

Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project Continues

# Segregation Side Effects... I Feel Cheated, Do You?

A recent email about this column from a white woman who grew up in Water Valley made me realize that we were cheated out of knowing each other. She wrote to tell me how much she was enjoying this column and wanted to make sure I was going to include three outstanding black women who influenced her life. She said she did not believe that our paths had ever crossed.

I wrote her back and told her that I knew her. She was very popular at Water Valley High School and was often featured in this newspaper. I idolized her and her friends when I saw them gather around the ice cream counter at Turnage Drugs after school – something that we black kids could not do.

I am excited that we have connected almost 50 years later and to hear of her appreciation of the black women who impacted her life. Just imagine the friendships that we could have forged had our schools not been separate, the pool, movie theatre and other public facilities not segregated, and diversity encouraged.

We simply had no opportunities to get to know each other. Yet our brothers and friends were fighting side by side in a war. We went to the same college and never knew it. Not only have our lives tread common paths, our careers have also, and we have agreed to share more of our experiences in collaboration. So, stay tuned and join in, if you like.

Here are some excerpts from her emails:

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*You were talking about the ladies who looked after us – I loved Minnie Jenkins like another mother, and I put up*

*such a fuss when I was little about her not getting to sit at the kitchen table with us at lunchtime that my parents relented! And you are rest assured Minnie was always welcome in the bathroom (unlike The Help.) After Minnie died, her son took her body to Waterloo, Iowa, and buried her there, and we went up there once and put flowers on her grave. I'll never forget that.*

-More about Minnie later-

*I'll tell you another quick story – when I was real little, we went to the Gulf Coast (probably Panama City) and Mildred Backstrom went along to look after us kids. The owners of the motel where we stayed wouldn't let Millie swim in the ocean. IN THE OCEAN! She had brought a swimsuit, so we all got up early one morning and went down to the beach, so she could swim without getting in trouble. My daddy took movie camera pictures of her swimming....*

*So glad to read all you had written, but I tell you Dottie, that line about watching us all when we gathered at Turnage's brought tears to my eyes. How awful, when I look back, that you and your friends didn't feel welcome there. We white kids didn't know any better then, but hopefully we do now! (at least some of us, I wish more did.)*

The uncanny connections are many. When my new friend mentioned her family's maid, Mrs. Mildred Backstrom, I confirmed that it was her son, Miller Backstrom, Jr. (Bumper), who spoke about my mother at my cousin's funeral in Illinois – which led to the birth of this project. I have since spoken to Miller and we were both overjoyed to make the connection.

I was also reminded that Miller Backstrom, Sr. was

a street sweeper in Water Valley, and while this may sound like a lowly profession, I, for one, was always comforted when I saw Mr. Backstrom on the streets. I felt safe when I saw him because I knew he was looking out for me and other black kids as we traveled up and down the streets of this small segregated town.

My new friend and I also discussed the integration of Water Valley High School, the closing of Davidson High, whose last class to graduate – mine – was in 1970. She was in the first class of the merger and the first class to graduate in 1971. She said the following about that school year.

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*Danita Hall and Patricia Freeman were the smartest girls to come over from Davidson in our class, I know that!*

*I am not trying to impress you with how close I was to my fellow (black) students, but I have so many fond memories of us getting to know each other. Diane Lewis, our great little point guard, getting between me and a bunch of players from another team who were yelling at us as we sat on the basketball bus. They were throwing gravel at the bus, and Diane stuck her head out the window and yelled (some strong words at them). She was so funny. Another time she said at a team meeting that she didn't understand why Coach McLeod would bandage a white foot, but she never saw Coach Easley bandage "no black foot." That taught us all a lesson, I think.*

*I remember one of the Gaston girls (Dorothy and Martha) asking me why white girls shaved their legs! And another time, we were putting on scenes from the Canterbury Tales in English class and I was an archer, and I shot an arrow (rubber tipped) down*

*the aisle of the classroom, but it curved to the left and got Martha right in the chest!*

*I was better friends with the girls than the boys, but I always liked Wesley Kerr, Charles White and especially Roosevelt Gooch. I don't know if he still works at the supermarket or not, but I used to see him in there occasionally when my mother was still alive. He was so proud of his children who were all at Ole Miss.*

*Anyway, lots of good memories. At one of our class reunions, we met at some B&B out on a little lake somewhere, and after everybody had a little too much to drink, person after person, black and white, got up at a microphone and talked about how we were the first to totally integrate, and we did it well. Not that we didn't have our problems, but we made friends and I hope we set a good example.*

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 When my friend was asked a few years ago to write about growing up in Water Valley, she offered the following:

*I would be remiss if I neglected to mention all the wonderful African-American ladies, young and old, who helped raise us. This small army of women often left their own children at home to come tend to us white kids. With exotic names like Etoile, Vinnie, Elnora and Ora Lee, or more ordinary monikers like Minnie, Mildred and Bobbie, they cooked, cleaned, played with us and became part of our lives.*

*The late Minnie Jenkins helped teach me to read Dick and Jane books while both my parents were working..... I still remember after she died and was buried in Waterloo, Iowa (where her son lived,) we went to visit her grave and put flowers on it. To this day, I wish I had a picture of Minnie, but her memory is steadfast in my heart.*

## The Tale Of World Travelers Is Quite A Story

As a late arrival to Water Valley, I am aware my first impressions often glide over the surface.

The images flow one to another, forming a picture of the town. The girls with grandmother faces at Michael's Hair Fashions. The farmers in high boots at Dunn's. The book reading Johnny Woods at Valley Agri. There is drumming Clay Ashford backing the Sharecropper's band, concerned Binnie Turnage counting pills to relieve the sick and Tamara Turner calculating postage to send a package on its way.

They seem all of a piece, matched one to the next like a background on a stage. No one is out of step, nothing surprises, everything fits exactly.

And then a story comes up that stops the flow, that does not fit but is somehow unexpected and out of place in my gliding first glance. Such was the story of the traveling Water Vallians.

Of course, I knew Water Valley traveled. The Alaska trip and its shipboard murder had been big news. Stories of trips to the Holy Land or a Women of Joy Conference in Branson, Missouri are often repeated. I have even compared notes with a few Mississippi visitors to my New York.

The unexpected part came when I was having lunch with Lucia Hollaway and Mim Carpenter at Melvin Ford's. Melvin was going out of town and needed help in emptying



*Dixie Scovel, a former New York newspaper reporter and editor, moved to Mississippi and Water Valley almost two years ago. Her column about the experience appears on the first and third weeks of the month.*

his refrigerator, so we were eating bits of this and that and slices of lemon pie to help him out.

It was there that I heard of the town people who packed their bags, climbed on a bus and took off for parts unknown. "You went to Canada by bus?" I was

incredulous. "Yes. It took a while, but we got there," came the answer.

I didn't expect this underbelly of curiosity on the open road, yet the stories unfolded.

It all began when parents of some high school students wanted to expose their children to a wider world and with the help of parent and traveler, Melvin Ford, planned a trip to Washington, DC. Everyone had such a fine time, they decided to keep on traveling.

Word of the adventures quickly spread. "Soon over 90 people came along. Once we had 122 sign up," said Melvin. People waited eagerly for the announcement of a new trip and quickly reserved a seat and the right roommate. Tickets even became popular Christmas presents.

The bus loaded with Water Vallians explored the country armed with their favorite homemade snacks, including cheese

and a specialty called trash. Salt Lake City, New York City, Jackson Hole, Santa Fe, the Grand Canyon, all the southern provinces of Canada and on and on they rolled. Then, Melvin said, they wanted to branch out and went international, traveling to England and Switzerland.

Lucia, who went on all the trips, recalled the Rose Bowl Parade. "We had a tour behind the scenes and great seats to watch the whole parade go by." Lucia and Melvin laughed over bus breakdowns and, on occasion, less than perfect accommodations. It was all part of the experience of any traveling crowd.

Stories flesh out the background on a stage. Colors deepen, people appear clearer, more fully defined and dimension is added to first impressions. A southern town and its people are complex, even mysterious and will most likely always remain so to a late arrival.



By Dottie Chapman Reed

*Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. She has launched a project to compile and share info about women in the county who have made an impact on the African American community. Her column appears bi-monthly, with occasional exceptions.*

*She can be reached at (678) 825-2356 or reed2318@bellsouth.net*

"Sing a song full of faith that the dark past has bought us,

sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;

facing the rising sun of our new day begun, let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the day that hope unborn had died;

yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet, come to the place on which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,

we have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered, out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last where the white gleam of our star is cast."

*Lift Every Voice and Sing - Songwriters: Rosamond J. Johnson / James Weldon Johnson*

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Arts Council Sets Date For Monthly Meeting

The Water Valley Arts Council monthly meeting is scheduled Tuesday, February 12, at 6:30 p.m. at the Water Valley Main Street office (207 North Main). You don't have to be a member to come to the meetings, artists, musicians, crafters and lovers of the arts are always welcome. For more info call 318-230-2132.

### Master Gardener Training Starts February 19

The Master Gardener volunteer training will start on February 19. This training is offered on-line at the Extension Office in Coffeeville. For information on how to sign up and become a Master Gardener please contact the Yalobusha County Extension Office by Thursday February 7.

### Weekend Activities At The VFW Include Bingo, Dance

Bingo will be played at VFW Post 4100 Friday night, February 8. Doors will open at 5 p.m. and games begin at 7. The Bobby Hood Band will take the stage for the regular Saturday night dance on February 9. Music will begin at 8 p.m. and end at midnight. Post 4100's Home is located at 11535 Highway 315, west of Water Valley.

### Order Of Eastern Star Meets On Feb. 12

Water Valley Chapter No. 5 Order of the Eastern Star will have their regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, February 12, beginning with a pot luck supper at the Masonic Temple on Champion Circle at 6:30 p.m. The meeting will follow at 7:30 p.m. All members are urged to attend and support your local chapter.

### Valley City Lodge Meets Feb. 7

Valley City Lodge No. 402 will have their next stated communication at 7 p.m. on Thursday, February 7, at the Masonic Temple on Champion Circle. Members are urged to attend and support your local lodge.

### English Department Sponsors African American Read-in

The Water Valley High School English Department is sponsoring the National African American Read-In - an evening celebrating and reading the works of African American poets and writers. It will be held on Feb. 26, 2019 at Bozarts Gallery from 6-8 p.m. All students (and their parents), staff and faculty from Water Valley School District, and community members are invited to participate. Call WVHS at 662.473.2468 to sign-up to read.

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 Friday Night 7 to 10 PM **KARAOKE**  
 Saturday 7 to 9 PM Music by **Jessie Higdon & Steve McGregory**  
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**IT'S REGISTRATION TIME! MAGNOLIA YOUTH LEAGUE BASEBALL AND SOFTBALL**  
 Registration begins at the Crawford Sports Complex on Saturday February 9th and continues through Saturday, March 2nd from 9 a.m. to 12 noon.  
**Only \$45 per child**  
 Early Bird Special \$5.00 Off until February 15th. Forms submitted after February 23rd will be charged an additional \$10 fee.  
 For Ages 3 and Up. Tryouts are scheduled for March 2nd at 10 a.m.  
 You can also register online at: <https://leagues.bluesombrero.com/magnoliayouth>  
 For more information please visit Magnolia Youth League Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/MYLwatervalley/>