

Duette community works to support its little school

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DUETTE — For as long as anybody in Duette can remember, red velvet cakes, power tools and gift certificates have helped keep their little elementary school alive.

Saturday was no different as longtime auctioneer Pat Carlton goaded and teased parents, grandparents and neighbors to bid just a bit higher.

It was all part of the annual Fall Festival, run by Duette Elementary's Parent-Teacher Organization, which over the years has raised funds for everything from air-conditioning units to class trips for the school's 15 students in kindergarten through fourth grade.

The festival is more than a quaint social gathering. It's a source of community action for the rural residents. Some say it keeps the school, which has been threatened with closure several times, afloat.

"We have more PTA members than most bigger schools," said Eleanor Parrish Jones, 56. "If it wasn't for the people's support, this school wouldn't be here. It's always been like that."

Jones was both a student and a teacher's aide at the school. She recalls, as a child, eating lunches of fried fish, grits and hush puppies in the cafeteria. But more memorable was the time, as an adult, that the annual auction raised enough money to air-condition the whole schoolhouse. Before that, open windows were the only respite from the heat.

When the community learned of the school's need, they bid extra high on auction items at that year's Fall Festival, formerly called the Halloween Carnival.

"We raised the money (for the air conditioning) in one carnival," Jones recalled, holding a finger above her head to emphasize this fact.

Teacher Donna King said

community dedication to the school is incredible. At her first Fall Festival 10 years ago, she couldn't believe her eyes. It's a small school, she reasoned then, so it will be a small event.

"I was overwhelmed when I saw all these people come out from the community," she said.

Jones' memory of the old days was especially acute Saturday. After a 20-year hiatus, she moved back to the area three days before the Fall Festival. The event brought her together with old friends and former students.

By the auction circle she saw her aunt Evelyn Barner, 79. Barner attended Duette in the 1930s, when the school first opened. Since then she's seen nieces, nephews and neighbors walk through its blue wooden double doors.

She remembers the Fall Festival when it was the Halloween Carnival held at night, lights streaming from the schoolhouse to the highway. It was bigger then, part of a school that ran up to the eighth grade.

Things have changed. The festival is now a daytime event; strings of red, white and blue balloons have replaced the dangling lights. But a hint of the Halloween spirit remains. Pumpkins large and small dot the landscape, assembled en masse on the schoolhouse's baby-blue porch.

On Saturday, Jones and Barner caught up on old times as the auctioneer's voice hummed behind them. Barner's sister — and Jones' mother — used to be the school's bus driver and lunchroom cook. Most of the people at the festival claimed a similar familial connection with the school.

"The majority of people here have been involved in the school in some way; either they came here or their kids went here or their grandkids," Jones said.

As they talked, former Duet-



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A couple of hundred people attended the annual fall festival at Duette Elementary School. Rosalinda Maldonado of Bartow eats roasted corn along with her daughter, Dezaræe, 2.

te student Amanda Tappan, 11, sat in the shade of an oak tree, watching the auctioneer. A tinsel halo she'd won at the 4-H-sponsored games clung to her blonde hair. Her cheek displayed two autumn leaves, painted from a child's art coloring set.

Tappan went to Duette for six years. Now she's home-schooled. Her parents decided the two-hour bus ride to the nearest middle school just wasn't worth it.

But leaving the classroom hasn't kept Tappan from attending the annual Fall Festival. This year she baked a cake for the auction, just like the older women in the community do, and spent most of the afternoon waiting to see it sold.

"My mom says I make the best chocolate cakes," she said.

After two hours of bidding, as the temperature dropped and the sun dipped to the west, the last part of the auction — for locally baked goods — finally arrived.

King brought out the sweets one by one. There was the famous red velvet cake, pumpkin bread made by students, and, at last, Tappan's chocolate layer cake.

The bidding started low, but rose quickly as neighbors competed over who would take home Tappan's dessert. The winning bid was \$50.

Tappan thanked her friends, parents and grandparents as they congratulated her. Like most everyone there, she made a small donation to a big cause.



Carley Peel, 7, who attends Duette Elementary, tries on a pair of glasses she won in the cow toss game.