



Stephen and Lillie Holman Brown had eight children, including Ollie Beth (Brown) Whiting.

of white girls who were really smart started to help us with our homework too. I also struggled with English as I was introduced to concepts that I had not been taught such as diagramming sentences and the parts of speech. I give all credit to my Literature and English teacher for teaching me how to write. Thank God my mom had an old English Grammar book at home that I used as my tutorial and was able to help Martree and Earnestine with homework too. I made “A’s” in English and Literature. **God prepared a table before me in the presence of mine enemies!**

Although life was interesting to us as students (we were isolated in areas such as the cafeteria, library, etc.) but no one really bothered us in a bad way at school. The bus rides in the evening were something else though. On the way back to Oakland that 20-mile ride seemed much longer as we had different objects thrown towards us constantly. I say “towards us” because by the grace of God we were never hit. The worst I remember were the smoke bombs. It was a miracle they would always land at our feet, in the aisle or at the seat in front of us. The taunting continued until one evening one of the smoke bombs landed in the lap of the daughter of one of the wealthiest white men in Oakland. From that day forward nothing was ever thrown or said to us on that bus. **God protected me!**

I wish I could say the same for my bus rides home by myself. Remember the Baptist preacher that I thought was a safety net on my bus. It turned out to be just the opposite. The Baptist minister and this little six or seven-year old boy would taunt me every day by making racial jokes and name calling. Of course, it was entertaining to the other white kids who would just laugh at their antics. It became a daily routine. I heard the “N” word so many times, more times I care to count. I did a lot of praying on my way home every day and tried to tune them out. However, before the school year ended, the minister became ill and his son, a classmate, took over his route. His son didn’t allow that kid to cut up and clown on the bus and use racial epithets. **God delivered me!**

The Proposed Integration Plan

In 1969 the U.S. attorney general sought to enjoin the Coffeeville School authorities from continuing to operate a dual school system. By March 1970, Integration was now the law of the land. What did the Coffeeville Consolidated School District propose to the courts? On January 29, 1970, the school district submitted a proposed plan of student desegregation on the basis of separate schools for boys and girls in the Coffeeville and Oakland attendance zones, effective September 1970. On March 12, 1970, THE U.S. District Court, over THE GOVERNMENT’S OBJECTIONS, approved a school board plan of student desegregation, in which separate schools for boys and girls would be operated in the Coffeeville and Oakland attendance zones. **This order was signed on September 12, 1970, United States of America, Plaintiff v. Coffeeville Consolidated School District, ET AL, Defendants. Case No. WC 6957-K.** Initially their proposal was to keep four schools open (the all-black Walker High, the all-white Oakland High, the all-black Central High School in Coffeeville and the all-white Coffeeville High) but some schools would offer classes to same sex students only, starting Fall September 1970. The proposal was: Operate a dual school system regardless of race in the following manner:

a. All girls residing in the Oakland District (prior to the consolidation of the Oakland and Coffeeville School Districts) in grades 1 through 9 would attend the Oakland Attendance Center, formerly the all-white Oakland Elementary School.

b. All boys residing in the Oakland District (prior to the consolidation of the Oakland and Coffeeville School Districts) in grades 1 through 9 would attend the Walker Attendance Center, formerly the all-black Walker High School.

c. All girls residing in the Coffeeville School District (prior to the consolidation of the Oakland and Coffeeville School Districts) in grades 1 through 9 would attend the Coffeeville Attendance Center, formerly the all-white Coffeeville High School.

d. All boys residing in the Coffeeville School District (prior to the consolidation of the Oakland and Coffeeville School Districts) in grades 1 through 9 would attend the Central Attendance Center, formerly the all-black Central High School.

e. All girls enrolled in grades 10-12 regardless of their

place of residence within the school district would attend the Coffeeville Attendance Center, formerly the all-white Coffeeville High School.

f. All boys enrolled in grades 10-12 regardless of their place of residence within the school district would attend the Central Attendance Center, formerly the all-black Coffeeville High School.

g. The principals, teachers, teacher aides and other staff who work directly with children would be assigned in a manner to ensure each faculty would have an equal number of white and black teachers.

h. Other Staff members working directly with children were to be hired, assigned, promoted, dismissed, etc. without regard to race, color, or national origin.

i. In the case of principals, teachers, teacher-aides, or other professional staff whose employment results in a dismissal due to the consolidation, it shall be done the basis of objective and reasonable nondiscriminatory standards.

The Lawsuit

Needless to say, the black parents of Oakland and Coffeeville opposed the separation of boys and girls. During the first semester (Fall 1970) and continuing into the second semester of the 1970-71 school year, a substantial number of black students boycotted the schools; and certain members of the black community organized marches and boycotted Coffeeville merchants to publicize their grievances of racial discrimination. This resulted in the filing of a follow-up lawsuit. My father, along with Mr. Tom Caldwell, another resident of Oakland, and a couple of parents in Coffeeville drafted a petition that was signed by a large percentage of parents on behalf of their children. But not all parents would sign. Some were afraid of retaliation mainly because of the person whose land they lived on or for whom they worked. Obviously, some of the defendants named in the lawsuit were indeed among the wealthier whites and larger white landowners in Oakland and Coffeeville.

The Fall Of 1970

School began with girls and boys separated as “they” had planned. There was lots of white flight to private schools. Some of the white teachers also left and went to teach at private schools and some just went ahead and retired. Buses rolled but many were almost empty because Black parents were angry and refused to send their children to school – not a good move for some of our kids who really fell behind and could not catch up. My father, the attorneys and a few other parents tried to convince parents to go ahead and let their children start to school because the lawsuit was pending, and the attorneys believed the previous lawsuit (separation by sexes) would be overturned. Still many parents would not enroll their children in school. Because the lawsuit wasn’t heard until October 9, 1970, many Black students did not enroll in school until mid to late October. Some even waited until January 1971 to start. Unfortunately, many of the Black students in our senior class who were from Oakland and Coffeeville did not graduate in May 1971 – probably about half of the Blacks at least. Several went to summer school to finish. Others received GEDs later, and some never finished.

The Ruling

The District Court struck down the previous lawsuit basically stating the separation by gender was illegal and a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. **(The United States District Court Northern District of Mississippi Case No. WC 7047-K).** When hundreds of students suddenly flooded the schools, a good deal of drama as well as tension and resentment ensued between those students whose parents held them out and those of us who had started at the beginning of the semester. Merging four high schools all at one time indeed proved to be disastrous. I must say as I look back on my senior year, I remember the chaos and disruption more than anything pleasant. I felt sorry for the students who were so behind academically. Many did not attend classes with the rest of us but had to sit in the library to be taught and finish their course work. You could see how disappointed some students were at being behind in their classes. A few became discouraged and dropped out. We missed out on so

Final Thoughts

It was with much humility that I researched the Russell Family and Beth Whiting’s experience integrating Coffeeville High School. When I try to remember what I knew of this moment, I realize that I heard very little about what was going on outside of Water Valley, my hometown, and most of that was by word of mouth. No one in the seventies had personal computers. Those who had telephones and televisions considered them a treat. I was a freshman in college when the Coffeeville and Oakland schools were finally integrated and was focused on my own challenges. As previously reported in three articles, integration in Water Valley began in 1966 and went what was considered smoothly.

Annette Hervey, one of the three girls who integrated Water Valley High, wrote about her experience in a November 29, 2018 article, *Mother and Daughter Played Key Roles in the Integration of Water Valley High in 1966*. What was so different about Coffeeville and Oakland that left many black students crippled by the racism that thrived there? On February 7, 2019 we featured an article from Camille Fly Dautrich, who wrote about the white experience in the first fully integrated Water Valley High Class of 1971, *Segregation Side Effects*. Then, Danita Hall responded with the other side of the story in *My Experience as a Member of the WVHS Class of 1971* on July 11, 2019.

Any conflicts over integration in Water Valley were mild in comparison to what happened in Coffeeville and Oakland, neither very far away from the county seat. Oakland is only seven miles from Water Valley, Oakland 20 miles. And the distance between Oakland and Coffeeville is 15 miles. I knew that my late sister, Alma Faye Chapman Caldwell, and several other teachers

much that year – no proms or many other social activities.

It’s Not Over Yet – Teacher Dismissal Lawsuit

Even though the integration of The Coffeeville Consolidated School District was finally resolved another problem erupted for the 1971-1972 school year over the failure to renew six Black teachers’ contracts (Alma Faye Chapman, Evelyn R. Miller, Robert Bennett, William Shelton, Martha Faye Bolton and James Lewis). Again, my daddy was asked to be the plaintiff in yet another lawsuit to try and get these teachers reinstated and their back pay. **(United States v. Coffeeville Consolidated School Dist., 365 F. Supp. 990 (N.D. Miss. 1973; Nos. WC 69-47-K, WC 70-47- K).** All of them had been employed in the formerly all-black school in Coffeeville except Martha Faye Bolton, who worked at the Oakland Elementary School. The court ruled in favor of Alma Faye Chapman, Evelyn R. Miller, Robert Bennett and James Lewis and ordered their reinstatement and ordered back pay. The court findings were based on the mandate in the previous lawsuit that “if any employment results in a dismissal due to the consolidation, the dismissal would be done on the basis of objective and reasonable nondiscriminatory standards”. **(Case No. WC 6957-K)** William Shelton and Martha Faye Bolton were not reinstated. The court found their dismissal was justified based on their employment history and misconduct within the school system and not based on discriminatory standards. **God is good to those whose hope is in Him.**

The Blessing And Curse Of Integration

Overall, the integration of Coffeeville High School did happen without a lot of publicity that some other school systems encountered. I think that was the good part. My only wish was for the two school systems to have remained separate and each worked through their own set of problems. I do believe combining all the schools created more of a headache than the actual act of integration itself. I know a lot of students were left with hurt and angry feelings from the chaos. I personally felt the sting of resentment from some of the Blacks in Oakland and Coffeeville. Why? Some people felt if the three of us had not signed up to go “over” there (in the first place) things would have been different but, in reality, the plans had already been put into motion. **Lean not unto thou own understanding. God Always Has A Plan!**

As for me personally, I graduated number four in my senior class of 1971 (a class with over 200 students, although some did not get to walk across that stage) – not bad for a poor Black girl who just wanted a good education. Academically, I was prepared for college because of the instructions I received my junior and senior years at Coffeeville High. I tried to absorb every ounce of education I thought I had missed in those 10 years at Walker High. And it was a lot indeed. However, I did not struggle with a lot of my classes at Northwest MS Junior College and later at the University of Mississippi, unlike some students. The racism faced at Coffeeville High gave me a glimpse of real life. I also was better prepared for the “only one” syndrome that comes with being at a predominately white college and in corporate America. **Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me always!**

I have often been asked by different people who heard my story IF I would do it again. My answer has always been: ABSOLUTELY! I believe I was, along with Earnestine and Martree, a vessel that God had destined to prepare the way for the other Black students and to forge open the doors of acceptance and tolerance at Coffeeville High and within the black and white communities. From observing many of the white students it was obvious they had never interacted with Blacks before. Some of the myths that they had been taught were debunked by us being there. You could see the change in some of them when they realized we were intelligent and yes, smarter than a lot of them. I also know the experience at Coffeeville High was just a test, preparing me for my future. **For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11**

had not been rehired and had to take legal action to get their jobs back. I did not know the level of racism they were dealing with until I read the *Ollie Beth Brown* story. Mitchell Payne, a Louisville, KY retired attorney and college administrator, when hearing Ollie’s story, said that her Coffeeville story is more common than many realize. Could we go from county to county or town to town in most southern states and find the same level of racism?

Ollie Beth Brown Whiting went on to obtain her bachelor’s degree in accounting from the University of Mississippi and a master’s in business management from the University of Arkansas. Her career in cost accounting included stints with Dobbs Life Saver, Incorporated, Kimberly Clark and Litton Microwave, Incorporated. She obtained an Instructional Design Technology Certificate from the University of Georgia in 2002. Before retiring she taught accounting classes at Kennesaw State University in the Atlanta area. She and her husband, John, a retired newspaper journalist, moved to Atlanta in 1986. Their son, Dedrick is a high school math teacher, basketball coach and business owner in Grayson, GA and daughter, Lakeisha, is a global marketing manager with Caterpillar in Peoria, Illinois.

How gratifying to publish their stories. Thanks to Ollie Beth Whiting and Barbara Russell Jeffery, just two more outstanding black women of Yalobusha.

Stay tuned for more Yalobusha County stories. We are working on an article about the role played by Jimmy D. Walker, who was the principal of the Oakland Black schools when they merged with Coffeeville High. If you have comments or information to share about this time period let me know.