

Elvira Hervey Jackson: An Educator Extraordinaire

It is no secret that black teachers had a major influence on the growth and development of black children before and after school integration in the South and perhaps across the United States. Some of us remember every teacher that we ever had – teachers who made indelible impressions and gave us the tools we needed to be successful beyond high school and college. I still have all my report cards and certificates!

These teachers inspired us to further our education, inspiring some to become teachers themselves and leaders in the community. Among Yalobusha County's black residents, teaching was the most honorable and respected profession aside from preaching.

Most of our teachers came in town to teach for the week and then returned to their hometowns for the weekend. Several local families provided boarding rooms and accommodations. I recall the Spencers, Webbs and Currys opening their doors to these teachers. Eventually, Principal Joseph H. Ford designated a house near the new Davidson High for these young teachers who came from black colleges and brought with them a freshness, cultural exposure and excitement. They made us eager to learn and anxious to see what lay beyond Water Valley. I knew I wanted to get some of what they had – an education, a job, independence. They made us curious about the colleges they had attended and their hometowns. We were blessed with some of the most excellent educators in the area, and in Coffeeville's Colored System, Elvira Mae Hervey Jackson stood out.

Elvira was born in Yalobusha County on Valentine's Day in 1915, the youngest of eleven children, six boys and five girls. Her parents, Ned and Ella Paris Hervey, were farmers and descendants of slaves. She attended school in Water Valley completing the 8th grade. Then she earned her high school diploma from Rust College in Holly Springs and completed her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education in 1958. She obtained her Master's Degree in Secondary Education in 1965 from Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial State College in Nashville, Tennessee, now known as Tennessee State University.

In 1934 Elvira married Henry Hessie Jones, the son of John and Mattie Jones. Mr. John was a logger, known for his ability to handle a team of mules and for the distinctive two walking sticks that he used when he went out and about. Elvira and Henry had one daughter, Marjorie, who lives in Coffeeville today.

The Jones family sharecropped on a farm in the Bryant Community, living in a house that had no electric lights and heated only with an old wood stove. Elvira was Marjorie's first teacher in a one room school where she taught first through sixth grade. Marjorie and her cousins and neighbors often walked four miles to school. But in the wintertime, her dad, Henry hitched his mule to a buggy to give them a ride. To keep warm on the way, the children heated rocks, wrapped them in blankets or old rags, put them in a bucket and put their feet on this homemade heater. As soon as they arrived at the Pine Grove Baptist Church School, they would build a fire in the school's wood stove.

Marjorie remembers that all the children were close, going through their lessons until recess time. They brought their lunch in buckets or paper bags - often peanut butter sandwiches or whatever their parents had on hand. They drank water – no one had juice or milk. They played basketball outside, with no gym and no inside toilets. Then it was back to their studies and an afternoon recess before being dismissed for the day.

In addition to teaching at Pine Grove, Elvira also taught at Rocky Mount Baptist Church School, at Antioch Baptist Church School and the Williams School before she became principal of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church School in the Bryant Community.

Elvira and Henry eventually moved to 128 acres of land, east of Coffeeville, which they bought from a black man named Frazier whose health was failing. While the land had some timber, the couple used most of it to farm, making sorghum molasses, raising livestock, horses, cotton, and vegetables. Elvira taught at Pleasant Grove School until the schools were consolidated into the public-school systems around 1952, when her daughter, Marjorie was entering 8th grade.

After Elvira and Henry divorced, she and Marjorie lived with her sister, Hattie Berry, who was the principal of Central High School where Marjorie attended ninth grade in 1953. Their brother, Roosevelt, was the principal of Davidson High in Water Valley – evidence of the family's commitment to Education.

Marjorie graduated from Central High in 1956. Elvira married Sam Jackson in 1957. By then she had moved up to teaching high school social studies and English and remained in the Coffeeville school systems until she retired in 1980 - a 40-year career that made an immeasurable impact on the greater Yalobusha community.

Sam Jackson passed away in 1970. Henry Jones passed away in 1989.

Elvira's commitment to teaching paralleled her commitment to Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, becoming one of its most active members. (She had attended Mt. Moriah in Water Valley as a child.) She served in numerous roles including Sunday School teacher, president of the Missionary Society, financial secretary and treasurer, yearly program coordinator, and member of the senior choir. She served for 24 years as the dean of the Mt. Moriah Baptist District Association, responsible for educational classes, teacher certifications and workshops. She attended both state and national sessions for years and assisted in implementing many district strategies and practices. The Pleasant Grove Church website singles her out as "a prominent member of our congregation."

Annie Givens, who was profiled in the December 18, 2018 column, trained Elvira for her dean's duties, and she in turn trained daughter Marjorie, who served as dean for 12 years.

In addition to her teaching and church activities, Elvira participated in community networks, retirement associations, and other committees and boards. Among her most prominent activities was her work with the



Elvira Hervey Jackson's 40-year career as an educator had an immeasurable impact on the greater Yalobusha community.

women's division of black Masons, known as the Royal Arch Masons. She achieved the high honor - or degree-of "Heroine of Jericho," the name deriving from the Book of Joshua, and the woman, Rahab, known as the Heroine of Jericho. Beyond this honor she was a lecturer of the Fifth District Heroines of Jericho Lodge.

Annette Hervey Westmoreland, featured in the November 29, 2018 column, shares the following:

My great Aunt Elvira was a soft spoken woman and did not mind helping anyone. When I had to ride the bus home from Jackson State College, she would pick me up at the bus station and carry me to her house to wait there until my dad, her nephew, would pick me up. Aunt Elvira inspired me to become a certified dean for a Christian Leadership School under the Sunday School Publishing Board in Nashville, TN. I took her advice and completed the necessary courses to become a dean.

When I played the piano for their church, my dad would drop me off at their house and I would ride with them to Pleasant Grove Church, which was located off number 7 highway. The building they are in now is new. She was a great dean and speaker for the Mt. Moriah Baptist District Association.

Aunt Elvira gave me a lot of encouragement. Every time I came home, my mom and I would drive to Coffeeville to visit her, and if my mom was not in the city, my husband and I would drive by to see her. I never heard Aunt Elvira speak negatively about anyone. She would always say, "well, we just have to pray for him or her." Her daughter Margie was also inspired by Aunt Elvira to become a dean, because she always traveled with her mom to the different National Congresses and the December Sunday School Publishing Board Conferences in Nashville.

The last time Aunt Elvira was able to attend the SSPB in Nashville, my daughter urged me to go to her hotel room with pen and paper to record as much about the family as I could. This is when I found out that our great, great grandfather was killed by the Klu Klux Klan. My dad never told me that or perhaps he didn't know. It is so important that we try to get all the information from our older ancestors that we can. I regret I didn't do better recording family history from all my older family members who are now gone.

From Dorothy and Syreeta Key, featured in the March 28, 2019 column:

Mrs. Elvira Jackson was one of the first teachers who captured my attention and gained my admiration. I was awed by how firm she was, but still managed to be so caring and nurturing. If you did something wrong or could even be perceived as wrong, she could make you feel 12 inches tall. Thankfully, she did not leave you that way. She would let the reprimand sink in and then build you up to do better. I loved that and really came to understand and appreciate it when I became an adult and began my own teaching career.

Mrs. Jackson was a role model, not only as an educator, but in the community and the church as well. She was most influential in my career. As a matter of fact, she even taught my dad in classes offered to veterans as well as in seminary. She also motivated many of us in our church and the surrounding area to pursue Christian education. To sum things up, we could simply say that she was an awesome lady who personally achieved much but always encouraged everyone she encountered to do their best in whatever they endeavored. With her, there was no half-stepping!

- Dorothy Kee

When Mrs. Jackson passed away, many people wondered whether she was really my godmother. She was so endeared and had such far-reaching influence that people were suspicious that anyone they were not aware of being connected to her were clout-chasers. (Now that's star status.) Only then did I find out that she had been my godmother since birth. Actually, I never thought about it until then and realized what a blessing she had been to me and many of the people I knew.

Although she was still teaching when I was in first or second grade, she was never my teacher, officially. Even so, she taught me much. She did the usual godmotherly things such as gifts on birthdays and holidays, secretly pressing tightly folded bills in my hand when I was home on weekends from college, etc. But I give her credit for many things I know and do today. She was a master at delegating tasks and responsibilities, and you always wanted to be sure your performance met her approval. She could easily discern who was best suited for what tasks. When she asked, you just did it!



By Dottie Chapman Reed

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

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Because of one of her assignments when I was around ten years old, I taught myself to type, incorrectly at first, but I was one of the fastest and most accurate four-finger typists in town. I guess I passed her inspection because her requests and golden nuggets of advice kept coming. My grandmother was so happy that she was allowing me opportunities to learn that she bought me a quiet, fancy new electric typewriter (the predecessor to the personal computer). "If you're going to be doing things for Mrs. Jackson," she said, "you need a better typewriter than that old, noisy, clunky Brother one your mom has. You may need it for school, too." So, you see she was respected by everyone, but at the same time, she remained down to earth, approachable and concerned for others. A couple friends and I quickly realized that she really did not need us to do the things she asked us to do, but she wanted to make sure we learned to do them. She was concerned about the welfare of future generations.

- Syreeta Key

Elvira Mae Hervey Jackson died February 15, 2011, the day after her 96th birthday. This heartfelt tribute from her grandson, Tyrone Moore, is but one example of her enduring influence.

Big Mama,

I just want to say thank you for being the best grandmother anyone could ever ask for. You taught me the meaning of love and forgiveness. Most of all Respect. I will always love you. I really enjoyed spending the moments I had with you before you left me. I must truly say coming to your house was really "BIG MAMA'S HOUSE," one always filled with love and smiles - never a dull moment. May you rest in peace and I will see you again one day.

I love you Big Mama.

While all the colleges are closed because of the coronavirus crisis, our oral history project in collaboration with the Center for Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi moves on. The interview that Colton Babbitt, the UM graduate student and Water Valley resident, conducted with Marjorie Moore contributed to this article. The transcript of her family history will be archived at the university. The Albany Southwest Georgian featured a second article about the oral history project during Women's History Month. A draft of the article is posted on my website.

Sharing the lives of these black women shows that we are more alike than different. As Eduardo Porter wrote in a recent article in *The New York Times*, "We must build an understanding of what it is to be American that includes everyone." It is my hope that when this crisis is over, we will have gained that understanding and have an America that does include everyone. Perhaps we can be inspired and encouraged by this quote that appears on an online obituary for Elvira Hervey Jackson.

"Knowledge by suffering entereth, and life is perfected by death. When she started walking in the light, she kept going through."

Yes, she kept going through.



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