

"Too Nice"

Bob and Katie Head, lifelong friends of Hank McKinnies, share their memories of him with Don Kregler

May 22, 2004.

DON: Bob, when did you first meet Hank?

BOB: The first time I remember him was when we were in the fourth grade. He lived across the street from my cousin in Whitefish Bay and we played together. We did things together. He always wanted to be a movie star and I wanted to be a baseball player.

DON: He wanted to be a movie star when he was ten years old?

BOB: Yes, and I always kidded him. I said "you made it and I didn't."

[HE LAUGHS]

DON: I thought he was interested in athletics.

BOB: Yes, he was interested in athletics but he was very interested in drama too. He was in class plays at the Richards elementary school. I can remember one time we wanted to see a show, a movie. We were playing outside and we went into his house, and his Mom and Dad were there, and he said "Mom, Bobby and I want to go to a movie. Can we go?" "Well," she said, "What movie are you talking about? I can't remember, I think it was 'Captains Courageous,' and he started acting out the movie.

DON: Had he seen it?

BOB: I think he had because he did such a great job.

DON: What kind of kid was he like? Outgoing?

BOB: He was always putting on shows for his parents. He was just so polite and so warm and friendly.

DON: Katie, did you know him then?

KATIE: No, I didn't. I knew him in eighth grade dancing school. They taught ballroom dancing.

DON: Bob, tell me about the school plays he was in.

BOB: We were both in the senior class play. I played a girl, I don't know why that was, and Hank was the father of the family and I jumped into his lap. The whole class laughed. They thought it was just the greatest thing.

KATIE: It was a children's play, I believe. "The Goose Hangs High" or "The Goose Hangs Low" or something like that.

DON: Now Hank was an only child. What was his relationship with his parents?

BOB: He was very close to both his mother and his father.

KATIE: I remember his father traveled a lot.

DON: Yes, his father was a salesman, an engineer, I think, and his mother doted on him. In college, his mother would call him and always wanted to know where he was. They had a real strong attachment, didn't they, he and his mother.

BOB: Oh, sure.

DON: And yet, he wasn't a "Momma's boy," he was a very rough and tumble guy. Was he in sports at that time?

BOB: Yeah, in elementary school he was in soccer, football, speed skating and other sports.

DON: Speed skating?

[BOB ROLLS UP HIS PANTS LEG AND SHOWS A SCAR]

BOB: He had racer skates on, ice skates, and I was in a school race with him on a frozen pond. I was behind him, trying to pass him and he brought his skate back and hit me in the shin. It was an accident, of course, since we were big buddies.

DON: What was his personality like at that time?

BOB: He was very popular. Very friendly. We used to say he was "too nice." I don't know why we said that but we did. He was a very interesting person and a good student too. I never heard anybody say anything bad about him, just that he was "too nice."

[BOB HAS A HEARTY LAUGH]

DON: Where do you suppose he got that niceness from? Were his mother and father refined people?

BOB: Oh yes, there were extremely refined. After the skating accident, Mr. McKinnies and Hank came over to my house to say hello and see if I was hurt.

DON: In high school, Hank had a large circle of friends, didn't he?

BOB: Yes he did. We had a close relationship, as I mentioned, because my cousin lived across the street from him and we all played together. One thing about him as a child was that he was very good with grownups. He was also so good-looking that the girls all liked him.

DON: What about the girls, any girl friends?

BOB: Oh, gosh, yes. He could have had any girl but he picked Mary Mockley, who was a year ahead of Hank and me.

DON: Did the girls pursue him more than he pursued them?

KATIE: Oh, I think so. And I have no idea how he and Mary Mockley happened to get together.

DON: Bob, tell me about Hank's high school years.

BOB: Well, as I said, he was in athletics and drama and was very involved with Mary Mockley.

DON: Was it serious?

BOB: Oh, yeah. Very serious. They were seen a lot together. It was a high school romance.

DON: Hank drew people to him, didn't he? He had a magnetic personality, don't you think?

KATIE: You know. Hank always smiled, and his eyes always smiled too. And people just liked that. That's what was so attractive about him.

DON: Katie, tell me about Hank's dancing class.

KATIE: It was in the eighth grade. And I remember his mother and father picking him up after dancing class.

DON: So he was knocking heads in football and dancing too.

KATIE: He was just so versatile. There was very little that he couldn't do.

DON: Bob, after Hank graduated from Northwestern and went to California, did you see him again?

BOB: Yes, I visited him twice in California. I was married then and was in the real estate business in Milwaukee. I was going to a real estate convention in Los Angeles and he was married to Barbara Rush at that time. I was at his house and he was jumping on a trampoline for exercise. And the funniest thing happened when I first arrived. I rang the doorbell and he came to the door and he looked at me and said "you were right!" I said "right about what?" He said, "Your Mom went around with Pat O'Brien." [who was from Milwaukee and became a famous character actor in Hollywood]. He said "I was at a party with Pat O'Brien and I went up and asked him if he dated your mother. And Pat O'Brien said, "Oh sure, she was my sweetheart."

BOB: When I was growing up, I used to say, "My Mom went around with Pat O'Brien and with Spencer Tracy" [also a Milwaukee native] and nobody believed me. Hank loved to dramatize things. His personality wasn't that way but when he acted something, he put everything into it.

DON: So what did you do when you met with Hank and Barbara?

BOB: We went out into the country, Barbara and Hank and myself, and we played charades. We had a picnic there. They wanted to get away from the public.

DON: Where did he get his manners from?

BOB: His mother. But his Dad was polite too.

DON: And where did he get his looks from, his mother, his dad?

BOB: I'd say it was a blend of the two.

DON: It's surprising he wasn't spoiled, being an only child.

KATIE: He wasn't spoiled.

BOB: I don't think so. He had a lot of friends and they had nothing but good things to say about him.

DON: When did you go back to see him the second time?

BOB: I called him before I left for California and his mother said, "I spoke to Henry and he's waiting for you." She always called him Henry.

DON: Was this during his second marriage?

BOB: Yes. He was married to this other gal.

DON: Dusty?

BOB: Yeah, she wasn't too friendly.

DON: What did you do while you were there?

BOB: He was entertaining some people. I think it might have been Dusty's parents. He took us around and showed us the house and the garden. It was a little later in the day when we got there. We were sort of interrupting them.

DON: Hank was an only child and I think his mother was rather controlling. Did you see that?

KATIE: Yeah. I think she was.

BOB: I can remember many times when Hank needed a ride— he was going from here to there— and his Dad said "I'll take care of it."

KATIE: But his Mom was the one who told him to drive Hank.

BOB: Yes, Mom ruled the roost and Dad helped to rule the roost. She wouldn't come to look at my scar when Hank ran into me with his ice skates but Dad did. I'll bet you she told him to go see me. There would never be a debate between them that I saw. She would say something and then he'd do it. There was no doubt about it. She'd say, "Henry needs a ride" and he would go. It was a respectful family. They all loved each other very much. You could tell that it was a close-knit family. Mr. McKinnies was there to take care of Hank and get him to different places since Hank never drove in high school. In fact, none of us did.

KATIE: Either Hank rode or he probably didn't go at all. He never was on his own really.

DON: He was spoiled but he didn't act spoiled.

BOB: That's right. His parents did everything to make him spoiled and he wasn't.

KATIE: It was his manners. It wasn't polite to be spoiled.

BOB: I was with him a lot when he was a kid and I never remember him crying, which was pretty typical of kids at that time. I also never saw him angry or depressed. He was always level. He just had control of his emotions. When I was going to go to California, and I wanted to see Hank, I told his mom that and she called and told Hank. "Bob Head's coming out and he wants to see you and you take care of him."

DON: How did you hear about Hank's death?

BOB: I was coming out of a parking lot when I heard it on the radio. I stopped the car and pulled over to the side. I couldn't drive.

DON: I once read a biography of Abraham Lincoln that quoted what he said after his little boy Willie died in the White House of typhoid fever: "He was just too good for this world."

BOB: Yes, I understand. Every time I come down the stairway of my home, I think of Hank McKinnies.