
Preserving Local History:

A Tale of Three High Schools

by Patricia Ryckman

From the outside, the modest house on Charlotte's busy Beatties Ford Road looks much like its neighbors. But inside, instead of a family of four you'll find a family of thousands. This is the Second Ward High School Alumni House, a museum and a monument to a school that was, according to Price Davis, class of '38, "just like one big family."

Packed with cases of trophies, scrapbooks, memorabilia, and annuals, the museum documents the first public high school for Blacks in Charlotte. Second Ward High School opened in 1923 and graduated its last class in 1969; the following year, students were reassigned to newly integrated schools and the building was razed. The family of students, teachers, and administrators scattered, but the school's spirit has lived on through the efforts of a dedicated band of alumni.

The members of the Second Ward High School National Alumni Foundation, Inc., understand that they are preserving more than just school history. Not only does the collection illuminate the school's past, it also provides a window to a way of life lost in the early 1970s to the bulldozers of urban renewal. Second Ward High School was a key institution in Charlotte's "Second City," a community of homes, churches, businesses, and families that thrived within — yet separate from — the White city. Understanding the school's history is crucial to understanding the larger story of a segregated Southern city.

This rich historical resource has been mined time and time again for a variety of publications and projects. Photographs from the collection have appeared in books, exhibits in local museums and schools, and recently in a multimedia presentation on the World Wide Web. Perhaps an even greater accomplishment is the way these materials, preserved through the years, have kept former classmates, scattered from New York to California, in touch, and the memory of their school and community alive.

In 1938 a second high school, West Charlotte, joined Second Ward to serve the growing African American community. The two schools developed an almost legendary rivalry that lasted for over thirty years. The annual Queen City Classic, which brought the two schools' football teams together, also brought virtually the entire Black population to the stands to cheer. Although Second Ward closed with desegregation, West Charlotte lived on. White students were bused in and, through the hard work and perseverance of students, faculty, and citizens, the school became a national model for successful school integration.

West Charlotte High School currently is featured in "Carrying the Spirit, Voices of Desegregation," an exhibit at Charlotte's Museum of the New South. The exhibit is built around oral interviews conducted by Dr. Pamela Grundy as part of "Listening for a Change, North Carolina Communities in Transition," a project of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Caro-

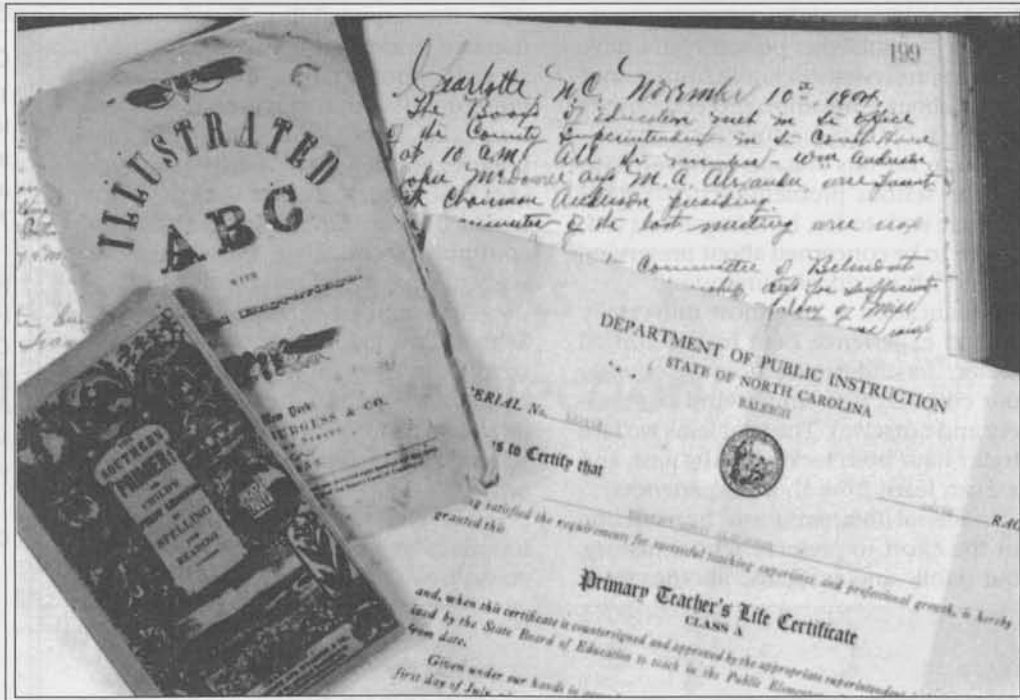
lina at Chapel Hill. With the recent court ruling that ends busing for integration in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system, the voices of "Carrying the Spirit" are particularly resonant. Their message is clear and inspiring: ordinary people, working hard together, can solve the most challenging problems.

For Grundy, understanding institutions is crucial to understanding a community. "How children are taught reflects the values of the community. In doing the oral histories, it just became so clear what a key experience education is in people's lives." Historians rely on evidence to interpret the past, evidence that can so easily get lost in the hubbub of a modern school. Asked what should be saved to document a school's history, Grundy included the obvious — published material such as school newspapers and annuals, photographs and event programs — and also the less obvious. "It would be wonderful if we could save the best of the senior exit essays and those papers where students talk about their hopes and dreams. The people who save that kind of material are historians' angels."

Charles Dickerson, assistant principal at Garinger High School in Charlotte, is one of those angels. When he came to Garinger fifteen years ago, he discovered a remarkably complete record of the school's past. For almost a century, school administrators and librarians had preserved the history of Charlotte's first high school. Each time the school was moved to new quarters — four times since its opening in 1909 — trophies,

memorabilia, annuals, and traditions were carefully packed and transferred. Dickerson is enthusiastic about his school's history. A regular attendee at class reunions and breakfast clubs, he arrives toting boxes of annuals and photographs to jog memories. He has begun work on an ambitious project to place exhibits representing each of Garinger's decades at various points around the campus, and he plans to develop a Web page devoted to school history soon. Dickerson does it all, he says, for the students.

But the students aren't the only beneficiaries. Leafing through the pages of *The Rambler*, the school's newspaper that debuted in 1922, one finds advertisements for local businesses and community events among the sports stories and school announcements. Charlotte College, forerunner of UNC Charlotte, got its start through the efforts of Central High math teacher Bonnie Cone and held its evening classes in the high school building. Over the years, the school has sent notables such as Hal Kemp, Frank Porter Graham, and Charles Kuralt into the world. The school's his-



Academic and public libraries often hold a wealth of school history materials, including texts, school board minutes and documents such as these from Special Collections at UNC Charlotte.

tory is bound up with Charlotte's history, and one is not complete without the other.

Three schools: each tells its own tale about our community, our lives. But without the care of many individuals,

storing away bits and pieces of the stories over the years, the voices would be silent today.

It is certainly an understatement to say that a school librarian is a busy person. Telling stories, selecting materials,



Charlotte High School's first graduates, 1909. Photo courtesy Liddell Family Papers, Special Collections, UNC Charlotte.

teaching library skills, rebooting computers — could this person really have time to preserve the school's history, too? What about renovation projects, moves to new buildings, personnel changes — how can the bits of paper survive? With all the serious problems schools must grapple with today, how important is it, really, to be concerned about preserving history? It is critically important.

Education is an almost universally shared experience here in the United States. To understand how we educate our children is to understand our society and ourselves. The problems we face today have been tackled in the past, and we can learn from those experiences.

School librarians form the front line in the effort to preserve school history, but public and academic libraries must

share the responsibility. Family papers donated to archives may contain school records, photographs, diplomas, and memorabilia, that document schools long gone. Often, public and academic libraries are in a better position to support oral history projects than a school would be. Educating our children is a community endeavor; preserving the story of education must be also.

The members of Second Ward High School's last graduating class, the class of '69, are now middle-aged. At some point in the future, they will no longer be able to care for the Museum and their school's legacy. But the history of Second Ward is our history, too. We will preserve and remember its stories and lessons as we work to educate future generations of schoolchildren.

Check out the projects:

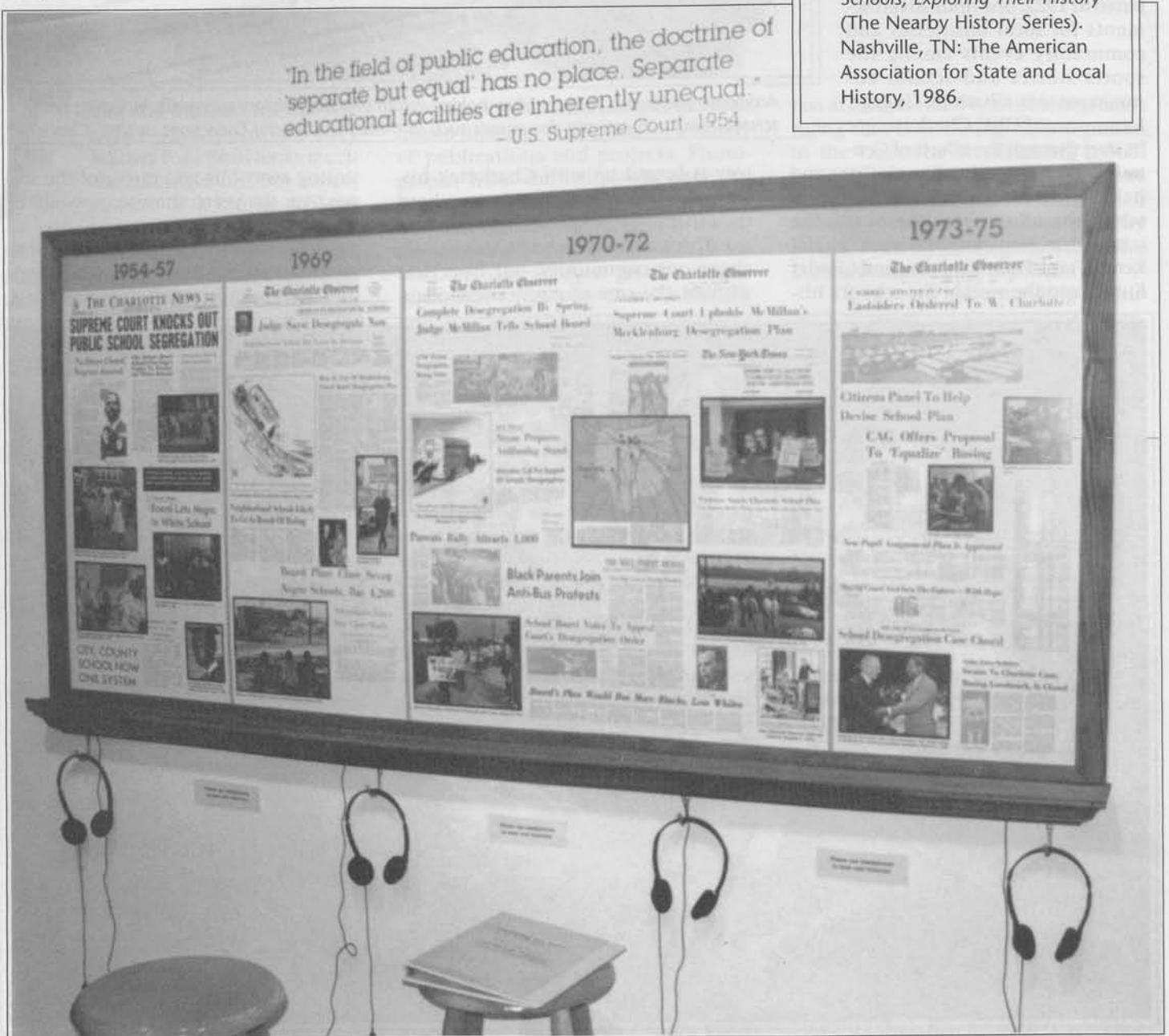
The Second Ward Alumni House is located at 1905 Beatties Ford Rd. in Charlotte. Tours of the museum are by appointment only. Call 704-398-8333 to arrange a visit.

Photographs of Second Ward High School and West Charlotte High School are featured in "The Charlotte Mecklenburg Story," a Web site exhibit produced by the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County: <<http://www.meckhis.org/default.htm>>.

And, for ideas and inspiration, check out this book:

Butchart, Ronald E. *Local Schools, Exploring Their History* (The Nearby History Series). Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1986.

"In the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."
— U.S. Supreme Court 1954



The Museum of the New South used oral history to tell the story of busing for desegregation in Charlotte.