



Classmates Thelma Thompson, from left, of Winston-Salem, with Syvera Hardy of San Diego, Calif., and Artelia Robinson of Washington, D.C.



Billie Matthews greets a former student. Beside her is Clara Gaines.

# ALMOST LIKE YESTERDAY

Class reunites 50 years after their high school graduation

BY T. KEVIN WALKER  
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It happened more than 50 years ago, but it may as well have been yesterday as vividly as it still lives in Leon Witherspoon's mind.

"I was running my mouth, and I did not have my French homework done," he told a trio of stately ladies Saturday. "So, Mrs. Hayes told me to pick up my desk and take it into the hallway. And that when I was prepared for class I could come back in."

But Witherspoon never got the chance to return to class that day. John Carter — the legendary former Atkins High School principal who was as caring as a parent and but as tough as a drill sergeant — saw him sitting in the hallway and dealt with him in the principal's office.

You could say that Witherspoon waited half a century to recount that story to the woman who played a central role in it: Clara Gaines, a former Atkins teacher. Gaines was one of the women who chuckled as Witherspoon shared the tale; the others were Gaines' former Atkins teaching colleagues Velma Friende and Manderline Scales (Billie Matthews would later join her former coworkers). The 50th Anniversary Reunion of the Class of 1958 was the occasion that brought the teachers and dozens of their former students together at the Downtown Marriott.

For three days, members of the class laughed, reminisced and basked in the memories of the good 'ol days — a time when school mates were like members and education was cherished.

"I would not have missed this for the world!" said Annetta Wells, who, along with her husband Robert, travelled from Alaska so that she could attend her reunion. "This was a very special class."

"Special" is also the term she used to describe the band of educators and administrators that molded her and her classmates. After graduating from Atkins, Wells earned a teaching degree from Winston-Salem State University and taught in the local school system for four years. Then she decided to try something new.

"I saw this ad in an educational journal that said 'Teachers Needed in Alaska,' and I applied," said Wells, who taught school in the nation's 49th state for several decades. She and her husband, who is also an Atkins graduate, love the state so much that they have chosen to spend their retirement years there.

It took some moxie for a young woman to move alone (John did not join her until several months later) to an unchartered state thousands of miles away. But Wells said she and other students were taught at Atkins to be bold.

"They pushed us and told us that we could do anything that we wanted to do," she said.

Bill Bell got that same



Mayor Bill Bell takes pictures during the reunion.



Clara Gaines



Manderline Scales



Velma Friende

we knew they cared," he said of the Atkins faculty and staff.

Like most of the classes that came through Atkins, the Class of '58 was schooled under segregation, a system that many today view as cruel. But looking back, Bell thinks it had its advantages. The black community, he said, was more unified and stronger. As a child, Bell said his early influences were the professional black men who lived in his neighborhood — men whom he saw go to work each day and come home in the evening. In this post segregation era, successful black professionals in black communities are harder to find, as is joint cooperation.

"We lost a sense of community in a certain sense," said Bell.

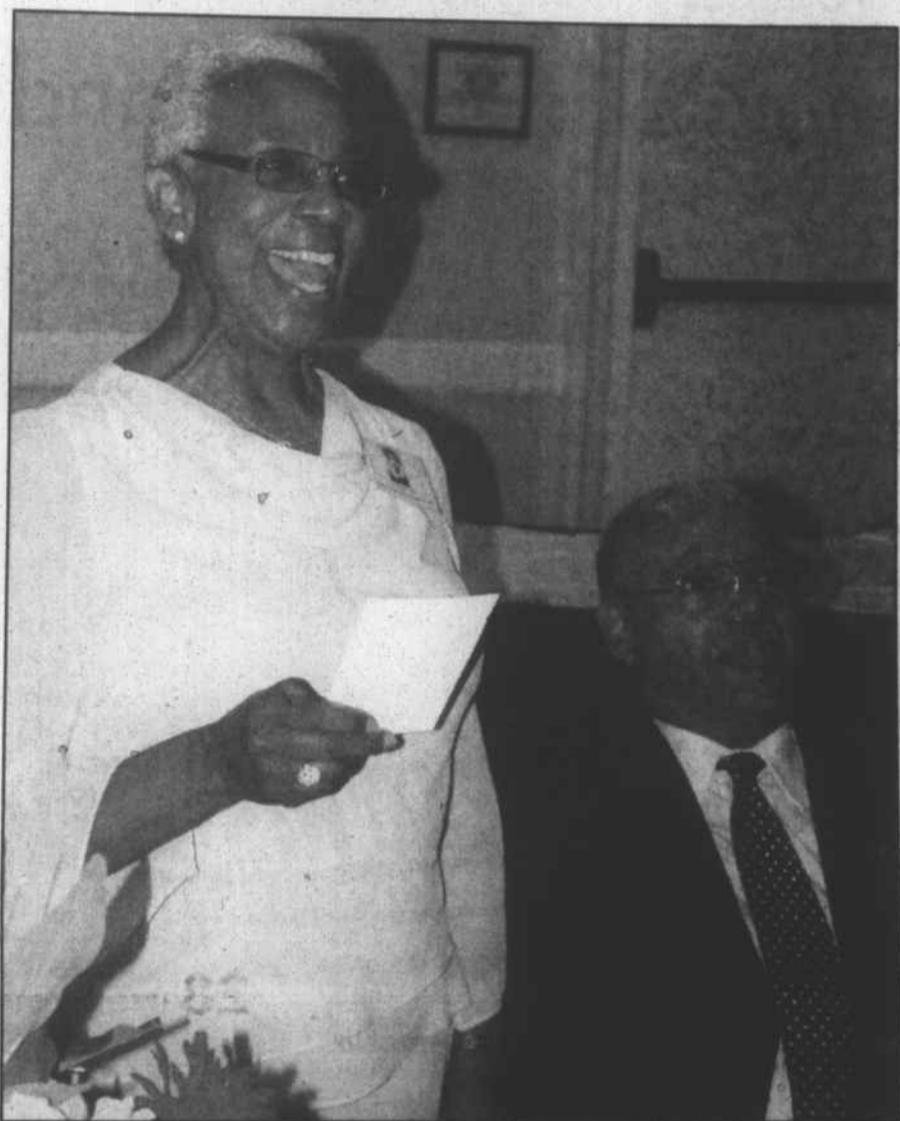
Even Atkins didn't survive integration. The high school was closed in the early 1970s and re-opened as a middle school. Today, the old Atkins High is known as the Winston-Salem Preparatory Academy. The school system has given a new multi-million dollar high school the name Atkins, but alumni find it hard to draw a correlation between the old and new.

The class of 1958 left Atkins High as bright-eyed 17-and-18-year-olds. Those on hand for the reunion were just as bright-eyed, despite being nearly 70-years-old now. The class holds reunions regularly, but each time they gather, fewer and fewer show up. Of course some choose not to attend, but many have passed on. Deceased members of the class were remembered during a candle-lighting ceremony during Saturday night's banquet. Photos of departed classmates were also shown as part of a slideshow.

"We owe it to them to be here to celebrate this 50th-year reunion," said James Rousseau, the head of the reunion committee.

James Lomax — who took part in a tribute for Hayes, Friende, Matthews and Scales during the banquet — had a special request for his classmates.

"Don't you dare leave Winston-Salem without giving me a hug or a handshake. Don't you dare!" he said. "This could be my last (reunion)"

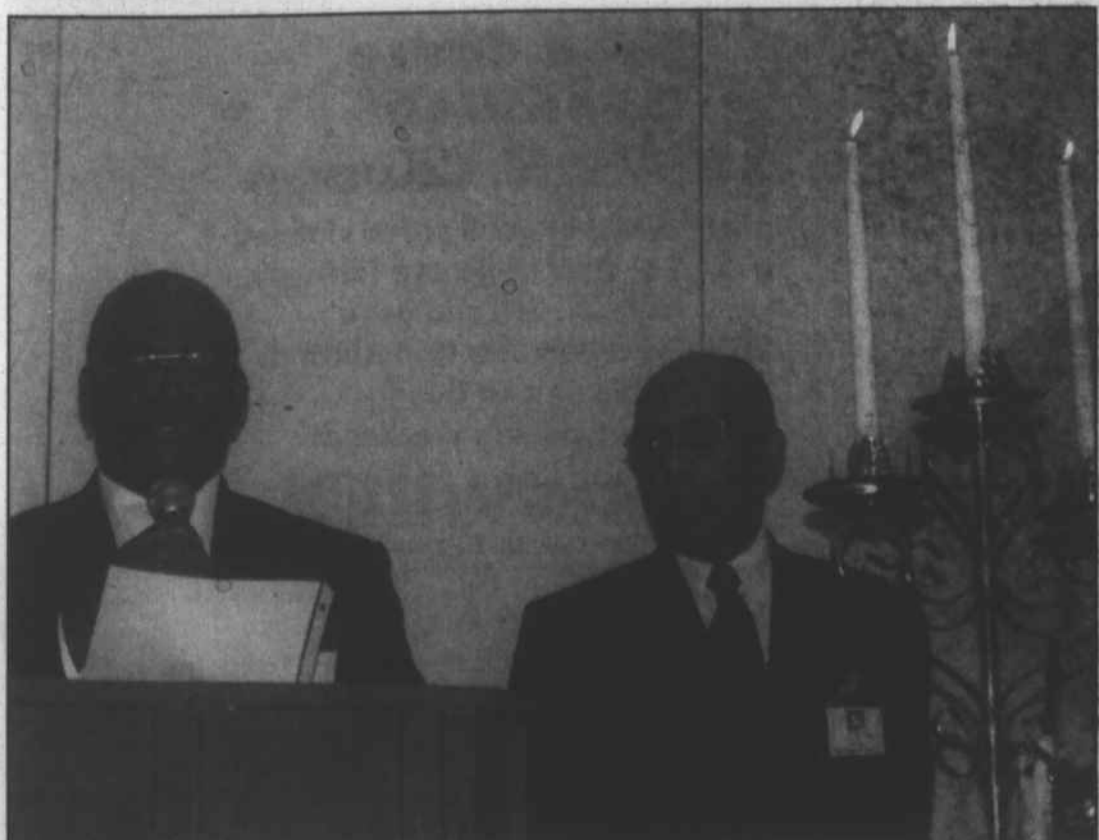


Photos by Kevin Walker

Robert and Annetta Wells, who came from Alaska to attend the reunion, sing the Atkins alma mater during Saturday's reunion banquet.



Teachers and many members of the class received a special throw featuring an image of the school and the alma mater.



Ernest Goodman, left, and Foster Lassiter pay tribute to their deceased classmates.