

Wednesday, June 28, 2006

Stadium brought magic back to the city

By Ben Beagle



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The aging, semi-hysterical retired reporter rides shotgun with the greatest station wagon driver of them all down the rocky road of life. Mondays and Wednesdays, steady as she goes.

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You could say that it was an act of faith that built the stadium and named it for victory in 1942 — long before any victory in World War II seemed possible.

But it was built — on land donated by the old Norfolk and Western Railway and on land that tended to flood when the nearby, usually timid Roanoke River became rather more than gentle and turned a roiling hateful brown.

It was built and it was magnificent. There was nothing quite like it in Western Virginia at the time and it shamed the memory of the structure that it replaced — the shambling, wooden “Splinter Bowl” at Maher Field.

Roanoke was once again a “Magic City.” But if there are memories of Victory Stadium, there are delightful legends about the “Splinter Bowl.”

Like the one in which the telegraph operator — always called “Sparky” — had to borrow some booze from the gentlemen of the press in the unsheltered press box.

This was not to drink, it is said, but as an application to keep the telegrapher’s fingers warm enough to send play-by-plays of the VPI-VMI Thanksgiving Day football game to The Associated Press.

The new stadium, of course, had a press box and if there was some booze in there, it wasn’t poured over the

cold fingers of a telegraph operator.

The stadium in its time has seen the coming and going of no less a politician than Richard Nixon. Roanokers and others filled half of the stadium's 24,000 seats to see him.

For years, it was the site of a mammoth Fourth of July celebration sponsored by The Roanoke Times — an event that filled it every time.

Briefly, it echoed to stock car racing and it was long the home field for Patrick Henry and William Fleming high schools.

In the 1970s, the Group AAA high school championship game between T.C. Williams High School of Alexandria and Salem's Andrew Lewis High School was played there. T.C. Williams won and the game was the inspiration for the film "Remember the Titans."

More than a quarter of a century ago, Roanokers ignored to extinction two semipro football teams that played in the stadium — the luckless Roanoke Buckskins and the Virginia Hunters.

This shunning of semipro sports of all kinds is typical of Roanokers — although many of them came to worship the old stadium by the river.

And then you can't dismiss the Thanksgiving Day game between Virginia Polytechnic Institute and VMI — about as traditional as you could get without becoming maudlin.

The arrival of cadets was a kind of Mardi Gras on Jefferson Street. Hotels filled ahead of time and it was good to be in business at that time.

It didn't last. VPI became Virginia Tech, with a limited cadet enrollment, and became a university.

VMI stayed the same, largely, as it had been when Stonewall Jackson taught there. But what a game then: The cadets of both schools marched in with flags flying and it didn't bother anybody that this splendor was very close to what went on before the Army-Navy game.

At times, it seemed that this wasn't about football at all. Among other assignments, The Roanoke Times sent "society" writers to describe what the women in the stands were wearing.

Police reporters were assigned to describe how the fans got into the stadium and out again.

Reporters who routinely covered the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors were sent to the sidelines with Speed Graphic cameras about which they knew little. Sports writers sat free from care in the press box.

And if, in the tearing down of the stadium, some worker thinks he smells bourbon, he shouldn't worry.

It smelled a lot like that on many Thanksgiving afternoons.
