



2013 Kirby High 1963 Honor Class Celebrates 50-Year Reunion

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At 11 a.m., Saturday, May 4, the Kirby High School reunion met in the Woodville Elementary School cafeteria. The Honor Class of 1963 celebrated 50 years with over 240 present. Next year, it will be the Class of 1964's turn. One has to be a 50-year graduate to get an invite!

Reunion Chairwoman Mary Lee welcomed all and introduced Master of Ceremonies (MC) Fred Sullivan who explained that the parade was not for them, but for Woodville native and American Idol top three Kree Harrison as she made her rounds through town.

With "Dogwood Memories" as this year's theme, and decorated accordingly, the Dogwood Festival Queen's train covered the speaker's podium. Sullivan recollected how the Festival celebrated its 70th year just a few weeks ago. In the Fall of 1968, Josiah Wheat called a meeting of about twenty leaders to the community room of the Citizens State Bank to discuss whether the Festival should continue. It was insolvent and Jasper was willing. Proudly, Sullivan beamed that there were third-generation volunteers helping today, and he hoped it would continue for another 70 years.

MC Sullivan introduced former Dogwood Queen Helen Sheffield Tyson, Class of 1946, of whom he said was a "charming, charming lady ... and a wonderful representative of this community, this festival, and this high school."

"The war has ended," Tyson said of 1945-46. "This is the first spring time since the war ended. And Judge Wheat, now known as the Father of the Dogwood Festival, and others ... decided it was time once again to have the Festival resume. The first festival was in 1940 ... second in 1941. During the war years there were no festivals. Then in 1946 the third resumed. It was my honor and privilege to be the queen, the first after the war." The junior and senior classes chose a representative, and Tyson was chosen by her junior class. Of the two girls, the one who sold the most tickets would be queen, and she won. Her mother planned her dress, and Betty Jo Gardner's grandmother made it. "It was white. I thought it was beautiful," Tyson said. A glittering crown and train were



Mary Lee



Fred Sullivan

rented from a costume store in Beaumont. “Though not as precious as this one,” she said, referring to the handmade train draped over the podium. “It was a very patriotic time in our country. And it was decided that all of the escorts would be from the military, the men who came home. Tom Brokow calls us the ‘Greatest Generation.’ I don’t think anyone would argue with that. So Elmer Ray Oates had returned from the war, and he was king of the festival. He was the step-father of Jill and Robbie Crawford.”

Tyson named many others who were there from the 1946 “court.” The Dogwood stage was smaller. A huge flag spanned the entire stage. Her dignified, articulate voice and demure humor harkened back to a time of respectful love for country, different from today. She thanked MC Sullivan and recognized all the former queens. Then, in a final tug to pull all present into her royal collective, as all shared a mutual affection for Woodville and Tyler County, she gently offered, “Speaking of royalty, I’d just like to say that each one of you sitting in this room – each of you is royalty if you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. You are children of the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. You are the *real* royalty.” With that precious sentiment binding them together, she gracefully expressed her desire to return next year and, once again, “Hear Fred say, ‘It’s Dogwood time in Tyler County!’”

It was a “royal” gathering, filled with the precious treasury of nostalgia and pulsating with heritage. Sullivan shared a few vignettes, including the reason why a “king” was no longer crowned. Lt. Governor Ben Barnes was close friends with Josiah Wheat, the latter inviting Barnes to crown the Dogwood royalty. Barnes came to town, rode in the parade, and went over to Ruby Wheat’s to enjoy some drinks. “Then Barnes went down on stage,” Sullivan said, slowing his speech respectfully, “he hadn’t had enough time to sober up before he got to the stage.” Giggles rippled through the audience. Barnes crowned the young man escorting the queen saying, “I crown you *queen* of the Dogwood Festival.” They finally got the queen crowned and decided after that there was no need to crown the king.

Tom Hicks opened with prayer.

The school food service personnel provided the lunch as members of their Texas Association of Child Nutrition (TASN). They donated their time, with all the money collected going to cover the cost of the food. Over the last 18 years the local TASN has given \$45,500 in scholarships to Woodville students. Sullivan recognized the 11 TASN workers and Linda Johnson of the Woodville Chapter to a standing ovation.



Helen Sheffield Tyson



Mildred Parker
Class of 1936 - 77th Reunion



Jessie Lazenby – seated center
Class of 1938, 75th Reunion

Sullivan thanked Mary Lee for chairing the reunion committee and recognized next year's chair, Mary Alice Nagypal. The senior-most graduate was Mildred Parker from the Class of 1936, celebrating her 77th reunion, and next was Jesse Lazenby, Class of 1938, celebrating his 75th reunion!

Sullivan introduced Emery Walker, Class of 1943, who said, "They asked me to say a few things that happened in 1943.... Not a dad-gum thing!" Most laughed or giggled. "Gas was rationed. Sugar was rationed. Tires – you couldn't buy." Walker rolled the audience with how he got things done. "One of the highlights was when we would go out to the end of the pavement on the Old Livingston Highway." They got a couple of bottles and a bunch hot tamales and "listened to the Lucky Strike Hit Parade. We'd eat those tamales, turn the radio on ... and dance on that road. We had a good time. We just made chicken salad out of whatever was available.... Mr. Cal Powell was the only Republican in Tyler County; he was known as Mr. Republican. Everybody else was Democrat, but nobody in Tyler County really understood the difference." It seemed like yesterday to Walker.

Sullivan recalled that in 1943 Tyler County produced 347 bales of cotton, had 14 Class A dairies, had 26 active saw mills, had a capacity to raise 65,000 broiler chickens, and that the average teacher's salary was \$1,200 a year. During the 1943 commencement in the amphitheater the lights went out, so they parked cars facing into the theater and held the ceremony by car headlights.

Ten members of the Class of 1953 were congratulated. The Class of 1963 was represented by '63 class V.P. Bob Boykin, who expressed his affection: "It's too special. The building is gone. Almost all the teachers are gone.... Many of the students are no longer with us. But the memory of those days goes on.... The spirit of Kirby High is still here. It lives on with us. You know you're very special.... Let us proceed with our lives and pass onto our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren, our friends and associates this spirit.... It's up to you to encourage good quality education."

Alva Cook gave a memorial.

Cybil Mitchell recognized Dr. Francis Edward "Ab" Abernathy who taught a few years at Kirby then went onto become regents' professor of English and finally professor emeritus of SFA. He donated the money that bought the sound system for the exclusive use of this and future reunions. Sullivan recalled Dr. Abernathy driving the school bus with his shotgun on board, not to keep the students in line, but because at the end of his route he would go hunting. "Everything I did got started at Kirby High," Dr. Abernathy said.

Their spirits invigorated once more, they parted with a prayer by Tom Hicks.