

## **A Visit to the Venard (Reunion, Class of 1966 [2017])**

We sat around a large round metal table in a shaded rock-walled enclosure where Brother Fred's apple orchard once flourished. Just six of us for that Friday afternoon moment, though nearly another dozen would join us that evening or tomorrow. Laughing at the memories, inwardly alone with private thoughts. Not unlike visiting the hallowed ground of a memorialized battlefield, mindful of where you walked and what you disturbed, we each knew that something special happened here. That something special was us.

Call it "contact magic." Touch a wall, walk a path, revisit the view from a window, and the past welcomes you back, in a rush, and not absent emotion. Time is irrelevant and you don't accept it's been fifty years since that last touch, walk or window. And so it was during a weekend in late May that fifteen former seminarians and several wives representing a range of high school Venard graduations came "home" to Clarks Summit, PA, to commemorate fifty years since Maryknoll Junior Seminary closed its massive oak doors, the property soon sold. Remaining classes were moved elsewhere and new residents shortly arrived. Today the grounds house the faculty and students of the Baptist-operated Clarks Summit University—the tenants have remained the same since, the school shingle having navigated several iterations.

We were giddy kids that warm Friday afternoon, in from Washington, California, Florida, Michigan and points in-between. It took more than a few wrong turns through new neighborhoods before finding Abington Road, then the old stone church and the once familiar turn east over a pair of rolling hills bisecting former pastures once populated by Brother John's cows. The 'T' intersection and the small grocery which was once the epicenter of Clarks Green just a block or two north gone, new construction having erased any evidence of the movie that played in our heads. Moments later, as though awakened from a long dormant dream, aptly named Bell Mountain in the distance, the iconic bell tower rose above the distant trees. A half century had passed since most last saw this picture. Whatever the decision to choose Maryknoll, Clarks Summit, and a suitcase stuffed with dark suits over the hometown high school, this is where it began-- for most, our first time away from the only home we knew, the unknown, unfamiliar and a million questions just over the rise. A half-century later, the memory again had a face.

We met in the Jackson Hall rotunda outside the former Chapel Saturday morning, now over fifteen strong, no longer racing to beat the door closing; when that happened, expect quality time with the Dean of Discipline. The tower bells still ring, though automation has replaced the long white cords that once dangled near the Chapel entrance. To look back down the one long hall, little had changed. Summoned by the Rector, en route to a Saturday evening reel-to-reel viewing of *The Magnificent Seven*, or waiting in line for your turn to call home, light bounces off the marble floors and walls as it has for the past ninety-eight years. A few short steps the other way and the academic wing, the "Dew Lab" still anchoring the far end, has changed not at all. A floor below, the gym is now one large open classroom, though frayed black wire mesh still covers the upper windows.

If you can accept the absence of the altar, pews, and other remnants of what had been the Chapel, little has changed within as well. The large, well-lit space is now a peaceful lounge, ideal for quiet reflection. The pillars, high chiseled inscriptions, floors, walls, windows—they still speak. The not-so-well-known back stairway from the Sanctuary through the former TV room brought us into the former Refectory, now a library, as is the Rec Room, and the Music Room, where fifty years earlier we mellowed to Maryanne Faithful, the Beatles, the "Stones," while debating the Vietnam War, the curriculum, the noon

meal, maybe even Oliver Twist. We remembered hot dogs and beans on Saturdays, having to sport the white apron to leave the table, Fruit Loops, silence until the hand-bell rang and the podium reader was dismissed, Visiting Sunday treats, sounds and steam spewing from the dishwashing monster and—truth be told—those late night refectory raids. The ledged, wooden-windowed door to the small condiments “store” remains. Where we once sorted “Mother’s Laundry” into personal cubicles is now office, as are much of the dormitories, though those tall mahogany lockers remain in many quarters. All our worldly possessions were kept either there, in the locker room, or inside a study hall desk. What else could we possibly need those nine months. We visited the former infirmary, where carefully dipping one’s thermometer in the hot tea might earn you another day’s rest, further delaying some dreaded exam. A visit to the bell tower itself was off limits, but that was always the case. Still.....we recalled the late night smoking session when one of the gathered group tripped over a darkened wire, setting the chimes to sing well after lights out.

Brother Fred’s Apple Cellar is now a well-apportioned student coffee shop, but the rest of that fabulous orchard has been replaced with faculty and student living quarters. The sister’s residence was torn down fifteen years ago, the red barn gone since the ‘70s. The brother’s residence is now a music building—the memory of Penal Squad and sorting screws under the watchful eyes of Brother Paul haunts us still. We walked the “Rosary path” that still encloses the baseball field, some of us remembering the interrupted soccer game when we heard JFK had been shot. The pitcher’s rubber and home plate remain just as we last walked off the field against, perhaps, Mt. Holyoke, though deep left and right fields now include impressive sporting, dining, recreational and other student life structures. Still, one can’t help but notice that within the confines of that black-tarred path, so little has changed. Mindful of where we walked and what we disturbed, still laughing but as deep in thought, we remembered why this place was special, why we returned each September then, as we did now.

Further afield, the pool is gone, now just a wetland. The Lake—that will never change. We spoke of pulling Brother John’s tractor out of the ice, hockey games, “Capture the Flag” in the hill beyond, feeding the ducks, the path through the pasture for a Wed or Sun afternoon walk to Clarks Green for a Yoo-hoo or on to town for the latest 45rpm by the Searchers or Four Seasons. The two-lane road that passes the Lake is still referred to as “Venard Road,” the toboggan hill now the home of a Baptist Church and a Jewish retirement home. We laughed some more and swapped fresh stories, many closely held in secrecy until that weekend, over a handful of meals and just maybe a few drinks. Clarks Summit is no longer the sleepy little pit stop it was back then, but once outside its confines, those small quintessentially American towns on the way to the Nicolson Bridge remain frozen in time. And to think we once hiked those hills, sack lunch in hand, mischief somewhere on the agenda. After all, we were young kids: immortal, bulletproof, forever pushing the envelope to its limit, our whole lives ahead of us.

It’s been seventy-seven years since Thomas Wolfe published [You Can’t Go Home Again](#).

He never met us.