For the “Silver and Gold,” a group of black women who grew up in the middle of a desegregating Columbia during the ’50s and ’60s, the lines of memory and friendship can’t be broken. Nearly half a century later, you can still find them together every week.
Decades after the party ended, Jo Ann Herndon still treasured a framed photo from her 1960 high school yearbook. That was the year Herndon ascended the throne. Douglass High School used to celebrate the coming of spring each year with music, dancing and a ribbon-wrapped maypole. One student was elected by her peers to reign over the festivities. The May Queen.

The landmark Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education, leading to desegregation of the nation’s public schools, ultimately shuttered Douglass’ K-12 education.

The high school was first to close in 1960. The junior high school and elementary grades at Douglass would follow over the next seven years.

While former classmates appreciate the positive contributions of desegregation, they say it splintered the tight-knit community where they grew up.

Members of the last segregated classes at Douglass have worked hard to keep their ties, meeting every Tuesday afternoon in the basement of the Armory Sports and Recreation Center on Ash Street.

When they’re not sitting together at plastic fold-up tables, eating and reminiscing, they treat themselves to
lunch at Golden Corral or field trips to Jennings Premium Meats and Amish shops.

This social group of black women “of a certain age” call themselves the “Silver and Gold.” Most grew up in the same neighborhood in north-central Columbia, where their lives crossed at school, church, on the streets, the sidewalks and the playgrounds.

**Remembering the 1950s and ’60s**

On any given Tuesday, about half of the group’s 21 members are present. They range in age from mid-’50s to early ’80s. Some have spent their entire lives in Columbia, while others have pursued opportunities elsewhere, only to be drawn back by illness and family.

“Camaraderie” is how Silver and Gold member Barbra Horrell describes the membership.

“We reminisce about, ‘remember who went to school with who; whose mother told us to be home on time?’” Horrell said.

In their Columbia, doors were never locked, and the corner shop owner knew your mother’s first name. In their Columbia, blacks couldn’t try on clothes in stores downtown, sit in Booche’s to eat lunch or enter the front door of the Missouri Theatre.

When these racial barriers began to crack in the 1960s, the women of Silver and Gold were at the forefront. They were some of the first students to integrate Columbia’s public schools after the Supreme Court ruled “separate but equal” unconstitutional.

They share a pool of memories, but each woman has her own perspective.

Taking their accounts together, their experiences describe how the past 50 or so years of history have reshaped community and race in Columbia.

**Pokino and prizes on Tuesdays**

The weekly meeting of the Silver and Gold starts at 2 p.m., which usually means most women are seated and nibbling by 2:30 or 3.

At this particular meeting, the tables were spread with snacks: brownies, hot dogs and “hunter mix” in disposable plastic bowls. Wynna Faye Elbert, the group’s chief organizer, distributes game pieces for Poker-Keeno, or “Pokino” as they call it.

“(The neighborhood adults) used to play it for money,” Elbert said.

“All night long,” added Evelyn Talton.

“Til 6 o’clock in the morning.”

“And have breakfast!”

Poker chips and pennies clinked on the table as the women laughed with each other.

No money was at stake, but winners picked their prize among scented candles, pocket calendars and bottles of hand sanitizer.

When the group meets, they are just as likely to ask about a friend’s health as to sweetly tease her. They circulate “get-well soon” cards for ailing members as they declare what’s on their minds — everything from local politics to Kim Kardashian — sometimes all at once.

Their banter ricochets among decades and topics. Their history together runs so deep, they almost speak in code.

A single word from one woman can set off geysers of memories around the room.

Jobs, kids, illness, fistfights, old loves, landlords. The women have witnessed each other’s personal histories,
as they have witnessed the dozens of ways Columbia has changed — and the dozens of ways it’s remained the same old place.

**Columbia, back in the day**

Most of the women grew up a few blocks from each other in Columbia’s historically black neighborhood, north of Broadway on both sides of Providence Road. Back then it was unpaved and called Third Street.

The area flourished with black-owned businesses: grocery stores, lumber yards, night clubs and restaurants.

The women call their old community “a village.” Children took orders from adults up and down the street, whether they were family or not.

Evelyn Talton remembers walking to Trubie’s Market on the corner of Garth Avenue and Ash Street, where the clerk behind the counter knew her mother, Ethel, by name.

When little Evelyn tried to buy candy, the woman would look at her and ask, “Did Ethel say you could?”

In fact, someone was always looking out for the girls.

Walnut Street used to be the place to party, with nightclubs and restaurants. Two of Talton’s uncles, Dick and Ellis Tibbs, and an older cousin, Bob Harris, managed and owned businesses on the street, and they wouldn’t let 12-year-old Evelyn linger on the strip. They would always call her “sister,” as in, “Sister, you need to get out from up here,” or “Sister, keep on going.”

Talton said the men always reported back to her parents: “I saw your daughter somewhere,” they’d tell them.

Wynna Faye Elbert lived at Fifth Street and Park Avenue and shared a faucet outside the house with seven or eight other apartments — their one source of running water for washing, drinking and cooking. The exposed pipe would freeze in the winter, and Elbert said her dad would wrap it in cloth and newspaper to thaw after he came home from work. But when her daddy was at work, it was the neighbor, Mrs. Miller, who kept an eye on the house and minded Elbert’s childhood shenanigans.

When she was 13, Elbert spotted an opportunity to make a little money. She would charge the neighborhood kids 5 cents each to slide across the mop water-doused kitchen floor in her house. It was 10 cents to watch “Howdy Doody” on TV.
Mrs. Miller would have none of it, and she promptly called Elbert’s father at work.
“I don’t care what Mrs. Miller told Daddy, Mrs. Miller was right. I used to hate that woman,” Elbert said. “She got my butt a many whipping.”

**Life at Douglass School**

Douglass School was founded in 1866 as the place to educate Columbia’s black children.

What was originally a two-story building with about 100 students in the 1860s had expanded to nearly 300 students in 1885 and moved to Park Avenue and Providence Road. High school classes were added a few years later.

Silver and Gold members who attended Douglass in the 1950s and ’60s were classmates at various times in the school’s elementary, junior high and high schools.

During that period, the school was still all-black — segregated, as were Columbia’s stores, hospitals and restaurants, and the MU campus.

Barbra Horrell said her mother traveled to St. Louis to shop for the family because they couldn’t try on shoes or clothes in Columbia stores.

Horrell said she was 16 before she went through the front entrance of a movie theater because black and white customers used separate doors.

The geography of segregation was a part of Evelyn Talton’s early education.

“My family had talked to us as kids, and we knew where we could go and where we couldn’t go,” she said.

Even though Herndon was aware of segregation, she said it didn’t dampen her spirits.

“I have all positive memories of growing up in Columbia,” Herndon said. “I was never sad.

“Going to church, having lots of friends, going to lots of parties, going to the theater, even though we had to sit upstairs because it was segregated, it still didn’t bother us.”

Students had everything they wanted at Douglass High School, Horrell remembered.

“We had band, we had chorus, we had honor society,” she said. “You name it, we had it.”

The women also recall a supportive learning environment. Teachers were strict but caring, and they pushed students to succeed.

Home economics teacher Alma Buckner made Talton sew and re-sew a zipper in a green felt dress so many times she can still recall the frustration.

Eventually, she got a class award for perseverance, once she finally got the zipper right.

“Our teachers were our mothers away from home,” she said.

**Desegregation redraws lines in Columbia**

The divide between black and white in Columbia began to break down after Brown v. Board of Education. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school segregation denied equal rights to black children.

“The ‘separate but equal doctrine’… has no place in the field of public education,” the ruling decreed.
Three years later, Army troops famously escorted nine black students, “The Little Rock Nine,” into Arkansas’ Little Rock Central High School to attend classes under the order of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Desegregation in Columbia happened without such drama.

Five days after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, the Columbia School Board officially ended segregation in the district.

During the following years, enrollment steadily dropped in the high school and junior high grades at Douglass, and the number of black students at the other public schools gradually inched upward.

The last officially segregated class attended Douglass High School during the 1959-1960 school year. The next fall, the students were transferred to Hickman High School, and Douglass High School was closed. The number of black students at the once all-white school swung from 20 to 113 that year.

Students gradually transferred out of Douglass’ junior high school classes for two more years until the junior high closed because of low enrollment.

Douglass elementary school students were integrated more slowly, and the deliberations were more contentious. In all, it took until 1967 — 13 years after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling — to completely desegregate Columbia’s public schools.

School officials defended the slow pace, and the superintendent deflected any accusations of racial prejudice.

“My family had talked to us as kids, and we knew where we could go and where we couldn’t go.”

Evelyn Talton

Students experience integration

Students at Douglass didn’t necessarily feel the same way. Some were frightened about the prospect of desegregation and reluctant to leave their familiar high school. Herndon was a member of the first integrated class at Hickman in the 1960-61 school year, and she was unhappy when Douglass closed.

“It did have a negative effect on me, because I had
such a good time when I was there,” she said.

Her participation in school activities dissipated. In the 1958-’60 Douglass yearbook, she appears in a half-dozen group photographs. When she transferred to Hickman, she gave up her busy social life.

Instead of spending her day in class and after-school clubs, she began leaving the building during lunch to work at a hospital lab on East Broadway.

Teresa Lankford left Douglass in the aftermath of desegregation and transferred to Benton Elementary School for third grade. She had to take a bus to school for the first time.

Her father had dubbed her the guardian of the other neighborhood kids, even though she was one of the youngest. He reminded her frequently of the responsibility.

“Every day he would tell me, ‘You’re going to this white school, so you look out for them,’” Lankford said.

If there was a problem, she and her cousin would tell the other children to look for them so they could intimidate the bully.

“We held our own,” she said.

Pat Tatum transferred to Jefferson Junior High School in 1960. It was shock to be one of the only black kids in a previously all-white school.

She recalls one of her teachers treated the black students differently, and her mother had to come to school to straighten the teacher out.

“We had to go to their school, but did it ever occur to them that we didn’t want to be there no more than they wanted us there?” Tatum said. “We wanted to be in our own school, too.”

The newly integrated school was also a scary place for Madeline Rolley, who was 9 or 10 when desegregation began. It wasn’t until she enrolled in Jefferson Junior High School at 13 that she really felt the hostility.

Once, when a white boy called her “racial-bearing names,” she fought back — but ultimately lost the fight.

“Before I knew it, I ran up on him and pushed him into the lockers,” Rolley said. “And I was expelled from school.”

Before she left, Rolley also “bawled out” John Stolt, principal of Jeff Junior. Years later, after she became an adult, Rolley said Stolt would give her a hug when they ran into each other around town.

**Times have changed**

After graduating from the Columbia Public School system, the Silver and Gold women went on to pursue college degrees and successful careers.

Rolley worked at Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center for 34 years until it closed and the Daniel Boone Regional Library, where she still works.

Jo Ann Herndon was a school teacher in Englewood, Calif., for 33 years, and moved back to Columbia in 2011.

Barbra Horrell became the director of medical education and recruitment at MU and also traveled the country.

Evelyn Talton worked as a licensed practical nurse at Boone County Hospital and served on the State Board of Nursing for three years.

Wynna Faye Elbert worked for the Columbia Parks and Recreation Department and is still active in bringing people together as a community organizer.

Teresa Lankford worked with kids for over a decade until she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She is in good health now, hoping for a cure for the disease.

Pat Tatum worked for MU for 42 years before she retired.

They are pillars of the community, Talton said, and have set a positive example for the next generations.

“We were taught to respect ourselves; that we were just as important as the other person,” Talton said.

She wants the next wave of Columbia children to realize just how much society has progressed.

“Our generation has struggled to get us where we are now,” she said.

In contemporary Columbia, black residents can go anywhere they wish. Women who belong to the Silver and Gold don’t have to stand outside a restaurant to pick up their lunch or restrict their lives to just one part of town.

Many of these women have younger relatives who are the products of interracial unions.

“The older generation didn’t have the opportunities
we have now to achieve what we’ve achieved,” Talton said.

Yet, at a recent Silver and Gold meeting, some of the women predicted that racism will never disappear. In contemporary Columbia, the racial divide is subtle, they said, but real.

As they pursued their careers over the past 50 years, they were often among the few people of color in their workplaces. They also could be targeted without reason for their race.

Horrell said her clients would sometimes address her white secretary as the boss, instead of her. A white cop once stopped her just because she was driving in a white friend’s neighborhood.

These women still look at the city’s leadership and see an overwhelming number of white faces — on boards and commissions, as police and firefighters — and they don’t feel represented, or included.

The black community has also changed, splintered even, since they were children. It’s changed 100 percent, Elbert said.

Columbia’s black population has spread across town, and a lot of people who moved here from other cities are unfamiliar with the city’s history.

“There’s not a community anymore,” Horrell said.

Every two or three years, memories of old Columbia surface at the Black and White Ball, held to reunite previous classes of Douglass students.

That’s where the 1960 May Queen, Jo Ann Herndon, can be royalty again, waving and yelling “Hi!” to spectators from the back of a convertible.

“Whether I’m an old queen or a young queen,” she said, “it’s just nice that I had a chance to be queen.”

The Silver and Gold members say that in Columbia today, the racial divide is more subtle but still absolutely present. We’d like to hear your perspective on the issue of racial divisions.

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