

When Race Took The Back Seat – Friends To The End

One of the gratifying byproducts of this column is the exploration it has fostered of our shared history in Yalobusha County – beyond the lives of the extraordinary black women already profiled. Last year two white women – “my white homegirls” as I call them – were moved to write about their own recollections of the black women who influenced their lives.

Camille Fly Dautrich and her friends wrote about the black women who worked as maids and babysitters for their families. Dorothy Wiman wrote about Cora Folson. These are among many familiar stories about relationships that developed when further socialization outside of white homes was prohibited or frowned upon. In most instances, the white children barely knew the last names

of these caretakers, where they lived or if they had children of their own. Today, we still wonder about the authenticity of the love for these women.

An eloquent remembrance from Dr. Hilliard Lackey several years ago about his experiences within and across the racial divide portrays genuine admiration and friendship.

In April 2007 Dr. Lackey spoke to an International

Women's Day program at the Clarksdale Exchange Club and chose to salute the 70-year friendship between his mother and her white friend in the Mississippi Delta, from 1940-2010.

Cora Lackey Long and Betty Tubb Garmon, both born in 1920, spent childbearing years on Garmon Farms and final years in Clarksdale. He called his presentation his personal salute to black and white



Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. This article is part of a project to compile and share info about women in the county who have made an impact on the African American community. Her column appears bi-monthly, with occasional exceptions. She can be reached at (678) 825-2356 or reed2318@bellsouth.net

www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com

women in the Mississippi Delta during and after segregation.

He acknowledged that his presentation included information that “may be sensitive material to members of both families, and for that I offer sincerest apologies. Yet, my soul

won't rest until and unless I share this story which is meant to be complimentary and not negative.”

Here is his presentation reprinted with his permission with minor edits for clarifications and consistency.

Pair Of Great Dames Accompanied Him

When the Clarksdale Exchange Club invited me to serve as guest speaker on Wednesday, I put up one stipulation: my two grand dames would accompany me. One is my mother, Cora Lackey Long and the other is the matriarch of Sabino Farms, Betty Garmon.

They are about the same age. Both married men on the Garmon Plantation in Quitman County, also known as Sabino Farms. Both have sons named for their fathers. Both are now widowed. My mom is black. Betty Garmon is white. That alone is recipe for a great story, but it gets much more interesting; they love each other. They are friends across the chasm that society imposed between them and have found ways and means of negotiating that chasm through methods akin to extrasensory perception.

These women of the Delta were born around 1920 during an era when black was black and white was white. There was no in between. Their worlds were distinctively different. One was the lot of the plantation owner and the

other was the plight of the tenant farmer. When and if the twain met, the Southern way of life was invoked.

My mom finished the sixth grade and married at age 15 in 1935. That was the norm for little black girls in that day. The year you started wearing a bra was the year you were ready for marriage. Going on to high school was not a notion, let alone an option for black girls on Delta plantations. High schools for colored children were in towns like Clarksdale, Marks, and Lambert. There would not be school buses for non-white children until the 1950s. Almost no one of color had an automobile. Everybody walked or rode a mule to work, church, school or to visit neighbors. Few or no doctor visits were made as home remedies and midwives were widely used. Rural life had its culture, its way of doing things and its limitations.

Mrs. Betty, as we called her to distinguish the younger Mrs. Garmon from the elder Mrs. Garmon, married the plantation heir around 1940 and in 1942, gave birth to my friend and soul brother, Judge Ollie



By Hilliard L. Lackey, Ph.D.

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Laurence Garmon, III. The Garmons epitomized the paradoxes of segregation. First and foremost, they were white. There were white societal standards of conduct they were bound to respect and observe, at least publicly. This was not their druthers. The young Mrs. Garmon was as gracious, as nice and as kind as any Christian ought to be. Her husband, the late State Senator O. L. Garmon, Jr., was fair, considerate and generous to a fault. Their three children were cut from the same cloth.

Their public stance was separation of the races

especially when around peers and business associates. Many an afternoon, early evening or late night, little colored boys slipped through the side door of the big house and shared desserts, toys and comic books with the Garmon boys. The sound of a car coming into the driveway occupied by a visiting peer was a signal to scatter. That's just the way things were.

My dad died when I was five years old. My mom remarried, and my step-father was an avid reader who loved comic books and sports pages in newspapers. We were too poor to even pay attention, so paying for a newspaper was way beyond our imagination. The Garmons received two or three newspapers daily: The Memphis Press Scimitar, The Commercial Appeal and, I believe, The Clarksdale Press Register. The younger Mrs. Garmon made sure that my stepdad brought us the second-hand newspapers every day or they were stacked and saved for later pick up. We had stacks of comic books, Readers Digest, National Geographic, everything. We were blessed

with a bountiful supply of reading materials. We would come to read our way from abject poverty to relative prosperity.

Senator Garmon had part ownership of a car dealership in Shelby. In a moment of benevolence, he said to this writer, "Whenever you need to get over to Lambert or Marks for a school event, just come by and get one of our cars." My proms were the bomb! I had a new car to drive the nine miles from Sabino to Lambert for major school events. God knows I was a happy fellow on those occasions. I am eternally grateful.

The reality of segregation became quite evident when it was time to go to college.

My friend, and soul brother, was going off to study agriculture (against his will) at Mississippi State University. He and I lamented that we both would like to go to the University of Mississippi and become lawyers. He was a victim of plantation expectations and I, the victim of racial discrimination since UM was not yet integrated. Instead, he went to MSU and I went to Jackson

State University. Ironically, we both got our wishes. He was able to transfer to UM and eventually got his law degree while I finally found my way to UM and got my doctorate.

Our mothers were still in touch, asking each other about the whereabouts and well-being of children. Senator Garmon passed away, and soon the younger Garmon clan relocated to Clarksdale. Eventually the Lackey-Long family also made its way to Clarksdale. Still the Southern-Way-of-Life chasm between the families loomed as large as ever. Yet, through the miracles of telephones and the mythical magic of bonding, there remained that sense of friendship and family.

So, at noon tomorrow, April 11 at the Clarksdale Exchange Club, at long last on this side of Jordan, these two matriarchs of families on different sides of the plantation chasm, will sit at the same table as friends, in public, before God and witnesses. Somewhere their deceased husbands, their scattered progeny, and an understanding public will be smiling.



Cora Lackey Long

other special occasions. She kept a mental log of most items and a master list of telephone numbers. As the Family Tree Infor-

mation Center, she visited or called to give uplifting encouragement to any of her lineage having personal challenges.

Cora drove her own car visiting the sick and shut-in until turning age 88. Never one wanting to worry others, she hid her own illness as long as she could. Finally, she wore down physically and with grace and dignity smiled and ascended peacefully to glory. A virtuous woman dwelt amongst us for more than 88 years. To God be the glory!

the blood, sweat and tears shed by black people that allow us to enjoy the lives we are living today.

I have read the transcripts from the oral interviews conducted by the UM graduate students, and I have been unable to garner words to describe my reaction to the openness and honesty versus the pain, hardships and discrimination; the strength, endurance, pride and love of family; the ultimate success in achieving goals, becoming positive role models and just plain good people.

How do you at five-years old miss three years of schooling because there were no buses or other transportation, and yet end up with a master's degree? How do you recover from losing your home, sharecropping two

or three years to buy it back and then still be willing to serve your country? How do you sit in a classroom at the flagship university where the professor refuses to acknowledge your raised hand and go on to teach public school for 28 years? I don't know how they did it.

Can we forgive the murders, the rapes and the discrimination? Can we forgive, as Dr. Lackey did, his father's preventable death in Water Valley? As the saying goes, "We have come a long way baby, but we still have miles to go before we sleep." I wish I could share each of their stories in full detail. They are being archived so that one day others can read them and learn about Yalobusha County's exceptional black residents. They fill me with pride.

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