



Alumni from Yates and Wheatley came to the unveiling of the historical marker for the Turkey Day Classic, which stands on the University of Houston campus at the site where the Turkey Day Classic was played from 1942 to 1966. Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

THE TURKEY DAY CLASSIC IN THEIR OWN WORDS

By Debbie Z. Harwell

The nation's biggest high school rivalry football game took place on Thanksgiving Day in the heart of Houston, Texas, from 1942 to 1966 at Public School Stadium (later Jeppesen, then Robertson Stadium). Although Jack Yates and Phillis Wheatly High Schools had played each other since 1927, it became the regular Thanksgiving Day game due to its popularity, with as many as twenty to forty thousand fans turning out for the Black community's social event of the year. A historical marker now stands at that location in the shadow of the University of Houston's (UH) modern stadium, but one can still imagine the wonder of those glory days. Students at the UH Center for Public History had the pleasure of interviewing graduates from Yates and Wheatley High Schools to hear their memories of the Turkey Day Classic. Excerpts from those conversations follow.¹

What is the Turkey Day Classic?

Thurman Robins, Yates '58 (TR): The Thanksgiving Classic in Houston [was] the largest attended high school game in America, period. They had one rival game in Chicago which began in 1935, but it was an ... all-star game between the public schools and the Catholic schools.

Willie Jordan, Wheatley '56 (WJ): The Thanksgiving game was homecoming and people from all over the country came back for homecoming. ... So people had Thanksgiving parties the night before for the out-of-town guests ... [T]he students had a pep rally. It was wild. ... Everybody just stood up and cheered, they introduced the football team, the cheerleaders, the major, we had a band, the majorettes ... It was a party.

Betty Taylor-Thompson, Wheatley '59 (BTT): But it was an organized party. Don't say it was wild because everything at Wheatley, and I'm sure at Yates, was disciplined. We didn't have disciplinary problems.

Ralph Oaks, Wheatley '59 (RO): It wasn't a game between two teams ... it was a game with the neighborhood. You had people who never went to Wheatley High School, probably never graduated. But they were for Wheatley. ... If they knew a kid in the neighborhood was going to Wheatley and could not afford it, they would help him out. It was a community ... you don't have neighborhood schools anymore. ... The Thanksgiving game, it made people aware of what Wheatley was about, and it made them respect education.



The Wheatley Wildcat cheerleaders had a busy week leading up to the game. Their preparations included ensuring every aspect of the uniform was in pristine condition. Interview participant Betty Taylor (now Taylor Thompson) is center front.

All photos courtesy of Yates and Wheatley High Schools unless otherwise noted.

Deloris Johnson, Yates '58 (DJ): We were involved with the Turkey Day Classic way beyond our high school years because that was the main event of the year for Blacks in Third Ward, Fifth Ward, Fourth Ward and all over Houston.

Thelma Robins Gould, Yates '58 (TRG): There was always so much enthusiasm and excitement about the game ... when they were still in grade school. It was something you looked forward to once you got to Jack Yates ... from seventh to twelfth grade.

TR: [Thelma and I] lived in Cuney Homes for the first eight years of our lives. I can remember just as vivid as it was yesterday, I was about five years old, and I was playing outside in the yard and all of a sudden you hear this noise, this big roar "Woo!!" ... And then it would die down. And a few minutes later you'd hear it again. ... I asked my mom, "What is all that noise?!" She said, "Oh, they're playing that game over at the stadium [about three blocks away] that's the Yates-Wheatley Game."

Donald Dickson, Yates '58 (DD): [Going to coach's house at 9:00 a.m. I passed Thelma and Thurman's aunt's house] and



Twins Thelma Robins Gould and her brother, Thurman Robins, Ed.D., graduated in the Yates class of 1958. Thelma led the Ryan Kadets and Thurman was in the band and on the swim team.

Photo courtesy of Thelma Robins Gould.

she would be dressed and ready to go to the game. She'd be standing outside in her red and yellow; I mean she's got on red shoes, she's got on red stockings, yellow purse, yellow hat; and, listen, her words to me were, "If y'all don't beat Wheatley today, don't you come back home!"

What other ways did the spirit of competition shine through?

DJ: As a little girl I would stand in the window and watch the people walk down Alabama Street going to the game ... They were dressed in their finest suits, hats, furs. ... You had to look good for the Thanksgiving game. Men too.

Loretta Thompson-Williams, Wheatley '59 (LTW):

It was probably the most dressed up football game. We were dressed to a T.

RO: It started at 5 o'clock.

WJ: They would have eggs and have bacon, and a buffet in the school cafeteria. ... Wheatley started it. Then Yates followed. Yates had some connections with communication, they got on the radio, and then Wheatley pulled some folk to get on the radio. ... We were talking bad about the other [school] ... The momentum of getting ready to have a sure enough fight. I mean figuratively speaking.

Samuel Taylor, Yates '58 (ST): Each ward, Fifth Ward, Third Ward, they would have their parades. Wheatley would have their parades up and down Lyons Avenue. Yates would have their parade up and down Dowling [now Emancipation] ... before the game and ... Jeppesen Stadium parking lot would be full of people.

TRG: Everybody was excited! ... Those of us who were in the squadron, the Ryan Kadets, we practiced every day except on weekends because ... you had to get out there at halftime and ... perform your best.

DJ: You had to beat Wheatley's performance too!

WJ: Halftime was just like the game because you're going to compete ... We would always compete with how Miss Wheatley would come out, how Miss Yates would come out, and one time they would ... come out in a Cadillac, another [year] some antique car, horse and buggy ... But I will have to confess when Carolyn Wilkins from Yates came out in a helicopter ... we threw in the white flag. ... It was a spectacle!

Can you share some memories about the game?

RO: The game normally started at 2 o'clock. ... You were almost on the field because of the crowd. ... They had to put up temporary bleachers on the north side of the stadium ... where people stood at least five deep around the field ... My most memorable Thanksgiving was 1951. My first Thanksgiving game. Can you imagine a little 10-year-old kid ... with his father going to football game? We didn't have television back then, ... but to see 25,000-30,000 people at a football game. ... People stood up most of the time ... so my daddy had to put me up on his shoulders ... I'll never forget that.

ST: They would have security to keep them back.

TR: They had a reserved section for whites. At every game. And the reserved section were some of the best seats in the house like the fifty yard [line], for whites. And we had many whites!

DD: When [the players] used to go to the stadium ... we would roll in [Square Deal] cabs. We had forty boys, it would be three or four in a cab. ... We would go down Holman Street just blowing, make the cab driver just go “booooooop booooooooooop” they knew that was Yates coming from the school.

BTT: Every single time that football team hit the field, and we cheerleaders came out with them running, every one of those are precious memories to me. Because every time it was the most exciting part of the game ... We’d line up, wait for the football players to come, and ... you’d burst through [the paper banner.] ... It was the highlight.

EB: [My favorite memory] is simple, just running on that field. ... Once the game starts, you really don’t hear the crowd. ... I’ve got some Yates friends now and they don’t let me forget [that Yates won more games] either.

LTW: In the 1958 football season, only Booker T. Washington and Yates scored on us. ... Wheatley beat Yates 20 to 8. The other schools didn’t score on us at all, that was one of my fondest memories.

DD: Thanksgiving game our senior year [1957,] our quarterback was injured. Sammie Taylor was a running back ... [but] Coach Andrew “Pat” Patterson ... took Sammie Taylor, who ... was a pitcher on the baseball team, ... [he] threw about a sixty-yard pass, ... and we beat Wheatley 7-6. Sammie Lee had never played quarterback before that game, but he had those kinds of skills plus our coach ... include[d] plays that ... [Sammie] knew from the running back’s position.

Algenita Scott Davis, Wheatley ‘67: The last game that Wheatley won, that was Thanksgiving Day in 1960. And Ronald Frasier was [quarterback] ... [I saw him] years ago in Florida ... I said, “My name is Algenita Davis, you were



Co-captains of Yates and Wheatley meet for the coin toss to start the game.

on the team that scored 3-nothing.” I can remember that. I can’t tell you where I was yesterday, but I can tell you what happened Thanksgiving 1960! Because it was a family affair. Your entire day was built around that Thanksgiving Day game, ... watching the performances and having participated [in the drill team] and ultimately seeing my brother becoming the drum major of the Phillis Wheatley Wildcat band, and ... [flying] home [from college] to see him perform, that’s how big of a deal it was to me.

What brought the Classic to a close?

TR: What brought about the demise of the classic primarily was integration. ... All of the Black schools in Texas played in a league called Prairie View Interscholastic League ... that controlled all aspects of all the competition, whether ... athletics or music or debate, whatever. ... [T]he White schools had an organization that controlled their competition called the University Interscholastic League, UIL. So when [it] integrated, the PVIL became defunct. ... There were so many schools in the UIL as compared to the Black schools that their playoff system ... had bi-district and regional and a state championship game. That playoff system started in the first or second week of November, which meant that all of your district games had to be complete by [then. So if] ... Yates was going to play Wheatley, they had to play before Thanksgiving.

Walking a block from the historical marker and looking at the houses, I can close my eyes and imagine the excitement of people walking to the stadium from their Third Ward homes dressed in Yates’s crimson and gold, or Wheatley fans from Fifth Ward getting off the bus decked out in purple in white. Although the Yates-Wheatley game no longer draws those large crowds, those contests represented two things that should not be forgotten – a friendly, competitive rivalry and an unparalleled sense of community. ✚

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In 1958, Carolyn Wilkins of Yates and her court made their entrance by helicopter. No arrival before or after this one created such a stir.