

ASWG, March 16, 2020 Submitted by Madge Owens
Georgia Historian Shares Voices of Dynamic Women in Oral History Project

Emma Spencer Gooch, a community and political activist, lived to be 97 years old. Described as way ahead of her time, she was an active member in the Democratic Voter Registration for African Americans, the Homemakers of America, and a member of Queen Ann Grand Chapter Order of the Eastern Star Inc. and Naomi Chapter Number 9.

Lillie May Caldwell Roberts was the first Black to register to vote in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. A lifelong member of the NAACP, she was the treasurer for her local branch for 50 years. She tells her story in her own words in a 2015 book, "Delta Jewels, In Search of My Grandmother's Wisdom," by Alysia Burton Steele.

Ruthie Jenkins White on February 11, 2000, the Yalobusha County Board of Supervisors hired her as the county's first black assistant purchasing clerk, responsible for getting supplies for all the county departments. This included the sheriff's office and the courthouses (one in Water Valley and the other in Coffeetown) and covered vehicles, guns, uniforms, briefcases, judges' robes, and office supplies. She now volunteers as the District Secretary for the Mt. Moriah District Missionary Baptist Association and its 23 member churches.

These are three of the many voices of the Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County. The oral history project initiated by Georgia historian Dottie Chapman Reed is making it possible for the accomplishments and stories of unsung black women to inspire those far beyond. Women's History Month is a time to highlight the outstanding achievements of women, many of whom are recognized for changing the world. Reed focuses on documenting the accomplishments of women year around – the thread that connected a community.

"I am encouraged by the strength and fortitude of these women and how we, by participating in this process, might encourage and motivate our youth of today; how we might support our millennials who are working for equal rights and registering voters across the country in preparation for the November elections," says Reed.

Reed credits her mother, Lula B. 'Helen' Chapman, a beloved mentor in the community, for inspiring her interest in education, history and experiencing the world. Reed remembers taking trips her mother arranged and chaperoned for the children in their community. They traveled to the Memphis Zoo, Parchman Penitentiary, Mound Bayou and other places. These trips, activities, and training made an impact on their lives.

"My cousin Eva remembers that when my mom drove her and three schoolmates on their first trip to the Memphis Zoo, she made them take notes and write a report for school – evidence of my mom's belief in education," remembers Reed. "I believe my mother's purpose for these trips was to educate and expose us to the world beyond Yalobusha County."

These childhood experiences motivated Reed to earn the Bachelor of Arts from the University of Mississippi and return to her alma mater through the years as an admissions counselor where she helped triple black student enrollment. She again returned to Ole Miss in 2009 to receive the Dr.

Jeanette Jennings Trailblazer Award, which was named in honor of the first black Ole Miss faculty member.

Her current collaboration with the University of Mississippi on her oral history project enabled Reed to participate in celebrating the 100th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage. She was a featured speaker on the "Community Activism" Panel at the "Women & Civic Engagement" Event.

The Ole Miss collaboration included five students in the Oral History of Southern Social Movements class taught by Jessica Wilkerson, PhD, Assistant Professor of History and Southern Studies Graduate Director.

According to Wilkerson, their goal was to create a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of African-American history in North Mississippi.

"The interviews offer rich descriptions of life for Black people in Yalobusha County from the early twentieth century to the present, documenting how African Americans attained land, built institutions such as churches and schools, asserted the right to vote, and joined civil rights protests for dignity and equality. The narrators tell more intimate stories, too, about the meaning of family in their lives, their faith traditions, and their relationship to place," said Wilkerson.

Each of their interviews and accompanying documents will be preserved in the institutional repository at the University of Mississippi and will be made available to the public. Upon completing interviews, students listened to one another's recordings and created a multi-vocal, multi-layered history.

They presented a collective narrative, "'All Our Names Were Freedom': Agency, Resiliency, and Community in Yalobusha County," in a staged reading in December and again during February when they were joined by project creator, Dottie Reed, for a second performance in the SouthTalks series during the Sarah Isom Center's "Women and Civic Engagement" Summit. Reed is proud of the fact that the events were attended by the greater community especially six of the interviewees.

The project and event have been supported by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, the Arch Dalrymple III Department of History, and the UM Diversity Incentive Fund. With the support of a \$3,000 donation from the Sylarn Foundation (based in Michigan).

This project stirs many fond memories for Reed. "As we feature Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County, perhaps we can bridge some gaps, peak curiosity, or inspire positive actions, while paying homage to those who have set great examples of unconditional love and kindness," said Reed.

Dottie Chapman Reed, a native of Water Valley, Mississippi, has lived and worked in the metro Atlanta area since 1981. Reed is the owner of Chapman Reed Associates, a professional consulting firm specializing in small business training and development, marketing and sales

training, and conference and strategic planning. She writes a column which appears bi-monthly in the North Mississippi Herald.

Source and for more information, visit: <https://blackwomenofyalobusha.com/>