

Rairdon Remembered 40 years later: Friendship never forgotten

By Karrie Carlson Daily Journal Media May 22, 2025

It's a scene that could be from any decade — three seventh-grade girls spending time together after school, making jokes, running around outside and making plans for the future. Sonja Lien and Jo Musel Parr can remember an afternoon like that with their friend Sarah Rairdon.

Although they didn't know it at the time, days were numbered for the three girls. What started when Rairdon didn't make it home from school and was reported missing on May 20, 1985, led to tireless searching, and when Rairdon should've been getting ready for eighth grade with her friends, her body was instead discovered in a field and the mystery of her death unraveled at the hands of her father.

There is a lot about the last moments and crimes surrounding Rairdon, but who was she when she was full of life?

Rairdon was born in Bertha on Feb. 12, 1972, and lived in Underwood through kindergarten, after which she moved to the Wheaton-Graceville area. She returned to the Underwood School when her family moved back to the area in 1983. She was in fifth grade and, according to her friends, quickly won everyone over with her humor and kindness.

"Everybody loved her," Lien said. "The students and the teachers all did because she was so witty. She was bright, and I mean that in both that she was smart academically, but also because she was so happy — always with a smile. I don't think I ever saw her without a smile."

Participating in school activities was something Rairdon and her friends, Lien and Musel Parr, were just beginning when they were in seventh grade. Rairdon was in basketball, track and speech. She babysat and saved her money to pay for the registration fees herself.

Musel Parr recalled, "She could talk me into things. I joined seventh grade track because she wanted me to. I joined the seventh grade speech team, as a horrible speaker, because she wanted me to."

Rairdon simply had a way of charming her friends into trying new activities.

In speech, Rairdon was a natural. She wrote her own speech, and although the details aren't as clear as they used to be, Lien and Musel Parr both still laugh when they think about it.

"She was really a comedian at heart," said Lien.

Rairdon won with that memorable speech.

Generosity and kindness were other traits Rairdon possessed.

"She didn't have much herself, but she was giving. I still have a pair of white moccasins that she gave me," shared Musel Parr, explaining that Rairdon had gone on a trip and had gotten the new moccasins, giving them to her friend when she had outgrown them.

Musel Parr also recalled a sleepover at which Rairdon had eaten a few pieces of fruit from a fruit bowl on the table. The next school day, Rairdon brought her Cheez-its wrapped up in a washcloth to thank her.

Some of the last memories Lein and Musel Parr have of Rairdon have elements of fear, sadness, anger and confusion woven throughout — not knowing where she had gone, if a stranger took her, being questioned by police, the presence of news media in the classrooms, the whole community searching for the girl in the pink teddy bear shirt.

In fact, the news initially had details about Rairdon's shirt incorrect, and providing accurate details was just one way the girls aided in the search for their friend.

Since 1985, as time has moved forward, Rairdon's classmates got drivers licenses, went to prom and graduated. There was a tribute to Rairdon in what would have been her senior yearbook, and on graduation day, which was five years to the day from Rairdon's abduction, the class met at her graveside to spend time together — as close as humanly possible — to all share the day's milestone with Rairdon.

Gone, but certainly not forgotten.

There was talk of Rairdon wanting to be a teacher or maybe a veterinarian because of her caretaking and nurturing personality, but who she would have become is something her friends can only imagine.

When the memories and grief get too heavy, and they do, Rairdon's friends remember her humor and ability to laugh at herself. It makes them smile. They remember the time, for instance, when Rairdon cut her bangs herself and they ended up way too short. Knowing people would laugh and point it out, Rairdon agreed that yes, they were too short, and she won't be doing her own haircuts again.

Lien also remembers a pair of yellow tennis shoes that some kids would talk about. Rairdon never let it bother her, though. Like a lot of things in her life, she took it in stride and moved forward.

"She had a great smile. She had a way of finding where she needed to be in a crowd so she could be comfortable," Musel Parr said. "I don't know how she did it, but she did."

It's been 40 years since the three seventh grade girls played the evening away. Lein and Musel Parr are all grown up, but Rairdon is forever a 13-year-old girl living in memories. Her friends have kept her close to their hearts, and though details fade, the joy their friend brought to their lives will take longer than 40 years to fade — it will last forever.

This is the fourth article in a series about the 40th anniversary of the disappearance of Sarah Rairdon.