

# Classes in the 1940's: Mitzi Frances looks back

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | March 6, 2007

The memories of one's school years often stay forever. Mitzi Hall has agreed to contribute to *Historically Speaking*, and you will identify with many of her memories. The first part of her reminiscences follow and the second part will be in a future column.

Mitzi Hall was born in Cumberland, Ky., on Dec. 1, 1933. She came to live in Oak Ridge in 1943 at 263 East Drive in what she now recalls as a "little flat top house." She lived here until she graduated from Oak Ridge High School in the last class to attend school in the original Oak Ridge High School.

She went to college at Tennessee Tech in Cookeville, where she met Phillip Francis and married. Phillip joined the Army. Mitzi says they have lived "all over the world" and have three sons and identical twin daughters.

She has been a real estate broker in Virginia Beach, Va., and Naples, Fla. Now retired, she and Phillip have homes in Naples and Key West, Fla., as well as Gatlinburg and Nashville.

Mitzi's story begins with her arrival in Oak Ridge's earliest time of boardwalks, mud and excitement. It is a delight to read of a young girl's experiences as she learns the lessons that have kept her on track throughout her life.



Mitzi Hall at 16 years of age

She begins by saying, "I started sixth grade in September 1943, not too long after we arrived in Oak Ridge. My teacher was Miss Nancy Kulp. The schools were considered 'progressive,' whatever that means.

"What I remember most about the sixth grade is that the math was still easy, I was already reading beyond my level, and that I was allowed to go ahead as far as I wanted. There was no 'dumbing down' back then so that some students wouldn't get their feelings hurt.

"I was introduced to the instruments of the orchestra for the first time in my life. It was done in a wonderful and painless way by listening to 'Peter and the Wolf.' A different instrument represented each character. The sounds of those instruments and their names are etched in my mind today.

"There were several cute boys in my class and for some reason boys and girls had physical education together. We played dodgeball, volleyball and games like that. We did not wear uniforms or gym clothes.

"One day we were in the gym and learning how to play volleyball. Evidently, I didn't move over like I was supposed to do, so this handsome young boy came up from behind, held me at my waist, and gently moved me over to the correct position. I was in love with him from that moment! Of course, nothing ever happened and I just worshiped him from afar.

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"When I was in seventh grade I met another boy on my school bus and we talked a while and somehow I thought we had a sort of date for the next Saturday afternoon at the movie theater. I didn't tell anyone but I dressed nicely, rode the city bus to the theater on Jackson Square. I waited outside while everyone went inside but he never came. I had been stood up on my first date! I saw him another day and he spoke and was very friendly. I didn't mention the incident and he didn't either, so obviously I had misunderstood.

"When I started seventh grade, it was at the old Robertsville School building that was called Jefferson Junior High School. I was the tallest girl in my class and I was also taller than most of the boys too. In class pictures I am always the only girl in the back row standing with the boys. I didn't really mind too much. It was kind of nice to be a taller person and look down on almost everybody else. I was 5 feet, 7 inches when I was 12 years old and never got taller. I remember my mother telling me to stand tall and be proud. She said that she was tall (5 feet, 5 inches) when she was my age, in the 1920s.

"When mother was a teenager, Clara Bow, the 'It' girl, was the biggest movie star. She was a tiny girl. She seems to have set the standards for beauty for the young girls of the time — so much so that girls would bind their breasts (can you imagine that in this age of young girls getting breast implants?) in order to try to fit into the mold of what was considered beautiful.

"I was also blessed with naturally curly hair (thank you, Dad), which was not in style at that time. I remember ironing my hair on the ironing board, and rolling it up on vegetable cans to try to straighten it out. But it never stayed straight. My mother and I were born in the wrong times!

"My eyes were always weak and I had to wear glasses. I always considered glasses unattractive and hated that I had to wear them. I was studious and the glasses helped the image of being a pretty straight girl. But it didn't keep me from being outgoing and friendly. My seventh-grade teacher, Miss Ava Crawford, told me that I should go into politics. I loved the idea!

"Years later I somehow found Miss Crawford — she never married — in Chapel Hill, N.C., long after I was married. I called her and she said, 'I'll bet you thought I died years ago!' To be truthful I thought she was old when she was my teacher. She was probably in her early 40s but she looked older as she was small and prim. She wore small, round, gold-rimmed glasses and just looked older. I always regretted not going to see her in person. She was a great teacher and even during that phone call, which was the last time I spoke with her, she gave me one final lesson. She said, 'Mitzi, I know you must think that I am ancient now but there is one thing I want you to remember and that is that each age has its compensation.'

"I learned as I aged that this is very true.

"My first venture into 'politics' was to run for vice president of the student body with Miss Crawford being my mentor. Boys always held this office, along with president and usually treasurer. Girls never even tried to be elected, as girls were supposed to only be secretaries. That was true groundbreaking territory, but I ran and I won. I was vice president in the eighth grade, and I ran for president in the ninth grade and won that, too. My parents were very supportive and always encouraged me to be anything I wanted to be.

"To jump ahead a little, I ran for vice president of the Student Council in high school and won. I really didn't consider running for president, as a boy was running whom I admired much and I supported him. His name was Jimmy Summers. The two of us were chosen as 'Most Popular' in the Senior Superlatives section of the annual in our senior year.

"Back to junior high school, one big disappointment was that girls' sports, which I loved, were banned. That is hard to believe now but for some reason during junior and senior high schools girls' sports were deemed 'unladylike.' I remember the day that all of the girls in junior high school were brought into the

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library and given a lecture on girls in sports and on the clothes we were allowed to wear. We could no longer wear blue jeans, slacks, or sleeveless blouses.

"We were still allowed to have intramural sports, which was just playing games in your gym uniform with other girls in your school. There wasn't much challenge there. This ban on women's sports continued on through college years. Physical education was a required subject for boys and girls back then. It probably isn't now. The girls' required uniform was bought through the school and consisted of a white blouse and white shorts that had a built-in panty band on the legs.

"I made a lot of speeches to the student body and I was not nervous, but for some reason I never wanted my mother to come to any of the events. One of my speeches was broadcast on the Oak Ridge radio station and I made her promise not to even listen. I found out years later that, of course, she did.

"I was also editor of our junior high school newspaper. We had to go to the town of Clinton to get it printed. Several of us would go to the newspaper office there and handset the print. This is unheard of today and the letters we used and the little drawers that held them are now selling in antique shops.

"My granddaughter, Laura, was the editor of her high school newspaper.

"I took Latin and algebra in junior high school and never saw the need for either of them at the time. The grading system was called 'progressive' and involved the teacher writing little paragraphs about the student and the subject.

"Mr. Reef Waldrep was my Social Science teacher. I remember that I missed a deadline for a getting some paper in on time and he called me in after school to talk to me about it. I told him that I was sorry but I was very busy with the school paper and the Student Council and besides I didn't feel that getting this paper in on time was a 'crisis in my life.' Well, he wrote that phrase on my grade slip and said that maybe this period was a crisis in my life and I just didn't know it. I still have that piece of paper because I never really knew what he meant!

"There wasn't much social life in junior high school at that time for me or for anybody really. The only people dating were Faye Sharp and Joe Brown. They had been together since the seventh grade. There was an Amelia and her boyfriend who were known to disappear during recess and reappear when time was up! They were married pretty young."

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Now, did you identify with those stories? Did reading Mitzi's stories cause you to recall things in your school years? Next week we will continue with Mitzi's memories on into Oak Ridge High School and graduation.

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