A Not-so-Grand Homecoming

All-white reunion saddens black leaders

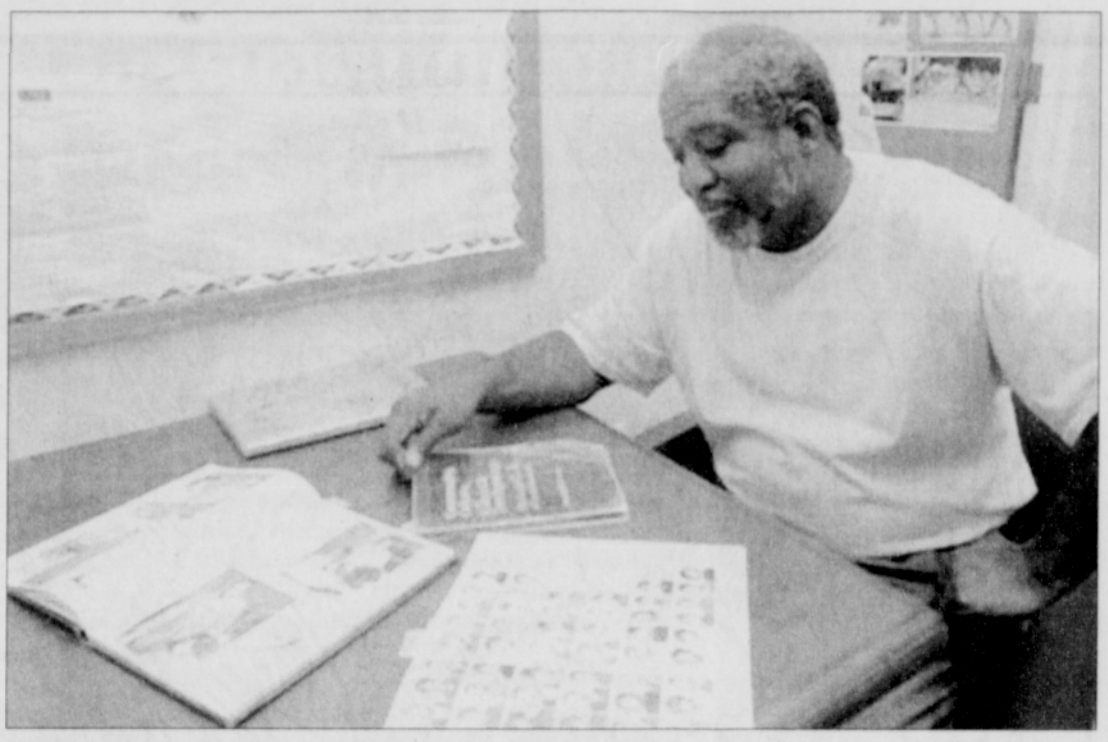
(AP) – The Princess Anne, Md. ballroom was decorated with floor-to-ceiling paintings of shiny soda fountains, classic cars and the old store windows downtown. A stoop jutted out from a rendering of the high school facade, so graduates could sit and talk — just like in the old days.

And just like in the old days, not everyone in town was invited.

The reunion Saturday was only for those who graduated from Washington High School before it opened its doors to black students in the fall of 1969.

Some black leaders say the all-white reunion is sad and painful evidence that 50 years after the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, some things have not changed all that much in this community on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay.

"It's just as divided as it's ever been," said Leon Johnson, a black political activist who worked behind the scenes in Somerset County in 1960s. "The old folks did a good job of teaching the young ones, of teaching them the old system."



Kirkland Hall, a 1969 graduate of Somerset High School in Princess Anne, Md., looks through yearbooks from 1964, 1966 and 1968. Of the old racial divide in his town, Hall said: 'It's one of those things I've been fighting so long, I'm just tired.'

Organizers called the reunion a "Grand Homecoming" for graduates from the 1940s, '50s and '60s. It was independently organized and was not affiliated with the public school system.

Mickey Wigglesworth, a retired banker and 1957 graduate who has spent the past year organizing the event at the Somerset County Civic Center, said there was no intent to exclude blacks.

Instead, he said, it is a gathering of students from three decades who share music and culture from the era of sock hops and jukeboxes. "This would have no appeal to them," he said of the post-1969 grads.

The integrated post-1969 classes at Washington High hold their own reunions periodically, but they are smaller and are not promoted as community events. The Grand Homecoming, by contrast, gets a weekly mention on the front of the county newspaper's style section, under old photos of the boys' basketball teams and girls' softball teams. A colorful flier posted downtown asks Washington High graduates up to 1969 to "Travel back in time to those good, old years."

"We're still a divided county," said Kirkland Hall, a former president of the county's NAACP chapter and a 1969 graduate of Princess Anne's black high school, Somerset High. Of the county's 25,000 residents, 41 percent are black.

The Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education came down in 1954, but it was another 15 years before any schools in Somerset County integrated.

Princess Anne, the site of Maryland's last lynching in 1933, did not integrate any public buildings until 1964. Not until 1968 did any white schools on the Eastern Shore open to black students.

"It would be nice if the class of 1969 of both schools would have a reunion. We might have something in common," Hall said, adding after a pause: "I don't think too many people would be up to the idea."

Hall's friends from Somerset High have urged him to organize an all-black reunion that could rival the Grand Homecoming in size. But Hall said: "I don't think that's the way to go."

H. DeWayne Whittington, a 1948 graduate of what was then called Crisfield Colored High School, eventually became the first black superintendent of Somerset County schools, in 1988. He won a lawsuit against the county four years later when it did not renew his contract, and the system was forced to name a school for him.

Whittington said he is less irritated by the Grand Homecomings than he is by the distribution of scholarship money raised at the event. A total of $9,500 has been awarded in 19 scholarships, but only to children of alumni who graduated before integration.

Whittington has helped organize relatively small, multiyear reunions that raise $3,000 annually in scholarships for the children of black alumni. "It came to that point," he said, "because blacks found that out and said, 'Let's try to do something for our kids.'"

The separate reunions are a symptom of a lack of black political leadership in the county, Whittington said. No black politicians have pressed for a stop to the practice.

Blacks held few public offices on the Eastern Shore before Hall sued the state in 1993 to keep out-of-town property owners from voting in municipal elections. It was not until 1999 that a black politician was elected to the state Legislature from the Eastern Shore.

Of the racial divide, Hall said: "It's one of those things I've been fighting so long, I'm just tired."

Ask Deanna!

Real People, Real Advice

An advice column known for its fearless approach to reality based subjects!

Dear Deanna!

My husband of 12 years and 3 children dropped the bomb on me that he had an affair and a pregnancy occurred. The woman didn't tell him about the baby until it was 4 years old. I didn't want him to have anything to do with the child. The child now calls asking for her daddy but I think the mother is behind this. Our kids talk about meeting their new sibling but I don't want to consider it. What do I do? --Keep it Real; Jacksonville, Fla.

Dear Real:

Your husband had a party without the balloons and now he's caught. The child is here and he has to pay child support, be a father figure and maintain his marriage and family. You can't punish the child and need to prepare yourself and children for their new sibling. Although you aren't feeling it, you need to be on civil terms with the baby's scandalous mother because it's your husband's child. Seek forgiveness, embrace counseling and lead and live by a Godly mother example and you'll get through this.

Dear Deanna!

I'm a well-endowed woman and all my life I've had problems with people talking with their eyes on my chest. It's so rude and annoying that I have retreated from society, hate going to work and don't have any friends. I'm not an airhead and want to be taken seriously and not viewed and treated like a play thing because of my shape. -- Talisha Jones; Montgomery, Ala.

Dear Talisha:

It's up to you to stop this treatment quick, fast and in a hurry before it gets started. Next time a person is communicating but zooming down below, stop talking and stare at them. When they realize they're busted looking at your chest, tell them point blank you don't appreciate their actions and you need to have eye contact. If you're extremely self-conscious or uncomfortable, contact your physician and seek breast reduction advice.

Dear Deanna!

I'm on the last leg of my prison term and I'll be released soon. Do you have any suggestions on what I can do to get a job? Prison has taken my manhood away so bad that I don't ever want to see this place again. I've decided I want to start on the right foot and get a job and stay out of trouble the minute I get my freedom. --Paul; Soledad Prison, Calif.

Dear Paul:

It's good you learned from your mistake and don't plan to spend the rest of your life behind bars due to crime. It's going to be hard landing a job because of the prison mark on your record. Fill out as many job applications as you can and go on every interview available until you get a job. The key is persistence. You may have to take a grunt job until you can do better, but at least you'll be doing something honest. Just don't give up in your search.

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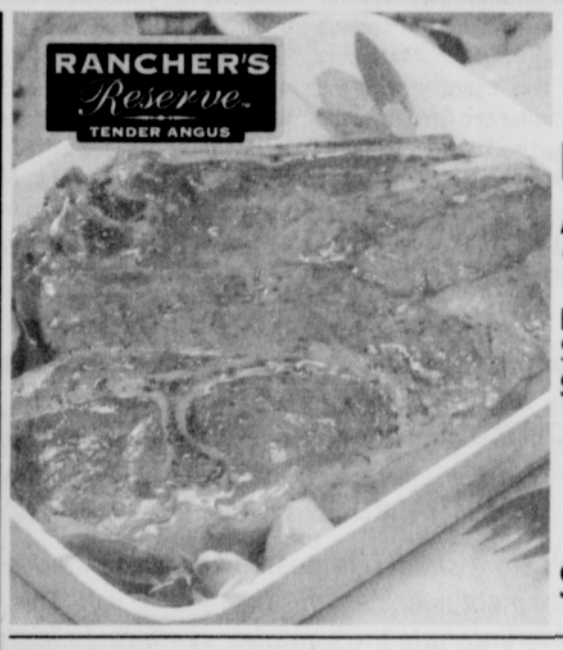

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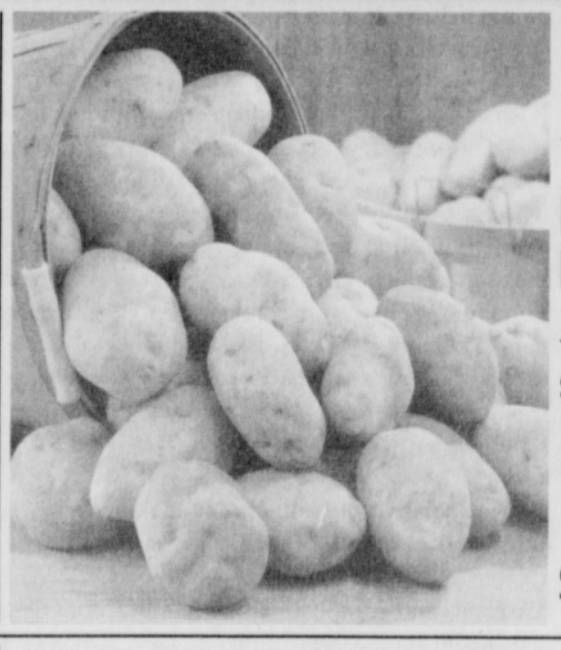

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