

FIRST DATE



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Bill Toivonen, 94, greeted Ruth (Nelson) Thorness, 93, before the two headed to their 75th high school reunion on Friday. His niece Eva Rukes, left, who lives in the same complex as Ruth, brought the couple together.

Class of '31 gives two a chance to start anew

By AISHA EADY
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They met in third grade. She was Ruthie Nelson then — busy, outgoing and, to his eyes, the prettiest girl at Bryn Mawr Elementary in Minneapolis.

William Toivonen was an outdoors type who enjoyed fishing and camping. They went on to Lincoln Middle School and eventually North High School.

He never got around to asking her out — until recently, to attend the 75th reunion of the North High Class of 1931.

Arriving to pick up Ruth — Thorness now — at Calvary Center Cooperative in Golden Valley on Friday, he didn't waste time in his greeting. "After 80 years we've known each other, and I finally got a date." She didn't miss a beat. "You never asked before."

As they made their way down the hallways of the DoubleTree Hotel in St. Louis Park, their 90-plus-year-old classmates joined their march toward the event room — 20 in all.

Reunion continues: The school buildings are long gone. **B5 ►**

Their first date, 75 years later

◀ REUNION FROM B1

Some didn't recognize one another; others did. There was a chorus of "Do you remember me?" and "Yes, I sure do."

The color of Thorness' hair has changed, but a familiar wave fell above her right eye. Her back is slightly stooped. The walker she uses to get around has a shiny cranberry-colored paint job. Her face is still round, and despite the lines earned over 93 years, she has a youthful complexion.

Toivonen, 94, has most of the hair he had in high school. He dressed smartly in a gray suit with fine stripes.

Much has changed since the two — who are both widowed — were in school. Bryn Mawr Elementary no longer sits on the same spot. The first building was demolished in 1974. The North High School building is not the same as the one they attended in the 1930s.

The city has changed, too. "I can't say it was integrated," Cerna Gendler said of her class. "I think there was only one black in our class."

As other graduating classes grew apart, the Class of 1931 kept in touch. "This is the first reunion I know of to go to 75," said Dewane Pagel, president of the Minneapolis North High School alumni.

Ed Silberman, chairman of the reunion board, said of the 688 graduates in '31: "Fifty of us are still alive." Silberman said he doubts there will be another reunion in five years.

'Right off the bat'

"It's Providence that we got together again," Toivonen said. He hadn't seen Thorness since high school until a chance meeting in the aisle of a Rainbow Foods five years ago.

"We recognized each other right off the bat," he said.

They talked in the store, but that was it.

Their big date might never have happened if not for Toivonen's 78-year-old niece,



Entries from the 1931 North High School yearbook.

Eva Rukes. She lives next door to Thorness in the Calvary apartments. One day, Thorness mentioned she was going to her high school reunion. Rukes knew her uncle was going, too.

"I told her, 'I betcha you could ride along with him,'" Rukes said. A phone call to Toivonen later and the match was made, but not without a little coaxing.

"She was beside herself deciding whether she should go or not," Rukes said. Thorness uses a walker to get around and didn't want to inconvenience Toivonen. He assured her that he didn't mind; he uses a cane, after all. They would be "gimpy and limpy," he said. They would just have to help each other around at the reunion.

Rukes and some of the other Calvary ladies took Thorness shopping for a new outfit. "They were more excited than I was," she said.

'A chance to go back'

"I'm so excited for these folks," said Rob Gauthier, general manager of the St. Louis Park DoubleTree Hotel.

"I've had some regrets in my day, not asking someone out on a date," he said. "It's nice he had a chance to go back."

Toivonen and Thorness might not have been the only love connection in the room. Miriam Keesey was keeping an eye on her mother, Priscilla Osterhus Afreth of San Diego. Priscilla was "the class clown, class organizer and class flirt," her daughter said — as if the two sequined cowboy hats she wore didn't give that away.

Keesey pointed at the gentleman sitting next to her mother, Wesley Burnham, 93.

"That's the boyfriend," Keesey said. "I suspect that's why we flew all the way up here from California."

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