

Speech: Edwin S. Gleaves

Cohn High School 50th Reunion of the Class of 1954: Remembrances of Things Past

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Here we are together again after 50 years, one full half a century since some of us last saw each other when we graduated from Cohn High School in 1954, on what was once the city's western border, reared against the sky. Had we been born a few centuries earlier, those intervening fifty years would have been years of little change. The truth is that for thousands of years most of the world's population lived just as their parents lived, worked just as their parents worked, and died where their ancestors had been laid to rest. The idea of progress, even of change itself, was not only foreign, it was simply unknown, unthinkable.

Not with us. Little did we know, back in the tranquil years of the 1950s, that ahead of us lay a world of change--local, national, international. Experts are now telling us that at the current rate of technological growth, the 21st century will be equivalent to 20,000 years at today's rate of progress. Whatever that means, that's too fast for me. As one young student of history said, "I wouldn't mind studying current events if there weren't so many of them."

Tonight, I would like for us to leave high-speed technology and current events behind while we journey backward briefly to the Nashville we once knew, the Nashville and West Nashville of the fifties.

Do you remember when downtown Nashville was the place to go--the only place to go--for many things in our lives? Back then, before the days of videos, DVDs, and multiplex suburban theaters, we went to downtown Nashville to see first-run movies such as *The Caine Mutiny*, *On the Waterfront*, *Rear Window*, and *White Christmas*--all hits of 1954--at the Loews Vendome Theater, the Knickerbocker, the Paramount, or the Tennessee. Now those grand old theaters are gone, all gone.

If we wanted to shop, we also went downtown--to Harvey's, where I saw my first escalator, to Loveman's Department Store, to the "new" Cain-Sloan building on 5th and Church, and to Castner-Knott on 7th and Church. They too are gone, all gone.

Nashville also had first-rate bookstores downtown in the 1950s: Mills, Zibart's, Stokes & Stockell. Gone, all gone.

And there were a surprising number of restaurants downtown as well: Cross Keys, the B&W Cafeteria, three Krystals, two Orange Bars, two Zagers, and Satsuma, among others. All gone? Not quite. Satsuma is still serving down on Union Street. Go there while you can; it has already closed once but reopened by popular demand.

By the way, for most of our school years, we rode the bus downtown. How many of you owned your own cars in high school? Most of us borrowed our family cars when we could. Need I mention how different that is from today's high school kids? Today's high school parking lots are bigger than their football fields!

Closer to home, West Nashville had its own downtown on Charlotte Avenue, roughly between 42nd and 51st Avenues. I'm sure that you remember it well. I do--the Dari-Delite on 43rd and Charlotte where my dog Vicki and I savored our first soft-serve ice cream; Allen and Bean Appliance Store, down near 51st, where I saw my first television set; my grandfather's drug store next door where I was treated special because of my name (but still had to pay full price for a cherry Coke); and the Sanitary Barber Shop near 46th and Charlotte where Doc Martin nearly cut my ears off. I bet that you remember Lovell's Pharmacy, later Dorris's, next door to that barber shop and Thomerson's Drugs a couple of blocks down Charlotte Avenue. If the potions and purgatives that we bought in the drug stores didn't work, there were no less than three funeral homes ready to serve us: Burkitt & Bracey, Pettus & Owen, and Wood Funeral Home, later Pettus, Owen, & Wood.

In West Nashville we had several places to shop, such as Kuhn's and Katz's and Kroger's, and quite a few little places to eat--if we could afford to eat out. And best of all, we had our own *elite* movie theater, fondly and reverently called the E-lite Theater, where we could see third-run movies at bargain prices and, once upon a time, cowboy movies on Saturdays, starring Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, and Lash LaRue, for the princely price of 12 cents.

Those of us who could get a car would sometimes venture out Charlotte Avenue to Gable's Ice Cream and Sandwich Shop, a popular drive-in restaurant, where we could hear Doris Day singing sweetly of her "Secret Love," Kitty Callen reminding us that "Little Things Mean a Lot," and Frank Sinatra crooning "Three Coins in a Fountain"--all interspersed with a new sound to the words, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," by Bill Haley and the Comets. It was in 1954, by the way, that a shakin' young fellow from Memphis by the name of Elvis cut his first record--and the rest was history.

Another drive-in, the Belle-Aire Drive-In Theater, was just up the road. It was there that some of us watched movies from our cars, while others of us, shall we say, continued our education. I distinguished myself by driving off with the speaker three times. Mr. Cool I wasn't.

Need I say that our old neighborhood has changed over the years, along with nearly every other aspect of our lives? And need I mention that Cohn itself has changed? The building we knew has not served as a neighborhood high school since 1983, but it now serves our community in other ways through its Senior Renaissance Center, the Cohn Community Education Program, and the Cohn Adult High School. Those of us here tonight remember it, as noted on the Cohn High Alumni Association webpage, as "a place of learning and inspiration, . . . a place where lifelong friendships are formed."

Yes, we are still here but we too have changed. In 1954 we left the security of the school that many of us had known for six years to go out into the sunlight and shadow, the triumphs and tragedies, of the real world. We either went into the job market or into military service or to college or got married--or all of the above. We knew the joys of good marriages and the pain of failed ones, but through it all we did our best to be good parents and to raise our children in the way that they should go. Then we watched our grandchildren come into a world as different from that of their parents' as our children's was from ours. Sometimes we have dared tell our children how they should raise theirs, knowing all along that we didn't have to raise them ourselves. We learned quickly that child-rearing is for the young, and we aren't that young anymore.

I started out by noting how different life was a few centuries ago. But consider this: had we been born only fifty years earlier, the chances of our being around at our current age would have been minimal. Life expectancy in our country in the early years of the twentieth century was only 47 years. Surely it is by the grace of God that some of us, but not all of us, have lived long enough to share this night together, to recall our formative years at Cohn High School and to share with each other a little of what we have experienced since that day in 1954 when we blithely and confidently took hold of our diplomas and set out, as we sang in our alma mater, to conquer and prevail.

Okay, so we didn't always conquer, but we did prevail, and we are here tonight to prove it. I am confident that what we learned at Cohn, and the friendships we shared, prepared us for the half century that followed, and I am thankful, as I'm sure you are, that tonight we can share this common milestone in our lives and say together, Hail to thee, our alma mater, Cohn High, all hail!