

PICTURES AT THE SCHOOL

By

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Shortly before the Christmas school vacation break in 1967, I had a telephone call from Mr. Threadgill, who had been my school principal from the second through the eighth grade, and who was still the Headmaster. He asked me to take a series of pictures at the Atlanta Avenue School, which was in its last year of use before being torn down and replaced with a new building. Mr. Threadgill wanted me to produce a yearbook-like souvenir booklet as a memento of the old school and its last classes of students.

As I took group photos of each teacher's class and scenes of the building, waves of nostalgia came over me. I located my eighth-grade locker, situated directly across the hall from the principal's office, in what (for me) had been a most inconvenient location, as we boys had often used it as a sort of headquarters for some of our infamous juvenile pranks. ("The Great Baby Frogs Caper" had originated in that locker.) The wooden-floor hallways---always shiny and a little slippery after being oiled-down---still looked much the same as when I had walked them years earlier. My nose once more tingled from the distinctive, pungent-aromatic smell of the red sawdust-like floor cleaner the custodians used with their push-brooms.

In the cafeteria, I could have sworn the same old equipment I had known as a youngster was still in use---the manual dishwasher and the antique ice cream machine were still there. Were the students still eating off the same plates we had used decades earlier? For that matter, were they the same plates and utensils my *father* had used in the 1920's and the 1930's, when *he* had attended the same school? As the day's lunch hour had just concluded, the cafeteria still had the familiar school-lunchtime aroma that brought back vivid memories.

In the auditorium---now silent and empty---things still looked pretty much the same as they had been at the weekly chapel meetings we had attended all through elementary and junior high school. Behind the stage, the big painted mural still dominated the rear wall. The taupe stage curtains looked, as they always had, as if they could use a good dry-cleaning. The gold-fringed American Flag that we had saluted and pledged allegiance to from the second grade until I went off to high school still flowed down its wooden staff at the side of the stage, albeit now a bit washed-out-looking. Two squat, empty, white-painted planters were still in place on the left and right edges of the platform. The heavy black podium presided from its usual front place at center-stage, although there were now noticeable scratches and scuff marks on it. The painted wooden trim that surrounded the stage on all sides now had a dull, faded appearance. The hundreds of folding chairs we had sat on and arranged and re-arranged at the principal's behest were now stacked against the walls, looking very tired.

I remembered the "Cub-Scout" meetings I had attended in the auditorium every fourth

Thursday night for years while in elementary school. I stepped up onto the stage to where we had once performed our Elizabethan "This is Thy Life---Robin Hood" skit in the fourth grade---the first time, by the way, I had ever delivered a commercial, even if it was a parody of a real one:

***"Proctor's Practical Pike-staffs! The staff with the SUPERIOR spike! '
'Tis a Proctor', 'tis no Gamble!"***

Stuff like that.

Another time we put on an Indian tribe skit, memorable because part of the play required us to smoke a "peace-pipe" (actually a self-made wooden "prop") during the performance---but several of us (including me) started choking on the fake "smoke", to the amusement of the audience. And there were other skits, many others. For a moment, it seemed as if I could still see us nine boys onstage in costumes delivering our pre-adolescent punch-lines to our parents' and friends' laughter and applause.

Leaving the now-vacant auditorium, I tramped down into the musty subterranean furnace room, where the ancient boiler carried on, gurgling and clanking, still shooting its pungent little puffs of steam out through the rusty pipe joints, as it always had. The old coal shovel with which I had seen the custodian fire the furnace many times leaned forlornly against the coal bunker. The dank room had a decaying look to it, and was obviously in its last days. Adjusting my camera, I shot some photos of the outdated furnace and boiler in what would undoubtedly be my last visit down there.

I went outside and walked around the school grounds for one last time, stopping here and there to take a picture or two, all the while reminiscing about the melancholy-looking old building in which I had spent so much of my youth.

The veteran school was still a solidly-handsome, three-story brick-and-stone structure with the year "1918" in foot-high, stone-carved numerals over the main entrance. The building had originally been built as the Sheffield High School, and had served as such until the late-'thirties, when it was gutted by fire. Even though rebuilt as an elementary and junior high school and still structurally sound, its crime now was that it was old . . . just too old---

I finished my photo shoot and put the camera back into its case. Standing at the rear of the school building, I looked across the small cobblestone parking lot at a big rectangular pattern of foundation stones outlined on the ground---the only remnants of where, for decades, the companion of the Atlanta Avenue building, the two-story, brick-and-stone Annapolis Avenue School, had once stood. I walked over onto the now-barren site of so many of my youthful adventures. The pair of brick structures had formed a complex with instruction from the first through the eighth grades. But when a new Junior High School was built on the bluff overlooking the Tennessee River in the early-'sixties, the Annapolis Avenue School was torn down. The Atlanta Avenue building, now an elementary school, had trooped on alone for a few more years, until . . . now, its days were also nearing an end.

Just beyond where the Annapolis Avenue School had been, I could see the new replacement building now nearing completion---a fine, modern, concrete-and-glass structure---functionally a great improvement over the old buildings. But I knew it would never be able to match the history or the charm of the Annapolis and Atlanta Avenue Schools.

