

Former students surprise retiring teacher with tribute

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

APTOS — The gym still smelled of children and school lunches as Mr. Merriam walked through the doors for the last time Sunday afternoon.

Robert "Bob" Merriam, who had started teaching at Valencia Elementary School 33 years ago, retired in June. His boyish blond hair was long gone, his face heavier and wrinkled from sun and age.

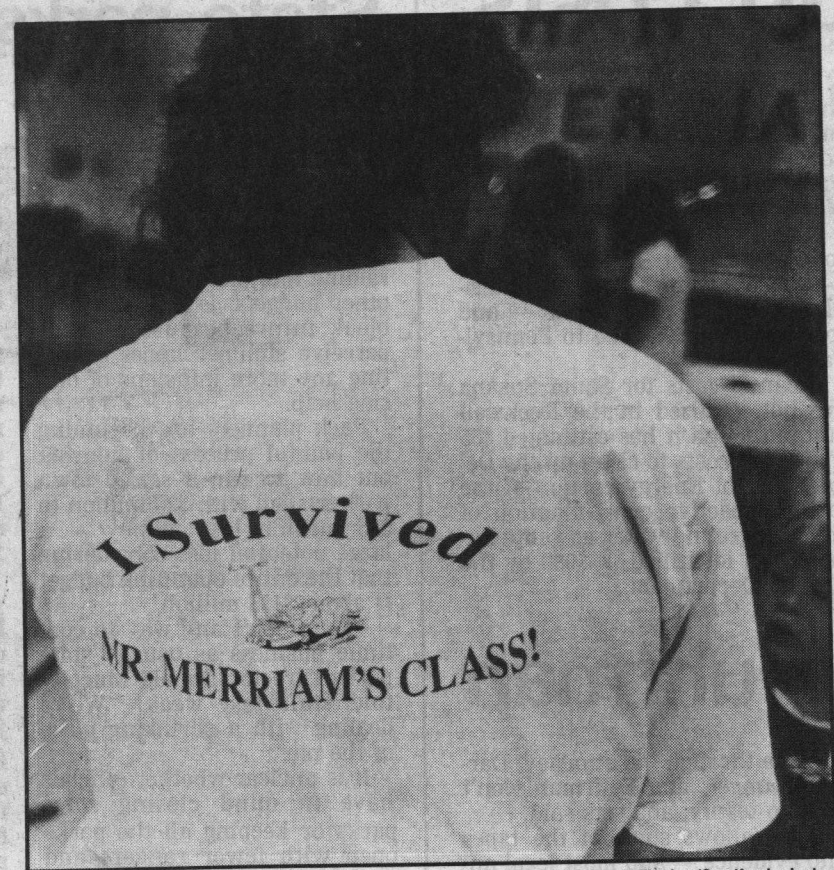
But to the 100 former students gathered for a surprise tribute, he was still "Mr. Merriam," their beloved seventh grade teacher — and for a moment they all felt 12 years old again.

"I used to bring him apples," said Robbyn Bringle. "I had such a crush on him. ... I finally got sent to the principal's office. She told me there would be other boys."

Bringle, a former mortgage banker now living in Tracy, still gets teased about the crush she had on Merriam, her science teacher in 1963 and 1964. She brought him a wooden apple in tribute, but seemed hesitant to approach him — uncertain after all these years.

While Bringle clasped the wooden apple and waited, former student Ken Kaysen led Merriam away by the arm to show him the water ski he made in Merriam's woodworking class in 1968.

The laminated ski was well-used but still in perfect shape, displayed on a table with inlaid chess boards, bowls and other artifacts of classes long ago. Merriam couldn't help but pick the projects up, running



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

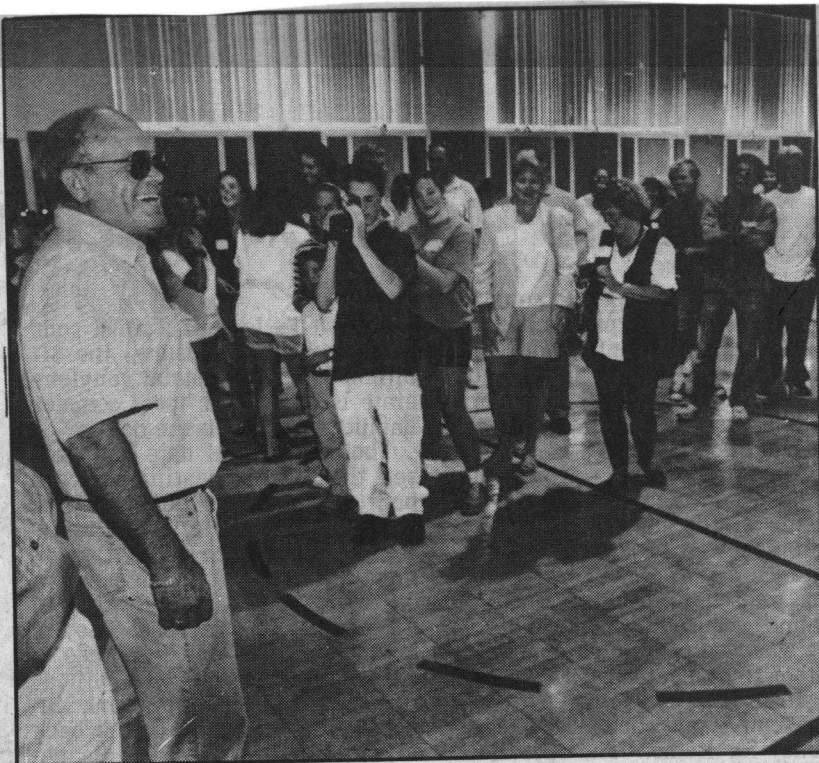
Tim Piumarta wears his feelings, but not on his sleeve.

his fingers over them, unconsciously grading them on their weight and smoothness of finish.

"He really influenced my life," said Kaysen, an Aptos painting contractor. "You go through life

and a only few people around you say something or do something that sticks with you. He was real strict and he made you do it right."

Merriam did not plan to be a teacher. A week before school



Bob Merriam is taken by surprise by former students.

started in 1963 an acquaintance called and asked if he would accept a job as teacher.

"I was going to do it one or two years and go into business," Merriam said. "But I enjoyed it. I was interested in every kid and tried to get the most out of them."

The young Merriam had an all-American look, boyish with a strong jaw and crew cut hair. The students flocked to him and young girls tried to play match-maker, setting him up with their favorite fifth-grade teacher, Miss Everton.

As it turned out, the couple didn't need much help. They married in 1965.

"Aptos was a different town

then," said Elizabeth (Everton) Merriam, who now works with the county Office of Education. "The biggest social event in Aptos was the new Safeway they put in. We knew all the families."

Then as now budgets were not large. At times, his science budget was zero.

"We'd had no equipment," Merriam said. "We'd use sow bugs for experiments. I'd have students run out at noon and turn over rocks, take the bugs and hope they would live until the next day. We found out sow bugs dried out very quickly. When it froze, the kids would bring me rats and mice. We'd warm them up and they'd start

running around." Merriam, who left Valencia for Aptos Junior High, has taught English, history, social studies, math, woodworking and electronics ... and no matter what he taught, the students were inspired.

"I tried to get kids to think they could do anything," Merriam said. "I was not critical of mistakes — you learn by mistakes. Don't be afraid to ask why. I want them to ask why, why it's a certain color. Why it works."

Over the years teaching methods and students changed. No longer could a teacher simply remove a troublemaker by picking him up, desk and all, and depositing him in the hallway — as one early student recalled. And liability problems would probably prohibit the skateboard contests he once hosted for students.

"Student's lives are different now," Merriam said. "They have less time to themselves. There are more broken homes and less family guidance, and the attention spans are less."

But still Merriam found a way to inspire students to learn and be confident.

In June he taught his last class, a math class at Aptos Junior High School.

Now he is starting a business recycling antifreeze and serving on the crew of car-racer Craig Breedlove, who is seeking to set a world land speed record and possibly break the sound barrier in a jet-powered car in October in the Nevada desert.

"I remember walking out the door of my last class. It was sad," Merriam said. "I am amazed how well so many kids turned out — even the troublemakers."

No one had to ask why.