

WHAT HAPPENED TO JOHN FENGEL'S CLASS RING?

by Linda Artlip Weinstein

Villisca (Iowa) Review

Class rings. Those glittering tokens of our high schools years that for most people quickly become just a sweet memory, lingering for years unseen, unworn, and unappreciated in a jewelry box or dresser drawer.

Unless it was lost when you were in high school. And then boy howdy! All heck was likely to have broken out at your house. Parents yelling, girls crying, boys cringing in embarrassment. Losing a class ring has happened oftener than one might think in the years since 1897 which is the earliest VHS graduating class known to have class rings.

They actually might be the second class as Dave Williams, VHS '49, thinks he remembers seeing his grandfather's VHS '96 (that's 1896) ring, but he can't find it. See. Another one lost!



Rummaging through the Review archives shows there have been a number of class rings gone missing. And not only Villisca's class rings. There are wants ads for lost class rings from Stanton and Corning high schools too. But from Villisca, the earliest ad reads like this:

Lost—Class ring of 1916. My initials are engraved inside. Finder kindly return to Mutual Telephone office and receive reward. Hazel Holdren,

This one was a bit of a surprise, because until finding this want ad, it had been thought that the VHS class of 1916 had had class pins not class rings. It was known that Sylvia Enarson had a 1916 class pin which is a treasured family possession. But apparently that class had choices: pins or rings. Good for them! It's not known if Miss Holdren recovered her ring. Let's hope so. We do know that after graduation, she worked as a live-in mother's helper for two years, followed by working at F. E. Snow's restaurant, and then she married A. B. Marsh and moved to Missouri. The birth of a child a year later is the last entry about her in the Review to be found.

Speaking of Class Pins. They went astray too.

LOST—On streets or at Air Dome a week ago tonight, a 1909, class pin.

This poor soul didn't even leave directions for finding him or her if someone did stumble upon the pin. Either the loser was distraught or added words would have cost too much.

The pin loser must have believed that any potential finder of the missing pin would take it to The Review office which pretty much served as the town's lost and found department for many years.

But the treasures lost were mostly class rings: LOST –“52” VHS CLASS RING. Finder please leave at The Review; LOST—1954 V.H.S. CLASS RING. Initials W. S. Finder please leave at Review office; LOST—1961 BOYS CLASS RING. Initials J. W. REWARD. Dodson's Jewelry.

There was only one JW in the class of '61, the late Jay Wheeler. His younger sister, Susan Smith, remembers how angry their dad had been over this misfortune! But she doesn't recall if the ring was ever found.

There were potentially happy stories too. The September 30, 1973 Review carried this ad: “FOUND: 1959 class ring, girls, initialed. Phone 761-3461.” It'd be interesting to know if the owner called the number and got her ring back.

Former Review Editor/Publisher Lynn Hull wrote a column about hunting for the owner of a class ring which was found in 1964. It took quite a bit of detective work, he wrote, to uncover the owner of the ring found on Darwin Sparks' farm near Villisca. The VHS Class of 1919 ring was sent to Villisca's Schools Superintendent Louis Sullivan, who called the Review and asked for the paper's help. Mr. Hull searched the 1919 papers to find a senior student with the initials “A” and “M” which were on the ring. There were two, Avon Moritz (then Wendling) and Austin Murphy. Avon who lived near Villisca reported she had indeed lost her ring, but not locally. So by default, the ring must have belonged to Austin, who was the Chevrolet dealer in Glenwood. In response to an inquiring phone call he said he thought it was probably his and he'd come to Villisca to look at it. He seemed pleased to get the ring back, but when asked when he thought he'd lost it, his only comment was “ How do you remember back 45 years ago?” Nevertheless, he left a nice reward for the finder.

The Review also told another story of treasure lost/treasure found in 2010 when Lois Neal, a member of the VHS Class of 1948, had her ring returned by a Red Oak woman who found it when she was remodeling her home. The finder, Libby Kruse, guided by John Houser, had taken the ring to the high school to try to find its owner. With the help of Tammie Johannes and Dawnette Herzberg, they discovered who the owner had to be as there was only one LMN on the class roll. With a few calls, they discovered that Miss Neal lived only a few blocks from Miss Kruse. “I never dreamed it would be that ring. I thought I would never see it again,” Lois Neal told Houser. But it was and the lost treasure was restored to its rightful owner after 62 years.

The back story was that Miss Neal had lived in Miss Krause's house in 1948 with her sister, Ruth, and they had matching class rings. She remembered—as if it had been the day before—the horror she felt when the ring had fallen to the floor and slipped into a crack in the baseboard and neither of the sisters could retrieve it. As it turned out, Lois and Ruth had switched rings at some point unknowingly, so Ruth had actually lost Lois's ring.

All in all, both are nice missing treasure found stories.

Which made me wonder if a classmate who had advertised in The Review about his missing class ring back in 1966 had ever found it. That ad read: "LOST—1966 CLASS RING, ON GOLF course. Bob Johnson, phone 76 1-4003." (Bob was a good golfer.)

And then my computer chimed, telling me I had mail—it was from stranger, but it didn't seem like spam or a plea for monetary help, so I opened it. And this is what it said:

Subject: Searching for the owner of man's class ring

Hello,

I found your name/email address on the Villisca.com/VilliscaHighSchoolAlumni and noticed you were in the class of '66. My husband has a hobby of metal detecting and many years ago while traveling he found a 1966 men's class ring from Villisca High School. Shortly, thereafter, he wrote to the Superintendent of Villisca Schools but never got a reply. A few months ago he was going through the safety deposit box where he keeps some of the items he had found with his detector and decided to try again to locate the owner. As I was looking up the address for the school on-line, I ran across your name/email address and thought I would try you. Again, it is a men's '66 class ring with initials JF. If you can help me with any information/name/address, etc.



I would appreciate it. Thank you for your time. Regards, Bev & Skip Umshler

As I began to read the email I thought "Wow! " Bob was finally going to get his ring back. Then I got to the initials.

Oops. Bob's initials are definitely not "JF." Not Bob Johnson after all, but instead it had to be John Fengel. Small classes are good; you know everyone without having to look in the class list bible for help.

So, off went an email to John: "Hey, John. Did you misplace your class ring?" (*Shown at right, reunited with his ring!*)

And almost immediately this came back: "As a matter of fact I did. If I remember correctly, it was lost in the city park. John"

While it was exciting to find that it was John's ring, it was a bit disappointing that it was found in Villisca. John's career in construction project management has taken him all over the world and having his ring found in an exotic locale would have been doubly exciting. John worked in more countries than anyone else in our class, even more than any of our career military men. He's retired now and he lives in Texas.



Skip Umshler, as it turns out, was a representative of an Omaha tobacco distributor who had southwest Iowa (and parts of Nebraska and South Dakota too) in his sales region before he retired a few years ago to Missouri. His Villisca clients were the grocery store and Casey's. He spent a lot of time on the road, his wife explained, and almost always had his metal detector with

him so he'd have something to do at the end of his work day. Skip recalls that he usually spent four or five hours searching each evening and he found an amazing number of coins and other small metal items over the years—more than 30 gold rings and 60,000 coins, all of which reside in a bank safety deposit box, except for the three class rings whose owners he and Bev have located. (*Editor's note: a few of his hefty collection are shown here*)



His favorite hunting grounds were city parks and that's where he'd found

John's ring. He even remembers that he found it in the southwest section of the Villisca square

in the late '80s. Skip never stayed overnight in Villisca, but had his eye on the town square as a good hunting ground so had come back on a weekend to search the park.

When it was suggested that it was surprising that her husband had kept the ring all these years, that it hadn't been melted down for the gold content, Mrs. Umshler was horrified. Oh no, she replied. He knows how much these things mean to the owners. "He would never melt them down if there was ANY chance of finding the owner," she wrote. "Skip is probably as excited about this as the owner will be!"

John, when prompted to remember what had happened, thought he'd just been fooling around in the park with some friends—probably playing catch—when the ring disappeared off his finger. He remembers he'd only had it a very short time when it disappeared. Since the class of '66 got their rings in the spring of their sophomore year that means the ring had been missing for 50 years, making this a nice little golden anniversary surprise.

And it was nice little treasure hunt too—from Iowa to Nebraska to Missouri to New Jersey to Texas.

Gotta love the internet.

I wonder if Bob ever found his ring. If not, maybe we should invite Skip Umshler and his metal detector back to town.

(Thanks to Linda Artlip Weinstein for sharing the above story and photo of John Fengel; and thanks to Bev Umshler for sharing her photos of Skip and his collection of artifacts!)

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