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By Teri Carnicelli

It began as an idea of the 1954 Sunnyslope High School Student Council. They wanted something to help this fledgling school, which was only in its second academic year, leave its mark on the remote community located several miles north of the Phoenix city limits.

Perry Daniel, class of 1957, recalled many long drives to visit his grandparents in Kentucky, one time stopping at a gas station in New Mexico. There he spotted a large white letter seemingly painted on a hillside. It left an impression.

Another student, Gary Davis, class of 1956, recently had moved down from Prescott where a large "P" was painted on a mountain slope.

And so the idea took root: a giant "S" on the convenient hillside located about a quarter mile north of the school, large enough for everyone to see. That would be their legacy.

Doug Shay, class of 1956, was student body vice president that year. He recalls that the most important thing was getting permission from the hillside's owner to paint their giant "S" marker. After that, it was a matter of rounding up volunteers and finding the cheapest method to paint the large letter, which in this case was buckets of water toted from the high school to the base of the mountain and then mixed with whitewash powder before being hauled up the steep slope.

The day before the mountain was actually painted, the "team" borrowed some walkie-talkies from classmates who were part of the National Guard barracks in Sunnyslope and used them to help stake out the area. One student stood at the school, looking up the slope and calling directions into the walkie-talkie. There was no surveying equipment, no carefully drawn out map or design. Just "a little to the left" and "down about three feet."

Gregory Diehl, class of 1956, happened by that day and was told to head up the hill and stand in a certain spot. He was "drafted," he jokes, into becoming a marker on the hillside. "He was our resident post," laughs Shay.

The next day, the truly hard work began.

"It was in December, so we started just after sunrise around 7:30 a.m. and finished around 5 p.m.," Shay recalls. "You got tired pretty quick of carrying those paint buckets up there. That hill was steep."

The volunteers painted out the S where the markers were set, and there was no need to bring over large boulders or rocks since the mountainside already was littered with them. "We just painted the ground," Shay explains.

The boys—and a couple of girls—who sweated and hauled and painted all that long day took a lot of pride in what they had accomplished. In the end, the “S” marker could be seen from more than 20 miles away, all the way down into the heart of the city below. Sunnyslope at that time had not yet been annexed into Phoenix and was only a part of the county.

“We were way out from the heart of the city,” Daniel recalls. “We had a volunteer fire department, a movie theater, a grocery store, a gas station, you name it. We were really almost a free-standing town,” except without an actual town government, he explains.

So it came as no surprise when the highly visible “S” became a symbol not just for the high school but for the entire Sunnyslope community as well. And now that marker will be preserved, in perpetuity for future generations to enjoy.

A special ceremony will be held on Saturday, Oct. 15 (the day after Homecoming at Sunnyslope High) to unveil the commemorative plate identifying “S” Mountain as a historic landmark. The plate will be embedded inside a large boulder that will be placed at the foot of the trail leading up the hillside.

The celebration begins at 10 a.m. at the base of the mountain on West Camino Vista Street. Many former Sunnyslope High students from throughout the decades will be in attendance, along with representatives from the Phoenix City Council, the Sunnyslope Historical Society, and the city's Historic Preservation Commission. There will be a gathering afterward at the Eyeopener Restaurant at 6th Street and Hatcher Road for refreshments and continued camaraderie. There also will be “S” Mountain T-shirts and a commemorative S Mountain book available for purchase.

For more information, call Nancy (Bergstrom) Anselmo, Class of 1958, at 623-979-2158 or e-mail nanselmo@earthlink.net.

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