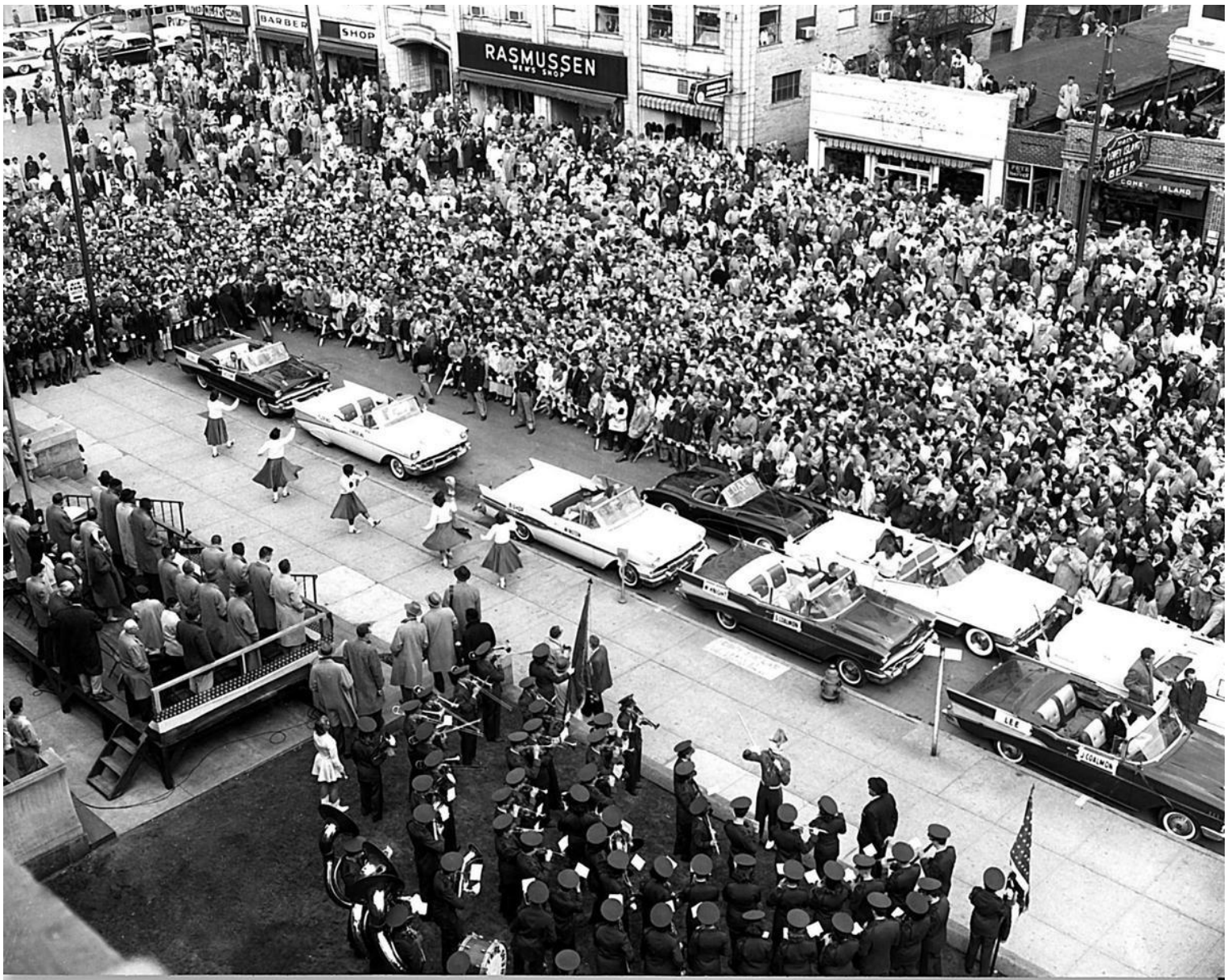


Three Cheers for Central (part 2)





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So many years have passed, but still so many memories. Good memories. The best.

“South Bend Central was just so special,” Sacchini said, his voice quivering and tears likely welling at the other end of the phone last week. “Everybody wanted to go to Central. That’s what I dreamed about.”

Dreamed about when he was growing up in the Beacon Heights apartment complex just off Lincoln Way West. Dreamed about it when Sacchini and his father made their typical trek to School Field for Central football games in the 1940s and 1950s. Hard to believe now, but lines to the ticket booths stretched toward Eddy Street. Really. The stands would be packed with fans, sometimes 15,000 of them. School Field was the place to be on those football Friday nights, and South Bend Central was the school to see.

When winter arrived and basketball season beckoned, Sacchini remembers one particular night at Adams High School, where Central played its home games because its gym wouldn’t do. Even with an enrollment that pushed toward 2,000, its home gym was too cramped for those crowds who wanted to see South Bend Central.

Sacchini was in sixth grade at the old Kaley School when he and his teammates played in a scrimmage between the Central varsity and junior varsity games. All those fans in those Adams gym stands. There was a buzz about the building. About the Bears. His Bears.

If he didn’t know it by then, Sacchini knew it that night — he wanted to be a Bear.

“Talk about a thrill,” he said. “We played for five minutes but we thought we were big time because we were at a Central game.

“Central was special.”

Special, yes, in sports. Particularly basketball. When the school’s doors closed in 1970, South Bend Central had rolled up a hoops history that included 28 sectional championships, 12 regional titles, four semistate banners and two state championships — in 1953 and 1957, Sacchini’s senior year. South Bend Central also was good in football, where it won three mythical state championships. It won state championships in boys’ swimming and track and field and baseball and wrestling.

Any talk today of South Bend Central typically starts with its sports programs, particularly basketball. With names like Mike Warren and John Wooden.

On Friday, Adams hosts Riley in a tribute game to South Bend Central. There will be a reception at Adams. The teams will wear special throwback Central-style uniforms. On Saturday, there’s a luncheon and program to honor Central, which opened in 1872 as South Bend High School. It was renamed South Bend Central High in 1924. It didn’t take long for the school to become an athletic powerhouse.

But the school was about more than just sports.

In a different time, it was different for other reasons.

Black and white

It was the late 1950s, and difficult days for the country lurked. Integration soon would start and create problems in major cities like Little Rock, Ark. Whites found it hard to associate with blacks. Blacks found it hard to associate with whites. Disharmony of the 1960s was right around the corner.

Then there was South Bend Central, an all-brick building with its marble steps in the entry way and stained glass windows. Whites and blacks shared the same sidewalks on their walks to school. Shared the same hallways and classrooms and common areas. They learned about life, learned about it as one.

Each school day, they converged on one spot — the corner of Colfax Avenue and William Street — from various points around the city. Whites and blacks, blacks and whites. One’s skin color or background didn’t register. Central embraced all kinds.

That’s what life at Central was like at that time, for those freshmen and sophomores and juniors and seniors. It didn’t matter if you were from the west side or the south side, from the east or the north. If you were at Central, you were a Bear.

“We got along well because we were able to see what was happening in other parts of the country, this racial divide, and it meant nothing to us,” said Melvin Holmes, a 1958 South Bend Central graduate who played football and ran track. “We were there to get an education. That was the main thing.

“Color was secondary.”

Sacchini was color blind during his four years at Central. When the basketball team won the 1957 state championship after going 30-0 and beating Indianapolis Crispus Attucks at Butler Fieldhouse in the finale, Sacchini couldn’t wait to soak in the celebration. Four years earlier, he cried while watching the 1953 team win a state championship. That squad returned home and rode around on fire trucks. Sacchini staked a front-row spot on the street as they rolled through town.

When Central won again in 1957, players were prohibited from the fire trucks. That bummed Sacchini out. Instead they were ferried through downtown perched on the backs of convertibles. Sacchini guessed there might have been 100,000 people along the parade route.

Central was that big.

It was a dinner later to celebrate that championship at Sacchini’s home that meant more. Sacchini invited his teammates and invited his good friend Holmes to attend. All enjoyed a traditional Italian feast offered by Sacchini’s mother. Spaghetti and meatballs. Family and friends. Laughs and good times.

At one point, Holmes pulled Sacchini aside. His stomach was full. So was his heart. Holmes told Sacchini that it was the first time he’d ever been invited into a white person’s home. It wouldn’t be the last for Holmes, who became a regular at the Sacchinis.

“He told me, ‘Sacc, I’ll never forget you,’” Sacchini said. “That’s powerful.”

Nearly a half-century later, Holmes remembers the gesture, and what it meant. To him. To his family. It was about more than just celebrating a state championship in basketball. It was about life.

“I appreciated it very much,” Holmes said. “It made us realize that, hey, we’re human beings. We had the same goals for our kids and our families and our community. It propelled us forward.

“I didn’t see a white guy. I saw a human being.”

Time moves on

Memories are all that remain of South Bend Central, though the building still stands. It served as a middle school for a few years after it officially ceased being a high school. In 1985, it was added to the national Register of Historic Places. In the late 1990s, a developer turned the hallways and classrooms where the likes of Sacchini and Holmes and the legendary Wooden once roamed into apartments. Today, you can have a one-bedroom place for \$799 a month, or a three-bedroom unit for \$1,540. The apartment’s web site boasts “80 different floor plans.”

But for Central alums, it will always be one school. Their school. Sacchini’s emotions stir every time he drives past the place. He can still see the state championship banners beckoning from the entry way. The trophy cases lined with

trinkets. The smell of the wood floors, the hiss of the radiators in winter. Others remember hanging out in the cafeteria on the first floor, or meeting under the clock on the second floor or the pep sessions in the 2,000-seat auditorium.

It was a great time to be at South Bend Central.

“South Bend Central was like the melting pot of the Midwest,” said John McCullum, a senior guard on the 1963 Central team that featured its most famous basketball alum, Warren, who went on to play for Wooden at UCLA before turning his attention to acting. “Everybody there, white, black, got along so well.

“There were problems in the country at that time, but back then, we really didn’t know about it.”

Or care. If you were at South Bend Central, you had a greater goal. Excel in sports, but also excel in the classroom. Go on to college and make something of yourself. Sacchini did. Holmes did. McCullum did. Sports just happened to help them get to where Central’s coaches like Wooden and Ross Stevenson, Elmer McCall and Jim Powers believed they could go. Someplace special.

They haven’t forgotten that, or forgotten Central. Alums and friends will celebrate that Friday at Adams. Some Central graduates will be there and proudly wear their blue and orange. Some won’t be there but will wish they could be. Warren was supposed to be the featured guest for the weekend but recently backed out. Family commitments will keep Sacchini in Florida. But Holmes will be there. So will McCullum. Stories will flow. So might tears.

What do those who attended South Bend Central want those who didn’t to know about their school?

“We were simply appreciative of the opportunity to be together,” Holmes said. “If I had to do it again, I wish it would go the same way.”

“We had everything,” Sacchini said. “The school was ahead of its time.”

Chills, again.