

# SPOTLIGHT ... on friendship

## Childhood friends reunite after 54 years

By **TED BROWN**  
Staff Writer

In the 1950s, kids living in the village of Stewarttown were a close-knit group, hanging out together, fishing in the mill pond, dropping by the general store, playing together as kids did back then.

It was the summer of 1955—a new kid arrived in the village, and the locals didn't take long to adopt him into their tight-knit group.

Peter Smurthwaite and his family moved in from England, and the new kid with an accent was soon spending time with his new friends Ken Grant, Phil Wilson, Bette Mae Mileham (Stokes), the Barclay sisters Linda (Gillett) and Jacqui (Cameron), Carol McLean (Copeland), as well as the Hunter kids; Mike, Barry and Rick.

"We did a lot of fishing back then," said Grant. "Pete was quite a fisherman, and we spent a lot of time fishing in the (mill) pond."

The gang of kids forged lifelong friendships, but were to be broken up when Smurthwaite's father decided to move the family to New Zealand in 1959. Pete was 15.

"We all promised like hell that we'd keep in touch, writing letters back and forth," said Grant. "But that didn't last long. Back then, all we had were letters, there was no email or Internet."

In time, the letter writing became more sporadic, and eventually the friends lost touch with their friend in New Zealand.

"During the 1980s, Bette Mae (née Mileham) Stokes decided to track down Pete, and got in touch with an international telephone directory. She managed to get his telephone number in New Zealand.

"After that, he and Bette Mae called back and forth a bit," said Grant. "They also resumed writing letters. When the Internet and email came around, that changed everything. We suddenly were back to

keeping in touch.

"In late April this year, I received a call out of the blue from Bette Mae," said Grant. "She told me Pete was coming to visit us in Stewarttown. I nearly fell off my chair—it'd been 54 years since we had seen each other."

Smurthwaite and his wife Annette arrived May 11 and they had a reunion in Stewarttown, meeting with many of the old friends, touring the area, while reminiscing about things they'd done together, more than half a century before.

"We visited the old mill pond, which isn't there anymore," joked Grant. "Pete looked at where his house



Longtime Stewarttown 'kids' (from left) Phil Wilson, Bette Mae (Mileham) Stokes, Annette and Peter Smurthwaite and Ken Grant assembled for a photo as they enjoyed a reunion last May, reuniting Smurthwaite with the gang, after he and his family moved to New Zealand in 1959. The group toured various Stewarttown landmarks and relived stories from their childhoods.

*Photo courtesy Ken Grant*



Peter Smurthwaite (left) and Ken Grant show off their catch of fish they caught in the Stewarttown mill pond in 1957. The photo was taken by Ken's mother in their back yard. **Right:** A lot of water has gone over the dam since then, but the longtime friends (Grant is on the left) assembled at the same place as they did in 56 years ago. Note the size of the tree at left in both photos.

*Photos courtesy Ken Grant*



"One day back in 1957, Pete and I caught some fish, and my mom took a picture of us in front of the old (mill) dam, right in our back yard," said Grant. "We stood at the same place, and had another photo taken, more than 50 years later. The one tree behind us was a little tiny thing in the first photo, but is now quite a size."

At a reception organized by Jacqui (Barclay) Cameron and Carol (McLean) Copeland, the group later assembled at the St. George pub for an evening of food and good times, before the Smurthwaites resumed their tour of Canada.

Grant said Smurthwaite and his wife have two daughters, two grandchildren and another one on the way.

"I think they have a pretty good life," said Grant. "Pete is still working—he'll be 70 in October. I get the feeling he enjoys what he's doing."

After their reunion, Grant said the connections will be that much stronger when the emails are exchanged in the future.

"It was a good time, and I'm sure there aren't too many people who can reconnect with an old gang like that, especially 54 years later," said Grant. "I know I'll never forget that weekend. It was great."

used to be; it's gone too. The road runs right through it now."

They also toured the site of the old Stewarttown School (which is also gone) as well as St. John's Anglican Church.

"It was amazing," said Grant. "Things came back to us as soon as someone mentioned something. I spent a lot of time just listening to the old stories, and found it interesting how we seemed to remember the good times, but managed to forget the nasty stuff."



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