

NOT YOUR TYPICAL CLASS REUNION

North Guilford's
County Road School
celebrates its 100th

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NORTH GUILFORD - Quick. Name how many 98-year-olds there are on the Shoreline. Now name how many of those 98-year-olds describe themselves as "progressively excited."

We found one. It's Guilford's Ann Holcomb, grandmother of six, great-grandmother of 11, and the oldest living student of the County Road School in North Guilford.

The cause for the irrepressibly sunny Holcomb's heady anticipation? A celebration. Not because she won yet another award as a volunteer at the VA in West Haven, where she's served for 29 years — most



An early class photo from County Road School. Submitted photo.

recently, working with the blind.

For Holcomb's alma mater, whose building will be observing its 100th birthday on Saturday afternoon, this won't be just any celebration. Invitations

have gone out to all alumni of the two-room schoolhouse. Specifically, anyone in North Guilford who attended the school from 1913, when it was built at a cost of \$2,964 plus \$150 for

a covered boardwalk and two outhouses, until 1954, at which time crowding led to the construction of a larger building on a different site named for the revered teacher Melissa Jones.

It's not so much the proclamation from the Town of Guilford or the plaque that will commemorate the building's 100 years of education that sets this party apart. (The structure now houses the Shoreline Outdoor Education Center.) Or the "class photo" on the porch planned for the occasion. Or even the fact that, according to organizer Bill Black, there are currently no plans for a 200th anniversary.

It's quite simple. These alumni, many of whom, like Holcomb, haven't been back to the school for decades, have tales to tell.

Like the "cow barn" perfume of wet wool pants wafting through the classroom on a cold

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winter morning from boys who had milked cows before they set off for school. And how Homer Lane, the beloved janitor, outsmarted an administrator from the Guilford school system.

There's also the one about the seesaw so old and rickety that it gave them splinters, as alumna Louise Anderson recalled, and the gravel on the playground so rough that she still has scars on her 83-year-old knees. Not to mention the preternatural tranquility of the school bus driver, no matter the noise and commotion aboard. (He was profoundly deaf.)

And that's only a small sample.

No doubt many of the stories will revolve around Melissa Jones, the Ellsworth, Maine native who taught grades



A portrait of Melissa Jones, the beloved teacher, who could sure hit a softball.

four to six from 1929 to 1947 without missing a day. That's 18 years, one more year than the consecutive games streak of Hall of Fame Baltimore

Oriole Cal Ripken. And even more impressive, considering she taught reading, writing, and arithmetic to three grades at once in one room, seamlessly shifting students who weren't sufficiently challenged to a higher grade and those struggling with a particular subject to a lower one.

She also led her charges on nature walks, enlightening them on the finer

points of flora and fauna, and originated the "lunch brigade," which involved grades four to six setting tables and washing, rinsing and drying dishes.

All that, while holding each student to high standards in etiquette, grammar, penmanship, and diction. Her reply when a schoolboy asked if he could go to Old Man Baker's store for candy: "You can, but you may not." All that, while scrubbing the tops of every desk with strong yellow soap to prevent illness each day after school was over.

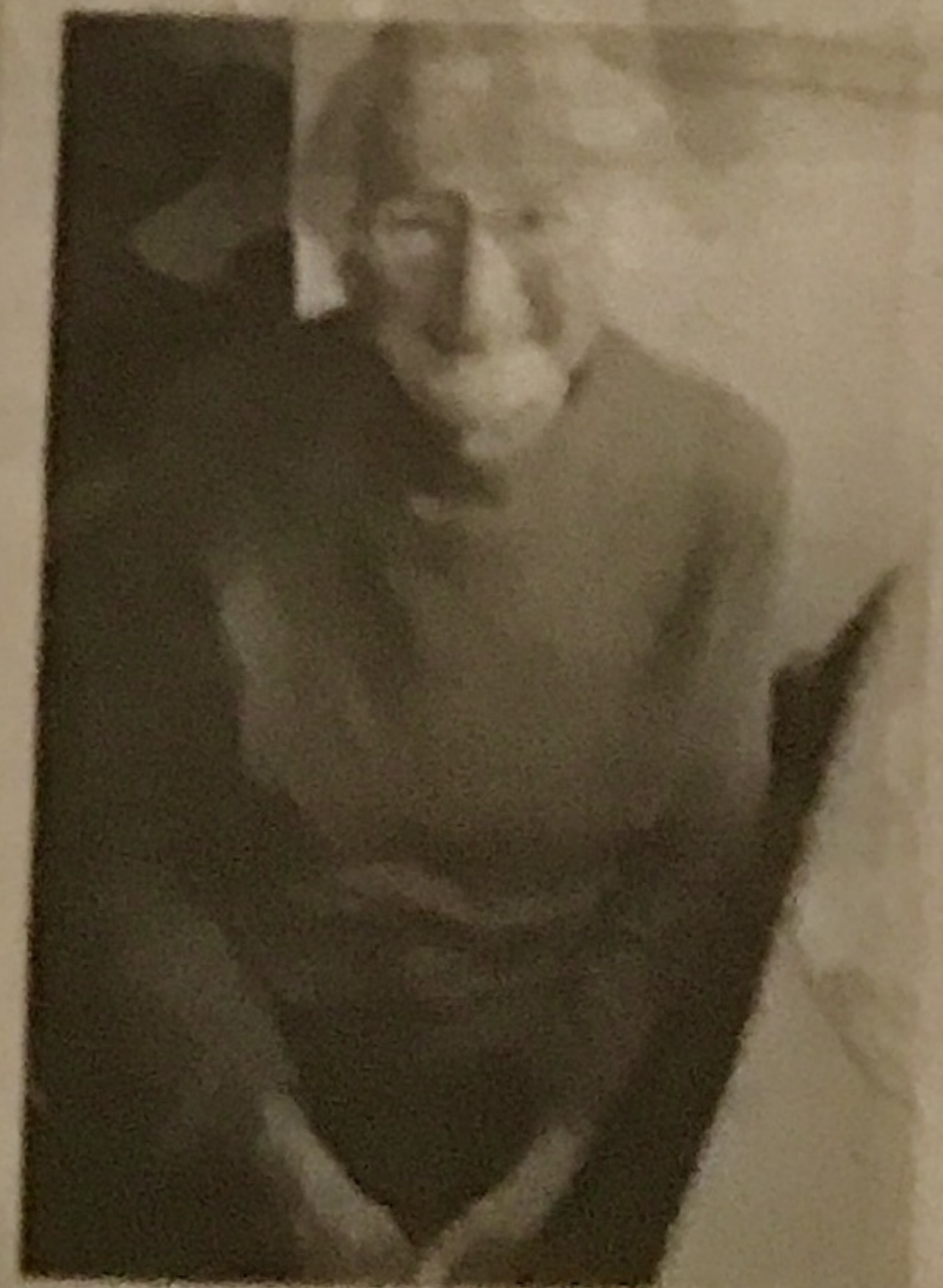
"She was strict, but she was also fun," said Anderson, who still lives in the same Great Hill Road house from which she took the bus to County Road School. "Boy, could she hit a softball."

Recalling Melissa Jones Ann Holcomb's face lit up. "She was just wonderful," she said in a voice so clear and strong it belies her 98 years. "So pleasant and friendly."

And, it seems, inspiring. How else to explain how Holcomb does so much at 98 — not only at the VA, but also in Guilford, with Friendly Visitors, a program she helped conceive, Meals on Wheels, and the Interfaith Ministries?

That's a question she can explore with her classmates on Saturday afternoon.

And she can't wait.



Ann Holcomb, 98 recalls her teacher, Melissa Jones.