

Mitzi Frances looks back, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | March 13, 2007

Last week we brought Mitzi Francis' story from her birth in Cumberland, Ky., to Oak Ridge in 1944. Note the corrected date of arrival. Mitzi had thought it was 1943, but Sara Gillespie reminded us that it had to be 1944, as Glenwood school did not open until September 1944. Sara recalled Mitzi arriving exactly one day after she did and living next door. Mitzi readily agreed with Sara. As usual, I appreciate the help to keep *Historically Speaking* accurate.

Mitzi was in the sixth grade when her parents moved here, and in the last column we shared her memories of that last year of grade school and the years she spent in junior high school in Oak Ridge. This week we will pick up with her years in high school and conclude with her graduation.

"My years in Oak Ridge High School were a wonderful experience. I never had 'suicidal tendencies' or remember being miserable as many teenagers seem to be today. I guess I was so busy with classes and all the extra curricular activities that I didn't have much time to dwell on personal problems.

"I remember reading a book about 'How to be a Successful Teenager,' or something like that. The main theme was to be good at everything you tried, but to be extremely good in one particular thing of your choice. I have tried all my life to find that one thing, but never have!

"The Student Council took up a lot of my free time. We represented the students and thought we had a lot of power. Looking back, I doubt that we had any, but it was good experience.

"I became a member of the band during the summer between my sophomore and junior years. I can't remember what influenced me but I signed up to learn how to play the marching drums. I always loved rhythm but we had to learn on the tops of tables because drums were ordered but had not come in yet.

"They were to arrive before football season. A close friend of mine and I both learned to play drums this way. We were also learning to play the very difficult oboe at the same time. We were to play the drums in marching season and play the oboe in concert season.

"When the drums finally came we were so excited! They were red and sparkled all over. We could hardly wait to slip the new white bands over our shoulder. The only problem was that they were so heavy we couldn't carry them! They were the kind that you put the straps over your shoulder and other supports fit over to top of your leg. We both tried but just couldn't walk with them.

"So I was switched to cymbals, which I loved. Just watch the cymbal player the next time you see a band playing a rousing march.

"I don't know what my friend played during marching season.

"We were both still learning the oboe, which was a difficult instrument. No matter how hard one practices, it pretty well does what it wants to do. I played a little better than my friend, evidently, as Professor Scarborough put me in first chair. She didn't seem to mind.

"One of our most ambitious concert pieces had a very quiet part at the very beginning, which featured oboes. It always made me nervous because I never knew what sound, much less the right notes, was going to come out! My friend surprised me when she told me one day that she just held her oboe in her mouth and would let me play it as a solo.



Mitzi Hall Francis today.
She is still young at heart!

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"I loved being in the band and kids who don't join their school bands are missing a great opportunity. We had to be at school an hour earlier than all the other students. Sometimes, when we would be marching on cold, wet grass early in the morning, I would have doubts. But when we were in our uniforms, marching proudly at halftime, or playing a Christmas Concert on a crisp night on Jackson Square, it was well worth it.

"We took several trips for competition purposes also, and on one trip we went to Memphis where I saw the gates of Graceland, the home of Elvis Presley. Several of us waited in vain to try to catch a glimpse of him but he probably wasn't even there.

"There are so many stories about high school that I recall. I learned to type, which was probably one of the best things I learned, even though I didn't use this skill until I got into computers. I had two years of Spanish, which I loved. My teacher was Mrs. Nancy Swain who taught the old-fashioned way by making us recite over and over, verb tenses for instance, and I can recite them to this day. By the way, the Latin I took in ninth grade, and thought was useless, was very helpful in learning Spanish.

"I was chairman of the Junior-Senior prom one year and we chose the theme 'Fairyland.' We decorated the gym to look like a forest and we even had painted 'sets' along the sides of the gym depicting fairies and elves playing in the woods. I had hired my dad's dance band to play and we made a set to look like a boat that they were sitting in and they all wore little elf hats. They didn't want to, but they complied.

"Dad arrived a little early to be sure everything was set up correctly for his band. He wandered around looking at the decorations that we had worked so hard to finish in time. He came over to me and asked if I had really looked at the pictures on the woodland sets. I really hadn't but when he showed me I saw that some of the elves were doing things to each other that they shouldn't have been doing! I didn't know what to do but he said to just ignore them and they probably wouldn't be noticed. We did just that and aside from a few teachers no one seemed to see them. We never found out who did it.

"Probably my best friend in high school was Tina Jo Warner. She was tall, like me, and had a great personality. She was very talented. She played the leads in a lot of our high school plays and musicals.

"She also played the timpani drums in the band. We didn't live too far from each other and we would visit in each other's home. I remember one night when I was at her house we played Frankie Laine's 45 rpm records and especially a hit he had then, 'That's My Desire.' We danced with each other and Tina would always lead. We didn't think a thing about two girls dancing.

"I remember one time we did the French dance, 'Apache,' for the Latin club after school one day. We had practiced a lot and we thought we were very good. She was the guy, dressed in a striped tee shirt and a beret. I had a gypsy-like costume on with a rose in my teeth. We had a record for the music. Well, some uptight teacher complained that it was not 'appropriate' and we never got to do it again. Actually, I never did know why we did it for the Latin club, of all clubs!

"Tina Jo's parents owned the theater close to Millers Department Store. Her mother was the ticket seller and her dad took up the tickets and worked the concession stand. We would always get free popcorn and some chocolate malt balls and watch the latest movie after school. What fun we had. Neither of us had a boyfriend. We would go to the proms with guys who were more friends than boyfriends.

"Something happened in our senior year, however, and Tina Jo became best friends with Lu Leonard, who was a tiny girl. I just never saw what they had in common but we were never really good friends again. We had promised to turn each other's tassels around on our graduation caps, which we did, but it was never the same.

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"At school we were taught the principles of democracy and I took it very seriously. One night at dinner, I made a little speech about how our family was not a true democracy. (Those were the days when it was unheard of not to gather for dinner as a family at night.) My dad heard me through and then asked, 'Are you a breadwinner in this family?' I answered that of course I was not. He said, 'When you are, we'll talk about democracy.' That was the end of my idea of voting for issues that came before the family.

"Sometime during this period several of my girlfriends and myself, who were not lucky enough to be asked to join The Penguins, the only social girls' club in high school (unauthorized, of course), decided to form a new club. We named it The Swankettes and were very proud of it. I think it still exists today.

"We would have teas and dress up in hats and gloves, proving we could be little ladies if we had to. We would also smoke a little at these teas. I don't remember ever buying a pack of cigarettes but someone did and we would all share.

"One Saturday my dad and I drove to Clinton for some reason. I thought this might be a good time to let him know that I had started smoking. I had a couple of cigarettes in my purse and a lighter. I didn't say anything but just took one out of my purse and put it in my mouth, getting ready to light it.

"I didn't get that far, however, because my dad, without taking his eyes off the road, just reached over with his right hand and mashed it into my face. He didn't hurt me but I was humiliated as I looked down at the tobacco in my lap. Neither of us ever talked about it and I never tried to smoke in front of my parents again. I fiddled with the habit in college but was never much of a smoker.

"My class, 1951, was the last one to graduate from the old high school. It was torn down long ago.

"Nothing is there now but the old concrete steps leading up the hill from Jackson Square. I was there not long ago to see a little memorial place where the school used to be. A brick for each student who chose to participate is there with the name and year of graduation.

"A few days before graduation day we had a senior banquet and I gave the farewell speech. I had practiced a lot and was ready to deliver my final speech. All I remember is that all the football boys were allowed to smoke cigars, some even putting their feet up on the table, bored as could be. While I was pouring my heart out about our rosy future, they were blowing smoke rings up at me. I never knew how they were allowed to do that.

"Graduation Day finally arrived and it was so hot I couldn't put my make-up on in the house. I finally went out on the little front porch with a small mirror. While I was out there a car drove up and up walked Mrs. Diggs, my eighth-grade teacher. I knew her as Miss Calvert and asked her to please come in, but she declined. She had a book for me. It was Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass.' I really appreciated that she remembered me after all those years.

"She left and I went back inside. My mother said something to me, now I don't even remember what, some suggestion about something, but I made the mistake of saying, 'That just doesn't make sense, mother.' Big mistake! She started crying and told my dad that I had said that she didn't have any sense!

"I told him exactly what I had said. He understood but had to take her side. I apologized over and over but she kept crying, saying that because I was getting older I was challenging her. I wasn't at all. My mother and I got along very well and this was probably the one and only time we had a disagreement.

"We went to the graduation that was held in the auditorium of the brand new high school. None of us wanted to do this. We wanted to have our graduation in the auditorium of the school we had attended for years. But the powers that be won out because the new auditorium could hold so many more people.

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"After I walked down the aisle and it was all over, I sought out my old friend, Tina Jo, and we moved each other's tassel over to the other side of our hats, but our old closeness was gone. Just until lately no one could even find Tina Jo. Suddenly Mary Lou Peters found her on 'Classmates.com.' She is coming to the next reunion.

So ends the memories of Mitzi Francis' time in Oak Ridge schools. She was kind enough to share these sections of her manuscript for a book she plans. She says she is writing a book for her "greats" meaning her great grandchildren. Her reasoning for this approach is that she recalls when she and Phillip bought her ancestral home in Georgia that she would have loved to have had something written about the huge old house they converted into a bed and breakfast. She had nothing other than her mother's few memories of who slept in which of the seven bedrooms.

Mitzi has led a full and happy life that had its foundation in Oak Ridge schools. The stories she tells, while quite typical of a young girl, are also profound in that they form her healthy basic understanding of life's opportunities and challenges. I hope you identified with some of them and enjoyed reading her story.

She ended her correspondence with me by saying, "My husband and I have been married almost 54 years and we spend most of our time in Naples with our two rescued kitties, and have some of our eight grandchildren nearby. We also have one great-granddaughter. We travel a lot, but mostly between our home in Naples and our other homes; one in the Keys, our beloved cabin in Gatlinburg, and our recently built home in Nashville. Life is good!

Indeed, Mitzi, life surely is good! Thanks for the memories!