

# Class of 1957 History

by Betty Reinertsen (aka Liz Price), August 2007

Before the video, which is really my piece of the entertainment tonight, I would like to spend a few moments reminiscing about the community of Okemos, Okemos Schools, and the class of '57. If it's true that we are the products of (1) our genetic makeup and (2) our life experiences, then the environment in which those two converge is critical to our development. In other words, we are in part who we are because of the days we spent as students in Okemos School. The truth of that statement rests on the story I am about to tell you. '

The year is 1788 ... the place Perry, Michigan, 20 miles east of here. A baby boy is born into the Chippewa tribe ... his name, Johnny Okemos. His youthful years are spent living in villages situated along the Grand and Red Cedar Rivers. Even as a youth he claimed this area as Okemos City. Here he learned to hunt and fish with the other braves of his tribe. He is stro away. This ability stood him in good stead as a warrior. He fought as a scout for the British in the War of 1812. In the battle of Lower Sandusky, he distinguished himself as a leader but was gravely injured and left for dead on the battlefield. He miraculously recovered and to his braves this recovery was a sign that the Great Spirit favored him. It is not known if he tired of war or if he gained insight into the politics of war, but in the spring of 1814, he presented himself to the commanding officer of Fort Wayne in Detroit and declared, "Now I make peace and fight no more".

How he became a chief is disputed to this day. Among the Native Americans in Michigan chieftainship was neither elective nor hereditary but rested upon ability and influence and continued only as long as that influence was maintained. Some historians believe the romantic version, that his band of brothers bestowed the title upon him for his leadership ability and his close ties to the Great Spirit. Still, others believe the more pragmatic version that he was granted the title by the United States government for his participation in the political process. In any case, the title spoke to his bravery and cunning.

In 1833, the first white settler cleared land and built a home on the Red Cedar near the place where the camel back bridge now spans the river. As more settlers moved into the area, the community needed a school. In 1844, a cabin that was also used as a cooper- shop (barrel maker) was the site of the first school sessions. The cabin was located two miles east of the village (across from where the Crest Drive-in Theater would be built). There were five students and one teacher. The teacher's name was Miss Samantha Worden and for her efforts she received \$1.00 a week plus room and board.

At this time in history, the area was known as Hamilton and was home to the Chippewa. They used the lad to grow and cache their com, and the site of the old Baptist church was their sacred burial ground.

Old land records show that in 1846, for \$15.00 Mr. Freeman Bray purchased "for school purposes" a small hill in the village (where today the fire station is located). The first

schoolhouse was built on that site shortly thereafter. The building was a frame structure about 18 by 22 feet, made of oak and tamarack and sided with whitewood. On April 14, 1849, community leaders allocated a sum not to exceed \$5.00 for the purchase of books, a bookcase, and library table.

Most of the Chippewa were moved west, but Chief Okemos continued to hunt and fish the area and lived peacefully among the settlers until his death. He had four wives and many children. Sadly, most of them died of consumption in the epidemic of the 1830' s. Chief Okemos is described as the greatest and most influential warrior to make his home in Michigan and highly praised for his courage, his natural ability to command, and his strategy in battle. He died in 1858, having served his people and community with honor. In 1859, by legislative order the village of Hamilton was renamed Okemos. If not for that change, we would be having our 50th reunion from Hamilton High.

The village school building was added onto from time to time until 1873, when what we know as "the little white school house" a two-story frame structure, complete with belfry and fire escape was built south and west of the original school building. The total cost was \$3,400 complete with furniture! Okemos Consolidated School System was established in 1923, as one of the first rural agricultural school districts in Michigan. In that year on the east end of Mt. Hope Road, a three-story building constructed of brick and mortar, and dedicated to the memory of Chief Okemos opened its doors to 166 upper class students. Thus, our high school was born.

The only addition to the school prior to World War II was the shop and band building finished in 1937. In September of 1944, the class of '57 began its journey in the little white schoolhouse and for the next thirteen years as classmates we would grow and learn together.

The growth of Okemos remained fairly stable until after the Second World War, when the GI's came home and the baby boom generation gave birth to suburban development and we welcomed Indian Hills Subdivision. The population growth of the area required adding space for elementary students and a one-story three-room unit was built behind the high school ready for occupancy in the fall of 1948. Under the watchful eyes of Mrs. Adrich and Mrs. Volker, the class of '57 was the first to occupy this space.

That spring we spent weeks preparing for what to us seemed like a musical extravaganza complete with costumes and stage sets but to our parents and friends must have looked more like a country ho-down. Under the direction of Mrs. Davis, we sang our hearts out and who among us could ever forget "Oh my Darling Clementine". It was during these years that we became intertwined in the lives of each other. We not only spent our school days together, we shared birthdays, brownies and cub scouts and we spent Sundays in church pews side by side.

As fifth graders we moved into the high school building proper and as sixth graders we moved into the new elementary wing with Mr. Wakeman and Mrs. Clark. For seventh and eighth grades, we were back in the high school, and in 1955, began our high school years in earnest. We studied together, made music together. and, together at sporting events, defended our school pride. In high school, we had a lot of firsts: our first cigarette, first beer, first date, first kiss, first true love and, probably, our first broken heart.

While we were in the ninth grade, there was another name change and we would graduate from Okemos Public not Okemos Consolidated Schools. During our junior year, we presented our brand of off-Broadway theater with the play "But Fair Tomorrow". The theme of the senior prom was "Now is the Hour".

In Hollywood, "The Bridge on the River Kwai" was the best picture of the year and on the radio, Elvis was "down at the end of Lonely Street at Heartbreak Hotel". James Dean was the coolest "rebel without a cause" and Leave it to Beaver premiered on CBS depicting the ideal American family. Our high school years were the wonder years ... after all it was the 50's.

Then came graduation and the completion of thirteen years of education. We thanked our parents, teachers and school administrators and we were launched into the world with the motto:

"In ourselves the future lies".

We were told by our valedictorian and salutatorian that we had been provided a "foundation" on which to grow. We were to fulfill our dreams and strive to build a "good life" based on that foundation. Our role for the future was to have a "positive impact on community and country" and to pass on to our children and grandchildren the same rights and privileges, which had been so graciously bestowed upon us.

It was 1944 when Mrs. McKinley greeted nineteen eager students. Through the years, classmates were added and subtracted until the class of '57 numbered seventy. For thirteen years we touched each other's lives and experienced events that would lay the groundwork for how we were to see the world.

On the day our high school was dedicated, a plaque was unveiled on the northwest corner of the building that reads:

*Erected to the memory  
of  
Chief Okemos  
of the Chippewas  
whose tribe once occupied the grounds upon  
which this school stands  
\*brave in battle \*wise in council \*honorable in peace\**

These character traits, bravery, wisdom, honor, were literally the foundation of our education.

At graduation, our parents sat in folding chairs and watched while we proudly climbed cement block steps and walked across a hay wagon to receive our high school diplomas. With that

diploma the mantle of leadership was passed to us. We were Chieftains! We were not the first. We were not the last. But we are proud to be the class of '57.

Now let's take a few moments to stroll down memory lane listening to old music and looking at old photographs.