

“The Day John Denver Came To School”

*By Polly Keith Scotland
Edina High School Class of 1970

At my 45-year high school reunion, there was a lot of chatter about John Denver.

Prior to the reunion, our class president, George White posed the question, “Do you remember the day John Denver came to school? Why did he come?”

The date in question was Wednesday, September 10, 1969— the fall of our senior year.

I emailed George’s question to our classmates and included a photo from our yearbook showing a smiling John Denver, on the cusp of fame, strumming his guitar encircled by a sea of fresh-faced students.

There was a wide variety of feedback. Some thought it was a walkout in response to an enforced dress code while others said it was a sit-in to protest the Vietnam War and the Kent State shootings (which actually didn’t occur for another eight months).

Time has a way of blurring the memory.

The circumstances surrounding an impromptu concert by the little-known John Denver (whose real name was Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr.) involved a salary dispute between the Edina school board and the teacher’s union.

In early September 1969, the teachers declared they would strike by boycotting all extra-curricular activities. That meant that there would be no teachers for club activities, dances, or after-school help, and all sporting events (pre-Title IX) would not have coaches.

Concerned athlete’s asked for a meeting with the superintendent at his Pentagon Park office before the scheduled September 5, 1969 football game. *Buzzette* newspaper staff member Dave Johnson took photos at that gathering.

Senior football player Greg Rothnam stated, “ I recall that when practice ended that [first] week [of September], Coach Canakes got the team together and told us that because of the situation, he and the other coaches would not be going to St. Cloud for the game. While delivering this message, he got somewhat emotional and basically had to cut the message short and leave. He was obviously saddened that he would not be coaching the team. I remember when he left there was a prolonged silence until someone (I think it was Bruce Carlson or Dennis Doyle) basically said, ‘Let’s get going’ and that ‘We aren’t going to let the situation stop us from winning the game.’”

Rather than forfeit the game against St. Cloud Tech, the football team was “coached” by seven alums naming Mark Ferguson and Marc Mayberg the designated head coaches. The volunteers were assisted by the high school principal Rollie Ring and athletic director Howard Merriman.

The St. Cloud bleachers were jam-packed. Our team brushed off the ‘coaches’ and listened to teammates Dennis Doyle, Bruce Carlson, and Bill Nyrop. Bruce Carlson said, “I recall very vividly, that various ‘coaches’ would send plays in, but Bill Nyrop totally ignored [them] and took control and called all of the offensive plays.”

St. Cloud scored first for their only points of the night. With emotions running wild, Edina won 22-7.

Four days later, the school board said it could not pay for extra-curricular services that were not provided and the paychecks of the coaches would be withheld if they did not return to coaching.

Student leaders Terry Gruggen, Randy Nordquist, and George White said they did not want their senior year soccer season to be taken away. They pitched the idea of a walkout to student council members Kristin Carlander and Steve Precht. Steve remembers saying, “What are we going to do if people do attend?” An entertainer was needed. Terry had gotten to know John Denver while waiting on him at the Dayton’s ski shop. Randy’s girlfriend was a neighbor of John Denver who had an apartment in Edina.

Arrangements were made by a faculty member to persuade John Denver, who literally was “Leaving on a Jet Plane” on Tuesday, to stay one day longer and play at the school on Wednesday morning.

On September 10th, flyers asking the 2600 students to support the teachers by walking out of class were passed out at all school entrances.

Students were asked to go to the cafeteria foyer at 7:55 a.m. If everyone stayed in the building, the day would not need to be made up. Disregarding the flyer, the majority of people went to their first hour; but protesting classmates visited the homerooms and encouraged everyone to leave. As a person who follows the rules, I personally was very hesitant at first, but one by one, kids got up from their desks, marched out, and were directed by principal Rollie Ring, using a bullhorn, to the gymnasium.

I remember watching Kristin Carlander use a black phone in the hallway to call John Denver and tell him that the students were assembling.

Classmate Phil Church took the microphone and recited the entire story of Alice’s Restaurant by Arlo Guthrie. Phil said, “I remember how embarrassed I was when I finished to turn around and see him [John Denver] standing there. Too bad I had no guitar.”

Denver, who was two years away from making it big, entertained 1400 students for free by singing “Sunshine on My Shoulders” and other songs that would become #1 hits. He played to a crowd that some remember with enthusiastic appreciation while others (more interested in Led Zepplin) were more apathetic.

Junior Pat Boulay snapped the only photo to appear in the *Whigean* yearbook. Pat recalls, “Few of us had heard of John Denver, but all knew ‘Leaving on a Jet Plane.’ That Saturday night he appeared on WCCO TV’s *This Must Be the Place* show hosted by Bill Carlson. That’s when I realized he [Denver] was kind of a big deal.”

Senior Dave Johnson also took pictures for the school newspaper that day. Dave said, [The *Buzzette* editor] called the *Star Tribune*. [We] drove downtown to meet with a reporter to give them the story. We (foolishly) gave our undeveloped film to them. The *Strib* kept 80% of our negatives. We got back almost nothing, especially the pics we took of John Denver.”

Class president George White and senior soccer player Scott Jenson never saw the concert because they spent the day at the superintendent’s office in negotiations. Scott pleaded, “We’ve worked so hard in preparation for the season and we need coach Szendrey to guide us on to victory. This is incredibly important in our young lives.”

After the walkout, Kristin Carlander and Steve Precht met with principal Rollie Ring. Steve said, “Kris did most of the talking. She was very calm and composed. Her position points were thought out and presented clearly. She was not negotiating but was demanding change.”

On Friday, September 12, 1969, the football coach Stan Canakas returned to coach the game against Hopkins. Senior player Jim Olson recollects that, “Coach Canakes told a group of us that he wasn’t worried as much about St. Cloud because he prepared us up until game day. He said he was more worried about the conference opener against Hopkins the following week because he wasn’t there to get us ready.”

Edina beat Hopkins 54-20. In fact, the 1969 football team went undefeated in Lake Conference play.

At our 45-year reunion in July 2015, there was a lot of conversation about the day John Denver came to school. In 1969 John Denver didn’t come to our school for political reasons—he came because he was asked.

As I journeyed for the reunion from my small town to the big suburb of Edina, Minnesota, renditions of “Take Me Home, Country Roads” danced in my head.

