

Lost class ring makes a long journey home

Ring discovered at Cacapon State Park is returned to owner 55 years later

by Kate Shunney

In the summer of 1952, Wanda Bailey went swimming at Cacapon State Park lake. At some point, the young woman from Beckley felt her high school class ring float off her finger in the water. Well, that's that, she thought, as her Woodrow Wilson High School ring sank through the water and settled onto the sandy bottom.

Over the years, Bailey thought of that gold ring with its red stone and gold "B" on the face. But she didn't fret about it, or get a replacement ring. She was busy building a life – marrying, moving to Washington, D.C. for a career with the government, raising three children, enjoying her grandchildren.

Then, last month, she got a letter from Berkeley Springs. Jody Crouse was writing to say that her nephew had found a Woodrow Wilson High School ring from the class of 1950. Inscribed inside were the initials "W.L.S." Could it be her? The woman that was once Wanda Lee Shaver?

David Crouse, Jr. has a talent for finding things. The 17-year-old Berkeley Springs High School senior somehow sees things other people overlook.

While raking dirt to prepare Cacapon State Park's new shooting range for grass seed this fall, Crouse noticed a ring on the ground. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands. It was obviously a woman's ring, because it barely fit his pinky finger.

Crouse put the ring in his pocket and didn't think much about it. When he got home from the summer job, he showed the ring to his father and grandmother, then to his aunt.

The ring, a gold band with a crest atop a red stone, sat at Crouse's house for a few months. One day, Jody Crouse told her mother it was time to do a little detective work.

The ring had plenty of clues – the name of the school, the class year and initials inside. Crouse looked online for Woodrow Wilson High in Beckley and found a website for the school.

The site had alumni pages, including one for the class of 1950. No one listed on the page had the initials of "WLS," so Crouse chose a random woman on the class list and emailed her. A woman would be more likely to look in her high school yearbook for an old classmate, Crouse figured.

Right away, Iris Cox Martin emailed back with an address in Cheverly, Maryland for a Wanda Bailey, pulled from a reunion mailing list. Martin remembered both Wanda Lee

Shaver and her sister Wilma from school.

Woodrow Wilson High School's 1950 yearbook includes photos of two dark-haired beauties back to back. Wilma and Wanda Lee Shaver both smile up from their place midway down the page. They aren't twins, but they certainly look like sisters.

Cacapon State Park's new trap shooting range is perched on a flat spot about midway up Cacapon Mountain. The range was built this summer almost two miles up the mountain, near an old park dump.

In the early 1980s, park workers started dredging the bottom of the park's lake to remove silt and debris. Dump trucks hauled the sludge up the mountain to a dumping area.

David Crouse, Sr. had just started working at the park when the lake cleaning started. He thinks the sludge from the bottom of the lake was hauled up to the same flat spot that became the shooting range.

That might be how Wanda Lee Shaver's 1950 class ring turned up on the side of Cacapon Mountain, so far from where she felt it slip off underwater during a brief visit to the park in 1952.

The way the Crouses figure the chronology, that means the gold ring from Beckley spent 30 years underwater and another 25 in the dirt.

"It's surprising that someone found it," said David Crouse, Jr., as if someone else made the remarkable discovery.

"When I cleaned it up, it looked just like it did when I first got it," said Wanda Lee Shaver Bailey from her Maryland home last Friday, December 7.

She had just received her class ring in the mail. She'd been pretty antsy to get it. Understandable, after 55 years.

"This ring brings back a lot of memories," Bailey said. One thing she can't remember is what she paid for the 10-carat gold band. But she does remember Iris Cox, the woman who helped track her down.

Bailey's feelings about being reunited with a piece of her past go beyond fond memories.

"I really don't know what to say. It was so generous of Jody to find me and send the ring. When it happens to you, it's kind of overpowering. It makes you realize how much people still really care about other people," said Bailey.

One of Bailey's four sisters wasn't entirely surprised by the unlikely chain of events.

"Only a person from West Virginia would have gone to all that trouble," the sister said.

The 75-year-old Bailey isn't sure how to properly thank the young David Crouse or his aunt for their efforts in returning such a sentimental object to her.

But Jody Crouse says reuniting the Beckley native with her 1950 class ring is the best thanks.

"I just wanted her to have it back," said Crouse.



JODY AND DAVID CROUSE, JR. HELPED RETURN A 1950 BECKLEY CLASS RING to its owner in Maryland this month. David Crouse, Jr. found the ring while working at Cacapon State Park this summer. The owner of the ring lost it at the park in 1952.



THIS 1950 CLASS RING spent the last 55 years underwater and in the dirt at Cacapon State Park. Summer worker David Crouse, Jr. discovered the ring this fall. His aunt, Jody Crouse, traced the ring's owner and returned it to her last week. Jody Crouse is a long-time graphic art designer for *The Morgan Messenger* and *The Hancock News*.



WANDA LEE SHAVER IS PICTURED in Woodrow Wilson High School's 1950 yearbook, alongside her sister. Shaver lost her class ring at Cacapon State Park shortly after graduating. She got her ring back last week.