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STORY TELLING AND HISTORY

I am looking at a digital image of a photograph shot on November 22, 1958 at the American Legion Post 585, in Duryea, Pennsylvania. I was then six years old, and I have no memory of this particular photograph. But similar ones, capturing the same event, later appeared in the *Pittston Dispatch*, a weekly newspaper. I remember those quite well, and the blow ups they caused at home. Pittston was the biggest town between Wilkes-Barre and Scranton in the anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania. It had a movie theater and a few stores and restaurants downtown, though like every nearby community it never recovered from the collapse of the mining industry. With a population of a few thousand, Duryea did not have its own newspaper, or library, or many amenities. All but a few of its people were working-class. There was one lawyer, one dentist, one doctor. But, like in wealthier communities, people lived and died, married, went to ball games and funerals, and sometimes got their names and faces in the Sunday paper. The *Dispatch* dutifully published gossip and news for many area towns and featured pictures of graduation ceremonies and reunions, bowling league and Little League champions, church picnics, the Fourth of July Parade, and other local doings.

My discovery of the 1958 image a few years ago brought to life in my mind the world I grew up in and that shaped my sensibilities, as a person and as an historian. For many years close friends have heard my stories about growing up in Duryea and most have now seen the image. Before I saw it, I often thought of the fierce arguments that occurred every year between my mother, who was embarrassed by the event in question, and my father, who put on his best clothes and took some pleasure in seeing his picture in the paper. Even when I was in high school, I did not really understand what all the fuss was about. My mother, a high school graduate, would complain, “You are setting a poor example for the boys. I want them to go to college.” My father would shrug off the criticism. Recognizing the dim prospects for the uneducated, he also wanted us to go to college. The noisy dispute would end, then revive a year later. Only with seeing the old image did I realize that this argument had ensued for many years, longer than I realized.

What was the fighting all about? A little more context. According to family lore shared by my father and grandfather, dad was expelled from high school. The story was essentially this. My father said that he was clowning around in the back of the classroom, and a teacher came from behind and hit him on the head with a book. My father turned around quickly, punched him, and got expelled. He had a chance to return to high school, my grandfather told me, if he apologized to the teacher; grandpa Reese said, there were no hard feelings with the superintendent of schools, who came to the house in person to make the offer. I don’t know if my father had
much say in the matter, since my grandfather doubted whether a high school diploma would do his son any good. Better to work at some job and help the family. And so my father never graduated, fought in France, returned home, worked at a slaughter house, and began a family.

The image in question was shot at the American Legion hall on Main Street. There are thirty-nine men in the photograph. All but one wear a coat and tie. They epitomize working-class respectability (a term I learned in graduate school). Many of the men also wear a smile, some wry and mischievous. My father (later a textile worker), my grandfather (a retired miner), and two uncles are present. In the front of the three rows of men are two banners. The smaller one, left of center, announces that this is the “NON-GRADUATES’ REUNION.” In the center, the larger banner reads, in bigger capital letters and in bold, “DIDN’T MAKE IT STILL TRYING,” and beneath it in smaller letters, “CLASS OF ?????” Hanging above the group are streamers suspended from a metal coat hanger attached to a heating vent in the ceiling. All of the men are holding fake diplomas, their way of thumbing their noses at the world.

I have no idea who concocted this annual event, or if any of the men ever considered getting a G.E.D. That would not have helped them much. But the reunion is a revealing send-up of that familiar American event: a high school reunion. A parody only works if it mocks convention. These men left school to work, to fight for their country, or both. It’s a patriotic group. On the Legion wall are the opening lines to the “Preamble to the Constitution.” My father was, like quite a few of the men, a World War II veteran. Since they met year after year, they must have enjoyed themselves. All of the men are holding fake diplomas, their way of thumbing their noses at the world.

Moments captured long ago in black and white film like this one, one of the most vivid in my youth, live with me still. While schools certainly played an essential role in my becoming an historian and educator, such memories of family and working-class life and the story telling so basic to daily existence were far more important. After all, stories are basic to history. The ones I heard, and told, were how I came to understand America and became curious about the world beyond my doorstep. Stories can do many things: they can entertain, connect past