

Don't Let The Rocks Cry Out For You

Do You Have A Story About Families Who Lived In the 'Bottom?'

The brutal murder of Emmett Till remains a part of the American story nearly 70 years after the teenager's death. It is among the most violent touchstones among many in Mississippi's checkered history. Virtually every year or two artists from various mediums address the tragedy.

In March New York's John Jay College collaborated with Opera Noire International and the Harlem Chamber Players to present "Emmett Till: A New American Opera." Mary Watkins, a black woman, composed the music. Tania Leon, another black woman, conducted the orchestra. Clare Coss, a white woman, wrote the libretto and included a new white character who in her words "represents white people who care but who fail to speak or act in the face of racial injustice." Coss said on her website that the play was inspired by "a spiritual mandate" to address the habit of White silence.

"I approached writing about Emmett Till through my conviction that this tragedy is shared in the way the tragic history of our country is shared," she said. "I mean, White people as perpetrators and witnesses of White supremacy have a stake in this story. Everyone has a stake in this story. It's an American story, and it's about the moral failure of the White community."

Coss' participation sparked debate and controversy about who can - perhaps should - tell what

stories. One of the most trenchant arguments came from the Black Opera Association, which noted, as Michael Andor Brodeur wrote in The Washington Post, "the opera's seeming alignment with an unfortunate trend in contemporary opera that treats Black suffering as a prerequisite to getting Black stories onstage."

"Most operatic creators are White/non-Black," BOA Leadership Council member James Dargan told Brodeur, "and therefore, have no lived experience with Blackness, outside of widely publicized trauma. Therefore, when they write us, they write us in pain, because that's what they are told and taught." BOA member soprano Raehann Bryce-Davis concurred: "Even the biggest allies often write about us with a sense of pity or righteous indignation. But it's not how we necessarily think about ourselves. We know the full breadth of our own experience, and it includes the full gamut of the human experience: joy, sadness, laughter, tears, victory, defeat, love and pain."

Reading about the new Emmett Till opera prompted me to think about the Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County project - now in its fourth year - and the theme I chose: "We are telling our own stories."

The discussion about the Emmett Till opera confirms the importance of accurate portrayals of our lives, past and present, and the

authenticity that we can birth by telling our stories ourselves. We can show that our lives are not all about pain and struggles, but of pride, dignity and perseverance - of strength, accomplishments and legacy. We owe it to our ancestors to tell it and to tell it straight.

Yalobusha County is just as interesting as the sound and spelling of its name and its untold Black history is even more intriguing. The county borders Tallahatchie County, where Emmett Till was lynched in 1955 and Lafayette County where two men were killed during the 1962 riot at Ole Miss. On September 17, 2021 Lafayette County erected a marker outside the county courthouse in Oxford commemorating the lynching of seven black men who were murdered by white mobs between 1885 and 1935. It stands near a statue that honors Confederate soldiers. It is the first marker documenting racial terror violence against Black people to be erected at a courthouse in Mississippi.

Many events over the years have affected the lives of Black Yalobusha residents, some good and some bad - some very good and some very bad. This column seeks to illuminate that history to reflect the "full gamut" of Black life," as Bryce-Davis, the soprano put it.

Growing up in Yalobusha County I often heard people speak of the Bottom. I had no idea what or where it was specifically. I believe

that my parents lived in the Bottom. I have shared a picture in this column of my mother, father and two sisters standing in front of a house that was taken before my brother was born in 1948, which I believe was in the Bottom.

I heard of it more recently in an oral interview with Mr. Luther Folsom, Sr. who spoke about his family being displaced from the Bottom and moving to the other side of town. They moved so far out from Water Valley - closer to the Panola County line - that he and his siblings had no transportation to school. They ended up missing three years of their education, and when they did return, the teachers at Davidson Elementary put them in the grades they thought best based on their size or age. The Folsom interview, conducted by UM graduate students, is available at www.egrove.olemiss.edu.

Even more recently in the March 31st article in this column, Mr. Percy Haywood, Jr. described the unity of the several Black families who lived in the Bottom. The area he spoke about was the McFarland Farm, a multi-family operation consisting of the Buford, Toliver, Jenkins, Murray, Wilbur Morgan, and Haywood families. "The construction of the Enid Reservoir changed everything," he said. "It consumed much of the fertile soil - considered some of



By Dottie Chapman Reed

Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. She published a series of articles in the North Mississippi Herald from August, 2018, through July, 2020, sharing the stories of unsung black women who made or are making a difference in Yalobusha County. This is part two of the project which features black men. Reed can be reached at (678) 825-2356 or reed2318@bellsouth.net

www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com

the most productive in the county - that produced the crops for these families. We all dispersed as the reservoir was created."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Vicksburg District website describes the effect in plain language as follows:

Prior to the construction of Enid Dam many families had to pack up their possessions and move from their farms along the Yocona River Bottom. In many cases these farms had been in their families for generations, and life as they had known it drastically changed. It was very difficult for these families because they could not envision the project or the many future benefits that would result from the construction of the dam. Making way for progress left many settlers with mixed emotions about flood control and the Federal government.

If you have stories or memories of life and the families who lived in the Bottom, I would love to

record your story. Let me hear from you. Was any compensation or assistance given to these families, I wonder? I also want to continue the column's focus on Black men who are making or have made a positive impact on the Yalobusha community. Give me a call and we will work it out. We will write it and edit for you. Nothing will be printed without your permission and approval. We are still writing about women as well.

We mustn't let social media be our main source of communication and information. Nor should we let obituaries be the last word - your story maybe the one to turn a life around. Or think of this way, in the words of Singleton McAlister, vice chair of the National Women's History Museum: "If you don't tell your history, your history dies."

(Luke 19 Verse 40: "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." NIV)

The Yalo-Ribbon Festival Continues

Due to inclement weather, portions of the Yalo-Ribbon Festival in Oakland were rescheduled. The Arts & Crafts Town Market and the Easter Egg Hunt, now named the Oakland Treasure Hunt, are scheduled Saturday, April 30. An additional

event will include a tricycle and bicycle parade at noon. And graduates in the Oakland area will be recognized after the parade.

Vendors in the Arts & Crafts Town Market as well as Food Trucks will operate from 9:30 a.m. until 2 p.m. at the Oakland

Walking Track and Park off Walnut Street. The Treasure Hunt will be at the Oakland Baptist Church at 11 a.m. on Hickory Street, adjacent to the Walking Track & Park. There will be also be a bounce house and other fun games for children.

OBITUARIES

Bill Loyd Shaw



COFFEEVILLE - Bill Loyd Shaw, 63, of Coffeeville, passed away Tuesday, April 12, 2022 at his residence. Born September 18, 1958, he was a son of the late Bill and Lucy Ann Farmer Shaw

Bill Loyd worked as a carpenter most of his working life and honorably served our country in the US Navy. He was an avid outdoorsman who enjoyed fishing at every opportunity. He also possessed a green thumb and enjoyed growing a vegetable garden every year. A devoted Christian, Bill Loyd was a Presbyterian and loved the Lord with all of his heart. While his passing leaves a hole in the hearts of those that knew and loved him, we find comfort in knowing he is at peace and free of pain and sickness. This is not goodbye, but "see you later."

Memorial service plans are private. Arrangements were entrusted to McKibben and Guinn Funeral Service.

Those left to cherish his memory include his wife, Brenda Shaw of Coffeeville; a daughter, Kristy Ingram (Michael) of Coffeeville; three sons, Jeramy Mooney (Alisha) of Grenada, Jason Mooney (Amanda) of Grenada and Adam Boyle (Candy) of Water Valley; a sister, Shula Shaw Cangelosi (Russ) of Memphis; 16 grandchildren, Ashton, Wesley, Cody, Haydn, Hunt, Kylee, Halston, Jasee, Jewels, Wyatt, Nolan, Jon Waylin, Reed, Kara, Carson and Case; and four great-grandchildren, Lore-

lei, Jaimsey, Logan and Callie.

He was preceded in death by his parents. In lieu of flowers memorials may be made to St. Jude's.

Darnell Whitten



CHARLESTON - Darnell Mills Whitten, age 95, passed away Saturday morning at Yalobusha Nursing Home in Water Valley.

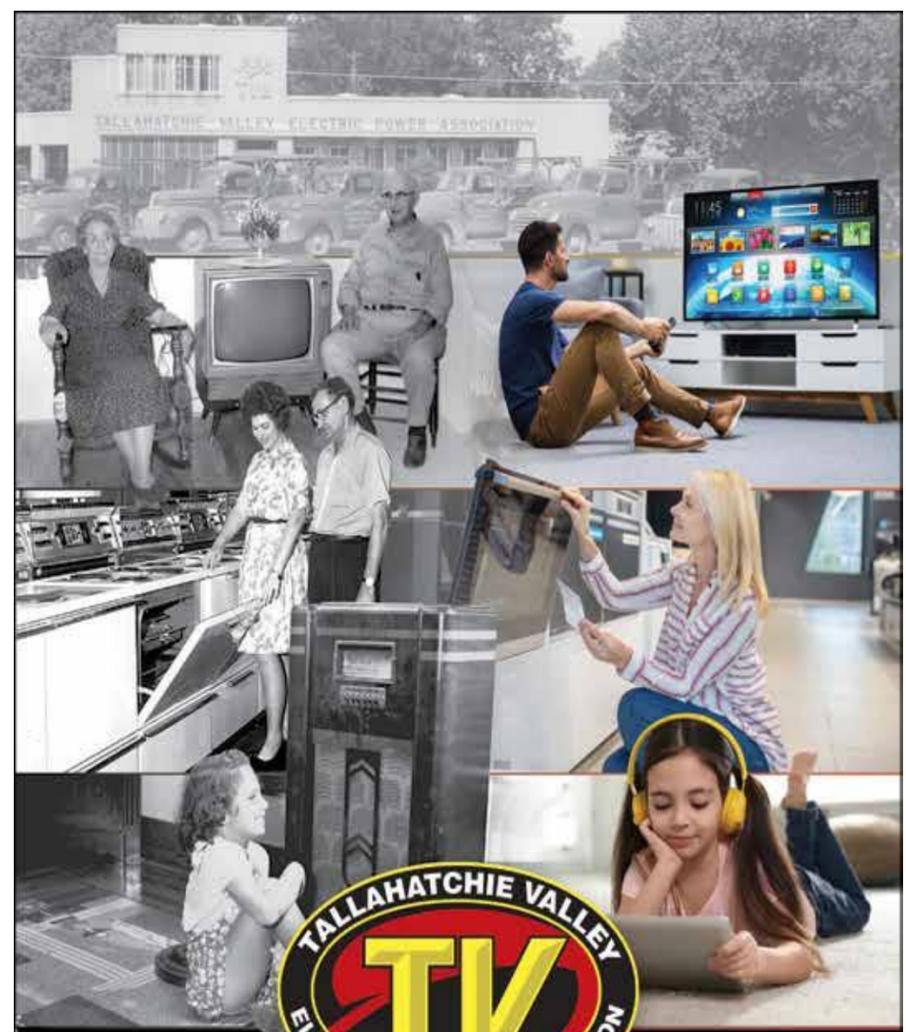
Funeral services were 11 a.m. Tuesday, April 19, at Newsom Funeral Home Chapel in Charleston with interment following in Bethel Cemetery.

Darnell was a charter member of Faith Baptist Church. She was an avid reader, quilter, needlepoint, gardener and loved her family, especially those grandchildren.

She was preceded in death by her husband, Dewitt Whitten; her parents, Lawrence and Velma McMinn Mills; and several sisters and brothers.

Those whom she leaves behind include her three daughters, Bonnie Burkley (and the late Tommy Burkley) of Batesville; Diane Stanford of Charleston and Janice Avant (John) of Water Valley; six grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren, three great-great-grandchildren; two sisters, Linda Hargett of Mt. Home, Ark. and Bettie Pittman of Batesville; and one brother, Billy Mills of Batesville.

The family requests memorial contributions be made to the American Cancer Society.



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