

# Time only strengthens friendship of Portville ‘brothers’



Tom Donahue/Olean Times Herald

Dick Anderson thumbs through a copy of the Viking Dispatch, a chain letter that has sustained the friendship of seven Portville Central School graduates for more than 50 years.

By Tom Donahue, Olean Times Herald | Updated Jun 20, 2014

No matter how close your high school friendships, the typical life story goes something like this: You graduate, head off to college and careers, settle in places all over the country, and maybe run into each other at your 20th class reunion.

And so it was with Dick “Hokey” Anderson and his “band of brothers” — six members of Portville Central School’s class of 1961 and one from the class of 1963.

Only with one big exception.

The seven friends never drifted apart.

Sure, each went his separate way. One became a dentist, one a college dean, two were school teachers, one a school principal, another taught for the U.S. Department of Defense after a 20-year career with the Marine Corps, and another was a nuclear engineering consultant.

Their home addresses are all over the map: New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Alabama, Florida and California.

Nevertheless, each knows what the others are up to, each could rattle off the names of kids and grandkids not their own, and each looks forward to get-togethers that come every few years.

The glue that has held these buddies together for more than half a century?

The Viking Dispatch is a combination chain letter, journal and scrapbook in a spiral-bound notebook that circulates constantly among the old pals.

The dispatch has been around the globe, and even found its way aboard the Apollo 13 capsule on its ill-fated mission to the moon in 1970.

Mr. Anderson and six of his best friends, Boyce McDivitt, Chuck Bennett, Earle Monroe, Jim Hawks, Don Bonsper and the late Norm Kahler, were known as the Vikings in high school.

“I’m not sure where the name came from,” said Mr. Anderson, guessing it had something to do with his and Mr. Bonsper’s Danish and Norwegian heritage. “We always hung around together, same bunch of guys, and the name just stuck.”

Their bond was forged on the football field at Portville Central, where all were members of the Portville Panthers team that won the Cattaraugus-Allegany County Championship in 1960.

It was the era of leather helmets, required flat-top haircuts, free double lunches (for football players only) and a “we’re all in this together” camaraderie.

“We were a unique group, I guess,” said Mr. Anderson. “I can’t say it was one thing or another, just a good bunch of guys. And after graduating from PCS, we all went our separate ways.”

The dispatch’s unplanned and rather unceremonious start was a letter from a lonely Brockport State freshman to his pals back in 1962.

“I must have been homesick, because I wrote a letter to the Vikings, put it in a manilla envelope and sent it to Hawks,” said Mr. Anderson, “I told him to read my letter, write one of his own, place both back in the envelope and send it on to the next Viking.”

When the packet eventually made its way back to Mr. Anderson, he started the process again.

“The dispatch would cycle about three or four times a year,” he said. “The letters, pictures and memorabilia kept our spirits up and kept us close.”

In time, the dispatch made its way into a spiral notebook. Pages would fill up with handwritten entries, typed updates carefully trimmed and glued in place, and so many photos taped to pages that the notebook would eventually bulge to twice its original thickness.

When one notebook filled up, a new one was started.

And so it has gone for 53 years with only one interruption, a year when three of the Vikings, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Bosper and Mr. Monroe, were fighting in Vietnam.

Mr. Anderson, now living in Dubois, Pa., after a 34-year career as a health and physical education teacher at his Portville alma mater, is credited with keeping the dispatch going.

“Dick’s the driving force,” said Dr. McDivitt, a retired Portville dentist. “He updates addresses and keeps the old notebooks.” It’s hard to pin down one reason for the lasting friendships, he said.

“I think it was mostly luck, the time we grew up in. Our parents had similar values, we played a lot of sports together and we just all formed very deep friendships that continue to this day,” said Dr. McDivitt.

“The dispatch has been all over the world because several of the guys were in the military,” he said. “And we almost made it to the moon.”

That moon mission comes courtesy of Mr. Bennett, Ph.D., retired dean of the College of Mathematics, Science, Technology and Health at Kentucky State University. Mr. Bennett joined the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the late '60s and spent six years at the Kennedy Space Center, training Apollo and Skylab astronauts as their flight data file manager.

“I basically was in charge of approximately 80 pounds of literature, flight plans and other materials, a document the astronauts took with them on their missions,” said Mr. Bennett.

Clandestinely, “and probably illegally,” Mr. Bennett admitted with a laugh, he included among the flight data files loaded onto Apollo 13 two copies of a piece of paper mentioning the PCS football program and the names of the Vikings.

One was to be among materials left on the moon, the other was to be returned to Earth and given to the school.

But an oxygen tank explosion aborted the moon landing and a build-up of carbon dioxide nearly cost the lives of the three astronauts on the mission. The ingenuity of NASA engineers is credited with averting a disaster.

The on-board fix came down to jury-rigging a square carbon dioxide scrubber to fit a round hole, requiring lots of filler material to hold it in place.

“In that process, the document, and I assume the letter, was used as filler, so it became part of history,” said Mr. Bennett. He, too, is hard-pressed to explain the bond that has held the Vikings together all this time.

“We were all fairly decent athletes, we were all competitive, even amongst ourselves, and we just came together under good leadership, whether it was coaches or teachers,” he said. “It’s a uniqueness you just don’t see anymore.”

The late Mr. Kahler, who graduated in 1963, two years behind the other Vikings, died last year from a rare form of cancer. The Vikings said goodbye to their old teammate and friend at a reunion of the group in Ischua prior to his death.

“We knew it was the last time we would all be together,” said Dr. McDivitt. “It was sad, but Norm was a very committed Christian and he knew this wasn’t the end. He lived a very fortunate and blessed life and it was time to move one.”

To honor their friend, the other Vikings have created a \$2,000 scholarship to be awarded annually to a graduate of Portville Central School. The inaugural award will be presented at the district’s graduation ceremony on June 28.

(Contact editor Tom Donahue at [tdonahue@oleantimesherald.com](mailto:tdonahue@oleantimesherald.com))

# Group of former Portville football players create scholarship

Posted: Monday, June 16, 2014 11:05 am, Olean Times Herald

A group of former Portville Central School football players who graduated more than 50 years ago has created an annual \$2,000 scholarship commemorating their close friendship and honoring one of their deceased former teammates.

The first Vikings PCS Football Award will be presented to a senior at the school's graduation ceremony on Saturday, June 28.

In addition, a large framed collage that captures the spirit of this "band of brothers" and their enduring friendship will be hung in the school's athletic hallway.

The scholarship honors one of the seven "brothers," Norm Kahler, a former principal at Barker Central School, who died last year.

The friends were known as the Vikings in high school, and they had a special bond that the passage of time could not loosen. They continue to keep in touch to this day via their Viking Dispatch.

The annual scholarship will be presented to a graduating senior who was a member of the football team, who plans to enter college or join the military, and who has a positive attitude, faith in God and respect for all people.

Retired Portville Central School teacher Dick Anderson, whose letter to his pals as a college freshman started the Viking Dispatch, will present the award.

In addition to Mr. Anderson, the other Vikings scholarship benefactors include Chuck Bennett of Frankfurt, Ky., former NASA specialist and retired dean at Kentucky State University; Dr. Boyce McDivitt, a retired Portville dentist; Earle Monroe of Millbrook, Al., Vietnam veteran and a retired teacher; Jim Hawks, a retired nuclear engineering consultant from Port St. Lucie, Fla.; and Don Bonsper of Carmel Valley, Ca., a Vietnam veteran, 20-year Marine, and retired Defense Department instructor.

All are members of Portville Central School's class of 1961. The late Mr. Kahler graduated in 1963.