

SWANK SOCIAL CLUB CELEBRATES 60 YEARS

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It was the summer of 1934, toward the middle of the Great Depression, and seven classmates at Charlotte's Second Ward High School decided to form a social club to make life better.

They had been friends for a long time, playing ball after school in a backyard field.

But now their friendship was official: They were members of the Swank Social Club.

They even had a motto: "Let us live while we live."

At meetings, they hashed out what they wanted to be - doctors, lawyers, businessmen, preachers.

They also threw memorable banquets, including one with cocktails, dinner and dance music that set them back quite a bit.

Little did they know their club would last into the 1990s.

But it has. And on Sunday, new and old members pinned white carnations to their suit lapels and gathered for dinner at McDonald's Cafeteria to celebrate.

Many couldn't help but marvel over the fact that the club stuck together for 60 years.

"In the 1930s, social clubs in public high schools were popular," says Gerson Stroud, a retired Charlotte educator who is one of Swank Social Club's 22 current members.

"There were two or three other clubs that were also prominent during the period.

"But hardly any of them survived like the Swank club."

On Sunday, while members and their wives ate steak and potatoes, a pianist played songs from the 1930s through today.

Speakers, including charter member Thomas Wyche, talked of "The Swanks Then" and "The Swanks Now."

Guests reminisced about the 21 members who have died, including the man most responsible for the club's birth, the scholarly John Merrick Spears, who was struck by lightning before his 20th birthday.

"It's kind of lonely up here," said Wyche, a retired lawyer. "I see the list of all the members who have died, and I knew them all."

Wyche told how the Swank Social Club's first members were classmates at Charlotte's first black public high school.

The club disbanded only once, during World War II.

In 1946, it came back in a more serious vein, adding civic responsibilities to its focus.

Members furnished a room at the old McCrorey YMCA, for instance, and they donate money to such causes as the United Negro College Fund.

Stroud, who joined in 1939, explained how the club stayed alive by bringing in younger members "of similar temperament and dreams."

The club took in six men in the last year.

"We decided, because of our advancing years, that we'd better start taking in younger members," he said.

These days, the club meets once a month for dinner.

They also have a New Year's Eve party and a cookout every Labor Day.

Most summers, they take a trip together - to Atlanta, for instance, for baseball games.

“It goes without saying that 60 years of being together is really commendable,” Stroud says.

“It's amazing to me that the club has lived up to its ideals and expectations the way it has.”

• Caption: Photo-2Staff photos by CHRISTOPHER A. RECORD: (this photo had a slightly different caption in ed.s 1-3) 60 and counting: Roger Campbell and his granddaughter Allesandria Bargallo, 2, attend the Swank Social Club's 60th anniversary party Sunday at McDonald's Cafeteria. Campbell is a retired building contractor. 2. Swank Social Club members (from left) Thomas Wyche, A.C. Flagg and D.E. Holden talk during the club's 60th anniversary celebration Sunday night at McDonald's Cafeteria in Charlotte.

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