

Ora Lee Polk Phillips

Loved by Many- An Inspiration to All

By now you might have noticed the prominence of the Polk family in Yalobusha County and in this column. The second article published, August 23, 2018, featured one of the family's grand matriarchs, Sallie Ann Polk. Then we featured Alma Polk Nicholson, Juanita Polk Fleming and more recently Mildred Polk. Now I feel we have come full circle to the highly respected and sought-after Ora Lee Polk Phillips. When I called her one day back in 2018 asking about who knows what, she told me she was glad that I was sharing stories about the black women of Yalobusha. "Someone sent this white man to me, who was in town looking for anyone who knew Hattie Turner," she recalled. "He said that she came and stayed with him and his dad when his father was ill - she helped raise him. They moved to Memphis and lost touch with her. I was sorry that I could not help him."

Even though she didn't have an answer that day, the moment showed Ora Lee Phillips in a familiar role because of her long and dedicated service to the community: the go-to person for valuable information about Water Valley.

Now her youngest sister Juanita pays tribute to this living matriarch of the Polk dynasty.



Ora and Raymond were honored to serve as grand marshals for the Water Valley Christmas Parade in 2013.

Ora Lee Polk Phillips

Sister – Matriarch – Servant

By Juanita Polk Fleming

As I started to formulate a synopsis of my oldest sister, Ora Lee, I realized I really don't know a lot about her early childhood because she is the second child and I'm the ninth child of ten. There is quite an age difference between the two of us. I was only five years old when she graduated from high school. Thus, I have learned even more from researching my oldest sister.

Ora Lee was born in Water Valley to Willie Winfield and Sallie Ann Winters Polk. As the oldest girl, she quickly learned how to cook and clean and became Mom's helper. As a child she had to work before and after school, feeding cows, hogs, and chickens.

Ora Lee's education started at Bayson Chapel School during the time our parents were sharecropping in the Mudline area. We then moved to Oakland where our parents were still sharecropping, and she attended the Leigh Branch School. After several years we moved back to the Water Valley area, and Ora Lee attended Bayson Chapel School until the eighth grade. Then she went to live with cousins Charlie and Victoria White, who lived closer to Water Valley, so she could attend Davidson High School for ninth grade. It was two miles to the school. When the weather was cold, they would stop about half-way at Uncle Stokes and Aunt Alice McFarland's house to warm up and then continue on.

We then moved to the Upchurch Farm in Coffeeville, still sharecropping. Finally, our family had electricity and our own well for water, which meant that we did not have to carry water from long distances for all the family needs. And we were able to ride the bus to school. Ora Lee attended the tenth through twelfth grades in Coffeeville, graduating from Coffeeville Colored High School in 1954. The principal at that time was Hattie Berry. (Hattie's brother Roosevelt Hervey was the principal at the Davidson Schools in Water Valley and her sister, Elvira Hervey Jackson, was a school principal in the community schools in the county. See Article 41, published April 8, 2020).

After high school Ora Lee attended Mississippi Valley College, now Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Bena. She left college in 1955 to marry Raymond Phillips. At their 25th anniversary the couple started an annual celebration, and for the next 40 years the entire family has gathered at Alma Polk Nicholson's house for the January event. This most recent January marked the couple's 65th wedding anniversary. They are the proud parents of eight children, grandparents to twenty-three and great grandparents to twenty-eight.

Ora Lee's hobbies include cooking and baking for family and friends, especially holidays and birthdays. She loves spending time caring for her flowers, and she especially likes competing with her husband and son Wayne to see who has grown the prettiest flowers each summer.

Ora Lee's diverse work history shows she was never afraid to tackle whatever was assigned to her - except for her very first job at the Valley Motel. She was hired to clean rooms after occupants checked out. "Day one went really well," she recalled. "On day two the owner carried me to the room to be cleaned and she gave me a white towel and told me, 'The person that stayed here last night had a dog, and I need you to get down on the floor and catch and kill all the fleas as they jump up.' When my



The Phillips at a family gathering - (left to right, back row) Maxine, Carl, Roy, Kathleen, Darrell, Annie, Wayne and Sallie. Ora Lee and Raymond are seated.

ride came, I left the white towel on the floor and never went back."

Ora Lee worked for the Water Valley Head Start Pre-School Program from 1968 to 1980. "Mayor Watson Hunt came to me with an application and asked if I would like to work at Head Start," she explained. "I completed the application and was the first person hired as a teacher in the first group of workers. The late Bernice Minor was program director during that time. At the same time, I worked after school and on weekends at Woods & Miller, a department store, operated by Jerry & Sharon Surrette. While working at Head Start, I was up for being promoted to head teacher. For this position I really needed to be able to travel, but I didn't have a driver's license."

Ora Lee's former Head Start co-worker, Juanita Cox (featured in Article 4, September 27, 2018) submitted this account which she labeled "Two Clever Women."

One beautiful day, two women - Ora Lee and Juanita Cox - were chatting at their Head Start jobs, talking about how Ora Lee needed to go to the Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) office to get her driver's license. The problem was that they only had a manual transmission - stick shift type car. Ora Lee knew how to drive but knew nothing about how to change gears with a stick shift. To Ora Lee's surprise, Juanita could shift gears like a pro. They quickly came up with a great idea to get Ora Lee her license.

They set out on the journey to the DMV with Ora Lee in the driver's seat and Juanita shifting the gears. While in route, Ora Lee suddenly thought, "Oh my! I sure hope they don't ask me to drive when I get there." If she was asked to drive, she probably would have run like...well, on with the story. They finally made it to the DMV, Ora Lee went inside and came back out a few minutes later with a brand-new driver's license in her hand and a big smile on her face. Thankfully, she was not asked to test drive!

The two then headed back to work the same way they had gone to the DMV - Ora Lee steering and Juanita shifting the gears! After they had safely returned, they laughed and laughed and still share that laughter today. These two clever women put their heads together to accomplish a goal: allowing Ora to get that job promotion and making a memory that will last a lifetime.

Fortunately, Ora Lee did find a car with an automatic transmission for her work travels! After her promotion to Head Start's lead teacher, Ora Lee wanted to enhance her skills, and in February 1971 she earned a certificate from the Lincoln School of Attendant Nursing, based in California.

Dottie Quaye Chapman Reed, a native of Water Valley, MS, graduated from Davidson High School in 1970 and the University of Mississippi in 1974. The mission of the project is to compile and share information about black women in Yalobusha County who have made an impact on the African American community. Her column appears in *The North Mississippi Herald*.



By Dottie Chapman Reed

The second phase of the project in collaboration with UIM is on going - providing an opportunity for black families in Yalobusha to record their oral histories.

If you are interested in participating, recommending an individual, telling your own story or have comments please contact us at quaye_reed@bellsouth.net - 6788252356 (O) - 6785255408 (C).

All articles are posted at <http://www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com>.

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A young and beautiful Ora Lee in the mid-fifties.

The Bathroom Encounters

The first encounter as told by Ora Lee.

One Monday morning on my way to meet Head Start Director Alice Faye White for a trip to Jackson and a weeklong workshop, a gentleman I knew flagged me down and told me that a new bank was coming to town and the president was looking for an outstanding black person to work in the branch. I told him that I was going away and that I would get back to him when I returned. All week in Jackson, I wrestled with the two positions - whether to stay with Head Start or to apply to work at the new bank. On that Thursday my nerves got the best of me, and I went to the bathroom. I cried and prayed and wondered what to do. Faye realized I had been gone for quite some time and came to check on me, afraid that something was wrong. I finally told her that I was considering applying to work at the new bank. Faye assured me that if that was what I wanted, she would support me, and she encouraged me to apply. When we got back to town, I told the gentleman I was interested in the job and soon I received a call from a woman named Yvonne Vance.

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