

Duette School Reunion Is, by All Means, a Family Affair

The Duette School is like a doting grandmother. With its oaken floors and clapboard siding, it's the country granny of Manatee County's school district. It's been a warm and secure home-away-from-home for generations of children. And when its graduates return, it welcomes them as if it always knew that, someday, they'd come back - if for nothing more than a kiss and a hug.

This past weekend, about 400 grandparents, parents and children - all of whom either attended Duette or taught there - returned to this little schoolhouse in the wildwood.

They came from as far as Maryland. Yet many of them would have made the pilgrimage if they'd had to come halfway around the world. To most people, this school 18 miles east of Parrish may just be a rustic speck in the middle of nowhere. To them, however, it may as well be the center of the universe.

Duette will forever be the heart and soul of their childhood. It, like grandmother's house, must always be there. It must never change.

Duette is the smallest public school in Florida. Yet it probably has more school spirit than any campus 100 times its size.

Ada Bilbrey has been Duette's principal/teacher

Dale White

Manatee Life



for 30 years. And, as she always says, she'd never manage without the loyal support of Duette's Parents-Teachers Association.

Volunteer labor built the school in 1930 when three even smaller rural schools were consolidated. The rambling structure with two classrooms, an auditorium and a kitchen replaced the Albritton, Bunker Hill and former Duette schoolhouses.

Virtually everybody in and around Duette is a PTA member, regardless of whether he has a child enrolled. The upkeep and care of the school is a community project. And, if the School Board ever decided to close it, the people of Duette would probably be tempted to secede from the county.

Freda Coffman volunteers as the school's Jill-of-all-trades - even stepping in as a teacher's aide or as

a cook, when needed.

Carolyn Keen is the school's bus driver. She transports Duette's 13 pupils and takes their older siblings to stops where they can transfer to buses bound for the middle school in Ellenton and the high school in Palmetto. "I put 100 miles on my bus every day."

The reunion, of course, was the most illustrative example of what the Duette school is about. It was, by all means, a family affair.

The covered dish buffet seemed as if it were a mile long . . . an endless stretch of barbecued chicken and pork, fresh vegetables and homemade desserts.

The bigger kids played softball on the sprawling front lawn. The smaller kids played on the see-saws and swing sets in the back. The older folks gathered beneath the shade trees, cuddling the smaller children who'd romped and run to the point of complete exhaustion.

The guitarist, fiddler, bassist and banjo player of Smuckers' Bluegrass Jam broke into their rendition of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?"

Silas Keen, the PTA president, and his friends took a phone call from **Bill Parks** of Utah - an alumnae who couldn't make the trip but had to

somehow take part in the festivities.

Ray Carlton captured the crowd on videotape. **Asa Gullett** of Duette, son of a former Manatee schools superintendent, and his 11 grown children posed for news photographers. **Wilbur and Geraldine Hicks**, Duette's husband-and-wife teaching team of the early 1950s, returned to see their former pupils.

Flora McGuire and **Oka Rawls**, two other retired teachers, chatted about old times. **Pauline Chancey** of the PTA recruited everyone's assistance to identify the young faces in old photographs. And, one by one, people stepped up to the old bulletin board to read a poem by Pauline's daughter, **Joann Baker**, who once worked at Duette as a teacher's aide:

"Duette may go unnoticed by those who've never seen

They may call us country bumpkins, and *that* we just may be . . .

But sure enough we'll all come back; We're drawn like moths to flame

Where the echoes of us, and chalkboard dust, will make the page in our childhood days."