce about high school. One individual reiterated the point made

²⁷Interview 5, pp. 11-12.

²⁸Interview 3, p. 10.

above when she said: "You go back to whatever it is that you did have in common. So a lot of the conversation was 'do you remember' type."²⁹

People reminisced about a variety of things. Among those most frequently identified were stories about old teachers and generally the "awful things we did" in high school. But whatever the topic, it was usually accompanied by a great deal of humor. For example, one person expressed it to me this way:

Some stories of some drunken occasions became the cause for hilarity. Well, a lot of them were recalling old high school days.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example?

Some amazing stories about the party after the senior prom which had been at my house, which I had almost completely forgotten. I remembered that the party had been there, but I blanked out all memories from the party except the memory of Richard sitting at the top of the stairs and throwing up all the way down it. ha ha ha I told him that. He didn't remember that at all. But he told the story of how, I guess he had gotten so drunk that he had fallen in the bathroom and cracked his head open and was bleeding all over. My girlfriend Vickie had somehow saved his life and he still credits her with saving his life. ha ha ha There were all those stories of those days.³⁰

Thus talk about the past seemed to function to hold people together for the moment. However, after reminiscing about the past, a few people mentioned that they began to run out of things to talk about. One person summed it up nicely when he said:

It kind of fell flat right about dinner time. You know, people ran out of things to talk about. I recall that there was a great sense of relief when dinner was over with cause the conversation during dinner (maybe it was because people were eating), but it kind of faltered quite a bit. I was a little

²⁹Interview 10, pp. 5-6.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 4-5.

disappointed too because I was, I was somehow hoping, well, that we could, that this thing would liven up and be some kind of lively little party and that it would be a nice evening. And it kind of dragged on as I recall. And I guess we had a few more drinks, but we didn't really stay all that long.³¹

The foregoing conversational involvements, "who's that", "what are you doing now?", and "catching up", and finally "remember when", dominated the interaction during the reunion. However, this list is by no means exhaustive. Other conversations were somewhat more unique to the individuals who attended, and others were characterized in terms of "small talk." Nevertheless, these topics served to reacquaint individuals once again.

³¹Interview 8, pp. 7-8.

CHAPTER V

REEXPERIENCING THE PAST

One prominent feature of the high school reunion was the way in which the occasion itself, and the participants involvement in it, created the aura of reliving the past. Whether the people characterized their reunion as merely a pleasant occasion, or as holding personal significance to them, they commented directly and indirectly that seeing their old classmates and talking with them again left them feeling as if they were reexperiencing the past. This emotion, however, often created practical problems for the participants. This chapter will focus on accounts of these encounters with the past and describe the ways they sought to manage the past in the present through conversational practices, thoughts and emotions.

All of a Sudden the Past Confronts you Again

Attending a high school reunion was reported to be one of those occasions where the participants felt as if they were reliving the past. This experience was referred to by one person who said: "It was a nice warm together kind of feeling. The people you know from out of your past; and, it was kind of like going through it again."¹

¹Interview 7, p. 10.

Another person commented that, in fact, for him and for others, the feeling of reexperiencing one's past was apparent from the beginning. In the following quote, he described the impact it had on him as he walked through the door:

I was kind of apprehensive, I don't know why. But it's kind of awkward. Well, it's just sort of The Past, you know? And it's all been laid to rest, kind of, and you've sorted it out in your mind. And then, all of a sudden you kind of come back, the past confronts you again. The same sorts of feelings. The likes and dislikes that you had forgotten all about. You know, the people that you like or respected, or people that had something about them that you couldn't stand! For instance, Paula. She'd drive me nuts! Well, I mean, all of a sudden, there she is again! Doing the same thing all over again.

Interviewer: Oh?

Yah. I mean the same little mannerisms and characteristics that are really kind of part of her, or those people, are still there. And I think the way they reacted hadn't changed a whole hell of a lot. I think of specific instances with individuals. Ah, something from the past would pop into your head. A particular argument that you had or maybe some kind of interaction with them that would stick in your mind that bothered me at the time. At the time it happened it probably bothered you a little bit. I saw Christy and I remembered, "Oh God," you know? That all over again. And I thought of a couple of things about Lynn-- one or two things that popped into my head.²

Another person also remarked about the impact that entering the scene had on her. She reacted in ways similar to the anxiety described above. Elaborating on finding herself reliving things, she said:

In the very beginning, talk about emotional trauma, particularly walking in there. I really don't think you ever escape those kinds of feelings, particularly in high school. I had such a terrible self-concept then, and I was aware, of course, that that's what it was. But intellect had nothing to do with the emotional part and when I walked in there, there was just like a knot in my stomach.³

²Interview 8, pp. 14-15.

³Interview 9, p. 14.

Feelings of reliving the past also created practical problems for the participants and the devices they created to manage this situation will be considered next.

Strategies for Managing the Past

The people I spoke with indicated a variety of ways in which, collectively and personally, they dealt with remembering and reliving their past at the reunion. These methods comprised reports of people dropping into their former high school roles, to discussing the past, not wanting to talk about the past, and attempts to minimize interaction with some classmates and maximize it with others.

Dropping into Former Roles

One thing that many people who attended their high school reunions observed was that they and their classmates began "dropping into former roles."⁴ As one informant stated:

Ok, well first of all, I was very hyped and everybody else was too, you know, cause its exciting to be involved. So I found myself feeling young. ha ha ha You know, uninhibited. You were sort of thrown into a single-girl type atmosphere where everybody was supposed to act like, bang, we were just out of high school. You know, the good old days, ha ha ha.⁵

The same person, who described herself as a tease in high school, also related the following experience when she bumped into an old boyfriend:

I was just remembering another event--I ran into a guy that I had dated for quite awhile. Course I never dated anybody

⁴Interview 9, p. 14.

⁵Interview 2, pp. 3 and 11.

steady, I bounced back and forth. And he was right now going to proposition me! ha ha ha So I found it flattering and intriguing and I just said, "Well, next time I'm in town and there is no one around," and teasing him about it. And it was fun to tease and it was fun to flirt, but I had no intentions of working anything out.⁶

Another person provided another instance of former classmates dropping into their former high school roles and some of the others reaction to it:

And then some of my old friends showed up! Really late, I mean really late and really blown away. A couple of ladies who were still single and on the loose, and a couple of real good friends of mine. Just blasted--drunk, stoned, whatever. Just coming in like this and, "hey whats going on here?" And one comment I heard (they were just sloshing around and bumping and falling all over the place and having a good time--an old high school good time), the one comment I heard was, "Why don't they grow up." "Look at those people." You know, and here is the woman next to me who hadn't seen this particular guy in ten years and she wouldn't get up and even acknowledge him. "Oh why don't they grow up, their doing the same thing they did in high school."⁷

In addition to dropping into one's former role in high school, many people also indicated that their former classmates began dropping into the old social groups as well.

Back to the Old Bullshit

Another closely related way people dealt with their past was to start gathering into the cliques they belonged to in high school. Although the process was reported to have happened gradually, the time it took appeared to be related to the duration of the reunion. One person, who described herself as an outsider in high school, remarked

⁶Ibid., p. 8.

⁷Interview 4, p. 14.

that things seemed rather egalitarian at first. But, she went on to state:

And so by Saturday night people were still kind of into this, but by dinner, the girls started seating themselves back into the old cliques. By 10:00 Saturday night downtown, it was really back into the old bullshit. It changed into something that was before. By Sunday, the same girls in high school that were fighting with each other, were calling each other names at the picnic, and getting drunk--and it was back to ten years ago.⁸

Others reported the same thing. One person said, "after you've been there a little while you start seeing the cliques,"⁹ another remarked, "there was kind of the cliquish thing, but there weren't any antagonisms,"¹⁰ and, "it broke up into, I think, the same kind of groups that they had had when they were still in high school, or the same circle of friends that they had or still kept."¹¹ And, according to another account:

At first they looked a little bit different, but I found that after a half an hours conversation everyone started looking exactly the same. And I looked around the room after about three hours conversation, and found that there was everybody--forming into the same social groups. And it appeared that even if we didn't consciously remember how we had related to that person in high school, there we were, kind of back on the same old footing, whether we liked them or didn't like them.

Interviewer: It happened over time?

Over time yes. I would say from when we came for cocktails and had a short cocktail hour, then we had dinner. And after dinner everyone, while we were still sitting, gave their little speeches. And then we broke up into somewhat looser conver-

⁸Interview 1, pp. 3-4.

⁹Interview 2, p. 7.

¹⁰Interview 3, p. 16.

¹¹Interview 8, p. 6.

sational groups, and I would say by about an hour after dinner this phenomenon had occurred. That everyone started just becoming like they were and the old social groups forming. After the newness had worn off, and everyone had recognized one another and met the spouses, and had been brought up to date a little bit, then people started drifting toward those that they had more to say to than others, which tended to be just as it was in high school.¹²

Sanctioned Silliness

Finally, a ceremonial aspect of some reunions was also associated with dropping into former roles by giving those roles formal recognition. That is, a few people told me about humorous presentations of skits, old cheers and fight songs performed by cheerleaders in evening gowns, and the rereading of the class will and prophecys in a couple of instances. These presentations were a part of the occasion's scheduled events and they too served as a reminder of the way they were. For example, one informant told the following story:

The Committee got together and had a sort of, oh I guess you would call it a skit. We had one young man, well he's an old man now, who was a very good actor. And he played the part of a very eccentric janitor. And he discovered all sorts of things, supposedly in lockers and various other places, and we were then given back these things that we left at school or we forgot. Usually they were humorous things, but obviously the shortcomings or mistakes, love affairs, or all sorts of slightly embarrassing in some cases, always funny, events that happened when we were in high school that we might just as soon forget. But suddenly, forty years later, they were recalled by this so-called janitor that hands things out. I got an award. I got a piece of rope. And this was because I was responsible for pulling many people through high school.

It comes about this way. I was a conscientious young man and I used to do my mathematics at home very regularly at night. When I got to homeroom period, my neighbor next to me would borrow my paper, just to compare answers I'm sure. And my

¹²Interview 10, pp. 4 and 8.

class was the last period of the day, and I would get my paper just as I walked into the classroom. It would be folded, wrinkled, taped, sometimes with mustard, catsup stains--obviously, it had passed through many hands. Lots of comparing answers.

At any rate, the janitor recalled that, thanks to my loaning of my math papers, why there were many who got through the class. And well, it was kind of this sort of thing. Let's see, there were events with the school paper, and mischief of various sorts--it was funny.¹³

In addition to what one person referred to as this "sanctioned silliness,"¹⁴ was another device used to manage the interaction at the reunion which was mentioned in the previous chapter. That is, humor.

Shared Misery: Encountering the Past

Another method reported to manage dealing with the past was to discuss it and openly share the "misery" associated with one's high school days. According to one person I talked with:

Friday night it was like everybody coming back and seeing everybody. And the "nobodies" ten years ago were "somebodies" now. A lot of the "nobodies" came to the reunion and the "somebodies" were taking the back-row seats. A lot of people talking to each other that in high school were the "too goods." You know, people that thought they were too good for other people. But at the reunion a lot of people were sharing.

Interviewer: Can you think of any particular instances of that?

Well, I noticed this one little guy. I don't know, small town shit, your either somebody or nobody, there is no in-between. And he was kind of a jock in my eyes so he was a "somebody." But in his own eyes he thought he was a "nobody." But anyway, we were in the midst of all this and he said that he was always afraid to talk to me in high school, and that he really thought I was going to go somewhere. You know, I said to him I'd have given anything for someone to have talked to me during high

¹³Interview 6, p. 3.

¹⁴Interview 4, p. 10.

school, but hell, he was a jock and therefore unapproachable. We were saying some real feelings to each other about, in my case, how miserable it was then, being alone in a small town. And other people had some of the same feelings but they were cast in another role. Because your a jock, well hell, your right in the group. But at sixteen, how do you view the world? But I thought there was a lot of feeling going back to "how did you really feel then?" And, "wasn't that silly shit that we did to each other?" And to me, that was the neatest part of the whole reunion--people finally speaking to each other.¹⁵

Another participant also made continuous references to this phenomenon.

She began the interview by saying:

People were genuinely glad to see each other. And while there was the kind of checking each other out about how did everybody look physically, it moved from that to a really warm, almost encounter session. There were about two-hundred people in my graduating class, and it was surprising to me that there was not the affectation that I expected. People were talking about, even the more popular girls--the cheerleaders--were saying they were miserable in high school, cause they felt ugly or the boys didn't like them because they were cheerleaders, or even the other girls said, well, they didn't like it for other reasons. Us bright ones, (I shouldn't say that, the ones that were tracked upward) were always wondering if that was the reason we were so miserable. The guys were the same way, which was really surprising. Like I sat next to some people that, because we were tracked, I was with them for four years and we hardly spoke to each other. Most of them just sat down and started talking and found out that they were, for whatever reason, miserable. Either they weren't having dates, or that they didn't make the football team, but whatever, feeling really "Ugh!" They were glad high school was over with!¹⁶

She continued later in the interview:

What was most consistent was this business of, that high school was a really heavy time that was emotionally traumatizing. ha ha ha I don't care who it was! They all said the same thing!¹⁷

¹⁵Interview 1, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶Interview 9, pp. 1-2.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 7.

While confronting the past through sharing one's feelings about high school with old classmates was one means of managing interaction at the reunion, yet another method that was mentioned was nearly its opposite--that is, not wanting to talk about the past.

Minimizing the Encounter

Another conventional way people managed the anxiety associated with the past was by minimizing conversations related to it. This was accomplished in a variety of ways.

Staying Emotionally Close to Home

One major way of shielding oneself from the emotional impact of reexperiencing high school was by what one person referred to as "staying close to home emotionally." He described this phenomenon in the following terms:

The first thing you immediately realize is that everybody is very formal and they are all keeping their distance. It's like each person moving around with their goods, you know? They're kind of approaching people, but not really making contact. Oh there is the typical, "Oh, how are you doing?" throwing your arms around them and giving them a kiss, you know, that phony crap. Everybody felt ill at ease and were staying close to home emotionally. There is no way your high school girlfriend could come up and spend three hours with you--and you wanted to. Very few of the women moved around, they never strayed far from their spouse. It was like they brought their spouse to the situation, and they were going to show them they were more committed to them. You know, some horseshit like that. And none of that walking around having a good time. It was not like being at a kegger.¹⁸

In order to see if this was also the case at other reunions, I asked another person if he had observed any similar instances of this.

¹⁸Interview 4, pp. 9 and 12.

He responded that it was very much the case with his wife who was also a member of the same class:

Yah, I can remember my wife was, very much, you know, right next to me. I mean she hardly, she did not circulate too much. And I recall that amongst several other couples too. I can think of my wife, Karen, and there was a couple of other girls who were never in the "in" group who were always kind of quiet and reserved, and they stuck pretty close to their partners; as did the people who married classmates that were essentially strangers. But there was a tendency to stick pretty close to their partners.¹⁹

Another manifestation of staying emotionally close to home was termed "being cool."

"Being Cool" vs. Having a "Good Time"

Another way in which a person can stay emotionally close to home is by remaining aloof or maintaining some distance from the situation.²⁰

One person expressed his disappointment with this behavior when he said:

I realized, Christ, there is no way you can have any meaningful human interaction, cause everybody is too busy showing their wares, being cool. You know, their just too busy being cool to realize its time to have a good time.²¹

He elaborated on his point when he mentioned that besides trying to make a good impression generally, his classmates were also, ironically, doing so in the same manner, or in accordance to the same rules for "being cool," that existed in high school. He continued:

¹⁹Interview 8, p. 8.

²⁰Erving Goffman, Encounters (Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), pp. 105-115. Goffman used the concept role distance to refer to "actions which effectively convey some disdainful detachment of the performer from a role he is performing." p. 110.

²¹Interview 4, p. 9.

You have to come up with something. And most of those people are still going by the old high school status system. I've gone through so many different things since high school that I just, I have such a disdain for it. I think the whole thing is a crock you know? I mean I thought it was all a bunch of lies anyway, all hype. I really don't have that much positive feelings associated with high school. I have very negative feelings, and the people that showed up there were perpetuating the same thing.²²

Clearly, this person was at the wrong reunion! When I asked him to explain what he meant by "meaningful human interaction" he explained:

By meaningful human interaction, I mean sitting down and talking to somebody as an individual. Really being interested in what they're doing and sharing ideas with them. And not being concerned about "heres what I look like," "heres my job"--being cool.²³

Other people I spoke with also pondered their classmates' attempts at what Goffman called impression management.²⁴ As one fellow reflected:

Oh everybody there was trying to manage people's impressions I think. I just wondered, you know, sitting in the room and watching everybody and wondering, "are all these people really this happy? Are they really this glad to be alive?" And I just don't think a lot of them were normally that warm and happy and feeling that good. Of course you have to play the role.²⁵

Still others referred to this behavior as a "stage show," "showing off," or "checking people out."

²²Ibid., p. 19.

²³Ibid., p. 20.

²⁴Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 208-237.

²⁵Interview 7, p. 8.

"Chitter Chatter"

Another way to minimize encounters with the past was explained by keeping conversations in the present and through casual mixing, thereby keeping conversations light and superficial. One person typified a great deal of the conversation as "chitter chatter" or small talk. Later, when asked if the participants got into any heavy or more serious conversations he responded: "There were some things you didn't recall, but I'm sure everybody remembered them!"²⁶ Another individual related his meeting with an old girlfriend in which he reverted to small talk to pass over a potentially difficult situation for him. He told the following story:

I really didn't have many old girlfriends, but Christy was there. And I had one date with her and a little flirtation that I was always very embarrassed by, because of the circumstances under which it occurred. It was a dance and she was crowned queen and it was a big deal. My mother insisted she drive us home and I was so embarrassed that I didn't kiss her goodnight. And I felt like an utter ass and never went out with her again simply because I felt like such a jerk.

And we had gotten together once before the reunion over some damn thing. An incidental meeting. And she talked about that with her husband being there. And that embarrassed me, and I realized that I really blew it. You know, I could have really followed up on the dance and perhaps had a lot of fun that I didn't have.

When I saw her again at the reunion, well I just relived all that. Everything I just told you went back through my mind again. It's one of those embarrassing moments when you think, "Oh my God, how could I do that?" And you vividly remember every moment, and for some reason its very important. I was so embarrassed by it all.

Interviewer: How did you deal with seeing her again?

Oh fortunately, I just said "Hello" and made a little small talk and that's as far as it went. And I didn't run away and hide, but I didn't actively seek her out and talk to her--I didn't want to!

²⁶Interview 3, p. 16.

Interviewer: What about some of the others?

Oh just nervous laughter kind of deals and you could tell people were a little ill at ease. And some of it many have been the past--the past feelings that people had for other people and the fact that their present husbands or wives were right there with them too. Because I had the feeling that it kept some people from being much more open than they might have been.²⁷

Still another person said he didn't want to "go back and hash over old locker-room stories" and was surprised and relieved that there was very little of that. "People just talked pretty much about the present."²⁸ Others mentioned that there was a good deal of mixing, in one instance preplanned, and that helped keep the mood of the reunion light and more festive.

Making an Effort: An Outsider Again

A final way in which people described dealing with the past related to what Goffman calls "fitting in."²⁹ When I asked one person if she saw any old girlfriends and boyfriends at her reunion, she responded that she didn't have any friends in high school. When I asked her how

²⁷Interview 8, pp. 11-12. A great many people also mentioned "bad vibes" because of the presence of husbands and/or wives that also contributed to inhibiting meaningful interaction between old boyfriends and/or girlfriends.

²⁸Interview 7, p. 4.

²⁹Erving Goffman, Behavior in Public Places (N.Y.: Macmillan, Free Press, 1963), p. 11. Goffman states that one rule of behavior that seems to be common to all situations and exclusive to them is "the rule obliging participants to 'fit in.'" However, he states that "occasions may arise when the individual will be called upon to act as if he fit into the situation when in fact he and some of the others know this is not the case. He must keep within the spirit or ethos of the situation."

she managed that she said:

How did I manage not having any friends? (laughter) I had to keep a real, I had to make an effort to be nice to some of them cause of all the shit they used to do to me.³⁰

Later in the interview when the topic of reminiscing came up she also remarked:

The stories I was getting in on were really back into the classroom shit. Like the parties, "remember the parties we used to go to?" Course I didn't get in on much of that, so I'd sit and listen--bullshit with them.³¹

Whether or not one was an outsider in high school, there were times when people had to deal with enemies or people with whom they were formerly not on the best of terms with. This was when small talk particularly dominated the situation. One popular member of his class recalled a fight he had with another student over sports. He said:

He was one guy I had not really liked when I was in high school, and I didn't make any special effort to talk to him and he didn't to me. We just said, "Hi, how are you doing?" and shook hands and that sort of thing. No long term conversation.³²

Another person said that there were people in high school that he liked, and that he still liked them, and people in his high school class that he didn't like, and that he still didn't like them, and when he talked with them at the reunion "it was very superficial."³³

³⁰Interview 1, p. 5.

³¹Ibid., p. 8.

³²Interview 5, p. 28.

³³Interview 7, pp. 10-11.

Not Managing the Past

To round out the picture, some people expressed a great deal of bitterness about the past or told of classmates for whom the occasion was obviously painful too. For example, one person told a story in which her encounter with an old antagonist was executed by creating jealousy as her form of retribution. She said:

With one girl in particular. She went to college when I did. She was Miss Queen Bee of This, and cheerleader of that, and all this hot shit! (laughs) Anyway, we went down to school and she had to take high school with her. Like she is Queen Bee and stay in your place. Anyway, she was married--got herself knocked up and had to marry this guy down there. So they came to the reunion. And he hadn't seen me in six years. Anyway, we were dancing and talking, and she was getting all pissed. So out on the golf course the next day he was telling some of the other guys that she had been jealous because of this. And I thought, well that evens things out. Yah, there is still a little retribution in me.³⁴

Another person mentioned that when she was reminiscing, although the topics were handled with humor, she noticed some people's memories of past events were very selective. She said:

There were a few that liked high school. The height of their life was high school. Telling stories with great pleasure about this or that or the other thing that happened and "do you remember," and "do you remember." It was interesting too because very often one person would tell a story that involved one or two or three of the others and the others might not remember at all. And then someone else would tell a story that involved the first person and he would have forgotten that. And so everyone had very selective memories.³⁵

The same person advanced a theory about why people do or do not attend their high school reunions and recollected a classmate for whom the

³⁴Interview 1, pp. 5-6.

³⁵Interview 10, p. 5.

reunion was very painful:

This one fellow that had won the prize for having changed the most, I think he found the whole experience painful. Because, and I almost suspect there is a self-selective device of who comes to a reunion and who doesn't. The ones that feel that they have themselves together and have their lives together and are pleased with where they are, they are the ones that tend to go to their reunions. And the ones that are kind of falling apart and all wasted and in bad shape just don't go. And he got drug by a couple of us to the reunion because we were drinking in his bar in the afternoon before. This was a rather quiet, mild mannered fellow, but he was so changed I never would have known him if I hadn't been taken over to the bar. And he really looked like he had been through the wars, just ravaged, and totally unlike the fellow that I knew. And we said, "Al, you've got to come, you've got to come to the reunion." Al said, "Ah no." And I think he probably found it a painful experience. And I guess that it depends on how you like where you are in the present, whether its a good experience or a bad experience.³⁶

Finally, one participant told a story about one member of his class who was so uncomfortable she would not have anything to do with him. He gave the following account:

I knew one girl was the only member of the class who just did not want to have anything to do with me. Her husband, who was in the class behind us, was very friendly. But I had had sort of a strange relationship with her. Sat next to her for a whole year in study hall and we talked a lot about all kinds of things--particularly her relationship with this guy. I had dated her previously, and I had a reputation of being fast, and that was not regarded as very good. And she was afraid of me. And it was obvious that she was afraid of me when we dated. And, later on though, like in our senior year, my relationship to her was very good. She was dating this other guy and never any hassles along those lines. I think I used to call her "my little sis." That was, simply, I guess, to kind of put it on that basis. You know, to be friends and not get into hassles over being lovers. I always thought she was a really nice girl and I liked her very much and was anxious to talk to her. I found the woman very unfriendly. And I can't explain that. I don't understand it. But I was bothered by it to some extent,

³⁶Ibid., p. 9.

recognizing that some emotional feeling that you may have had at one time, kind of came back to you in those situations.³⁷

Perhaps this woman was unable to deal with the past, as the informant states, because those emotional kinds of feelings indeed "come back to you," in the setting of one's high school reunion.

In this chapter the people described various conversational tactics for dealing with reencountering the past and the strains and problems the past brought up in the present. Confronting the past was described as having been managed in a variety of ways: by dropping in to former high school roles and social groups, through sharing thoughts and feelings about high school, and through minimizing encounters with the past by staying emotionally close to home and by keeping conversations with classmates light and superficial. Attempting to fit in was another tactic used by those who were at one time on the fringes of the social group. Finally there were those people who experienced even greater difficulty in managing the past due to painful associations it recreated.

In the next chapter, the theme moves from the on-going management strategies used at the reunion itself to presenting the various interpretive schemes by which the members' reflected on their reunions and the meaning the occasion had for them.

³⁷Interview 5, pp. 20-21.

CHAPTER VI

REINTERPRETING THE PAST

This chapter will address the on-going interpretive schemes through which the participants made sense of what was happening during their high school reunions and the perceived outcomes of their encounter with the past.

Now and Then: Reevaluating Others

In a previous chapter it was described how one consequence of the reacquainting process was the surprise to learn that classmates had changed in a variety of unexpected ways. Beyond merely acquiring information about these former classmates and an interest in following people, gaining this information also provided the participants with an opportunity to assess their peers and themselves and in the process, to reflect on how their behavior, attitudes, values and aspirations had also changed over the years. One way this was accomplished was by making comparisons and contrasting the past to the present.

"Mr. Garrison was Right"

Making past to present comparisons was evident by the way in which the people referred to their cohort generally or to certain members of the class in particular. For example, one informant remarked: "We had a hell of a potential class and we didn't do much

with it I don't think."¹ In fact, the topic of unfulfilled potential was mentioned by several people. Another instance of this method of comparison was given by a person who, early in the interview, mentioned that seventy-five percent of his classmates planned to enter college in the fall and later stated that one of his former teachers made a different prediction. He said:

And we talked about Garrison too. He was the history teacher and home-room teacher in our junior year. And he was the one who told us that half, most of the girls would be married and pregnant or have kids, about a year or two out of high school. And he was right. And that kind of hit me. My God, Garrison was right. Most of the girls did get married and most of them do have kids!²

Still another individual made a similar remark about one of the more promising of his classmates: "The Valedictorian of the Class, Pam, went to Penn. State, graduated, and then didn't develop any career. Got married, I don't know if a housewife is a career."³

In addition to examining the unfulfilled potential of one's class as a way of gauging how time had changed things, another way was by viewing and reviewing past events through the perspective of an adult.

"Recasting Old Memories"

Engaging in comparisons of one's high school days to the present was also evidenced in statements like: "At sixteen, how do you view

¹Interview 1, p. 8.

²Interview 8, pp. 13-14.

³Interview 3, p. 7.

the world?"⁴ or "I mean, what are your life's goals at seventeen? I wanted to have a fast car and a cheerleader! ha ha ha."⁵ Another individual referred to this as "recasting old memories"⁶ or looking at things from the perspective of an adult.

Attending a reunion and revisiting places associated with one's youth is in itself one way of "recasting old memories." One informant described this phenomenon this way:

Going back there was, well I think it's just neat to go back to places and kind of get the feel again. And the perceptions come back, and I'm aware again of my perceptions when I was in high school, and how it is now. And I was able to, just sort of go back and sort of emerge myself or remind myself of how I saw things or how I felt when I was younger.⁷

Another person also touched on this topic when she talked about one of her conversations about the "good old days." She was talking about how she and her classmate experienced the same events so differently and remarked: "Some of my perceptions maybe weren't fair at the time."⁸

One popular topic through which the past was reexamined focused on former teachers. One person described a conversation he had about the antics of his basketball coach that made him conclude that the coach wasn't such a great guy after all. After talking to a former teacher at her reunion, still another person said: "A strange thing

⁴Interview 1, p. 10.

⁵Interview 7, p. 7.

⁶Interview 10, p. 10.

⁷Interview 9, p. 17.

⁸Interview 1, p. 5.

happened—I wasn't being treated as a student!"⁹ Another example of how old memories become recast was illustrated by the following story:

Oh, one of my dearest, favorite teachers, I didn't get to talk to, but I saw him. The reason he became my favorite teacher is interesting, because those were the days when you sat in alphabetical order and I was a Smith and there was this gentleman named Stevens that always sat beside me who was the typical jock. You know, not interested in anything but getting your skirt lifted, trying to be real sexy, a real-man type guy. One day, back when I was a freshman or sophomore in school, this kid was sitting and rubbing his hand on my leg and bugging me. And so I had a metal fingernail file, and I had gotten to the point where I just couldn't take it anymore. Anyway, I sort of flipped that day and so I took this fingernail file and I jammed it down into his knee. It busted and went boing—all the way across the room and landed on the floor! (laughs) And the teacher said, "Alright Smith and Stevens, have you got something going on back there? Maybe you better tell the rest of the class about it too!" That thoroughly embarrassed me, but I was pretty gutsy. And I remember I went over to his house and asked if I could speak to him and explained the problem. And he apologized and he moved the guy to the other side of the room. It was so neat and from then on he became one of my favorite people. (pause) And when I saw him at the reunion, he was obviously an alcoholic, he drank very heavily, very unhappy, very depressed. And I'd never seen him this way. And, you know, my friends said he was always like that, but to me he never was. He had always been my ideal teacher. And it really disappointed me--this was my view of it.¹⁰

Still other topics by which people reflected about the past, were stories about how the classmates values differed from those of their former friends.

"My Head is Just Not There Anymore"

The topic of differences in values appeared early in the interviews and continued throughout. In fact, one person's reluctance

⁹Interview 9, p. 12.

¹⁰Interview 2, pp. 14-15.

to attend his reunion was due in part to this awareness when he said, "I knew that I would probably not have anything to say to those people because I knew, for where my head was, wasn't where their head was."¹¹

One topic receiving particular attention was the emphasis many of their classmates placed on materialism and the acquisition of possessions. One person stated that attending his reunion changed his feelings about people because of the emphasis they placed on things:

Part of it is where I am with reference to something that I saw among some of them, that I really have problems with. And that's a heavy emphasis on materialism. Like this old girlfriend--she was very much into a heavy materialism trip. She was married to a very wealthy physician of some sort, and she brought all kinds of pictures of her house and her yacht and all this sort of thing. Money. The thing was a big deal. And this friend we went to visit on the coast, he was also heavy into money. And that heavy emphasis on materialism kind of turned me off. And so I really felt, hummm, changed attitudes about some of them.¹²

Another person mentioned that there were two groups at her reunion, one of which was also materialistically oriented. She said:

The group broke into two splits. And one was the people who were being very middle class, particularly among the women who did a lot of the organizing. They were much more into the sort of "society" mentality. Clothes, "How many?" "What kind of house do you have?" The other group was a lot looser. A lot of it has to do with your attitudes and well, you could see people who were still super-closed-off and caught up in their own little things.¹³

She returned to this topic later in the interview with regard to one of her former friends:

¹¹Interview 4, p. 3.

¹²Interview 5, pp. 28-29.

¹³Interview 9, pp. 9 and 15.

I guess part of it is that those people don't interest me. There was one woman in particular who I grew up with and went to high school with. And she married a guy in banking and they have their one child and they live on the lake. And, you know, her conversation was, "Oh yes, we're going to do that to the house," and "Yes, of course, we want more money and he's got to work harder." And she takes tennis lessons and swims in the summer. And those people are interesting to talk to, but they are not someone that I would really get off on talking to for long.¹⁴

A few other values which were compared, past to present, included beauty, occupational prestige and status distinctions. In summary, one person spoke for many when she said:

The reunion is something we talk a lot about now. You get together with your friends and talk about your vacations. And we found ourselves reiterating our class reunion compared to their class reunions. And we found ourselves saying things about people that we were originally friendly with. Well, gee, we really don't like them anymore.¹⁵

Catharsis and Reappraisal

Another outcome of attending one's high school reunion was interpreted in terms of the resulting self-reevaluation. In this case, self-reevaluation appeared to be related to how well one was received by his or her peers. It is interesting to note that the judgements of one's peers not only affected one's past perceptions of self, but one's present perceptions as well. Furthermore, when the present judgements or peer receptivity was seen as favorable or positive, it enhanced the self-esteem of the participant, and they saw themselves more favorably.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵Interview 2, p. 17.

Here excerpts from two interviews will be cited to illustrate this point. The first excerpt is from an interview with a person who was initially coerced into attending her high school reunion. She described her high school days quite negatively and remarked that at that time she had no friends. Her high school experience left her feeling very bitter about her classmates and small town life in general. However, she undergoes a complete attitude change at her reunion, which she attributed to a direct result of attending and winning the Award for the Most Changed Person. She said:

It was a complete turn around, because time had really equalized a lot of people. And, as it turned out, they gave me an Award for the Most Changed Person. But I interpreted it, right or wrong, that they had changed. I hadn't changed, but they did. Now I'm OK, and maybe I think I'm OK, but they thought I was OK too. So anyway, I didn't want to go, but the reception of people toward me was so much different, that it made it fun.¹⁶

She demonstrates how this affected her once again when she tells the following little story:

Oh there is something else neat that happened. I made a point of telling my folks, cause they used to catch a lot of shit because of me. I used to write letters to the editor and, in the sixties, if you said things the town didn't like, you got branded (in this case, as a radical). Home-town stuff you weren't supposed to do. So it was not very comfortable to go home. Anyway, because of this bit about getting the Award for the Most Changed Person, it was like the town had finally accepted me. You know, it's OK and I'm OK. And so my Ma and I went downtown walking, and it's the first time in ten years I didn't have my chin on my chest. You know, I could just look around and say, "Hey, I'm here and I'm OK and it's a really nice place to be." So I really had an attitude change. "You accepted me finally." So it's a happy place to go and I didn't have to be ashamed anymore.¹⁷

¹⁶Interview 1, pp. 2-3.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 6-7.

In fact, as the next quote indicates, this person came to identify so strongly with her class and home town that she became quite upset when some people assumed she was from out-of-town.

There is something else that happened when we were downtown Saturday night. There is a disco and a bunch of us were in there. And a couple of kids came over and asked us, "where you guys from?" I can't remember what we said to them, but we said among ourselves, "What do you mean where do we come from? This used to be our town!" Its like they were treating us like outsiders, and these punk kids asking us where we came from—kind of liked to tell them where to go!¹⁸

Finally, at the end of our interview, I asked her if attending her high school reunion made any difference to her. She responded, "For some it was a nice trip back. But for me, it was a new start in that town. The start of having my head up in that town."¹⁹

Another person I interviewed, also from a small town, had a different story to tell, but like the one summarized above, she too came to see herself differently as a result of attending her reunion and the warm reception she received. However, unlike the previous story, this person, rather than reidentifying with her roots, came to identify more closely with her present circumstances and expressed a negative attitude toward reacquainting and reuniting with her former peers. She began:

In a little town like this there is a lot of cliquishness and I think its really hard to realize the intenseness of the criticism that's dealt out. I had gotten pregnant and I had a typical shotgun wedding, and at that time, several of my good friends stopped being friends. Not from choice, but because they were still young and going by what their parents

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 11-12.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 13.

were saying. But it amazed me how many people came up to me who were the very same people who wanted me out of town when I had been disgraced by being pregnant. One girl in particular, I had gone downtown after school to buy a wedding book (you know, to record guests) and she had seen me. And the next day, you know how things get back to you so easily in a small town, she made a remark that, "Gosh, Laura didn't seem ashamed." Well these little remarks from olden days stay in your mind. And she was extremely friendly to me at the reunion, which just amazed me because she had been so critical of me in the past.²⁰

Although this reception was a positive one, later in the interview she stated she came away from the reunion with a lesser opinion of others and a better opinion of herself.

I came away from the reunion having a lot lesser opinion of a lot of people that I had once sort of idolized. I went away feeling that I wasn't so dumb or lazy. I felt I had grown a lot more than a lot of people around me and it helped my confidence. When I came away from there I knew positively that I was where I should be. And that helped tremendously because I plunged into my work more.²¹

Furthermore, the reunion enabled her to work through the shame she still felt as a result of having had to get married:

I found a real warm acceptance from them this time which amazed me because I had gotten a lot of criticism originally, and they viewed me completely different. A lot of marriages had fallen apart, there was a tremendous amount of divorces, and here we've been married almost ten years and we were one of the typical shotgun marriages, the girl who drops out of school because she's pregnant. I felt much better about this particular situation.²²

Finally, when asked if attending her high school reunion made a difference to her, she remarked it had a beneficial effect, summarizing

²⁰Interview 2, pp. 5-6.

²¹Ibid., pp. 9-10.

²²Ibid., p. 15.

it this way:

I would say it was very worthwhile. And it was beneficial to my life because I found, well it will sound melodramatic, ha ha ha, it was really beneficial to me because it made me feel comfortable and happy about my own position in life.²³

In addition to the interpretive schemes displayed above, through which the participants engaged in reevaluating themselves and others, enabling them to work through seemingly everlasting torments, others reported that attending their high school reunions allowed them to rid themselves of the hold of the past in general and high school in particular.

Making Peace with the Past

Some of the people that were interviewed extended the interpretation of reevaluating themselves and working through problems associated with high school. These people, in fact, were able to release themselves from their past and let high school go.

Once again, excerpts from two interviews will be used to follow this interpretive reasoning. In the first story, the person also described herself as an outsider who took flight from her hated rural background and, upon returning to her high school reunion twenty years later, was able to "make peace with the past:"

I feel the whole experience of the reunion allowed me to make peace with my past in a way. All those painful memories and difficult times, and the way I hated my home town. It was a small town and I couldn't wait to get out--go to the big city. But I felt that this time, going back, looking around at things, and thinking it wasn't such a bad place after all.

²³Ibid., p. 22.

And it allowed me to lay some of the ghosts from my past to rest--which was maybe why I went I suppose.²⁴

She reiterated this interpretation when she was asked if attending the reunion made any difference in her life. She responded by saying:

In a way I suppose what it did was allow me to settle a few old scores. To think of people, well you didn't like me very much then, but boy you can't say a word now. ha ha ha I'm smart, and I'm tough, I know where I'm going and what I'm doing, and you can't hurt me anymore. It was that sort of feeling. Finally, finally, my high school days can't hurt me anymore. I've worked through it and those people can't hurt me anymore. They have no power over my memories or over my present or anyway that I am now.²⁵

The same kind of interpretation was also developed by a woman labeled "bright" in high school, who as a consequence, felt rejected by her class, especially by the males. A member of a large class from a suburban metropolitan area, she too was terrified about attending her reunion, yet felt compelled to go to take care of some unfinished business. From the beginning of our interview she told me how the reunion removed a burden from her:

And because of the unfinished business, well, I left like, ten years I've been carrying this burden on me about "Wow, those people rejected me" or didn't like me--now I'm going back and I'm in much better shape emotionally to deal with it. Except as soon as I got there, that kind of bitterness or concern went away.²⁶

When asked if she had any idea as to why this had happened, she too partially attributed it to winning an award and to the way she was received by her classmates. She explained:

²⁴Interview 10, pp. 2-3.

²⁵Ibid., p. 7.

²⁶Interview 9, pp. 2-3.

I got the Most Interesting Job Award! ha ha! And some of the guys said, "Boy she sure didn't look like that in high school!" Ah ha, but I did. And I didn't feel inferior at all. I think it cleared up ten years of neurosis in one night. For me it was definitely serious. Ten years of carrying that stuff around.²⁷

She continued theorizing about what happened by discussing the importance of what another informant termed a "landmark time" in life. That is, the importance and impact that our high school years have on us. She continued:

And I'm convinced too that the kind of values that your peers, whatever peers, you know, the values of your age group, they get ingrained. For example, I find myself even now, looking at men and sometimes thinking "He's cool," or "He's not cool." And it's based on the same kinds of criteria that I had then-- I mean it's changed somewhat, but still those things come back to you. Yah, so I needed to go back.²⁸

As a result, she felt that attending her reunion released her from dwelling so heavily on her high school years and later summarized the difference the reunion had on her:

I don't think too much about the reunion now--except when a thought comes out about one of my old friends or something. And I don't think that much about high school anymore--and I used to think a lot about high school.

I think reunions really do have a place. And I think it's because you are so close to people, regardless, even if you don't want to be, you are close to the people you go to high school with. And I think they do make such an impression on you, that I would not trade going to the reunion for just about anything. Just because, it's this--this is really an outlandish remark, but it's certainly one of, what's the word? It had a lot of impact on me, as much impact almost, as four years of high school. And I think it's silly to say that they don't matter. There is some kind of connection with your past.

²⁷Ibid., p. 3.

²⁸Ibid., p. 4.

I'm theorizing now, but I really believe this. The way everybody is so mobile now and so disconnected, that your class is kind of an extended family. And even if you may hate half your family, you may hate them all, there is something still there. And that's what I think the reunion did for me. Was to go back and have a chance to experience it again. It allowed me to emotionally deal with all these feelings that had been with me for all that time. There is a point to wanting to see each other again, even if it's maybe in ten years.²⁹

This interview in many ways typifies and summarizes the various interpretive schemes presented in this section. That is, she talked about the lifting of a burden from her which enabled her to release herself from the hold high school had on her memories of the past and herself. In addition, she too was influenced by the reception of her peers and by achieving some form of recognition through receiving an award. These factors also contributed to the release, leaving her less preoccupied with high school. Finally, she recognized and reflected on the impact of her high school years and how this impact remained with her, and yet, as a result of attending her reunion, a more positive connection was made with her classmates and her past. Thus, attending her high school reunion enabled her to reexperience that past and yet to establish a closeness to it which she had yearned for so long ago.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 16, 19 and 20.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Sociolinguistic methods of data collection and analysis were used in this study. These methods were used in order to discover the naturally recognized types of conversations and stories found in the occasion itself as well as to determine their role and function. In addition, these methods were used in order to find and display, through members stories about the occasion, the different interpretive schemes which developed as a consequence of attending.

In Chapter III, Setting the Stage, the standard organizational features of a high school reunion were presented. This chapter also included a sample of the reasons people gave for attending their reunions. These reasons ranged from general remarks about sustaining friendships and a desire to gather together again, to feelings of nostalgia associated with their homecoming. Curiosity was also well represented, whether it was in the form of a curiosity to see if old couples could start all over again or a curiosity to see how classmates had fared compared to themselves. Others mentioned more personal reasons for attending their high school reunions. However, what was common about them was some sort of desire to take care of unfinished business. But whatever the reason or reasons people gave, a pervasive theme which wove through their statements was that being able to attend

at all was partly due to feeling good about themselves in the present.

Chapter III also included a brief look at some of the thoughts and questions the participants had about the reunion itself. These thoughts and questions were often accompanied by feelings of doubt and skepticism over having anything to say to their former classmates and a wondering how their former classmates would receive them. An additional wish was expressed that the reunion not be a repeat of high school. These thoughts and questions, which included many recollections about what high school was like for them, helped prepare the participants for the approaching event.

From the very beginning then, receiving an announcement about one's high school reunion occasioned a resurgence in thinking about the past, recalling one's high school days, and a reawakening of the feelings and emotions associated with that period in the person's life. Furthermore, these memories and the decision to attend were not solely associated with the yearning, pleasant, nostalgic experience, since for many these recollections were not accompanied by a longing for bygone years.

A commanding feature of involvement in a high school reunion is the way in which conversations and stories dominate the nature of the occasion. And, Chapter IV on Reacquainting presented the major, naturally recognized topics of conversation in which the participants engaged. After a brief description of the setting for a typical reunion, these conversations and stories were described. Upon entering the participants reported that they initially had the feeling of being among strangers and told of their difficulty in recognizing former

classmates due to changes in physical appearance. Naturally gravitating to familiar faces and friends after initial greetings, one of their first conversational involvements was referred to as "Who's That?" As the participants began to adapt to their surroundings, another topic which facilitated the reacquainting process was identified as "What are you doing now?" As people began to gain information on the directions their classmates had taken since they graduated from high school, a common reaction was registered in terms of surprise about how they had turned out. One consequence of learning about these unexpected outcomes was that, at times, "new" friendships were created among people who discovered they shared common interests.

Another related topic was often characterized as "Catching Up" on past events, or on the interval between graduation and the present. As the participants thus began to renew and reveal their identities to one another, another characteristic reaction was a recognition that people had changed. Their old classmates didn't look, talk, or act the same. Furthermore, as this process of reacquaintance continued, people began to notice the differences time and experience had created. It was at this time that conversational strains began to appear. This awareness produced a search for things to talk about which they still held in common—that is, the shared past—high school. And as the evening progressed, the participants reported that they resorted to "Remember When" or reminiscing about the past.

Although these topics served to hold people together for a time, some people noted that as they became exhausted another conversational strain set in. People began to run out of things to talk about, and it

was about this time that the reunion usually drew to a close.

The process of reacquainting generally, and the recognition that people had changed or gone off in unexpected directions in particular, was accompanied by a common interpretive scheme. That is, nearly all my informants engaged in a process of reevaluating their former peers. As described in Chapter VI, the participants began to make comparisons of their peers, past to present. These comparisons commonly focused on differences in values which had changed over the years. A typical outcome of this reevaluative process was to conclude that their opinions of their classmates had changed, often for the worse.

Another prominent feature of the high school reunion upon which the participants commented was the way in which the occasion itself prompted feelings or created an aura of reliving the past. Chapter V addressed this phenomenon and described how the participants managed this situation.

Many strategies were developed. For example, it was noted that people began to drop into former roles and/or social groups (which, at times, was enhanced by the performance of skits, awards ceremonies, or by the rereading of the class will and prophecy). Another management strategy that was developed was sharing, or having intimate conversations about one's high school days. It was interesting to note the participants surprise when they learned their classmates were as "miserable" as they were in high school and that although the reasons and details were different, they discovered they shared similar emotional states. Conversely, another strategy which emerged was a

desire not to talk about high school at all and to keep conversations oriented more toward the present. Still others reported attempts to minimize the encounter with one's past through staying emotionally close to home, remaining distant, attempting to manage the impressions others received and by keeping conversations on the level of small talk--light and superficial. Managing the past was accomplished, however, with varying degrees of success and for some the process proved difficult to handle. These people indicated coping with the situation by attempting to fit in, through selective memory, or by avoiding some classmates all together.

In addition to reliving the past, another consequence of attending one's high school reunion and reminiscing about the "good old days" was that the participants engaged in recasting old memories from the perspective of an adult. Reexperiencing the past from this perspective also enabled people to once again "get the feel" of those past events and associated emotional states and to contrast and compare them to how they felt in the present, thus attending to not only how others had changed but to how they themselves had changed as well.

Chapter VI on reinterpreting the past focused directly on the way people interpreted the experience of attending their high school reunions. One interpretation was mentioned briefly above in conjunction with the process of reacquainting; that is, reevaluating or reappraising one's former classmates. These evaluations concerned the unfulfilled potential of the class in general or certain individuals in particular. Still other evaluations were made in terms of value differences and how the participant differed from his or her classmates on matters of

materialism, status and prestige. Throughout the evaluative process, the people interviewed also compared themselves with others and evaluated how they had changed.

Self-reevaluation, it was noted, seemed partially contingent on the way the person was received by his or her former classmates. Thus, not only had their former peers exercised influence on their self-esteem and self-concept in high school but continued to do so in the present. As a consequence of a positive peer reception at the reunion, some of the people interviewed were able to change their attitudes toward themselves or to reinterpret how they felt about the class, their high school days, and their past in general. An additional factor which seemed to be involved in this process of self-reappraisal was through receiving some form of recognition by the class, typically through winning an award.

Through reappraising self and others, half of the people interviewed carried the interpretive process beyond merely attending or reacting to the way they themselves and others had changed. That is, they discussed at length how attending the reunion and engaging in reacquainting, reminiscing, and reliving the past enabled them to work through or release themselves from the past. The passages which were quoted in this section clearly demonstrate that attending their high school reunions made a difference to them or dramatically effected their way of viewing themselves in relationship to their past. These people, regardless of a general state of well-being which enhanced their desire, if not their ability, to attend their reunions, still carried "high school" around with them. And they told me how the

reunion helped them to let go of that portion of the past which still had a hold on them, or to rid themselves from the torments which had lasted for five, ten or twenty years! Thus people reported how their classmates or their memories per se could no longer hurt them, and they were now able to make peace with the past and view it in a more positive light.

This study has explored some of the conversational practices and interpretive schemes of people who attended their high school reunions. It has aimed to describe how the process of reacquainting generally and telling stories about the past in particular enabled the participants not only to relive those past events but to reevaluate themselves and others as well. Furthermore, for some, it was demonstrated how the occasion enabled people to reinterpret their past and to release themselves from it. But whether a person engaged in merely immediate interpretive devices consisting of reevaluating themselves and others in light of the passage of time; or to react to their classmates as they are and were with gladness, skepticism, or disdain; or to review and reappraise themselves and the past more positively--attending their high school reunion provided the participants with an occasion in a highly mobile and transitory world, to dramatically affirm and empirically discover first hand, that indeed they themselves and the times really do change.

Discussion

This section will discuss a few of the potential contributions the study of reunions could make to sociolinguistics and to sociology, particularly to theories bearing on self-changes, language use and status transitions.

There is a way in which talk about the past is instrumental in the process of acquainting, for through this act we reveal our identity and history to others. However, when we engage in this activity, the players or the cast from the past are usually absent. Attending a reunion, on the other hand, necessarily involves the reacquainting process as people renew friendships and get to know each other again. Reunions, by definition, involve the coming together of people who once had a prior relationship or some previous connection. Thus, a reunion involves, to a greater or lesser degree, those people with whom we shared some portion of the past. These two different sets of circumstances pose different problems for the act of storytelling. In the first case, becoming acquainted, enables persons to present a variety of versions of the same historical circumstances, situations, or events. And these interpretations commonly differ in detail, tone and impression according to the age, sex, status and expectations of the other. What is unique about a reunion is that the people who were involved in that historical moment are present, and one's particular version of the past is subject to other's scrutiny and correction. For example, it was indicated in this study that people developed a variety of strategies for managing the past in the present. One such strategy which relates

to the way people remember the past was through being selective of the topics they chose to talk about. That is, certain stories and their details were remembered well, partially, or not at all by some and others often filled in the gaps of a story, helped to tell it, or may have told it differently. What this suggests is the potential contribution the study of reunions could make to those interested not only in narrative, but specifically to the way in which people present, manage, retain or discard different versions of a story, and how those versions change over time.

The study of reunions also has implications for the study of conversation and sociability as well as intentional conversational productions. For example, it was reported that as conversational strains set in at the reunion, people often reverted to reminiscing about the past to keep the conversation going. Furthermore, they told of how, once that topic became exhausted and they had run out of things to say, they moved on to speak with someone else. After people finished "making the rounds" the reunion drew to a close unless different sorts of activities were planned to keep it going (e.g., dancing, picnics and the like). Furthermore, there are ways in which attending a convention or professional meeting has characteristics of a reunion. People often meet old college classmates or former colleagues and have a reunion of sorts. But, at a convention or a professional meeting, the participants also share present interests and occupations as well. Sharing present interests also serves to minimize conversational strains. But at a high school reunion, people quite often do not share present interests, which makes this particular setting peculiar and suggests a need for a

typology of different forms reunions can take.

The study also has implications for the symbolic interactionist perspective which concerns the relationship between self and significant others. For example, one of the things this study discovered was that not only were one's classmates significant to them and their self-concept in the past, but the participants continued to depend on the way their classmates saw them in the present as well. That their classmates continued to be among the participants significant others was also evidenced by the way their reception influenced the participants' feelings of self-esteem and their perceived outcome of the event. For some, this influence was so great as to enable them to recast or reconstruct their interpretations of the past in more positive terms.

Finally, the study of high school reunions provide rich descriptive details about growing up in American society and the trials and tribulations associated with living through youth, which in our society, is so prominently identified with the high school setting. Therefore, this topic may be of interest to those studying status passage in order to better understand the transition from adolescence to adulthood and how the occasion enables a person to relive those experiences again and to finally release themselves from haunting memories of youth. More can be said about this too in terms of one's changing sense of self and the participants' persistent status impression, which only attending the reunion itself was able to change. Finally, the structure of a high school reunion shares many of the ritualistic and other structural properties associated with status passage.

In conclusion, the study of high school reunions, because of their uniqueness, suggests many possibilities for research. This study has been but one exploration into a topic which to date has received little systematic attention but which is a pervasive part of the contemporary American scene.

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APPENDIX A

THE INTERVIEWS

Appendix A will describe the measures taken to protect the informants of this study and includes a sample of the kinds of questions which were asked.

Before each interview, the informant was asked if he or she had any questions before we began. Each person was then informed that their names, other names they may mention and places would not be used, and substitutions would be made as necessary in order to protect each individual's privacy.

Each interview was conducted with minimal prompting. However, some questions were asked in order to obtain basic information on the organization and setting for the reunion. These preliminary questions helped to put the individual at ease and to start talking about his or her reunion. Later in the process of data collection, as this study gained a greater focus, more specific questions were added which related to the developing analytical framework.

The Questions

1. Have you ever attended a high school reunion?
2. Was it your fifth (tenth, twentieth)?
3. How often are they held?
4. What time of year?

5. How long did it last?
6. Who can attend a high school reunion?
7. Who was in charge?
8. Could you explain how the reunion was organized?
9. What is the purpose of a high school reunion?
10. How did you first learn about the reunion?
11. Did you think about the reunion before you went?
12. Did you talk to anyone about attending the reunion? What did you talk about?
13. Why did you decide to attend? Any other reasons?
14. Did they give any prizes or awards? Did you get one?
15. What were the major activities?
16. Would you describe (tell me about) your high school reunion?
17. Did you go with anyone or did you go alone?
18. What was the first thing you did when you arrived? Who did you see? Who did you talk to? What did you talk about? How did you feel about it?
19. How did people talk to one another?
20. Can you expand on that?
21. Then what happened? What happened next?
22. What were other people doing at this time?
23. Can you give me an example of that?
24. It might help if you try to put yourself back in that setting or try to imagine yourself there.
25. What other kinds of conversations did you have?
26. Was there anyone in particular you wanted to see? Were they there? Why did you want to see them?
27. Why do you think some people didn't attend?

28. How did stories of the past occupy your time? Was there any reminiscing about high school? How did you feel about talking about the past?
29. Can you give me an instance of that?
30. What other kinds of stories were there? What sorts of stories were people telling? Can you tell me some of the stories you told?
31. Do you think people had changed? In what ways? Have you changed?
32. Had any of your relationships with others changed or were they different at the reunion?
33. Were there any surprises or unexpected outcomes?
34. Did attending your high school reunion make any difference to you or influence the way you felt about things?
35. Did you notice anything odd or interesting about the way people talked? Could you describe that to me? Why do you think that happens?
36. How did you handle (manage, deal with) those conversations?
37. Do you think people developed any strategies for managing the situation? What do you think they are? How did they accomplish it?
38. Would you go back to another one? Why?
39. Could you summarize what the reunion was like? What the reunion meant to you?
40. If you were conducting this interview with me, what would you ask me about my high school reunion? Would you ask me anything that we haven't talked about?

APPENDIX B

TWO SAMPLE INTERVIEWS

Donna's Reunion

Interviewer: Have you ever attended a high school reunion?

Donna: Yes I did. I attended my ten year reunion. It would be one year ago this summer.

Interviewer: Could you tell me about your reunion?

Donna: Yes. (pause) I think probably all of us go thinking it's going to be the same thing as high school. And I was totally prepared for that. My high school experience wasn't the most positive, which I think is also fairly common. So when I went, I was fully prepared for it to be a repeat of high school. The kind of nit-picking, cliques, checking each other out. There was a lot of checking each other out. But this was in _____, which is about sixty miles _____ of Chicago. Semi-rural, some bedroom communities. That kind of, most of the people I went to school with were middle to upper-middle class kids. I also graduated in 1966, so it was a heavy time. It turned out that my fears were gone almost from the time I went through the door. People were genuinely glad to see each other and while there was the kind of checking each other out about how did everybody look physically, it moved from that to a really warm kind of, almost encounter session. There were about two-hundred people in my graduating class and it was surprising to me that there was not the affectation that I expected. People were talking about, even the more popular girls, the cheerleaders in high school, were saying they were miserable in high school because they felt ugly or that the boys didn't like them because they were cheerleaders--that sort of thing. The other popular girls said, well they didn't like it for other reasons, but I can't recall specifically what those were. Us bright ones, or the ones, I shouldn't say that, the ones that were tracked into the upper ones, of course, were always wondering if that was the reason why we were so miserable. You know, we got labeled as being bright and, therefore, unavailable. The guys were the same way though. Which was really surprising, they were--like I sat next to some people that were, because we were tracked, I was with them for four years during high school and we hardly spoke to each other. Most of them just sat

down and started talking and found out that they were, for whatever reason, miserable. Either they weren't having dates or they didn't make the football team, but whatever, feeling really like, "ugh" they were glad high school was over with and no one was really interested in particularly reliving high school. And so we ended up being a bunch of adults talking about the times that we went through. You know, the late sixties. And I left feeling just really good. That I wanted to see those people again and not that it was trying to recapture something that I lost or didn't have in high school.

Interviewer: Did you talk about going to the reunion with anyone before you went? What were your feelings about it? What did you talk about?

Donna: Well, I talked about it, well you know, people who weren't actually going to the reunion with me. Well, first of all we got this little notice and you were supposed to fill out these biographies. You know, "what have you been doing in the last ten years?" And I don't know if everybody does that, I assume so, that they make up these little books. Well, I was feeling very frisky at the time, and so when I filled mine out, I said that I was teaching sex. ha ha Which is basically true because I'm teaching a class on sex research and sex roles. But anyway I had fun with that. But I didn't really get a chance to go into the details about how miserable I was and, therefore, I was absolutely terrified about going! Ah but I knew that I had unfinished business, and I think a lot of it had to do with how I looked. I used to stand in the mirror and think, "I look ugly." I do not. I would think, "whats wrong with me, why don't I get to go out like the other girls?" And I never came up with much. So I would, it was really the same kind of a terror about well, I would go and I would be all dressed up and then I would still end up being a reject. But I wanted to look really nice and impress everyone. I compromised by going kind of counter to the culture of going to reunions and just wore my old clothes--and they were sexy--and they worked! I had a good time! You know, so I didn't really like have anyone to talk to about going to the reunion, but then because of this unfinished business, well I left like, ten years I've been carrying this burden on me about, "wow those people rejected me" or didn't like me, now I'm going to come back and I'm in much better shape emotionally to deal with it. That's true except as soon as that happened, I got there, that kind of bitterness or concern went away.

Interviewer: Do you have any ideas about why?

Donna: I won the "Most Interesting Job" Award! ha ha And some guys said: "Boy, she sure didn't look like that in high school!" Ah ha, but I did. No I really think it was just the whole demeanor of the place. Well, my one best friend from high school who I hadn't seen in ten years, who had been living in Mexico and married a Mexican, she was there, and that was really just a nice reunion.

And I didn't feel inferior at all. It turned out that, oh probably again, fitting with that time period and pressure, probably eighty percent of my class at least started college, and probably three of us were in doctoral programs or had finished. And everybody else, most of them, hadn't even finished college. So in that way it was a kind of status that was nice. And I was really feeling good about myself at the time. Maybe that's it about growing up, you all of a sudden find yourself thinking, "oh it doesn't matter anymore." And I, the funny thing about it though, is that seems to happen to everybody. And so, at one time I was sitting upstairs in the bar part, talking to somebody, and here like, some of the men that I had gone to high school with that always intimidated me, and all of a sudden we were sitting around and we were having drinks together and talking and being able to laugh about all that stuff and then talk about what was happening now, and so it was just, in some ways, like meeting new people, or a much more easy-going type thing. And in another way, it was kind of a shared intimacy of oh, particularly with a couple of these guys who sat next to me, for four years, it was like, "oh yah" we were both aware of it and able to talk about it. You know, we were both aware of how we were next to each other, but you couldn't just talk to each other, and all the different kinds of pressures from peers about who was cool and who wasn't and all that. And it was just like it was gone. I think it cleared up ten years of neurosis in one night.

Interviewer: Was it just a one night affair?

Donna: Yes. A lot of people were in that area, and a lot of people stayed there or they are all in contact with each other and so a lot of them had seen each other. And so a lot of them had, of course, kept in touch. And then for us, like I had gone to the southwest, in fact in the middle of my senior year, and ah, my friend going to Mexico and things like that, so then there were a lot of us who really hadn't been around at all. And we all sort of came in for the one night and then split.

Interviewer: Did anything happen after the reunion? Did people get together and have their own little parties?

Donna: I kind of just went. And in fact I really didn't feel any pressing need to want to see anybody. At that time I was living in _____ which is about two-hundred miles away and I had no real desire to go back. Before that I was in the southwest and now I'm in the Rockies. With my friend Maureen, the only regret is that we said we would write and, but then she was moving around Mexico, and I've already lost her again. At least until next time.

Interviewer: What made you decide to go then? You said you had some unfinished business. Do you think that that was the primary reason why you went?

Donna: Umhum. For me it was definitely serious. Ten years of carrying that stuff around and I'm convinced too that the kind of values that your peers, whatever peers, the values of your age group, are really ingrained. And I find myself even now looking at men and sometimes thinking, "He's cool," or "He's not cool." "He's really good looking," or "He's not really good looking." And it's based on the same kinds of criteria that I had then. I mean it has changed somewhat, but still these things come back about how to dress and that sort of thing. And even, you go through all this business through the sixties where you throw all that stuff out and all that kind of weird stuff, but some of that still stays and, yah, so I needed to go back. In some ways I suppose it did work for me. To go back and say, "I'm in good shape now and I like where I am" and then to get some feedback from the people. Now maybe it's that, I'm sure if it had been the same kinds of cliquishness of high school that I would have left probably with a more negative feeling about well, like I started. I showed them. And now, because you get older, it's just more of an acceptance and then it just went away.

Interviewer: What were people talking about at the reunion?

Donna: In the beginning it was a lot of "What are you doing now?" Right? It was just like meeting new people. "Who are you with?" What are you doing now? A lot of us women sat around and looked at all the men. ha ha And decided that the women were in much better shape than the men were. Most of them had gotten heavier and balder and most of the women had gotten thinner and better looking. And then it moved to, particularly with my closer friends, a real fast catching up of more serious business. "Are you happy?" "What are you planning to do?" And some about the people who weren't there and did anybody know what they were doing. Then later, it got to a much more intimate kind of thing. Like this one woman, Marie, who I really didn't know that well in high school, but you knew everybody in a class of two hundred. I remember she and I started talking and within about ten minutes she was telling me about how she had just gotten blown away right after high school and had ended up in some sort of mental hospital. Probably a more private kind of one. And that she had really been just, well she had been hallucinating and that sort of thing. And so we were sitting around and we were just talking about what she had been going through, and it really struck me, that "My God," you know, that's something that most people don't sit down and say, "Well I was crazy for a year!" But that kind of stuff happened all the time and that was real nice. I think probably too that I was more listening to them than talking about what had happened to me, except for my very closest friends. But at the same time, there were other points where, later on particularly, when we were just sharing all kinds of experiences that we were going through in high school, and somewhat today. You know, but there was catching up between that and then the commonality of the sixties and all that kind of stuff. And then, "So what are you

doing now?" and a lot of talk about values. You know, like with all the upheaval then, "are you living that out now? Have you succumb to the corporate structure?" Interestingly enough a lot of them had. But there was that kind of honesty about it. That awareness that that was what they were doing. "It was really tough working for," oh, some sort of pharmaceutical house. Questioning about, "well, do you really feel comfortable in doing that?" Well at that point it was like, "well that's all I know what to do right now." And that was, I was real surprised about that too.

Interviewer: Do you think people mingled well or were people sticking pretty close to their old groups and friends?

Donna: There were a few like that but there was quite a bit of mixing. I think I had a chance to talk, well to say three-quarters of the people there. And I would say about maybe one-hundred and twenty, one-hundred and thirty people showed up out of two-hundred.

Interviewer: What was the setting like?

Donna: Country club. That whole area is full of sort of, not exclusive, but country club type places. Semi-private kinds of courses, and so it was really in a pleasant setting. And lets see, did we have dinner? I suppose we did. I didn't pay any, I went through and I didn't eat, ha ha ha, I drank. And then you know they had a band or something for dancing. I wasn't interested in that at all. That's when we moved up to the bar and got down to more heavy talk. I figured it was a one shot deal and I had to catch up on everybody real quick.

Interviewer: How did stories about the past occupy your time?

Donna: Well lets see. I'd say probably about half the conversation was that. And like I said, a lot of it had to do with, especially when the women got together, and probably with the people I was friends with, it might have been twenty to twenty-five people that formed a loose knit kind of group from being in classes together or activities together. And so we spent a lot of time talking about, like I said, how miserable high school was. And then I'd say probably of past stuff that was the most consistent, especially just checking up on each others perceptions of what was going on, what it was like.

Interviewer: At the reunion itself?

Donna: At the reunion itself. Talking about what past perceptions were then and comparing them to how they are now.

Interviewer: Was there any reminiscing about the good old days?

Donna: Not very much. No. Not that kind of "gee, wasn't it neat."

Interviewer: I wonder why?

Donna: I don't know. What was most consistent was this business of, that high school was a really heavy time that was emotionally traumatizing. ha ha ha And I don't care who it was! And then the conversation, it got kind of like, you know, when you sit around and your talking with women, I find it so much easier, of ideas about things. Like interpreting what was going on and generalizing it to more broader kinds of things.

Interviewer: Do you think others were trying to interpret what was going on at the reunion itself?

Donna: I didn't see too much of that. You know, there were those little points about looking at people your not that close to and seeing who they are with now. Or what was, who they were siding off with at the reunion. But there wasn't hardly any gossip or stuff about so-and-so, they used to be going steady, now they are with each other again. There wasn't that at all. And possibly too though, I think about half the people there weren't married.

Interviewer: Divorced?

Donna: Yes, but there was a high, (pause) say sixty of those people weren't married, I'd say half of those were probably never married. There was a high percentage of people like that. Particularly some of the men that I had been in classes with and some of the more wimpy, superintelligent guys. They all ended up looking pretty good and being very successful. Its like one guy was a stock broker in San Francisco, or doing theater in New York, that kind of thing. And they were still nonconformists. And, I do a lot of interpreting, but it's more of ...

Interviewer: What kind of interpretations were you making?

Donna: Well just about that. You know, why so many people weren't married. Considering my sister is six years older than I am, and that would be unheard of. You know, your almost thirty years old and your not married. And I really think that had a lot to do with the times. That we missed a lot of, or rejected a lot of those pressures. And there was a wide variety of people there the same way. Still being fairly freaky, to being very middle class and living on the lake, that kind of thing—two kids and barbecues in the backyard.

Interviewer: Did you go by yourself?

Donna: Yes. I did not want to bring anybody with me. They'd be bored. That was fine. I've had a lot of practice in the last few years that way. So it doesn't bother me. And it gives me a lot more free reign to move in and out of different groups. So there was never a

point of like, ever of feeling alone or isolated because there was always somebody around that was interesting to talk to.

Interviewer: What about the other spouses that attended?

Donna: I ignored them. ha ha ha I mean that was too much trouble. Most of the people, lets say of my closer friends, were there by themselves. So like Maureen's husband, who was a doctor in Mexico, I don't think he came back with her at all. And other people like that didn't bring their spouses. Now there were a couple of inter-class marriages between classmates and, of course, they came. In one case, one guy brought a younger sister of a classmate who he married. That kind of thing and those people knew some other people and they sort of intermingled. I didn't see too many people, as far as strange spouses, being isolated but I certainly wouldn't recommend anybody tracing off to their spouses reunion. I mean, my God, I don't think that would be fun at all.

Interviewer: Did you see any old boyfriends?

Donna: I didn't have any. ha ha So I can't help you out on that one. ha ha

Interviewer: Did you notice anything odd or interesting about the way people talked?

Donna: The only difference is that the group broke in to, two splits. And one was the people who were being very middle class--particularly several of the women who organized the reunion. They were much more into, sort of a society kind of mentality. Clothes--how many, what kind of house do you have? "And do you belong to these clubs?" The rest were just a lot looser. And, you know, some discussion about divorces, and again particularly among the women there was this thing about, "well, how did your divorce affect you?" "And how are you doing now?" That sort of thing. Attitudes toward men. But beyond that, some people just picked up right where they left off and it was more intimate.

Interviewer: Was it awkward? Were people apprehensive about talking about those things to each other or did it just happen?

Donna: It didn't take very long. There was a little checking out and then sort of slipping right back. Now I think one of the things that was apparent was a lot of the people who sort of had, a tenuous kind of relationship female-wise, that stayed so, particularly with some people. Got through the superficial stuff and then there wasn't much desire to talk about anything else. But generally I was real happy to find that of my closest women friends, that there was that kind of uneasiness at first, but then there was no, we just slipped back into a kind of very nice feeling. And then the other thing that was real pleasant was finding other people who either

I was intimidated by, women-wise, or I didn't know very well, that all of a sudden found them to be extremely interesting people. But then it was a much more, like starting all over. Like getting to know somebody. And there was that kind of, I don't know if I answered your question or not.

Interviewer: Yes you did. How was the reunion organized?

Donna: It was supposed to fall to the class officers. But I think it was decided at the time of graduating that the class officers would be in charge. A lot of the organizing itself was done by people who were living in the area and they worked through the high school. The school had the records and I was concerned, for instance, that people wouldn't have any idea where I was. So about two years before the reunion, I have one friend who has nothing to do with high school but she lives up there, and I was visiting her so I went by the school and talked to the principal and had sort of a little reunion right there. That was fun. And that is when I said, how when it comes up reunion time, this is how you get a hold of me cause I want to come. And the school kept all the records and then there were a core group of about four or five, mainly women, and it fell into, the class officers were supposed to do it, one was in Colorado, one was in Mexico, so they really didn't participate very much as far as the organizing went. And I'm sure that's why we had it at the country club. ha ha The socialites of the area were basically the ones who put in the effort.

Interviewer: What about the roles people played in high school, did you find anything like that still happening at the reunion?

Donna: There are some kind of role expectations put on, like say the cheerleader types. Like Jane. Jane was very popular. Everybody liked Jane. So wholesome. That kind of, but I don't think she really played up to it at all. And a couple of the people, the organizing types, who were also the cheerleader/popular type girls, two or three of them who did that in high school played that out somewhat at the reunion. But they didn't seem to get much status out of it. That didn't seem to happen at all.

As far as the awards went, I can't remember all the ones they had. I know they had one for the person who came the longest distance, and the shortest distance. And Maureen from Mexico, of course, came the longest distance. I think there was one for who had the most kids, who was the baldest, and then who had the most interesting job. I can't really remember any of the others. That was a very relaxed kind of thing, and it went real fast. It was sort of like at the end of dinner.

Interviewer: Were the awards received with a great deal of humor?

Donna: Yes. Real relaxed. Just like you had been with everybody for ten years. And it was a way of catching up on people. I think part of that also played the role of giving you a better chance to sort of look each other over, you know, and have more of an idea of what was happening with certain people. But, say for instance, the awards did not fall on the people who were generally the most popular in high school. And, in fact, there was just that kind of a melting away of class distinctions, there just didn't seem to be that at all. It was real strange. It really just blew me away because it was the last thing I expected.

Interviewer: Was it difficult to recognize people?

Donna: It wasn't hard to recognize people. There were a few, like I said, sort of, particularly the more wimpy type guys who probably hadn't reached puberty by the time they were graduating from high school. They were just, they looked really different. They had really filled out and, of course, styles were so much different. We weren't wearing those funny glasses like that hung down over your nose, and a few of the men had gotten so bald or fat, that was sort of shocking to see. I think that's the most fun part. In fact, I would go back again just to see how physically people had changed.

Interviewer: Will you go to another reunion?

Donna: Well, we are having another one in about five years, but I would doubt where I would be or if I would go back. I would go back and hang around the high school again some time. ha ha I did that. The first time I did that I was so stoned I could hardly see straight! But it was a wonderful trip. I just had a great time.

Interviewer: Did people talk about old teachers?

Donna: I don't remem... the only thing we did, the only thing we did talk about that I do recall was, it was a parochial high school and lets see, right around our junior years, about 1965, was when we had some fairly radical nuns and priests. Young. Who were always going off on marches, having us read world politics, and that sort of thing. So around '65, something went really weird and they all left. ha ha Nuns were running off with priests and others were just quitting and joining social concerns, so there was that kind of, you know, discussion about all the upheaval. And I think that probably affected us a lot as far as awareness of what was going on.

There was some talk about college too. About was it worth it? And like I said, a lot of people didn't finish and there was some talk too about other people, particularly the most promising academically--that didn't show up and sort of disappeared. And that was something everybody was just really curious about. The Valedictorian who was a super-straight guy, most of the way through high school, when he gave his speech he gave one of the most blasting,

negative speeches ever given there. And everyone was quite shocked that he took such a strong stand politically. He was also, top grades, so the curiosities, "well what did Fred do with himself?" "Did he end up going off the deep end somewhere?" And there was, we did lose all contact. And then there was another guy too, the same way, who was just so bright, and so good looking, and fairly isolated himself throughout high school. But obviously people paid attention to his isolation. Word had it that he started at Yale, dropped out, started somewhere else again, dropped out, and really sort of drifted off somewhere. And again there was that kind of wonder, what happened with him. But it was just a funny kind of curiosity, like, "yah, you know, it happened to a lot of us." So what happened to them?

Interviewer: Did you find yourself reliving those things?

Donna: ha ha Yah! But mainly in the very beginning and like I said about the emotional trauma, particularly walking in there. I really don't think you ever escape those kinds of feelings. Particularly in high school. I had such a terrible self-concept. And, of course, I was aware of that. That's what was going to happen when I was there. But intellectualizing had nothing to do with the emotional part. And when I walked in there there was just like a knot in my stomach and the best feeling was that by the end of the evening I was also aware that it was gone. And part of it was, we can relate as equals, that I really don't need your approval. It wasn't an issue. And I guess part of it had to do with, you know, that there were nice comments made and that was, well that more confirms my reality now than the past, so that's OK.

Interviewer: Did you have a good time?

Donna: I had a wonderful time! ha ha ha Just after my experience I've said to numerous people, "why on earth wouldn't you go to your reunion? And, in the last few years particularly, I, what's the word--have just become much more open and less self-defensive. And I think that that attitude probably also carried forth, regardless of my traumatizing about being there and kind of thinking, "I'll show them." In actuality, I think I was probably much more interested in just seeing everybody and since that wasn't an issue, it didn't become one. How do you separate that out? I could speculate on that.

Interviewer: Speculate.

Donna: ha ha ha Well, just that, I think it has a lot to do with your attitudes and that, well, you can see people who are still super-closed-off and caught up in their own little things, and you feel bad for them. That they are still stuck that way. But like I said, I think the most remarkable thing that I observed there was that,

for some bizarre reason, most of them weren't. And I think I'm fairly sensitive to picking up on people. When that distance or closed-offness is there, it's just not really worth much effort to reach out. Whereas, when all of a sudden you are with people that there's kind of an electricity, and you can just kind of start going. And that was there. And I would love to find out, like when you are done with this, if you found that other people have experienced that. It just blew me away. I was not prepared for that. And so I did leave feeling like, I don't need to think about it anymore.

Interviewer: Have I missed anything we should talk about?

Donna: I don't think so. I just want to say that I went prepared that it was, that it would be, or could be, reliving high school and that people really hadn't changed. And it would just be, having to deal with the same old things all over again. And that I found that it wasn't that way.

Interviewer: Do you find the reunion becoming a part of your conversations with others?

Donna: ha ha I just had a conversation about it today. ha ha ha With this woman who had just been to a five year reunion. It comes up when people are about to, when they get a notice about their reunion, or they are about to go. Then it comes up in conversation. And then you say that you have been to your reunion. Then they want to know what it was like. Cause they're all anxious! ha ha And so that, then what I say is, "well, I thought it was going to be that way too." Because they're going "ugh." And then I say, "well, it just wasn't" and that I really enjoyed seeing everybody and that we weren't just reliving the past, but were actually, dealing with each other in the present and that I felt really good about that. And then I always say that it cleared up about ten years of unfinished business, so I don't have to carry this around with me. And, leaving out those conversations with people, I don't think hardly ever about it. I don't think too much about the reunion, except a thought comes up about one of my old friends or something. And I don't think that much about high school anymore. And I used to think a lot about high school. And, maybe I'm just less neurotic, ha ha ha, I don't know.

Going back there was, well, I think its just neat to go back to places and kind of get the feel again. And the perceptions, particularly as a child, come back. And I'm aware again of my perceptions when I was in high school and how I saw the countryside then, and how I see it now. And I sort of get into those things. So that, it was real pleasant. I like that. I like being able to, once in a while, just sort of go back and sort of emerse myself or remind myself of how I saw things or how I felt when I was little. So it felt real good. I would certainly not want to live there again, my interests are certainly not in that kind of an atmosphere. So it's, the past is

past and there are points where it's nice to go back, but not to ever really seriously want to be there.

Interviewer: If you were interviewing me about my high school reunion, what would you ask me?

Donna: ha ha Just that. What were your expectations of going back there and how did it really turn out? You know, did people, were they stuck in their high school mentality or have they grown? I would really like to know that. I mean from a lot of people. Particularly, why, I have had other friends and we sit around and speculate on things, and part of it is, the business of, is it really healthy as far as for people to grow, to get out of the area? You know, for the people who left town and didn't marry their high school sweethearts and didn't stay in the area, are they coming off as say, how does the right word go, better adjusted? Happier? More interesting? Worldly? Whatever kind of people, as opposed to the ones who do stay.

Interviewer: Did you find that at the reunion?

Donna: Generally, yes. I mean, a lot of the people for instance ended up like one guy, doing his father's business or running a gas station or that sort of thing. I guess part of it is that those people don't interest me. There isn't really much, someone who sort of just lives in _____ and runs a gas station, isn't someone I would pick to have a conversation with. Whereas my friend living in Mexico or the guy who lives in San Francisco who is doing some interesting things to me, then they're the ones that I gravitate toward to want to talk to. Or people who are just being housewives, particularly in the more social group of them. There was one woman in particular who I grew up with, and she's married to a guy who is in banking. And they have their one child and live on the lake, and you know, the conversation is, "oh yes, we're going to do that to the house," and "yes, of course, we want to have more money," and "he's got to work harder" and she takes tennis lessons and then swims in the summer, and in some way are playing out the same role that their parents were. I knew her parents pretty well too, and what the life-style was. But now it's her own. And those people are interesting to talk to, but they are not someone that I would really get off on talking to. I can talk to them for a while, it's interesting to see what they're up to.

Interviewer: Do you think there was much impression management going on?

Donna: Well I was looking for it. ha ha ha In isolated cases, yes. But again it sure didn't generally, instead it was the flip of that which was this whole business of, "I'm still not really sure of what I'm doing with myself," and "I really bombed out at college," or "I certainly didn't meet the expectations of somebody," that kind of thing was much more prevalent.

Interviewer: If you were to summarize what you think the reunion was about, how you felt about it, or why it seemed to make a difference to you, what would you say?

Donna: I think reunions really do have a place. At least from my perspective. And I think they do make such an impression on you. I should say, impression on me, that I would not trade going to the reunion for just about anything. Just because it, this is really an outlandish remark, but it certainly, what's the word, it had a lot of impact on me. As much impact almost, as four years of high school. And not that it generally effects me in adulthood, but there are, as I said, such strong bonds with all those people that you almost never have except maybe in isolated times as an adult. I think it's silly to say that they don't matter, and that it doesn't matter to know how people are or what they are doing. There is some kind of connection with your past. And, I'm theorizing now, but I really believe this--the way everybody is so mobile now, and so disconnected--that there is a kind of extended family, and even though you may hate half your family members, you may hate them all, because of it, there is something still there. And I think that, if anything, that's what it did for me. To go back and have a chance to experience that again, and experience it as an adult. So that I have a much different perspective, but it allowed me to sort of emotionally deal with all these feelings that had been with me for all that time. And I would imagine that if I went back in ten more years, or nine more years, maybe they wouldn't, maybe there wouldn't be any interest. But I imagine that for seeing some of those people, it would still be an important time to be able to see them again. We shared a lot of, we lost, I think it was four people died when I was in high school from car accidents, and each time, maybe that brought home also an awareness of that, you really do lose people. And there, I don't know, some of that is a pulling together. But there's a point to wanting to see each other again, even if maybe in ten years.

Terry's Reunion

Interviewer: Have you ever attended a high school reunion?

Terry: Yes. I have attended two of them, both my own and my husbands.

Interviewer: I'd like you to tell me about your own.

Terry: OK. Well, it was quite interesting because I found as the twentieth year approached, I knew it was going to be, I started thinking about my high school. And I thought, "gee, I wonder if anybody is going to do a reunion?" It was a place that I hadn't liked when I was there, and couldn't wait to get out of. I hated all the people it seemed like--what I could remember--large sections of it I blocked out entirely. But I found myself thinking of it, and I suppose it must be sort of a landmark time. I really didn't do anything about it, but finally I got a letter. They had found me through an old friend of my brothers, ha ha, because we had all left our home town and connections. And so they found me and I got the letter all about it and got excited and I decided, "by God, I'm going to go!" I just don't know why I decided to go, but it just seemed the thing to do, because it was in Kansas and I was in the Rockies. So came the time and sure enough I went. I got my husband to go with me and had quite a fun trip back to Kansas, and except for a couple of brief passes, I hadn't been back to my home town in twenty years.

Interviewer: Was it the first reunion that had been scheduled?

Terry: I'm not sure. They may have had others, but nobody really worked at it like they did at this one. ha ha And it was a graduating class of twenty-one, one had died just a year after we graduated, so that left twenty living members of the class and ten of them made it to the reunion. And I got the prize for coming the farthest.

Interviewer: They had prizes?

Terry: Oh yes. All reunions have prizes, almost always for the same things it appears. ha ha My prize was an ugly tray and matching coasters, a souvenir from Kansas. Haven't used the coasters yet, but I use the tray. It's just great. The state flower looks nothing at all like the state flower is supposed to look on the tray.

Interviewer: Did you feel any apprehension about going?

Terry: Not exactly apprehensive, just very wondering and, of course, there is the urge that, "well gee, I've got to look good for the reunion." I wonder how many people go on diets six months before their twentieth reunion comes up? ha ha ha Because you don't want

to look too bad for the folks you haven't seen for all those years. I suppose I was a little bit apprehensive and wondering how I'd be received and what everyone else had been doing. You know, who they were and so forth. And, I found as the reunion approached, I had blocked out so much of my high school years, repressed it I think is the word, ha ha ha, that I could hardly remember. So I called my mother to see if she had my old high school annual. She dug them all up somewhere, God knows where, and sent them off to me. ha ha And I started thumbing through them to remember peoples names and stuff. And that started a whole host of memories going, just looking through those annuals. But it kind of prepared me because there were lots of people that I had forgotten entirely. And, it was very weird to be in my home town again after all that time. Staying in a motel and walking around and being a grown-up in the place where I had been a kid, and remembered as a kid essentially. Cause I left about a year after I graduated from high school.

Interviewer: Did you talk to anyone about going to the reunion before you went?

Terry: Yes. Oh yes, I told everybody I was going. ha ha ha I guess the most common response was "gee, I just went to my tenth last year" or "gee, I'm just going to my tenth next year." ha ha ha Which I guess says something about the age of people that I know. "The twentieth Terry, for heavens sake!" ha ha ha But oh yes, I talked a lot with people about that I was going back to my high school reunion and what it was like.

I feel the whole experience of the reunion allowed me to make peace with my past in a way. All those painful memories and difficult times, and the way I hated my home town. It was a very small town obviously, and I couldn't wait to get out--go to the big city. But I felt that this time going back, looking around at things, and thinking, "yes, it wasn't such a bad place after all." And it allowed me to lay some of the ghosts from my past to rest, which I suppose is why I went.

Interviewer: I was wondering about that. I recall one person made the comment that it took care of a lot of unfinished business.

Terry: Right. Absolutely. There was definitely that feeling, those little tag-ends of memories.

Interviewer: Could you describe the setting to me?

Terry: Sure. It was set at a local restaurant/bar place. And you came for cocktails and dinner and conversation. It was a two-day thing. And that was pretty much for couples and the following day was a potluck picnic for the families and people brought both children and parents to that. A couple of our old teachers were there. And, being from so far out of town, I didn't bring anything to the potluck.

I remember those wonderful Kansas potlucks. ha ha ha People bringing delicious dishes, God there was so much food there and it was so good. But it started with cocktails and dinner. And half the class made it, I guess which is average. Very small, of course, because ten out of twenty plus spouses. Of the ten people that came there was only one class member that wasn't married, who was living with a woman. Both came and they were the only non-married couple. He was a guy who ran the bar in town.

Interviewer: Were most of them locals?

Terry: Most of them were from the area anyway, living in the region not too far away in Kansas. Actually, I shared the prize for coming the farthest with the person that I had been closest to in high school. This other woman, who is now living in Washington, D. C. being a sort of an upper-middle class housewife, but also involved in the arts and theatrical world. She had gone off after we graduated from high school to be the world's greatest actress. And now she is doing amateur work in D.C. and married to a fellow that's a journalist there. But I would say there were three people who I was actually interested in seeing from the class. And two out of the three were at the reunion and I heard enough about the third one to know what he had been doing over the years and so forth.

Interviewer: What was it like when you walked through the door? Did you find yourself able to recognize people?

Terry: Yes I did. At first they looked a little different, but I found that after about a half an hours conversation everyone started looking the same. And I looked around the room after about three hours of conversation and found that there was everybody, forming into the same social groups that they were in in high school. ha ha ha The people that had hung around together happened to be standing around talking to one another. ha ha ha It was small enough so that everybody could see everybody and talk to everybody, which they did. And everybody would get up and do a little speech about what they'd been doing in the last twenty years.

Interviewer: Did you do that? Was it the kind of thing where you got up and talked about yourself?

Terry: Yah, we did that after dinner. Everybody sitting around the table and everyone gave a little speech.

Interviewer: I was curious because some people said they were sent a questionnaire asking what they had been doing for the last ten years or twenty years, and then they put together a little booklet of it.

Terry: Yah, right. Well they did that at mine too. It took about a year to get it after the reunion. ha ha ha And the pictures and

so forth. But since the class was so much smaller, it was possible for everyone to talk.

Interviewer: What were some of your conversations like?

Terry: Well, a lot of them were recalling old high school days. Some amazing stories about the party after the senior prom which had been at my house, and which I had almost entirely forgotten. I remembered that the party had been there, but I blanked out almost all memories from the party except the memory of Robert sitting at the top of the stairs and throwing up all the way down it. ha ha I told him that. He didn't remember at all, but he told the story of how, I guess he had gotten so drunk that he had fallen in the bathroom or something and cracked his head open and was bleeding all over. There were all these stories of those days. I couldn't remember any of that happening.

Interviewer: Why do you suppose?

Terry: I think that I just disliked high school a great deal. It was very painful for me. It was a very small town and I didn't really feel any kindred spirits there. ha And never quite felt in with the social group, or even wanting to be. And my family was not a farm family but most people there were, and my vocabulary at that time, I never said farmer without adding "dumb farmer"--I just really disliked it. I could hardly wait, and felt that once I got out to college I would be able to find people with my same interests. So, well, it's interesting because I have talked with a number of women in consciousness-raising groups, and found that, by and large, they all disliked high school and found it equally painful, whether they were queen of the prom or whether they were the odd-one-out. ha ha ha It seemed to be equally painful for all of them. That was a great revelation to me because I always assumed that the popular girls that were cheerleaders and prom queens and stuff like that, but I found that most of them didn't like it either. ha ha There were a few that liked it. The height of their life was high school. Telling stories with great pleasure about this or the other thing that happened and "do you remember," "do you remember." But, so a lot of the conversation was "do you remember" type.

And it was interesting too because very often one person would tell a story that involved one or two or three of the others and the others might not remember that at all. And then someone else would tell a story that involved the first person and he would have forgotten that. And so everyone had very selective memories. There were some stories that everyone remembered. But quite a few things that one person would remember, that for some reason had made a mark on their minds, that the others would have forgotten it.

Interviewer: Backing up a little bit to what you were talking about in terms of how everybody seemed to feel like they were miserable in

high school, did you get a chance to talk to anybody at the reunion about that kind of thing? To see if they felt the same way?

Terry: To some extent I did. But partly because the same problem still existed there. They were not generally kindred spirits twenty years later, and in general, had turned into the sorts of adults that had been predictable from the kind of high school students they were. And so, I would say there were maybe two that I felt even partly at home with.

Interviewer: I'd be interested in knowing how those stories of the past occupied your time. It seems that whenever you don't have a lot of things in common, there tends to be a lot of that.

Terry: Right. You go back to whatever it is that you did have in common. Of course everybody talked a little bit about what they were doing now and sort of gave an account of themselves, bragged about their children and so forth. ha ha

Interviewer: Did the future come up?

Terry: I don't remember any of that. The only time the future came up was the suggestion that we have another reunion at twenty-five years. Which everyone sort of agreed, but I think most people thought that it was a little too soon. ha ha And I feel that it would be very unlikely that I would go back at twenty-five years. If I went to another reunion, possibly I'd go to my fiftieth. My mother-in-law interestingly enough just went to her fiftieth. It was quite a reunion year there for a while. ha ha ha It seemed like everyone I knew was going to reunions. But no, very little talk about the future. I certainly didn't feel that I had very much to say to anyone that I particularly wanted to write or carry on the relationships.

Interviewer: Did you find any surprises at the reunion? Did anything shock you?

Terry: Well I suppose one thing that surprised me was the fellow that got the prize for changing the most. That's another traditional prize at reunions, the one who has changed the most. And another is for the person who has changed the least. And, this was a rather quiet, mild mannered fellow, at least he seemed that way to me. Although some of the stories I heard that night about what really went on in high school, ha ha, I hadn't been aware of. But he was so changed I never would have known him if I hadn't been taken over to his bar which he was running. And he really looked like he had been through the wars, just ravaged. And totally unlike the young fellow that I knew. Everyone agreed without even discussing it that he was the one that changed the most. In fact, everyone was in agreement about the prizes, they obviously agreed to who had changed the least. It was a fellow that had kind of looked like a middle-aged man when he was in high school and he still looked

identical. ha ha ha Only now he looked more appropriate for his age. ha ha ha

Interviewer: Did you find that over time, things that were once serious became funny in the retelling?

Terry: Oh somewhat yes. Some stories of some drunken occasions, like the fellow whose life got saved by my girlfriend at the party became a cause for hilarity. I'm sure that it was serious at the time. And, it was quite easy for me to look back at, make jokes about how awful it was, now that I'm twenty years older and have a great deal more self-confidence. ha ha

Interviewer: Did the reunion help your self-confidence?

Terry: In a way I suppose, what it did was allow me to settle a few old scores. To think of people, well that you didn't like me very much then, but boy you can't say a word now. ha ha I'm smart and I'm tough and I know where I'm going and what I'm doing and, you can't hurt me anymore. It was that sort of feeling. Finally, finally my high school days can't hurt me anymore. I can look at them and they just have no power over me anymore. They have no power over my memories or over my present or any way that I am now.

Interviewer: Can you recall anything odd or interesting about the way people were talking?

Terry: No. I wouldn't call it odd or anything, just mainly a great deal of hilarity in remembering old times, and as I said, people dropping into their former roles.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

Terry: Well it's hard to describe. It's just that the more we talked, the more everyone began to seem the same. And it appeared that even if we didn't consciously remember how we related to that person in high school, there we were kind of back on the same old footing. Whether we liked them or we didn't like them.

Interviewer: Did it happen over time?

Terry: Yes over time. I would say from when we came for cocktails and had a short cocktail hour, then we had dinner and after dinner while we were still sitting and giving our little speeches, and then we broke up into somewhat looser conversational groups. And I would say by about an hour after dinner this phenomenon had occurred. That everyone started just becoming like they were and the old social groups forming. After all the newness had worn off and everyone had recognized one another and met the spouses, and had been brought up to date a little bit. Then people started drifting toward those people that they had more to say to than the others. Which tended

to be just as it was in high school.

Interviewer: Did you have a good time?

Terry: Yes, I would say I did. I've been to better parties in my life, ha ha, Kansas folk tend to be fairly straight as a rule, ha, they hadn't changed much in that way from when I was there.

Interviewer: Do you think others might have been feeling the same kinds of things you did in terms of going back to the reunion and reliving the past in a way?

Terry: I think so, yes. This one fellow that had changed the most, I think he found the whole experience painful, because, and I almost suspect, there is almost a self-selection device of who comes to a reunion and who doesn't. The ones that feel that they have themselves together and have their lives together and are pleased with where they are, they are the ones that tend to go to their reunions. And the ones that are kind of falling apart and are all wasted and in bad shape, just don't go. And, he got drug by a couple of us to the reunion because we were drinking in his bar in the afternoon before. And Hal said, "ah no" and I think he probably found it a painful experience. And I would guess that it depends on how you like where you are in the present whether its a good experience or a bad experience.

Interviewer: Do you think people develop strategies for managing the past? You mentioned before some things about selective memory.

Terry: Ugh, huh. Well there is certainly a tendency to bring up all the wilder stories, not the day-to-day things, but "remember the occasion we did that" that had been somehow noteworthy. Trashed the gym or gotten real drunk, ha ha, or some notable experiences with a teacher or something like that. And a lot of stories about teachers too.

Interviewer: I was wondering about that.

Terry: Oh, ha ha, at the picnic the next day a couple of teachers came, but there were an awful lot of stories, little things I wasn't aware of at the time. I was a little innocent in those days, and also a bit detached. Not quite in with the social life of the school because I was always sort of an outsider, and so a lot of the things that went on I wasn't aware of. And I heard a lot of stories about teachers and what they had been doing and the way they related to various members of the class, that I hadn't been aware of at the time it was happening. And so now as an adult, I could look back on the teachers recognizing them as adults with many of them at the time I was there in their late twenties or early thirties and I could look at them with an entirely different perspective. And see them as people and see them trying to relate to these high school

kids, ha ha ha Recasting some of my memories of the teachers in line with the new view of them as grown-ups. Which, never quite saw them that way when I was in high school, or at least only in flashes.

Interviewer: If you were interviewing me about my high school reunion, what kinds of questions would you ask me?

Terry: Well certainly a number of the same ones that you asked me. Did you like it? How do you feel about seeing people again? Did you like them or not? Did you feel comfortable or not? And I would want to know if it had had the same structure as the other ones that I know of. And I would be interested in what led you to go to the reunion in the first place and who goes to them and who doesn't and why.