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20 years after their fight, antiwar activists to meet

By Chuck Haga
Staff Writer

Gene McCarthy tells a story about crossing a street in New York City recently. He started across the street and a man stopped him.

"You're Sen. McCarthy, aren't you?" the man said.

"That's right," McCarthy said.

"But you aren't so much against the Communists as you used to be, right?"

McCarthy said he smiled, nodded, said something about how he had indeed mellowed, and then went on his way.

Has it been so long that one McCarthy looks the same as another?

Maybe it's time for a reunion.

That will happen Sunday, with the timing and some of the nervous anticipation of a 20-year high school reunion. In the high-Establishment surroundings of the IDS Tower's

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Reunion

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50th-floor Orion Court, the old antiwar crowd will gather around a cash bar and remember 1967.

They'll remember when they knocked on doors, compiled lists, trimmed their hair and "got clean for Gene" — and turned anti-Vietnam War sentiment in Minnesota into a political movement with legacies still felt and debated today.

"Everyone who was involved in politics at that time, their lives were changed by it," said Howard Kaibel, then 21 years old and student body president at the University of Minnesota. Today he's a state administrative law judge.

The reunion, starting at 2 p.m., is open to anyone who took part in the antiwar movement. More than 600 invitations have gone out, with names taken from old membership rolls and convention delegate lists.

McCarthy himself will be guest of honor — that's Gene McCarthy, not Joe.

"I'm looking forward to it," he said. "I never really saw a lot of those people. In that campaign, those people did it on their own. They had to confront the party people, some powerful people. It was often a very personal thing."

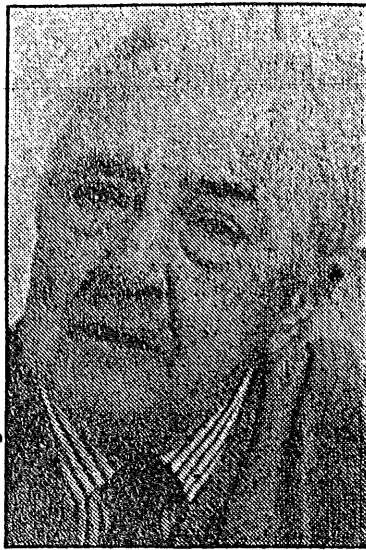
It was 20 years ago this week that McCarthy, then a senator from Minnesota, declared himself a candidate for president. The war was escalating and there seemed little chance Lyndon Johnson would change that if he won another term in 1968.

With McCarthy providing focus, the antiwar movement eventually chased Johnson from the race. But in the end, after all the trauma of 1968, the assassinations and riots and hate, McCarthy lost the nomination to Hubert Humphrey. And then Richard Nixon became president.

"When we lost the state convention and we lost in Chicago, they didn't seem like the best of times," said Forrest Harris. "But in the 25 years I spent on the state executive committee, it was the one battle that I would willingly fight again."

Harris, 71, a retired university professor, was state DFL vice chairman when he was asked to start a state chapter of Concerned Democrats in 1967. He was reluctant, he said, because the DFL had been mauled just a year earlier by the primary fight between Gov. Karl Rolvaag and A.M. (Sandy) Keith.

"I thought we had spilled enough



Eugene McCarthy

blood and didn't have any to spare," Harris said. "But as things got worse in Vietnam, . . . The thing that tipped me was the general who made some reference to this village they had burned: 'We destroyed it in order to save it.'"

Harris and John Connolly, now a Ramsey County district judge, were elected co-chairs of Concerned Democrats. "It was almost a spiritual time," said Connolly, 55. "It was a sad time — I had to go up against a lot of my old friends and political allies. But it was rewarding."

The reunion's organizers include Vance Opperman, at 44 a prominent lawyer and DFL fund-raiser, at 24 organizer of door-to-door canvassing that was so successful it shocked the dissidents as well as the regulars. He said some of those regulars have been invited to the reunion.

"This is a celebration of practical, day-to-day politics," he said. "And people who believe in practical politics don't hold grudges for 20 years."

Some of that sentiment is returned by David Lebedoff, who opposed the war but stuck with Humphrey. Now a lawyer and chairman of the state Board of Regents, Lebedoff organized at the precinct level with Opperman. But at the state convention, they were rival floor managers.

Lebedoff said he won't be at the reunion. "But I wish them well," he said. "I commend the idealism of those people. Their cause was just."

He still resents what he calls "their disdain for majoritarian procedures" and their midwifing of single-issue politics. "But their judgment was correct . . . to be almost fanatically opposed to the war."

Mayor Don Fraser, of Minneapolis, who plans to attend, was a DFL

congressman in 1967, antiwar but pro-Humphrey. He also laments some of the political residue, but says he misses the "intensity and breadth of involvement" of those times.

"That stands in stark contrast to the apathy and disinterest that seem to be the way a lot of people look at the world today," he said.

Opperman cited a more positive legacy: a lesson "that American citizens can be involved and have an effect on the political process."

It was an "exhilarating" time, he said. "But it was frustrating. I learned it takes a lot longer to make significant change, and you have to work at it every single day."

He said that the reunion shouldn't be a nostalgic love-in. "Most of the people are still pretty active," he said. "I'm not a person who looks back. I don't think that's what people who care about society should do."

McCarthy agrees. "I hope it'll be more than nostalgia," he said.

Alpha Smaby, 77, the reunion's other honored guest, has written a book about the movement, due out in two weeks. She was a state representative for four years until she lost in 1968. "Labor was so angry with me (for opposing Humphrey), they went with the Republicans," she said.

"I resented very much that they said we were breaking up the party, that we were disloyal. The DFL has been fighting its whole life. It surely is a natural thing."

"We've all gotten older," Opperman said. "I told my kids I'm turning into a caricature."

Does he see Sunday's reunion inspiring another generation?

"Well, two or three hundred people getting together after 20 years isn't much of a catalyst, no matter who the people are," he said. Also, young people today "are so conservative," preoccupied with work, money and toys. "We've had 20 years of growing fascination with personal greed."

But McCarthy said his old supporters shouldn't be hard on youth today.

"Young people are concerned," he said. "They just don't know what to do. Adults don't know what to do. I don't think it's apathy. It's more a . . . feeling of helplessness in the face of chaos and disorder."

"But we still have militarism," he said. "It never goes away. That's what we have to talk about: What do you do about militarism?"