

Austin High School, but not memories, fades away

A former Westsider reflects on the passing of an era

By LINDA GARTZ

Chicago's Austin High School, which closes its doors this June, holds a mythical, magical place in my memory. Its closing is bittersweet for me, not because I attended Austin, but because it's another icon of the West Side's past that has faded away, another piece of my family's past and another era going extinct.

My dad, Fred Gartz, was born on the West Side in 1914 to Romanian immigrant parents. He graduated from Austin in 1934. His younger brother, Frank, graduated in 1942. Growing up in West Garfield Park in the 1950s and '60s, I always figured I'd go to Austin too. It was my neighborhood high school and sounded like an idyllic place from the stories my dad told. He fenced in the hallways after school, swam in the pool, boxed, and played ball with friends.

His high school sweetheart, whom he met in the choir at Bethel Lutheran Church, West End and Keeler, was a little younger than he and also attended Austin. Oh, he was smitten with this young lady. Her name was Marie Coleman, and I learned more about her when I discovered my dad's 1933-35 diaries after his death.

He wrote about the notes he placed in her Austin locker to ask her to a dance, on a date, or to meet after church choir practice. She dropped off missives of her own into his locker, inviting him to parties or to walk home from school together, saying yes or no to his invitations. Marie graduated from Austin High School in 1935, a year after my dad. "Our class was so large, 900 graduates, they had to hold graduation on two nights to fit everyone into the auditorium," says Marie, now 89 years old.

Seventy-two years ago, she asked my dad to be her date for the Austin prom. It was held at the Edgewater Beach Hotel and afterwards they went to Russell's Barbeque on North Avenue. "I think everyone from Austin went to Russell's after the prom," she said. "I wore a pink dress, and boy, your dad thought it was a knock-out!"

His diary entry of June 7, 1935, recorded a more poetic impression of Marie that night: "She was a most beautiful vision. An enchanted mirage."

Almost a decade later, my dad's kid brother, Frank, took Marie's younger sister, Eva, to the Austin prom. But by the time Frank graduated in 1942, America was at war, and that meant induction into the armed services was looming for the young male graduates of Austin. My uncle was around long enough to be best man at my parents' wedding in November, 1942. His Austin prom date, Eva, sang solos for the nuptials. Frank left for Army Air Force training in January, 1943. A month later, another Austin High School chum, Harvey Duck, was inducted.

I learned about Harvey from the collection of World War II letters sent to and from my uncle from 1943-1945. Among them are several from an Austin teacher, Ms. Catherine Hartley. She regularly wrote to her former high school students serving in the armed forces, bringing them up-to-date on each other. So many of the scores of letters written to my Uncle Frank came not only from family members, but from neighbors, family friends, classmates, and



Photo courtesy of David S. Hall

THOSE WERE THE DAYS: Austin High School Class of 1953.

teachers like Miss Hartley. It was a time of solidarity, and just about everyone made the effort to write, bolstering the young men's spirits and confidence for the battles ahead.

On May 7, 1944, Miss Hartley wrote to Frank to give him the latest news on his Austin High School buddies:

"Cpl. Harvey Stocker, radio man and gunner, is on furlough. Stillo said some of his gang were afraid they might be sent back into the infantry. Barnstein's ship is in the active part of war and is in among some hot islands. Lt. Heggie looked grand when he was home on furlough after getting his wings. Duck was wearing 2 stars on his stripes."

Harvey Duck was one of my uncle's best friends. Next to Harvey's senior photo in the 1942 Maroon and White, the Austin High School yearbook, Duck noted that his ambition was to "become a successful sports writer." He reached his

goal at the Chicago Daily News, where he spent 35 years as sports-writer, then moved on to be public relations director for STP, the petroleum company and auto racing sponsor.

My uncle never got the chance to fulfill his dreams and ambitions. Stationed near Naples, Italy, Frank survived numerous bombing missions as an Army Air Force navigator through the end of the war. After VE (Victory in Europe) Day, he chose to stay in Italy to fly around the top brass, who were arriving by the plane loads to rebuild Europe. It was a grand adventure for my 21-year-old uncle—until he contracted polio in October, 1945. It infected his brain and he died within five days.

His Austin classmate, Harvey Duck was a pallbearer at his funeral, and I learned he visited my grandparents almost every Christmas until he moved away from the Midwest.

Almost two decades after my uncle's death, in 1962, I was ready for high school. But the early 1960s ushered in profound upheaval on Chicago's West Side. School boundaries had changed and Austin was no longer my neighborhood high school as it had been for my dad and his brother. Racial tensions were building as African-Americans moved into previously all-white communities, and white flight began in earnest. We stayed until 1966, one of the last white families to move from our West Side neighborhood.

Now Austin High, as we knew it, is leaving the West Side too, another piece of the past to disappear.