



(Times photo by Rich Partain)

Sister act

The Sharpton sisters, Dolores McBrayer, Geraldine Tipton and Barbara Woods (from left), sit outside West Point School, where, as a group, they have been a fixture for over 24 years. Their teaching careers came to an end this year as all three retired from their positions at the elementary school.

Class acts

Three West Point sisters retire after nearly a century of teaching

By RICH PARTAIN
Times writer

The halls of West Point Elementary are quiet during the summer months.

Beginning this fall, they will be a bit quieter than in the past; a bit more solemn as three laughing voices will no longer be heard above the youthful clamor and the shuffling of first-grade feet.

The Sharpton sisters, Geraldine Tipton, Barbara Woods and Dolores McBrayer, have chosen to retire this year from their long tenure as the *grand dames* of West Point School, taking with them a measure of the charm, class and wit that bloomed in their presence.

From a teaching family, the

sisters are like a missionary program for the profession, scads of teachers popping up in their wake.

"I hope I can be the kind of teacher they have been."

Cheryl Rusk

Many of their former students and almost all of their progeny have become involved in the field with scores of their co-workers at the school having been taught by either Tipton, Woods, McBrayer or some combination of the three.

Between them, they have over 99 years of teaching experience,

much of it spent at West Point. Their classrooms, now vacant or in the process of being filled, have held no other classes but theirs for decades.

When asked what made them choose to teach, Tipton and Woods said that, growing up on Dayton Sharpton's farm in the Harmony Community, there was never any other option.

"With our father, it was always either preachers or teachers," said Tipton. "That's all I've ever wanted to be as long as I can remember."

"From the time I started to school ... it was like a calling to me; something I had to do," said Woods.

"Dolores has been around

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Sisters

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longest," said Tipton with a smile. "We followed her example."

"And it was a *perfect* example," said Woods, laughing.

"I thought I was going into nursing," explained McBrayer. "Until I decided that I couldn't give shots."

Over the course of their careers, the Sharpton sisters have seen many changes in the teaching profession and have had to adapt their styles to fit the reshaping of their roles. In several instances, McBrayer's inclination toward nursing has come in handy, she said.

"Michael Simmons, he's a teacher here [at West Point] ... I pulled his first tooth when he was in third grade," said McBrayer.

"If I had money for every tooth I've pulled ...," said Woods. "You had to be careful, though ... if you ever lost the tooth, you had to help them write the tooth fairy a letter."

"Things are different now ... you have to wear gloves."

Along with being nurses to their students, the sisters were often counselors as well, dealing with emotionally disturbed children and those with unhappy homes.

In later years, however, guidance counsellors were hired at the school, giving teachers both more time to do their work and regrettably less of a need for teachers to spend special time with students.

"One big change is that kids don't get any free time ... the

state expects so much of them," said Tipton.

"[The state] take[s] all of the fun out of it," said Woods. "There's no time to enjoy the children ... they're much more private now ... they don't talk to you anymore ... even recess is structured."

They have seen many positive changes as well, such as the advent of air-conditioned rooms and the computer, they said. Despite the ups-and-downs of a life spent in the educational field, they have very few regrets and many good memories. Most of the good, they said, came from the children.

"I just thought that being around the kids for me was a lot of fun," said McBrayer. "I think my favorite time was reading to them."

"They will keep you young and on your toes," said Woods. "It's been 30 great years."

"I liked being with them, hearing the tales that they tell and seeing them grow up and come back to see me," said Tip-

ton. "I think the worst part of retiring is that I'll be sitting at home, looking at the clock, and wondering what my kids are doing."

Their students and co-workers will no doubt be wondering what the Sharpton sisters are doing with their new-found free time, said Cheryl Rusk, Tipton's daughter, who is also a former student of the sisters and their co-worker for years as a teacher at West Point School.

"It's going to be weird next year," said Rusk. "I'm happy for them, but it's going to be sad ... a big change without them."

"They could always laugh ... always find humor in the kids; they were three of a kind ... I hope that I can be the kind of teacher that they have been."

According to Rusk, the sentiments expressed by everyone at the school have all been in the same vein as her feelings about the loss of the sisters.

"All the people I've talked to say the same thing: 'It just won't be the same...'"