

The Greatest Prank by the Class of 1968 That Didn't Work by Randy Olsen

The 50 Year Class Reunion for the Lathrop High School Class of 1968 brought discussion of some pranks pulled by class members, and brought to my mind an ambitious prank that did not succeed. It has been mostly concealed, but can probably now be told.

As we approached the end of our senior year of high school, we felt deep in our bones that the Class of 1968 was something unique. We had a good mix of upholding high standards set by earlier classes, and breaking new ground.

As an initial matter, we dealt with the Flood and were part of the community response in recovery which was heroic in its own way. Our senior year was a period of recovery and rebuilding and by graduation there was a sense of accomplishment that permeated the whole community.

Then the school was bursting with students: we had a larger student body than enrolled at the University of Alaska campus nearby. We had visiting students from Monroe. For the first time in our school experience we needed to share hall lockers, and everybody made it work.

In sports we won our share of contests, although I don't remember state championships. In music Bob Boko's band was named one of the top 100 high school bands in America. The band and choir got the highest scores in competition with Anchorage schools, and we had representatives from each at All-Northwest activities out of state. The debate team excelled, going to Anchorage and winning first place. (Jim DeWitt and Becky Gordon.) The drama and musical productions were outstanding. (The band, at its Christmas Concert, had the surprise finale of putting the instruments aside and forming a 65-person choir, singing "Silent Night", and pulling off a stunt the choir could never counter-attack.) Arctic Capers, with its theme "Up, Up and Away (with the Class of '68)", set to the music by the 5th Dimension was icing on the cake. (The song would win the Grammy Award for Song of the Year.)

And we broke some new ground, circumventing the usual practice of trying to keep the theme of the Senior Ball secret until doors were opened (which was never successful) by announcing it in advance. Our own Jane Haycraft first won the Miss Fairbanks title, and then won the Miss Alaska competition in Anchorage. We were pretty cocky--whatever we did seemed successful.

Then came some upsetting news. In the few weeks before graduation the administration decreed significant changes in our graduation traditions. First, instead of a valedictorian address, four short student addresses would be given. (I believe, but could be wrong, that Gwen Pilcher was our valedictorian. It sure wasn't me. I still feel bad about that decision.) Jim DeWitt, student body president, and I were somehow chosen as two of the student speakers. (I can't remember the selection or appointment process.)

Then, contrary to the usual practice of graduation ceremonies in Hering Auditorium, (nice seats; nice setting; nice stage; our own school hallways) it was decreed that graduation would be held in the university's Patty Building gymnasium (bleacher seats, gym setting-no stage setting but a platform on a gym floor).

Then, contrary to the tradition of the Malemute Concert Band playing "Pomp and Circumstance" as the processional and recessional, the music would be provided by an organist.

A triple-whammy. No arguments were persuasive, as the administration was unmoved by our logic or our tears. (We didn't really cry, but there were plenty of emotional arguments.) We were not used to failure or disappointment. So the prank developed.

The prank was the brain-child of Jim DeWitt. It was to be an act of defiance and whimsy rolled into one. At graduation we would march in to the dignified strains of "Pomp and Circumstance", as the administration wanted, but at the conclusion, while filing out, we would cut out the organ, and fill the air with "Up, Up and Away". He talked to me, and we kept our plans secret from, I think, everybody

but a junior class member we needed to make it work.

We only had a couple of days before graduation, and it was a hectic time-end of year activities, tests, yearbook signing, etc. We went to the Patty Building and talked our way into the gym. (This required some fraud, as we were also trying to cover our tracks and keep from getting caught and being possibly suspended from school, and not getting to graduate from high school, or go to college, etc.) Once in the gym, we located the organ, which was up on a second tier, behind the bleachers where the audience for graduation would be facing the platform, and we saw where it was plugged into the wall. We climbed under the bleachers to examine the wall under the bleachers and found a wall outlet nearby. Seeing the layout, we left and made a continuous, 15 minute recording of "Up, Up and Away".

The day before graduation Jim and I went back to the Patty Building with an extension cord and tape player, and somehow sneaked back into the gym. We unplugged the organ from its wall outlet and into the extension cord, which we snaked over the edge and down to the wall outlet under the bleachers. We set up the tape player there. The plan was for our junior class friend to wait underneath through the ceremonies, and then, at the moment for the triumphal recessional, to pull the plug on the organ, and start blasting our own class theme.

We met up in caps and gowns for all the graduation stuff, and we filed in to the organ music, as expected. There were the usual delays getting ready and waiting, but eventually 300-plus students got in and seated, with proud families in the bleachers. Jim and I were up on the platform as part of the ceremonies, and as we looked towards the bleachers we could not see the extension cord dropping from the second tier down the wall behind the bleachers. We were surrounded by administration folk also on the stand-principal, superintendant, etc., but quietly had a couple of exchanges about what this might mean. Our speeches were intended to be short, so while all the other things were going on (principal certifying that we had completed requirements, superintendant accepting us and extolling our accomplishments and promising futures, etc.) I scrapped my prepared remarks. I made a quick mental outline in which I encouraged our helper to check the cord. When it was my turn to speak I made some sort of analogy about us not being alone and family and friends being like parachute cords holding us up, and we should appreciate and be sure to "CHECK OUR CORDS" often. It wasn't a great analogy and it wasn't really a good speech but I got said what was important at the time, which had nothing to do with graduation sentiments. (A Newsminer article the next day made my comments sound better than they were.)

Well, it was over, and the organ started up, and we filed out. No "Up, UP and Away." Dang. We soon learned that part of the delay in things starting was the organ wouldn't work. They saw the extension cord, unplugged the organ from the cord and plugged it back into the wall socket, and it fired up. They traced the cord to our helper under the bleachers, but he didn't get into too much trouble because, after all, we weren't on high school property, and his dad was high up in the university administration. So that is my story about the greatest unsuccessful prank by the Class of '68, and Jim DeWitt can expand on it or correct it as he wishes.