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Wake school bonds supporters highlight Garner High School

College yearbook archive offers many blasts from the past

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Charles Kuralt, UNC, 1955

UNC

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If you're still a little angry at your mom for selling your 1972 college yearbook at a garage sale, you can finally let go of the grudge.

Thanks to an impressive digitization project at the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center at UNC-Chapel Hill, hundreds of old yearbooks from 51 North Carolina colleges are all now available to peruse online.

With just a few clicks, you can be browsing the “Yackety Yack” – UNC-CH’s yearbook – from ’72, reliving the wide ties and mustaches, the war protests, that epic John Denver concert and of course, dressing up in a fancy gown to have your picture taken in the woods. Oh, look. There’s Rigdon Dees III (later known as Disco Duckin’ Rick Dees) with his brothers at Pi Kappa Alpha.

Or pop over to Western Carolina University’s “Catamount” yearbook and look at writer David Sedaris in all his bearded, bespectacled 1976 glory. Really. Marvel at that for a moment.

You can even find a super serious class photo of PBS and CBS newsman Charlie Rose (aka Charles Peete Rose) in Duke’s 1964 “Chanticleer.”

From the same year, there’s student government president Jesse Jackson at North Carolina A&T State University. Or travel back a ways and see Charles Kuralt as the 1955 Daily Tar Heel editor in Chapel Hill or Andy Griffith as president of the 1947 UNC Glee Club.

Though looking for gawky photos of famous people is a fun way to kill an hour (or three), spotting long-gone loved ones or reminiscing about days spent with old friends at various libraries, brickyards and ball fields is the heart of the project. That and research, naturally. The searchable digital collection, managed by UNC’s Wilson Special Collections Library, is a treasure trove of information for historians, genealogists and nostalgics.

Nick Graham, program coordinator of the Digital Heritage Center, said there is a strong demand for these types of online resources. Response to the collection has been great, he said.

“I think people are increasingly looking to online sources to connect with other people,” Graham said. “The yearbooks give people a great opportunity to connect with their past.”

Graham said he recently heard from a woman who had found grandmother’s yearbook photo from Saint Augustine’s College.

“And she was touched and surprised to see how much her grandmother looked like her,” Graham said.

Grandma’s yearbook

The center has so far scanned more than 800,000 pages of yearbooks, the oldest being the 1890 “Hellenian” from Chapel Hill (which became the “Yackety Yack” in 1901). Davidson College’s “Quips and Cranks” is chronicled from 1895, and Wake Forest University’s “The Howler” begins in 1903.

Officials are now expanding the collection to include yearbooks from community colleges, and they soon hope to begin digitizing campus and community newspapers. The yearbook website also has a section for high school yearbooks, but so far only a few schools are represented there. High school yearbooks must be 50 years old or older to be posted on the site.

The project is supported by grant funds distributed by the State Library of North Carolina.

Who is missing?

The three UNC system schools missing from this collection are the UNC School of the Arts, the N.C. School of Science and Math and N.C. State University.

N.C. State previously digitized its yearbooks independently and that site is also searchable. “The Agromeck” at N.C. State goes back to 1903 (some volumes are missing), but the site also archives old course catalogs going back to 1918 and a historical photograph collection going back to the mid-1800s.

Thanks to those “Agromeck” yearbook archives, the adorable 1940 class photo of a fresh-faced Bill Friday and the 1959 senior photo of former Gov. Jim Hunt (and his trademark hairstyle) will be around to enjoy forever.

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