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Integration and the High School Years

Life at Central High School was fun. Glenn was involved in HI-Y, FHA and basketball at school. We were all involved in different school activities such as choir, 4-H club, Tri-Hi-Y and youth activities at church. We attended basketball games in surrounding areas. Monroe Walton, our biology teacher at Central, took us on various science fair trips to Florida and Tennessee. Betty and Glenn made the trips to Chattanooga and Look Out Mountain, Tennessee. I went on the science trip to Florida.

Everyone knew my dad, the principal. Needless to say, no one could ask my sisters or me out without the entire Russell family coming along. I remember my sister, Shirley dating a young man in Water Valley, and when he visited, the entire Russell family visited with him. And the same held true when we stopped by his home in Water Valley – the whole Russell family in tow.

In 1969 three students, Earnestine Allen, Ollie Beth Brown and Martree Horton integrated the white school, Coffeeville High. By the fall of 1970, my junior year in high school, the schools in Yalobusha County were forced to integrate. Unlike what happened in Water Valley, the Yalobusha County Seat, the school board decided to separate the students by sex. The girls were assigned to the former white school, Coffeeville High, and the boys were relegated to the former black school, Central High School.

There were no junior or senior proms in the spring of 1971. Many black students refused to attend the first year of integration and stayed home. I had very few friends, aside from Linda Bland, who remains one of my closest friends to this day.

I remember one day when Coffeeville High was being inspected for accreditation. A white woman, Mary Moorman, was the principal at that time. As all the big shots walked through the halls, I saw my dad leading the group around and explaining things. I wondered why he had that task and then realized he was the assistant superintendent!

By the fall of 1971 my senior year the student bodies had been merged but still no prom in the spring of 1972. We were all at Coffeeville High, including students from the Tillatoba and Oakland schools - in fact, the Oakland schools had closed – a sign that marked the creation and expansion of private white academies that cropped up in Yalobusha County and throughout Mississippi.

The Russell Offspring

We Russell siblings all graduated from Alcorn. There was no other choice! My parents and more specifically my mom's sister, Naomi encouraged us to pursue job opportunities in St. Louis, Missouri after we graduated. My mother had three sisters and two brothers and lots of cousins living in the area. Thus, three of us ended up in Missouri.

Shirley, the oldest child earned a bachelor's degree in business education and stayed in Mississippi. She married Julius Oatis, also an Alcorn graduate with a degree in Vocational Agriculture. She taught at Central High the first year of integration and then moved over to Coffeeville High the next year. Shirley taught at Coffeeville High until her untimely death in 2019. She was a well-respected educator and entrepreneur in Yalobusha County. Her children, Lashonda and Julius, still live in the area. Her daughter-in-law Robin teaches sixth grade at Como Middle School in Como, MS. Her grandson, Jarell, is a senior at Mississippi State University in Starkville, Ms., majoring in Mechanical Engineering.

Betty and her husband, James Patty live in St. Louis. James is also an Alcornite who earned his degree in Music. Betty earned her bachelor's degree in business education and a master's degree from Webster University in administrative leadership. Their daughter Melanie is a social worker and is the CEO of a Home Health Care company. Daughter Amanda is an educator and school administrator carrying on the legacy of education.

Glenn earned his degree in Vocational Agriculture and has retired from the Department of Agriculture, also in the St. Louis area.

Glenn and his wife, Regina, are the parents of Glenn Jr. and grandparents of five beautiful children.

I, Barbara Jeffery, earned my bachelor's degree in Home Economics and a masters of education from the University of Mississippi. I taught high school at Hazelwood West High in Hazelwood, MO until I retired in 2009 after 31 years. My husband Jimmie and I have five children and six grandchildren. My children are professionals serving in various roles: an English teacher, a YMCA director, an insurance administrator, two of my sons are ministers and another is in the military. My first granddaughter, Jaylin, recently graduated from Jackson State University. Since retirement I have established a seamstress business and am carrying on my mom's legacy as a seamstress.

As I look back, I thank God for my parents and family and the values and morals they instilled in each of us.

The Integration Of Coffeeville High School

By Ollie Beth (Brown) Whiting

Before I get into the details of the actual integration, I feel compelled to give a little background as to what led to my decision to attend the all-white Coffeeville High School.

I was born and reared in a small farming town in Mississippi called Oakland. My parents were Stephen and Lillie Holman Brown, who together had eight children, of which I am the youngest. Most Black families were on the lower income realm and the majority lived on the white man's land. I can only recall five Black families who actually owned their own land in Oakland during that period. My father was blessed to own his land, which was one of the reasons he became a key plaintiff in the lawsuits in 1969 thru 1973 against Coffeeville Consolidated School District. Owning your own land was so important then, because those who owned their land felt more empowered and more willing to voice their opinion. We had three schools that served the Oakland area - the all-black School (Walker High School), and two white schools, Oakland Elementary School and Oakland High School. Walker High School housed all grades from kindergarten thru 12th grade and at one point was a very thriving school with extracurricular activities, a fairly good basketball program, a shop for boys to learn a trade and Home Economics for the young ladies. There were also debate teams and other clubs where students could compete against other All Black schools.

I mentioned that Walker High "was" in its earlier days a thriving school. However, the school was controlled by a white school board in Oakland, so the Black parents really had no input into the overall operation of the school. In other words, the money that was allocated to the school was budgeted and distributed by the local authorities and the state. As a young girl I often heard my father, Stephen, speak of the school and lack of control by Black parents. Thus, over the years I observed how the school had begun to academically decline and how the building itself was deteriorating. The one clear thing to me was the textbooks that we were issued had almost always been used by others (whose names I did not recognize) and the majority were not in the best condition. Getting a brand-new textbook was a treat for us.

An Unusual Decision

I had attended Walker High since kindergarten. It was April of 1969 when I took a hard look at our school - observing the administrators, teachers, condition of the classrooms, Biology Lab (where nothing worked anymore), Home Economics Classroom, the Shop, and the outside trailers that housed the broken typewriters). Each day I would go to school and basically conduct an assessment for myself of our school. I was not pleased but didn't know what could be done other than occasionally mentioning things I observed to my parents.

Beginning in 1965 Freedom of Choice, or Free Transfer Plan, were two of a number of plans developed in the United States aimed at the integration of schools in states that had segregated educational systems. Each year the teachers distributed these forms for students and their parents to complete and return to school. In April 1969 when the teachers informed us that we would be receiving The Freedom of Choice forms, I started thinking about what I would do. On the day the forms were distributed we were told to complete them in class. I told a classmate, Earnestine Allen, that I was going to select the white school (Coffeeville High). At first, she thought I was joking until she saw me fill out my form. Word quickly spread throughout the class, and she and several more students decided to do the same. I believe it was 11 of us in all. The look on the teacher's face was priceless as he took the forms up and reviewed them. Of course, he wanted to know if we knew what we were doing or had done. I could not speak for the other students, but I definitely knew what I was doing, even without discussing it with my parents. To my surprise my parents supported my decision when I told them that night and stated "IF you want to go you can go." **God leadeth me.**

Oakland High School To Coffeeville High - How We Got To This Point

Fall of 1968: Talk of integration floated all over the county and state. In order to prevent (or so they thought) integration from happening in Oakland and Coffeeville, the two school systems decided to combine the All-White Oakland High school with the All-White Coffeeville High, later to become The Coffeeville Consolidated District. We soon surmised this was done to prevent the mixing of the races (white girls and Black boys.) I understand some white parents in Oakland did not agree with combining the schools but did not object. The Coffeeville students and parents were opposed to Oakland sending their children there, but they too wanted to prevent integrating their school and went along with the plan. Oakland High School was completely dissolved into the Coffeeville School System. Bussing began in Oakland, 20 miles to school in the mornings and 20 miles back to Oakland in the evening which STILL exists to this day.

The Unsolicited Summer Visits Of 1969

Summer of 1969 was revealing as various white men of Oakland paid visits to homes of the 11 Black students who had signed the forms to attend the all-white Coffeeville High, my home included. I remember at least three visits by different white men to speak with my daddy. But daddy would not change his mind. He and my mom, Lillie, stood by my decision, and my daddy said to me at one point, "You may be going by yourself" because he was hearing some parents had signed another Freedom of Choice form for their child



Ollie Beth Whiting

to return to Walker High. The only other student I knew for sure who was going was Earnestine Allen. Her mother assured my dad Earnestine was definitely going IF I was going. However, in the end only three out of the 11 of us who signed up showed up to board the bus to Coffeeville High in the fall of 1969: Earnestine Allen, Martree Horton and I.

The Journey

The system was designed to transport students from their respective bus route to the former Oakland High School. Then one bus from Oakland would transport all the high school students over to Coffeeville High and back each day. My house was about a mile from Highway 51 so I had to either walk to catch the bus or my daddy sometimes would drive me to Highway 51 to catch the bus every morning and evening or sometimes my mother, who worked at Walker High School's cafeteria, would wait on me in the evenings. Some evenings I would walk home alone through the woods. Whew! **God kept me.**

The first day I caught the bus amidst stares and strange looks, but nobody said anything to me. The bus driver was the pastor of the local Baptist church in Oakland. Being brought up in the Baptist church and faith I felt somewhat safe having him as my bus driver, but little did I know what was ahead for me as time went on. The three of us rode different buses to Oakland High School where we would catch the bus to Coffeeville. What a relief to see Earnestine and Martree that morning, but we could not believe we were the only ones enrolling. Initially we thought some of the others would enroll after they realized we did, but that never happened.

The Integration

First day of school: We sat together on a mostly quiet bus full of students. I think we sat in the second or third seat, which became "our" seat for the rest of the school year. The ride was uneventful unlike what we had heard on the news about the integration of other southern schools - no police escorts, hecklers, rock throwing, virtually nothing. Upon our arrival a few whites stood and stared. The principal and assistant principal were waiting as we departed the bus. I kept waiting for something to be thrown or hecklers, but we were escorted peacefully into the building to complete registration and then escorted to our first period class. We were, however, met with more stares and hateful looks from students.

We had some laughable moments of students walking into things staring at us and some would even turn their backs and walk sideways facing the walls in the halls to keep from looking at us. We usually had the stairs to ourselves "initially" as they would not walk up or down the stairs at the same time. When we went to the bathroom the girls would scurry out real fast, sometimes without using the bathroom. We mostly sat together in our classes and anywhere we went. The assistant principal, Mary Moorman, did escort us to our classes until we knew our way around. As we got acclimated and were allowed to go to classes on our own some students would turn and go in the opposite direction when they saw us coming. (We stuck together for sure - there were 1,000 of them to the three of us.) Occasionally a spit ball or pencil would be thrown our way in the hallway but nothing major happened at school.

Most of the teachers tried to be nice, even though we could see the prejudice in their faces. A few students eventually started to speak but were incredibly careful to not get too friendly since they wanted to stay in with their friends. I believe the fact that we soon showed the entire school that we were smart, intelligent, and friendly young ladies helped smooth things out a lot for us, with the teachers especially. One teacher in particular, Mrs. Pace, who taught Geometry took interest in us right away and would seemingly snap on some of the white students who were not as smart as us and not scoring as high as we did on her exams. I soon recognized I had not been taught enough Algebra to handle Geometry so that class proved really, really hard for me. I made my first "C" in all of my years in school that first semester, but with Mrs. Pace's tutorials, along with my friend Earnestine who seemingly understood the concepts better, I was able to pull a "B" the second semester. Surprisingly, a couple

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Ollie Beth Whiting pictured in 1971 as a student.