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The finished product surrounded by members of the junior class, the Class of 1970. Photo courtesy of Chris Williams

Building Junior the Giant Snowman It Took a Village

By Bob Zahler

Fifty years ago a group of sixteen and seventeen-year-old kids brazenly believed that they could win a radio contest to build a snowman larger than anyone else in the entire Twin Cities listening area. Ridiculed and doubted at first, the determination of these gutsy kids inspired the entire community, and their project became a source of pride. While the story was briefly covered by this author in *Faith, Family, and Farming*, it is hoped that this retelling will be more complete and accurate. The book account was largely based on articles from newspapers. Unfortunately, those reports contained errors. For this article, several of the entrepreneurial individuals of this project were contacted. Fifty years has clouded some memories, but what follows is at least based on the recollections, although not identical recollections, of some of those involved in the project, namely, John Roden, Theresa Huber, George Marx, Chris (Jaeb) Williams, Gayle (Kilian) Weber, Gene Hackenmueller, Dorothy (Peloquin) Winkelman, Lynette (Barthel) Deziel, and Mark Kessler.

Nearly everyone who was a teenager in St. Michael in 1969 was listening to their favorite top-40 hits on AM 63, KDWB, which had announced a tallest snowman-building contest in early March. Why a snowman-building contest? According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the winter of 1968-69 was one of the stormiest winters on record with six separate blizzards in December and January. Records for Minneapolis show that over 50 inches of snow fell before March of '69. Every community in Minnesota faced the challenge of how to manage huge piles of snow as a result of cleaning the public roads. KDWB, trying to capitalize on an issue that was on everyone's minds, announced that it would award \$10 per foot to the person or group who built the tallest snowman. That message was heard by a group of enterprising juniors at the new STMA high school. John Roden recalled that it was Theresa Huber and Dorothy (Peloquin) Winkelman who approached him, as class treasurer, with the idea that their class should enter the contest. The student council had been trying to raise money for their class fund in the hope of being first to take a class trip out of state. Spreading the idea among the juniors didn't take long as just about everyone was listening to KDWB and knew about the contest. But how do you get an enormous vision like this underway? Well, the answer seemed to be to just get started. John and Theresa pitched the idea to the principal, as nothing could happen without his permission. Fortunately, the principal was Theresa's dad, Joe Huber. But according to Theresa, her dad didn't embrace the idea immediately as she recalls having to lobby him at home. Within a day or so Joe gave his blessing to the project, and that was key or else Superintendent Bill Tidmarsh would have never approved. Without impediments from adults, the kids started working.

The location for building 'Junior', the name eventually given to the snowman, basically presented itself since directly behind the school (now St. Michael Elementary) was a huge pile of snow dumped there by the county and village. Despite the enormity of the final product, there is general agreement that nobody worked from any set of plans for building Junior; he

just sort of grew organically. Work started on Friday, March 7, and continued the next week, much of the work happening after school and late into the evenings. Several of the junior boys who came from farms convinced their dads to let them use tractors with front-end loaders to help pile the snow higher and form the circular base. While the following is likely not a complete list, the kids (and dads) who provided machinery included George Marx (Reiny), John Roden (John), Tom Neuman (Ray), Mark Kessler (Dale and uncles Bill and Wayne), Jim Haller (Lawrence), and Gene Hackenmueller (Bernard). To be clear, it was the kids who were running the equipment, but it was the dads who allowed their farm machinery to be used to build a snowman.

Essentially, the circumference of the base, which turned out to be about 190 feet, determined the final height as the kids knew that in order to create the appearance of the typical snowman, they had to form at least three tiers; and so the larger the size of the base, the taller the snowman would have to be in order to preserve proportionality. After shaping the base with tractors, the guys determined that snow fencing, obtained again from their parents' farms, would work to help form the three tiers. But it wasn't until after they started rolling out the fence that they realized they were going to need *a lot* of fence, and so the boys used their best skills of persuasion to finagle fencing and support posts from other local farmers. Not everyone was certain that loaning their materials to these kids was a wise gamble; but in general the kids found that most of the farmers were willing to help them out, even if they were a bit suspicious of whether they would ever get their snow fence back.

Support for the snowman project in both the school and community was not universal and not immediate. The juniors were razzed daily by the seniors. Some, no doubt, were convinced that the juniors were stupid for even trying such a scheme, but others were likely just envious of the fact that it was the juniors, and not the seniors, who were able to rally their class behind this tremendous undertaking. The faculty were generally supportive. Besides the help and encouragement of their adviser, Brian Doyle, some remember that faculty like math teacher Bev Carlson, who was worried that the kids were getting sick from working late into the night on the snowman, allowed the kids to take a short nap in class. Many members in the community thought that the kids were crazy, at least at first. People drove to the school parking lot and watched them work. Many laughed at them in the early stages, but as the snowman started to take more shape, people sat in their parked cars and admired the kids' ingenuity. As remembered by the participants, at one point the parking lot contained at least 25 cars of people who just came to watch them work. As for the members of the Class of 1970, there was certainly a core of individuals who got things rolling, but eventually everyone in the class participated. It should be noted that this was the first year of STMA high school after new school district boundaries had been drawn throughout the county, and so some of the members of the junior class had attended, just the previous year, Buffalo, Elk River, or private schools other than St. Michael Catholic High School. The snowman project, therefore, became a unifying event for the junior class, helping them to bond and forge lasting friendships.

As the height of the snowman started to climb, the challenge became getting the snow into the rings created by the snow fence. Here the guys employed more farm machinery. Hay elevators, normally used to lift hay bales up to the mow of the barn, were utilized to get snow up to the higher tiers. Eventually, even the elevators didn't go high enough and so someone came up with the idea of using a silage blower, meant for filling silos, to get the snow into the upper rings. Welter's Implement donated the use of a used blower that they had on their lot about a block away from where they were building Junior. The blower worked great as long as the snow was a fine consistency, otherwise it needed to be broken up before being



Above and below: hay elevators and silage blowers were utilized with snow fencing to create Junior's enormous height. Photos courtesy of Chris Williams



shoveled into the hopper. At one point a blower stopped working and a mechanic from Welter's Implement came over to assist, eventually determining that the blower chute was just plugged with ice. Blower pipe extensions, to get more height, came from Bernard Barthel and probably others. Getting workers up to the top to shovel and pack snow required affixing metal silo ladders to the sides of Junior. John Roden recalls that he and Dave Heuring were often the two climbing to the top to pack snow. The liability concerns would boggle the mind of any school superintendent today, but this was a different time, and kids were given a lot more leeway to enjoy activities without the fear of lawsuits.

While the guys of the class were largely responsible for the snow piling, the girls were also directly involved. Some of the people interviewed remember the incident where Mark Kessler, driving his tractor with a bucket full of snow, knocked Chris Jaeb into the hay elevator. The elevator started taking her up until Tom Neuman pulled her out. Chris wasn't hurt, and it was understood that this was just part of the fun of working on the project together. The girls of the class, however, were almost exclusively responsible for giving Junior his face and the other required accessories. Under the direction of Florence Huber, Theresa's mom and the principal's wife, the girls dyed old sheets that were then sewn together to create Junior's belt and scarf. Other moms like LaDonna Zachman, Helen Peloquin, and Armella Kilian provided late-night meals for the kids or brought them hot chocolate. While everyone remembers that the parents were incredibly supportive of the project, what is also agreed upon is that for the most part the kids were allowed to work unsupervised.

The kids worked feverishly to meet the Friday, March 14 deadline set by KDWB. It was one of the girls who decided that they could ingratiate themselves with the radio station by creating buttons that spelled out "K-D-W-B" using large sheets of cardboard which likely came from flattened appliance boxes from Carroll Kilian's hardware store. The girls also used the cardboard to make Junior's eyes, nose and mouth. Before these final pieces could be added, however, the juniors had to resolve one nagging problem: how to disguise the snow fence. Snow fencing was typically a reddish-brown in color. Left alone, Junior would have looked like he was wearing a seersucker suit or confined in a series of corsets. The kids needed to get Junior to look like a snowman. They had considered painting the fence white, but time and weather conditions made that an impossible task. The answer came from someone on the fire department, perhaps one of the dads like Carroll Kilian or Allen Jaeb. The solution was to use fire hoses to spray water on Junior while at the same time blowing fine snow on the fence with the silage blowers. The result was a sort of "snow plaster" to hide the fencing. This was, perhaps, one of the most remarkable tricks employed that really made Junior look authentic. With permission to work on the snowman during school on the last day before the deadline, the kids finished putting on the final touches just in time for the official measurement by representatives of KDWB.

Since this was long before the days of social media, nobody knew if other groups were trying to win the contest. They had heard through the grapevine that students at Anoka were building their own snowman, but some STMA kids drove over to Anoka to spy on them and found that their snowman was skinny and probably not more than twelve feet tall, but perhaps



Above: KDWB radio DJ True Don Bleu arrives at STMA to size up Junior. Photo courtesy of Chris Williams

there were other contestants about which they hadn't heard. KDWB's afternoon DJ, True Don Bleu (real name Rick Kelleher) along with a camera man and another radio representative arrived to measure up STMA's snowman on Friday. After they caught sight of Junior behind the building, the radio reps walked back into the school. A teacher overheard Bleu talking on a phone in the high school office, telling someone back at the radio station that they can give up looking anywhere else as he had found the contest winner in St. Michael. Apparently, none of the other contestants had built anything that even came close to the size of Junior. While winning the contest was now certain, the kids had decided early on that they didn't want to just win, they wanted the final height to be 63 feet to match KDWB's position on the AM radio dial (and of course to win more money). They were pretty certain that they were close to the 60-foot range, but for extra measure they added a "feather" to Junior's head, a decorated 4x4 post that added at least another ten feet to Junior's height. The radio station reps had to determine the official height since they promised to pay the winners \$10 per foot, and they were doubtful of the 63-foot height claimed by the kids; but principal Joe Huber, who had been both a music teacher and a math teacher, demonstrated to the radio reps using angle of elevation calculations that the kids had

Left: junior class adviser Brian Doyle. Right: True Don Bleu awards the prize check to John Roden. Looking on are Lynette (Barthel) Deziel, Kathy (Zachman) Marquette & George Marx



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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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achieved their desired goal. Besides, he argued, the station was getting some great advertising out of this snowman. The radio station relented and agreed to award the kids \$630. True Don Bleu came back to St. Michael a week later to present the class with their check at a special event in the gymnasium.

Riding high on their accomplishment, the juniors were inspired to see if they could boost that class trip fund even higher. They decided to sell chances on when the last bit of snowman would melt. John Roden recalled that with connections through Mr. Doyle, they purchased a color TV as the grand prize. These high school kids went door-to-door and into bars as far away as Osseo selling chances on Junior's demise. According to some, a few seniors snuck behind school in the spring to break up chunks of snow to hurry the melting process and improve their chances at winning. The last flake of Junior melted on May 28, and the junior classes netted over \$700 just on the raffle, bringing the total raised to about \$1300. By the way, in 1970 they took their senior class trip to Lake Okoboji, Iowa. Yep. They made it out of state. Building Junior the giant snowman not only earned a group of high school kids a memorable class trip, it demonstrated how enterprising kids can do great things when provided with the tools and support from the entire community.



Left: the front page of the Minneapolis Star from March 19, 1969. The British military invades the short-lived Republic of Anguilla, and kids at St. Michael build a gigantic snowman. Long before STMA was winning state championships, it was a snowman who helped put St. Michael on the map.

Upcoming Events

All events and meetings held at the Gries Lenhardt Allen Library Room at City Hall

- Feb. 11, 7:00 PM Regular Board meeting
- Mar. 11, 7:00 PM Regular Board meeting
- April 8, 7:00 PM Regular Board meeting & Annual Meeting/board elections