



'To thee we all are loyal,' sing the survivors of the North Braddock Scott High School Class of 1949

Group among the 23 living graduates of an impoverished Depression-era mill town high school class of 193 students



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From high on the sun-soaked summit of breezy “Kenny’s Hill” in North Braddock — or “Cow’s Hill,” depending who you ask — seven friends approaching the century mark in age could still envision 75-year-old memories clear as the Pittsburgh skyline on the northwestern horizon as they celebrated the past, and each other.

“When I was little, my bedroom was in the back of the house. And I could look out and I could see fire from the steel mills and I could see a glimmer of the Ferris wheel behind that smoke,” remembered 92-year-old Ruth

Kemerer, fresh from a 2,400-mile journey from San Diego.

"I looked this way, and this was all on fire, in big streaks of fire."

"It was like we were surrounded."

Last week, Kemerer was joined at the summit, home now to Grand View Golf Club and Asti's Italian Steakhouse, by

good reunion

five fellow members of the North Braddock Scott High School Class of 1949 (plus one honorary member). They represented the last able attendees from among a group of 23 living graduates of an impoverished Depression-era mill town high school class that once counted 193 among its ranks.

"What means so much to us is that this is where we played. We played pickup baseball, we played pickup football games right here where the golf course is. It was right here and our homes were just a couple hundred yards away," said Bill Priatko, a former NFL linebacker, now the oldest living Pittsburgh Steeler.


"We used to come up here with a lunch packed with five or six sandwiches and a bottle of Pepsi-Cola and come up here and play ball all day. We came out here at 8 or 9 in the morning, came home at 5....There was nothing but cows up here."

"We roamed this hill," added Audrey Costello. "This was our playground."

Since those days, the place the classmates recall as dotted with fossils and artifacts from the French and Indian War, became home to a radio tower and then the golf club. But it's also home to stray whimsical memories, like the time a classmate herding cows came back one short following a particularly precise lightning strike.

During a reunion lunch held atop the hill on Sept. 11, some remained spry and jocular as ever. Others sat mostly quiet, working diligently to eat with dignity.





“All of us can’t believe we’re still here,” said Priatko, who says he still does 103 push-ups a day. “We’re grateful, blessed.”

“Well you know, I’m the youngest in the class. I was only 15 when we graduated,” said former majorette Evelyn Dedo Ward with a smile, pausing for effect. “...And I lie a lot.”

The classmates eventually found themselves strewn on the wind as far as California, Florida, the Carolinas and London, many keeping in touch by phone, letter and later email.

“Our class has been so special. We’ve always been tight-knit and close,” said Kemerer.

They’d gone on to become not only Steelers but telephone operators, typists and history teachers, multimillionaire European entrepreneurs, amusement park employees and “soda jerks.”

And they all started out playing on that same hill.

“We grew up with nothing — we had nothing,” said Rose Anderson. “U.S. Steel, they all came from there and Westinghouse. It was tough.”

“It was Depression days. You appreciated everything,” added Kemerer. “To this day I still scrape the last bit of jelly out of the jar not to waste anything.”

“We were so satisfied and happy with such little things.”

Kemerer looked around the room from one familiar face to the next, from Priatko, raised by his widowed mother alongside four siblings from the age of 6, to Lucille Amasino and Eddie Paul, and others who filled her days in

and outside the walls of the Bell Avenue school building razed in 1995.

“With Evelyn over there, we used to go bike riding a lot and we’d both have piano accordions and we used to play for a square dance up around here.”

“And of course Rosie was the most beautiful head majorette that you could imagine. She really turned heads.”

“Bill, I had a crush on. He was my puppy love. I used to stare at him. I was secretly, desperately in love.”

Costello, a close friend of Kemerer’s since age 10, cut her off with a quip.

“It was almost fatal. It wasn’t a crush.”

Though a transfer before graduation, Costello is a fixture at the reunions.

“They tell you once you’re born in North Braddock, you never leave,” she said with a smile. “You never break that tie and I’m just grateful to be part of it.”

Then, there was [Jimmy Zockoll](#).

When Zockoll was 15, his mother died and his family cast him aside, leading him to live with some of his classmates. Before graduation, he traded a transistor radio just to have a decent pair of shoes to wear.

After graduating, he worked to become an Air Force aircraft crew chief, eventually serving in the Korean War. He then took up a role as a commercial pilot before attaining a degree and earning the first part of his diverse fortune as founder of a London-based emergency plumbing company. Over the years, the [late entrepreneur](#) funded their reunions.

“Jimmy Zockoll was the one who really, really made it big and he made it from being just a poor little boy in North Braddock. He did it himself,” said Kemerer. “I think some of that discipline we got helped. Because when you can come from nothing — everybody has a chance — but it’s how much nerve you have in taking those chances.”

“And Jimmy did it.”

He gave a \$30 gift card to every resident of North Braddock — twice.

“My classmates are the only steady friends I’ve ever had,” Zockoll told the PG in 2021. “How could I not be devoted to them and North Braddock and the people there? You can’t spend \$140 million on yourself. You find yourself acting like a big shot and helping out all of your relatives and friends.”

While proudly and methodically steering the proceedings, as though buttoning up a defensive front, Priatko spoke of an older North Braddock alumnus, the late Penn State and Steelers fullback Fran “Rogie” Rogel of “Hey diddle, diddle, Rogel up the middle” fame.

"Whenever he would hear the alma mater or sing the alma mater, he did what many of us still do: We get tears in our eyes," said Priatko. "And we did that today. And as I looked around at some of my classmates, particularly Rose next to me, there were tears."

North Braddock had forged them all together.

“These are special gals. We’re special classmates. It’s a special school, it really was,” said Priatko.

“I know a lot of people may feel that way about their high school. We were all blessed. We talk about it all the time — I know Evelyn, Rose and I we’re on the phone all the time — how grateful we were to grow up in North Braddock, this community. Then to go to a high school where he had so much togetherness...”

Each year since their 60th reunion, those who are still able make a point to gather in that same spirit on Kenny’s Hill to remember looking out on the flames of a different world and sing in unison that same North Bra song:

*Nor Bra High, to thee we all are loyal
And may thy colors ever wave
Over the bravest and the truest
Thy name from dishonor we shall save*

*Oh, Nor Bra High, Dear Nor Bra High
Thy name shall ever loved and honored be
Oh, Nor Bra High, Dear Nor Bra High
We’ll always give honor to thee*

*When no more within thy walls we linger
Still scenes shall dwell in memory dear
When the cares of life have come to save us
Thoughts of thee then shall fill our hearts with cheer*

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