

When someone is struggling to make headway against a thorny problem, they may offer the assessment that things are ‘two steps forward, one step back.’ Perhaps that is just the human condition or some fundamental rule of the universe. Progress always seems to come with at least some sort of a downside, we gain a lot even as we lose a little. A cell phone is a godsend when I am out in the wee hours checking snowy country roads, but, then again, I never lost my land line telephone. It was, after all, tethered to the wall.

I reflect on the same sort of loss when I consider e-mail vs. what is sometimes called ‘snail mail.’ An e-mail exchange is lightning fast compared to the envelope-bound correspondence that arrives in my mailbox at home. Yet, I never look forward to e-mail in the way I do to what might be found in the magical metal container that sits atop the wooden post abutting the city street. This was especially true when I was a kid. To find a letter in the mailbox addressed to me was an exhilarating moment. It held endless possibilities. And this was true for me even though my father and I had the same names and so he would often inadvertently (and also I suspect sometimes *advertently*) open my mail. To get a letter back then was an event. When I reached adulthood, much of the shine on that particular apple wore off, in the face of junk mail, bills, and the necessity of dealing with what arrived. That changed for me, though, when e-mail became common. The novelty and the possibilities that accompanied the honest-to-gosh paper-sealed-in-an-envelope returned.

But what never really lost its luster was the package. When a bundle or box or parcel arrived in the mail for me as a child—the redemption of all those Bazooka Joe comics I had submitted, the unsolicited scattering of stamps from the company that would later demand payment from this budding philatelist, a souvenir of the most recent travels of a grandparent—it was a red letter day, the equivalent of a birthday or Christmas entirely unforeseen. An unexpected package is just one of life’s unsullied pleasures. And I cannot imagine the sort of progress that would ruin it. If, today, a drone was to hover over head and release a package into my arms, that would just add a level of ‘cool’ to the eager anticipation.

Given that, February 12 of this year was a pretty good day because, with it, came the arrival of an entirely unexpected, bubble-wrapped parcel in my school mailbox. Quickly relegating to the recycling bins the many unsolicited offers and catalogs that sat atop it, like manure piled inexplicably on a treasure chest, I lifted the package to eyelevel. It had heft! The return address looked residential, rather than commercial, and it was addressed not to the superintendent of schools or the disappointing ‘occupant,’ but to “Superintendent Dr. Joseph Graves.” Redundant, certainly, but also targeted. This package was not for my position or my school or whoever it was that sat in a particular office, but for me. Someone had gone to some real trouble to ensure that whatever was in this package would find its way to...me.

That someone, as it turned out, was B Janey Vinson Pullen. And I had never heard of her. Nor had I ever heard of the original owner of the contents of the package, Betty Hays Vinson. Betty Hays, a petite young thing with lovely brown curls and an endearing smile if her senior picture has anything to say about it, was, you see, a graduate of Mitchell Senior High School in 1938. When she died, at 97, her daughter Janey did what we all must do at those difficult times, sort through the personal effects of a beloved parent. Among those effects were the treasures that would be found in my parcel:

- 3 yearbooks, the 1936, 1937, and 1938 editions of the *Warbler*. And not just the iconic pictures of young people in their youthful attire from before the Second World War but also histories of the school district, casual portraits of my predecessor, and all those lovely handwritten messages to Betty from her classmates. These will bolster our

existing, but incomplete, archive of *Warblers* and *Maizes* from the early part of the 20th Century to the less and less early part of the 21st.

- A dozen and a half historic postcards of Mitchell from that same era and featuring the Corn Palace, of course, but also the courthouse, an extinct band stand, West Park, and “White’s Old Mill.”.
- And, finally, a note. Perhaps the best of the three treasures, it was, unaccountably, a thank you note. A note which reflected that “I’m sure Mother was one of the last of her class.” That explained that “Mitchell was always ‘home’ for Mother even though she had moved away in 1941.” That shared Betty’s sense of her old high school, that it was “top notch.”

The funny thing about packages is that too often, almost always in fact, the contents are never as good as the imagination. We dream of just what might be in that Christmas present beneath the tree but the unwrapped never quite captures the full potential that was the wrapped. It so often falls far short. It almost always falls at least a bit short. But occasionally, very occasionally, it is far better than anything you might have imagined. And so it was on February 12.

Thank you Betty for your memories of your alma mater. And thank you Janey for packing those memories up and sending them my way.