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## Local

Where do all the years go?

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### BALTIMORE -

The road from Gwynn Oak Junction to Gamber is a long one, but worth the journey: You travel from Northwest Baltimore to [Carroll County](#) for a neighborhood reunion, and the trip doesn't end until you're half a century back in time.

You leave Howard Park Elementary School, on Liberty Heights Avenue a block below Gwynn Oak Junction in the 1950s, when everybody was giving up "Romper Room" and discovering [Elvis](#), and you land at the Gamber Fire Hall, when everybody's in their 60s and giving up pickup basketball games and discovering arthroscopic surgery.

You leave a mid-20th-century neighborhood of Toots Barger's Bowling Lanes and the Ambassador Theater, of Read's Drug Store and the [Ben Franklin](#) 5&10, of Gwynn Oak Park and Conlon Field, of the Enoch Pratt Bookmobile and 25-cent gas at Purcell's [Amoco](#) Station, and arrive in Carroll County to find everyone 50 years older than we used to be.

Where do the years go? You look at [Fred Barth](#) and [Mike Wertz](#), who put together last weekend's Howard Park reunion, and imagine somebody should choose up sides for a ballgame. Barth had the most terrifying fastball in the [Howard Park Little League](#), and Wertz was developing a lacrosse shot that sizzled.

But they're both retired gentlemen now. Fred lives in [Pennsylvania](#), and Mike's out in [Kansas](#), and instead of meeting at the old Howard Park Elementary School, we're gathering in the Gamber-[Finksburg](#) area because it's out there in the sticks where so many have moved through the years.

(And, anyway, you can't gather at the old Howard Park Elementary School anymore because it's now a home for the elderly. And we're not quite ready for that yet.)

So there we were, a few hundred of us Saturday night, checking each other's name tags to match them with faces somewhat weathered with the years, and examining dozens of old black-and-white photographs of yesteryear.

Here were shots of some of our old teachers: Miss Siegel and Mrs. Massicott, Mrs. Dennis and Mr. Palumbi. Back then, they all seemed kind and caring — and roughly 112 years old. Now you look at them and realize they were decades younger than we are now.

Where do the years go?

There's a homeroom shot from Garrison Junior High, where most of us went after Howard Park. It's [Mrs. Grey](#)'s class: Sarah Grey, who taught ninth-grade science. And you realize, not for the first time, that she was part of the first generation of African-American teachers when the city schools were first integrating half a century ago.

And the names of some of those junior high teachers come back to you now: the English teachers Miss Millburn and Miss Lomax, the gym teacher Mr. Craig, the science teachers Mr. McNair and Miss Chapman, who became Mrs. Mills.

You realize something remarkable that they all had in common: In that delicate time, when so many kids were sitting in integrated classrooms for the first time in their lives, these African-American teachers, raised in their own segregated schools, offered not only academics but extraordinary sensitivity and sophistication and a comfortable emotional place.

The '50s are now seen as a time of great calm. Eisenhower seemed to lull us through eight years. But they were also an era of Sputnik and [Little Rock](#), of the dawning of rock 'n' roll, of the last of McCarthy hysteria and the heart of the arms race with [Russia](#).

And they were a time of changing sexual relations.

“Boys and girls were kept completely separate in those days,” Jeff recalled Saturday night. He was an old classmate, warmly remembered for his good nature and his quick wit. “We couldn’t eat lunch together, we couldn’t play on the playground together. Even when we got to Garrison. Even when I went to [Forest Park](#).”

“Right,” somebody else said. “We were kept apart, and then suddenly they’re telling us it’s time to start dating these girls. Who are they? What do you say to them? We’ve barely been introduced to them, and now we’re being thrown together with them.”

When we gather for reunions, we’re not only waxing nostalgic about yesteryear — we’re congratulating ourselves on having survived a lot of it. We can laugh at the awkward times, and the embarrassing times, because they’re safely behind us. We survived them together.

It makes reunions sweet. You slip past the front doors of the old Howard Park Elementary and head out to the Gamber Fire Hall. The trip takes about 40 minutes. And takes us back 50 years.

*Examiner*