



Lyman Hafen's attendance at a youth soccer game for his granddaughter, Emma, left, led him on a trip down memory lane near East Elementary School in St. George | Photo Submitted by Lyman Hafen

Let the bell ring:

Game chimes in East Elementary memories

BY LYMAN HAFEN

Not long ago I attended one of my granddaughter's soccer games. When we arrived I was delighted to find the field was set up on the wide lawn south of East Elementary School, where I attended kindergarten through sixth grade. Debbie and I sat down in our lawn chairs at the southwest corner of the field and settled in for an hour of watching two teams of bright and spunky girls swarm like bees around a helpless little ball that wove and tangled and bobbled through their busy feet.

From time to time the ball would pop out of the hive and roll free toward one of the goals. The air would fill with cheers, and then the ball would veer out of bounds, and all fell silent. As we sat there I scanned the south face of the building and looked at each of the doors that opened out onto the field. One of them had been the door to Mrs. Phoenix's fourth-grade classroom, and as soon as I thought it, an image

appeared in my head. It was Mary Phoenix seated stately and prim at the front of the class with an open book in her hand. Golden afternoon light filtered in through the south window. It was almost time for the bell to ring. But we didn't care if the bell rang that day. We didn't care because Mrs. Phoenix was reading to us. She was reading a book called "Charlotte's Webb." When Mrs. Phoenix read to us, we didn't care if the bell ever rang.

My eyes moved down the building to the east until they stopped on what I remember as the door to Mr. Hughes's fifth-grade classroom. I know we studied U.S. history and the Constitution and the three branches of government and a host of other monumental subjects in fifth grade. But the image that remains from that year, and still burns brightly in my mind a half-century later, is the tall, slender, Cary Grant-like figure of Owen Hughes seated

at the front of the classroom reading from a tattered copy of "Where the Red Fern Grows." Most days in fifth grade we lived for the final bell to ring. But when Mr. Hughes was reading the words of Wilson Rawls, the mesmerizing story of an Ozark boy and his dogs, no bell on earth could have lifted us out of our seats. And when he pulled down his copy of "The Black Stallion" and opened up Walter Farley's dream world of a boy and his horse, you couldn't have dragged us out of that room by our feet.

So there we sat on the corner of the south lawn, the same lawn we spilled onto every morning and afternoon at recess. The same lawn where we played tackle football when the teachers weren't watching. Where we played kickball and tag and ran foot races and rested in the shade of the mulberry trees. The same lawn, I now recalled, where the two fifth-grade classes played the epic baseball game to settle

once and for all which class was the best: Mr. Hughes or Mr. Ence.

I got to play catcher that day. For that reason it was one of the greatest days of my life, up to that point – and up to the point in the game when Gary Nelson, the top power hitter on Mr. Ence's team, took a Ruthian swing and sent the ball sailing into the next county and gleefully tossed his bat in such a manner that its trajectory led directly toward the face of the catcher, who went to a school that did not own any catching equipment and who found himself innocently exposed to any and all flying objects that might come his way. I lost half of one of my front teeth that day, along with about a pint of blood and a gallon of tears. I think I lost more pride than anything. And I think we lost the game, too.

Within the hour I was back at my desk holding an ice pack to my lips and listening to the words that floated off the page and into the head of Mr. Hughes — the words that fluttered out of his mouth with healing in their wings.

It was then, in the middle of that thought, I realized that where I sat in my lawn chair that morning watching my granddaughter play soccer was the very spot where I had crouched behind home plate the day Gary Nelson's bat brought my career as a catcher to an ignominious end.

The girls played on, and cheers filled the air until suddenly there was a collision in the middle of the field. Two little girls, one in a pink jersey and one in baby blue, rose slowly to their feet, crying. One held her mouth as blood oozed between her fingers.

I wondered where Mr. Hughes was when we needed him.