

Nobody Forgets School Days

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4 students, one teacher and a member PTA. Duette doesn't mince. Anybody with an in- (in-laws, grandparents, for- students) can support the That school is the very soul e community and nobody's to forget it.

heard the 54-year-old school aving its second reunion. And president Silas Keen said, could come on up. So, I found f with more than 500 people, of whom had come from as far

as Indiana to recapture a lost part of their childhoods.

I couldn't imagine my old school back in Miami even having a re- union. Nobody would ever bother to track everybody down. And, even if most of the graduates wanted to go, their parole officers would probably veto the idea.

I even assumed I'd stick out as an outsider. Everybody would know I wasn't an alumnus and probably would resent my crashing their party. Then, to my surprise, I noticed that even Sheriff Charlie Wells had

swung an invitation. Well, after all, Duette is God's country. I figured I might squeeze in unnoticed. But I had no idea Republicans were allowed.

Well, any fears about not fitting in were unwarranted. Within minutes, it seemed I'd been introduced to everybody.

Carolyn Keen, the school bus driver; Bernice Forrester, who, at 93, is the oldest Duette teacher; Wright Rawls, who, at "79 and a half," knows every inch of earth in the vicinity; Wayne Rawls, former student turned university professor

I think I shook more hands than the sheriff.

Doyle Chancey and Perry Chancey tipped their wide-brimmed hats and started reminiscing about how volunteer labor slapped the building together back in 1930.

"There was the Albritton School just over there," Doyle recalled, pointing south. And the old Bunker Hill School was about four miles that way (north). And the former Duette School was about four miles south. When the Depression forced the School Board into a consolidating mood, the present facility was born.

"I graduated in 1940, when it was still a strawberry school," contributed Pauline Keen, who grew up to see her own five children through the same homespun institution.

Flora McGuire, who was principal back in the 40s, knew I hadn't a clue what a strawberry school could be. Until the '50s, the school year ran from April to December - so the youngsters could help their folks pick strawberries during the season.

Back during the war years, teachers were scarce, mentioned Oka Rawls - who received an "emergency teaching certificate" in 1943 and continued helping out for 30 years. And the kids behaved beautifully. "There were never any discipline problems."

"Of course not," I assumed. "They knew you knew their parents." "That makes a difference," confirmed Miss Ada. Having been Duette's schoolteacher for only 27 years, Ada Bilbrey is part of the new age. She's teaching the children of her former pupils computer-talk.

"We could use some more software," she confided as we joined the throng.

I found the comment interesting. Unlike some other places, Duette doesn't need a fancy civic center to get its people together - just some space in the shade and a natural ceiling. Yet, for the kids' sake, they'd like some more programs for the Apple II-e.

"We're up in the world," stressed Frances Parrish, who inherited the job as school caretaker and lunch-

Duette Reunion



April Baxley, 6, left, youngest current student; present schoolteacher Ada Bilbrey; former schoolteacher Oka Rawls; former schoolteacher Beulah Bryant and former student Wright Rawls.

Nobody Forgets School Days Amid the Strawberry Fields

Behind the schoolhouse, I heard a whole lot of partying going on.

An old gent was scratching a fiddle. Another fellow was pickin' banjo. And a chorus line of ladies in all sorts of frills was clogging the day away. This evidently wasn't some shindig for folks whose idea of a good time includes black ties and stiff conversation.

About a quarter-mile's worth of barbecued chicken, baked beans, potato salad, and desserts rich enough to buy out CBS were stretched out and ready to get dipped into, spooned over and forked out.

And by the time the multitude was finished, just about every bowl and platter had been scraped clean. Nope, this wasn't some social for folks who think hosting a lunch means hiring a caterer and passing out bite-sized morsels.

Grandparents were running down grandkids. And the grandkids were running after classmates. And those classmates were looking for their parents. And their parents were chatting with

Dale White



their teachers from way back when, some of whom happened to be the grandparents who'd started all the running around anyway.

Well, the scene almost seemed lifted from a lemonade commercial. Television's about the only place I'd ever seen a get-together like this before. And, even then, actors had to play the parts.

To find the genuine reunion I attended Saturday afternoon, I had to prepare for an hour's trip out of Bradenton (one way). I moseyed into the metropolis of Parrish, turned east on a battered stretch of Blacktop, and traveled 17 miles to the Duette School.

The rambling, gray schoolhouse is the last of its kind in Florida. Planted amid the strawberry fields and live oaks, it

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