

Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project Continues

'All Our Names Were Freedom'

Agency, Resiliency, and Community in Yalobusha County

This was the title and outcry of the oral history program the UM Southern Studies graduate students presented December 7th in Water Valley. If I had a video, perhaps I could recapture the emotional highs of the occasion. The presentation left the approximately 70 in attendance in awe and me in tears. How fitting to be at Spring Hill M.B. Church North on Martin Street, directly across from the black funeral home that was once the site of an adult only club, The Blue Room, on what was known as The Block. It was the center of black entertainment, black businesses and way too many tragedies years ago. Strangely enough, while there is little to no business there now, men still socialize under the trees near the funeral home, even on Sundays.

The interviewees present were Lillie Roberts, Emma Faye Gooch, Dorothy Kee, Marjorie Moore, Katherine Roland Pollard, and Luther Folson, Jr. James Wright and Luther Folson, Sr. were unable to attend. Had they been present they would have heard the interview-

ees whispering, "That's me!" and seen the faces light up as they recognized their quotes.

When I was younger, I admired 88-year-old Lillie Caldwell Roberts. She dressed like she could have been on the cover of *Ebony Magazine* and carried herself just like that - a grand and elegant lady - ahead of her time. I often wondered where she found such beautiful clothes. By now my readers know that she was the first black to register to vote in Yalobusha County, her husband, Joe Caldwell, accompanying her to the courthouse with a gun in his pocket. She and Dorothy Kee were featured in Dr. Alysia Steele's 2015 book, *Delta Jewels, In Search of my Grandmother's Wisdom*, and also in this column.

Retired Army 1st Sergeant Emma Gooch has returned home after extensive service to our country and describes herself as a lone community activist, most concerned about the lack of social activities or facilities for the black youth in the community.

Every time I speak with

Marjorie Moore I learn more and more. Her mother, Elvira Jackson, was one of Coffeenville's leading black female educators. On Saturday, I learned that Roosevelt Hervey, one of the early principals of Davidson High School, was her mother's brother. One of the young preachers that my mother mentored and carried around from church to church across north Mississippi was Reverend Johnny Roland, Katherine Roland Pollard's grandfather. My mom also influenced Luther Folson, Sr., and that, in turn, influenced, his son. Luther Folson, Jr. is currently awaiting a legal review of the recent county sheriff's race where he lost (to his white opponent) by two votes.

As I mentioned at the church, James Wright was the youngest I remember in his strong God-fearing family. Nobody messed with his dad, Ed Wright, Sr. The Wrights, the Gooches, the Boldens, the Sanders and the Chapmans rode the same school bus driven by Kenneth Carothers, Harry Campbell, Fred (Pee Wee) Harris and Lincoln Shields

and others. Their stop was next to last. Saturday night Annie Gooch Longstreet told me she was a little girl on that bus, and she looked up to me because I was so



By Dottie Chapman Reed

www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com

Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. This article is part of 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



Dr. Katie McKee, Dr. Jessie Wilkerson and Dottie Reed with a \$3,000 donation to the University of Mississippi from the Sylarn Foundation for the Yalobusha Oral History Project.

confident. "I wanted to be just like that," she said. From what I saw, she ac-

complished that, and I was left shaking my head.

Special thanks to Dr. Jessie Wilkerson and her outstanding graduate students. I am so proud of them and honored to have worked with them: Colton Babbitt, Michelle Bright, Brittany Brown, Keon Burns, and Rhondalyn Peairs - future PhD's.

The interviews these millennials have documented are preserving the legacies and black history of Yalobusha county. This information will lead to more stories, expanding, on what we have already accomplished. The interviews are being transcribed and will be presented to the participants. With their permission, the university will archive them. "I couldn't have been happier with the way things turned out, and we're looking forward to future collaboration", said Dr. Kathryn McKee, the Director of the UM Center for Southern Culture.

The university has prom-

ised continued support for this oral history project and the *North Mississippi Herald* column. During the December 7th event, I gave Drs. Wilkerson and McKee a \$3,000 donation from the Sylarn Foundation, which is based in Michigan. This matches UM's funding of the oral history project to date. One of the foundation board members has ties to Mississippi and read about the project.

Continue to check my website and the column for updates. We are still accepting stories and recommendations of individuals who would like to participate.

Sincerest thanks to all who attended the program, with special thanks to Pastor Samuel Townes and Spring Hill North for the use of their facilities and the extreme hospitality shown. Now back to the presentation. I could share more of my response and feelings but want to give you the perspective of four attendees:



The interviewees attending the oral history program on Dec. 7 included (front row, from left) Dorothy Kee, Lillie Roberts, Marjorie Moore and Katherine Pollard; (back row, from left) Colton Babbitt,

Keon Burns, Brittany Brown, Emma Gooch, Dottie Reed, Rhondalyn Peairs, Michelle Bright, Luther Folson, Jr. and Jessie Wilkerson.

Classrooms are both public spaces and strangely private ones. As professors, we seldom see what our colleagues or their students are doing; we hear anecdotes about discussions that went well and, just as often, about activities that veered comically off course. But on December 7, I joined some of my co-workers and many residents of Yalobusha County in peering into what had been going on all semester in Southern Studies 560, "Oral History of Southern Social Movements," taught by Dr. Jessie Wilkerson at the University of Mississippi.

Five students from that course (Colton Babbitt, Michelle Bright, Brittany Brown, Keon Burns, and Rhondalyn Peairs) treated us to a staged reading of the oral histories they had been collecting all semester from African American residents of Water Valley, Coffeenville, and the wider county. Although we saw a seamless performance, akin to being at a play or watching a radio drama, the students tell me that it was harder to put together than it might seem. They weren't just reading the "best" or most "interesting" lines from what they heard. They were curating what they'd heard by putting moments from the transcripts in conversation with each other around particular topics that ranged from religion to outright discrimination. The result was a powerful retelling of stories that have not been often told, told in the words of people who have not always been heard. At the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, we are excited to continue mapping and recording the experiences of African American residents of Yalobusha County. Thank you to Dottie Reed for initiating this important project and for recognizing in the first place that everyday experiences in small town Mississippi are the very essence of history.

Kathryn B. McKee
Director, Center for the Study of Southern Culture
McMullan Professor of Southern Studies
and Professor of English

While I was born and raised in the City of Atlanta, I did see a strong thread in my past and the stories told at the presentation. Education was the overriding theme for me. I was raised to believe that education was the key to having a successful life. The roads to that much desired goal were different, but the goal was the same. I have to admit my road was not as arduous as the stories I heard, I am still proud of the results. We have all been a part of the "southern mystique", however I must say it took heartier efforts from the stories I heard in Mississippi.

Thomasenia P. Robinson
Retired HR Manager

The students presented a unique perspective of African Americans they had interviewed, and they did it in a way that was totally unexpected. Most people with whom I spoke expected to watch a presentation on the video screen. When the students did an oral presentation, it took them by surprise, but I and those I spoke with enjoyed the method of presentation and its content. To take the time to review hours of interviews, digest the information, then narrow the scope for presentation was well done. Then to write a script was wonderful.

Having heard about some of the individuals in the beginning of the program, I was able to recognize them as the student did the oral presentation. That made the presentation even more meaningful. I hope the students will consider that type presentation again, maybe as a short play where they could learn the lines and expand the production. I thought they were all great.

Earl Warren Richard
UM Graduate
Bachelor's 1978
Master's in Education Administration 1996
Ph.D. in Educational Leadership 2016 -
Emphasis in Administration, Leadership & Management
Research Specialty: Acting White Phenomenon

It was a great experience. I honestly was not expecting it to be so rich in history and culture. I am grateful and honored to have been a part. In addition to its being a rich and informative event, I'd like to add it felt nostalgic. To have the opportunity to listen to some of the stories - some great, others not so good, was priceless and reminded me so much of the stories my grandmother often shared with me while sitting on her lap as she relived the glory days and expressed her fondest memories of how the black community was tight knit and dependent on each other and its institutions. Again, it was an awesome occasion. I look forward to hearing about where this project goes in the future.

Joshua D. Harper
Coordinator of Diversity Recruitment
The University of Mississippi
Office of Admissions

Closing Thoughts

A repeat performance has already been scheduled in February at the university, most appropriately timed - Black History Month. I am confident parents, high schoolers and youth could enjoy and learn from this experience.

This column and the Black Women of Yalobusha project started 16 months ago, in June 2018, and continues to grow exponentially. I thank all those who have been featured, those who have written and for all contributions. Finally, special thanks to David Howell and the *Herald* for providing this venue. We look forward to sharing more stories of the many outstanding black women of Yalobusha county in 2020 and documenting oral histories of the black community. Merry Christmas and A Happy and Blessed New Year to All!

- Dottie Chapman Reed