

The Russells

Coffeeville Early Black Educators

In my research and conversations to compile the 45 articles now featured in my book, *Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha - Their stories and their contributions to a Mississippi Community*, I have discovered that obituaries are often the best and - most of the time - the only source of information about one's life. This is particularly true of blacks born before the mid 1900s. Generally, only the famous are prone to write an autobiography or spark enough interest for a biography. This makes it even more critical that we research and know our family histories and document our life stories. We must take advantage of the available tools and opportunities to find our roots and leave a record and legacy for generations to come.

Fortunately, I continue to find information that reflects the reality of life for blacks in America in the early 1900s such as this from the May 2nd, 2009 obituary of Rosie Allean Russell, who was born in 1923. "During a time when blacks were denied equality and hindered from education, her parents placed high value on education and made enormous sacrifices to ensure that their children received the best possible education." Thank God for parents like hers.

After completing her early education in the Coffeeville Mississippi Colored School District in Yalobusha County, Allean - as she was known - attended Alabama State College in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1947 she married George William Russell, and together they raised four children. Mr. Russell served as the principal of Central, the black high school in Coffeeville and Allean worked for the school system as school secretary for 23 years. But she did much more. She was a volunteer for the American Cancer Society, a Heroine of Jericho, an honor given by the Royal Arch Masons, a member of the Order of Eastern Star and an accomplished seamstress. An active member of Zion Grove Missionary Baptist Church, she was a soloist and president of the Mount Moriah Baptist Association choir.

Allean's life mirrored that of her husband's - both were community activists. Before working at the school, Allean integrated the Kellwood Manufacturing Plant, which opened the door for other blacks. George was a deacon, a Sunday School teacher, a Master Mason, and like his wife, a member of the Heroines of Jericho and much more. He was a World War II veteran who traveled overseas and then served as an Army recruiting officer. George earned his Bachelor of Science Degree from Alcorn State University and a Master of Education Degree from Tuskegee University in Alabama. He worked as a Newton County Agent in Decatur, MS before relocating to Coffeeville, where he began a 36-year career in education. He served as the principal of Central High School for 15 years from 1955 to 1971 while still finding time to teach veterans Vocational Agriculture.

Growing up in Water Valley I knew the Russell children and their father from school and a few church activities. I had cousins who attended school in Oakland, MS, and I knew of Mr. Jimmy D. Walker, who was the principal of the black school on that end of the county. Having written about Professor E. C. Davidson and his role in educating black children in Water Valley, I became curious about George Russell. I had heard over the years and recently that when the courts forced Mississippi to integrate the public schools ASAP, the Oakland schools were combined with the Coffeeville schools. At some point, Mr. Russell was appointed assistant superintendent of the Coffeeville, Oakland and Tillatoba schools until his retirement in 1972. He passed away on November 17th, 1984 just a few weeks shy of his 78th birthday.

Yearning to know more about how this all transpired, I began my quest to connect with the Russell siblings to discover more about their parents and what they remembered about the integration of the schools and their childhood in the segregated south.

I remembered I was given Shirley Oatis' name in March, 2019 as an outstanding woman who should be featured in my newspaper column. A few days later Shirley passed away. I did not follow up, wanting to give the family time to grieve. In July 2020, as I was deciding to close out my column after two years, Shirley Oatis crossed my mind, and I decided to try the numbers I had for her two children. It took a while to reach her son, Julius, and it was in my conversation with him that I learned his mother was one of George and Allean Russell's three daughters.

By December 2020, I had spoken to the youngest Russell daughter, Barbara Jeffery, and she agreed to share what it was like growing up in the Russell family in Coffeeville in Yalobusha County during the sixties and seventies. During this process the name Ollie Beth Brown came up. I knew that Beth was involved in integrating Coffeeville High, and there was mention of a lawsuit. Beth, now Ollie Beth Whitling, lives in Georgia. She has agreed at last to share in writing her experience as one of the three black students who integrated Coffeeville High School. Her father and family were intimately involved in the process and should be recognized for their determination and bravery during a very volatile time in Mississippi. The total detriment, sacrifices, and threats to the core of the black families and the black communities in Yalobusha County will never be known. We continue to share these stories in hopes of encouraging healing, reparations and forgiveness.

One of my friends who has visited Yalobusha County and read my articles says that these black Mississippians are the hardest working and strongest people she has ever seen. I am inclined to agree. With each story another unfolds.

No doubt George and Allean Russell, the Browns, the Walkers and many other early black leaders influenced many lives and the lives of their own children and grandchildren. Will these legacies live on?



Allean and George Russell

The Russell Family Remembered

By Barbara Jeffery

My father, George William Russell, was born two days before Christmas in 1906. His parents, Millard and Melvina Bailey Russell, had three other boys and a girl. The boys were Prentiss, Gilbert, Matthew and the girl, Mattie Bernice. Mattie Bernice and Matthew were twins. After Dad received his Bachelor of Science degree from Alcorn State University, located in Lorman, MS, he earned his Master of Arts in Education degree from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, now known as Tuskegee University.

My father's professional career and volunteer experience included serving as a Sunday school teacher, a church Deacon, and a Newton County Agent in his hometown of Decatur, MS. He was an officer in the army, serving during World War II, and completed a tour overseas. Dad was an Army Recruiter, and after he left the military, he taught veterans vocational agriculture classes for several years.

My mother, Rosie Allean Bailey Russell, was born June 20, 1923 in Coffeeville, MS. Her parents were Virginia Kimble Scurlock and Major Scurlock. She was number six of 10 siblings, four sisters: Mary, Willie Ruth, Naomi, Leona and five brothers, Joseph, Benjamin, Daniel, Vernon, Major, Jr. - all deceased. She received her formal education in the Coffeeville School District and attended Alabama State College. On March 3, 1947 she married George William Russell.

In her first job she became the first black woman to work at the Kellwood Clothing Manufacturing Plant in Coffeeville. Once she broke the color barrier, set reasonable production goals and more black women were hired, she moved on, joining the school system as a secretary to my father. He had taught for a few years before his promotion to principal of the black schools, Central High School in particular. Mom was also active in the commu-



The Russell sisters, left to right, Barbara, Betty and Shirley

Written by Dottie Chapman Reed, The Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County column ended in July, 2020 with the promise of occasional articles. The mission of the project was to compile and share information about black women of Yalobusha County who made an impact on the African American community. All of the previous articles are published in Reed's book, *Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: Their stories and their contributions to a Mississippi Community*, available for sale at Violet Valley Books in Water Valley, Square Books in Oxford and online at www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com.

Reed is a native of Water Valley. She graduated from Davidson High School in 1970 and the University of Mississippi in 1974. She can be reached at quaye_reed@bellsouth.net.

www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com



By Dottie Chapman Reed

nity, a member of Zion Grove Missionary Baptist Church and the Mount Moriah Baptist Association. She was a soloist and president of the association choir.

My parents placed high values on education and made enormous sacrifices to ensure that all four children received the best possible education. Education was in my family's blood. My grandmother, Melvina Bailey, taught school in Mount Bayou, MS, an all-black town. My granddad, Millard Russell, taught in Decatur and became an assistant principal.

Life in the Russell Household

Growing up in Coffeeville, we were very sheltered. There were three girls and one boy, my sisters, Shirley and Betty and my brother, Glenn. We were never allowed to spend the night at anyone's house - not even relatives or friends. Now that I am older, I understand why. In my child's eye, we did not experience a lot of racism, but of course it was in full force as we survived the turbulent sixties and emerged into the uncertain seventies. When we went to town, we entered the stores from

the back, and I being only five or six did not think anything of it at the time. We were always with one of our parents when we were young and out in public.

We were in church some place every Sunday. At that time black churches in our area met only once a month so we visited different congregations, many of them members of the Mount Moriah Baptist Association. My father's church held services on the third Sunday of the month and so did Zion Grove Baptist, my mother's church. Glenn would often join my dad at his church.

On Sunday evenings, we would visit my mother's cousin, Benjamin Scurlock, who lived in Tillatoba. Other than that, we were home. Once a month we went

to my dad's homeplace to check on his 237 acres of land in Decatur. When we went my mother would have to bring food and purchase groceries to prepare our meals while we were there.

Betty and Shirley took piano lessons from Mrs. Edith Wilson Boyd, who lived in Water Valley and taught business education at Davidson High, the black high school. When it was my and Glenn's turn for piano lessons, Ms. Boyd suffered a serious health issue that forced her to stop teaching. She was a great role model, very loved and highly respected.

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George William Russell standing in front of the school.