

# Don't Let Our Black History Be Forgotten – Why We Must Tell Our Own Stories

I hope that you have missed this column a little bit. Black History Month and Women's History Month provided such exciting and challenging opportunities for me, and I am most grateful. So much so I hardly know where to start. The first outing was with local historian Reverend Calvin Hawkins at the Civil Rights Museum in Jackson. We presented the lunch time event "Preserving Overlooked Local History." Calvin brought several students, staff and teachers from the Coffeeville School District. He spoke about Yalobusha's black history from 1870 to 1970, highlighting successful Yalobusha natives featured in his book "Under the Dusty Sand." I covered the outstanding black women featured in my book and on my website. Quite a few of our friends from college, Water Valley, Coffeeville and Jackson came to support us. I learned later that two of the students with Calvin's group from Coffeeville were so proud to see their grandmother, Mrs. Sallie Ann Polk, featured in my presentation. I only wish they had told me about their connection so we all could have learned about their memories of Mrs. Polk.

When I returned on President's Day from a 95th birthday celebration with my son Cameron, I found a surprising – and delightful – email telling me I was currently being featured in six retail locations at Hartsfield Jackson Airport – where my son and I had just landed! This was Day 20 of their 28-day observance of Black History Month.

Had I known of this kind honor, I would have visited each location while Cameron and I were at the airport. The sponsors of the display had designed a poster from the most recent article published by University Relations at the University of Mississippi which, by the way, went viral on online media including blackenterprise.com. Special thanks to Mr. Mack Wilbourn of Mack II, Inc., the owner of those six retail stores in the airport, for the recognition.

Next, the staff in Archives and Collections at the J. D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi held over the displays of my collection, "Coming Full Circle – My Journey Through the University of Mississippi to Many, Many Points Beyond and Back" - through the first few



Calvin Hawkins and Dottie Chapman Reed presented a lunch program, "Preserving Overlooked Local History," as part of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History's (MDAH) "History Is Lunch" series during Black History Month. Pictured at the luncheon were (from left) Hawkins, Water Valley native and MDAH Director of Special Projects Chris Goodwin, Suzette Shields Ware and Reverend Larry Ware.

weeks of Women's History Month. I was pleased to kick off Women's History Month on the University of Southern Mississippi campus in Hattiesburg, where I spoke to the members the OLLI Lifelong Learning Center about the origin of this column, how it evolved into an oral history project with the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, a book, and, finally, into 50 years of my life, my work and projects now archived at the University of Mississippi.

In Hattiesburg, Annette Holmes Sowell and Gwen Holmes Mason introduced me. For those who might remember, they are the daughters of the late Reverend Casey Holmes, who pastored Everdale Baptist Church in the early 1960s. I promise to tell you later about my wonderful reunion with them last year at the Mississippi Book Festival.

Next, I returned to the Civil Rights Museum in Jackson to participate in a panel presentation for the annual meeting of the Mississippi Historical Society. My message focused on the importance of recognizing unheralded black women, such as those featured in my book, who succeeded in making tremendously positive contributions throughout their communities all while deprived of the rights and privileges of their white counterparts during the racist Jim Crow era.

Then back to Atlanta where I spoke to the Writer's



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 that also features black men.

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[www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com](http://www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com)



Water Valley residents enjoyed viewing Dottie Chapman Reed's exhibit at the University of Mississippi in March. The group included Emma Gooch and her grandson, Shyhiem Brown (right) and Casey Townsend left. The exhibit featured keepsakes from Reed's journey including her time at the University of Mississippi after its integration, as well as her travels back to the campus in the years following to work on such collaborative projects.

Workshop at the Lost Corner Preserve in Sandy Springs and at the monthly meeting of the Atlanta Writers Club. Pictures, highlights and videos of all these events are now on my website. It was great, and now I must admit that Johnny Wayne Herod has pulled me out of my sabbatical state of mind, prompting me to give this update.

Johnny Wayne was featured in my last column published in January to rave reviews. How fortunate we are now that he was inspired to share his memories of his father, John Watson Herod with "An Example of Adaptability". No doubt you will think of many other adjectives when you read this well-deserved tribute – enjoy!

## An Example Of Adaptability

By Johnny Wayne Herod,  
Edited by Cynthia Herod

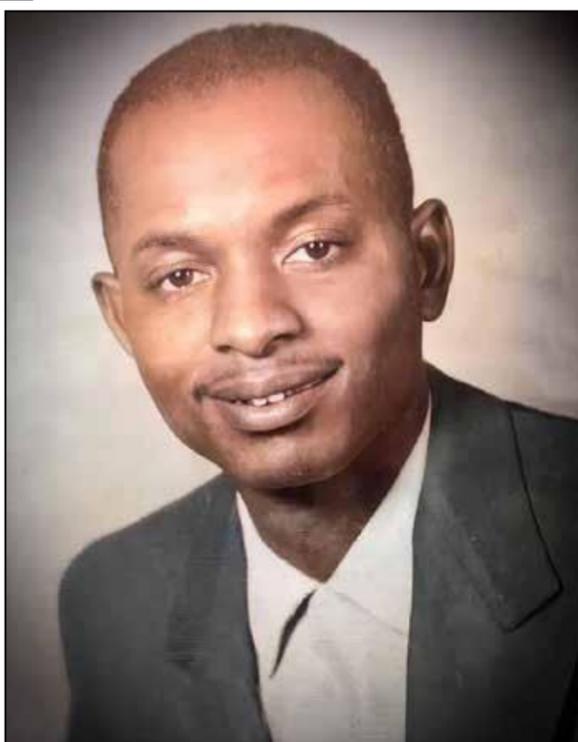
At age 62, John Watson Herod retired from teaching after 39 years. To celebrate this milestone our mother, Rachel Lee Campbell Herod, made a big dinner. She invited two of his best schoolmates and friends that still lived around Water Valley, Mr. J.T. Miller and Mr. James "Junior" Nicholson. Mr. Miller was a local businessman and Mr. Nicholson owned and operated a gas and service station. As they reminisced, one comment we overheard them repeat was, "It was John's way or the highway." To us, that was no different from the way Dad raised us to believe.

John was born on May 6, 1926, to Johnson Herod and Irena Barnes Herod in Oxford, Mississippi. He was named for his father (Johnson) and his mother's brother, Watson Barnes. Dad's father was much older than his mother. He was also a widower with several children. A paragraph from the book by Valerie Racine Herod Belay, "The Herod Family Chronicles: A Mississippi Tale," provides insight into his early life.

Unfortunately, the promise of Johnson and Irena's marriage quickly faded. John faced changes that could have easily unraveled his promising future. The absence of his father from his early life was one of those changes. Much to his regret, John would go through most of his life without a picture of his father. Fortunately that he was, John got the opportunity to resume a relationship with his father as an adult; however, he never took a picture of Johnson before he died.

Mom told us that as an infant I was the only grandchild to be in our grandfather's presence. He lived his life as a preacher and, unfortunately, was blind by the time of his death. We know little else about my grandfather.

Irena Barnes Herod was born in 1882 in Lafayette County. Life was very hard on her family. She reasoned that once she started having children, she would do everything in her power to provide them with a better life. "Big Momma," as we affectionately called her, never wanted her son to work in the field or take care of chickens as she had. However, she taught him to clean, cook and cure/salt unprocessed meats. Raising a young boy as a single parent created several challenges. John returned home to Mississippi for college after military service during World War II. John reflected on his early years in a writing assignment while attending Alcorn State College in Lorman, Mississippi where he pursued an education degree. He wrote in his autobiography that his mother said, "John, if



John Watson Herod

you will try to finish high school, I will give you a prize." That prize turned out to be \$50 upon his graduation in 1944. That was a significant amount of money from his mother who worked hard as a domestic. In 2023, this is equivalent to the purchasing power of about \$850.

In 1936, Miss Irena married Redmond Jones of Coffeeville, Mississippi. They purchased the only home we knew as "Big Momma's House" at 306 Calhoun Street, Water Valley, Mississippi on February 8, 1936. They had no children. Unfortunately, Dad nor Big Momma ever talked much about Mr. Jones, who died in 1954. Now, we realize what a mistake we made in never inquiring about this man. The contributions and influences both he and Mr. Johnson Herod made to Dad's life were never known nor shared with us.

In John's autobiography, he mentioned his teacher, Mrs. Theresa Davidson, and how she influenced him and his best childhood friend, Sammie Edwards. Through her, Dad indicated that he participated in Glee Club, although we could all attest to the fact that Dad was not a singer.

He played and coached basketball while in high school. We suspected that at some point he was very athletic because, as kids, whenever we were in trouble, we could never seem to outrun him, and we knew we would suffer the penalty for trying.

World War II came knocking at John's door on May 16, 1944, with a letter stating, "Greetings from the President." This was shortly after his 18th birthday. He was inducted into the Army on August 16, 1944. After training, he was assigned to the 361st Quartermaster Company and stationed at Camp Shelby, near Hattiesburg, Mississippi. John attained the rank of Tech Sergeant (E-5) working as a baker and cook before his departure from service on July 3, 1946. He never served overseas. Awards received from his time in the Army included the American Theater Service Medal, the Good Conduct Medal and the World War II Victory Medal. Fortunately, President Franklin D. Roosevelt adopted The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the G.I. Bill of Rights), signed into law on June 22, 1944. "The G. I. Bill provided benefits to all honorably discharged World War II veterans that included low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans, a year of unemployment compensation and payments for tuition and living expense to attend high school, college or vocational school" (History.com Editors 2019). This allowed John to have the funds necessary to get his higher education. He chose to stay in Mississippi and attend Alcorn A. & M. College (presently, Alcorn State University) in 1946.

Initially college was not what John expected or desired. According to his college-assigned autobiography, his first campus life realization was noting how poor the conditions were in the dormitories and that his first lunch meals did not include meat or milk. In spite of these shortfalls he said, "My first day's experience at Alcorn A. & M. College was very pleasant. I am proud that I made this decision of entering this Institution." Here he found many veterans in attendance and, because of their many shared experiences, found developing friendships much easier. John enjoyed school and these friendships enough to pledge Alcorn's Alpha Zeta Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. We discovered this as a family at his death. Much younger fraternity brothers notified us that he had been their oldest member at age 90. They asked to perform a ceremony at the funeral in his honor. This brotherhood extended through the years. When Valerie, John's youngest daughter, moved away from home pursuing a teaching job, Dad gave her the addresses of his fraternity broth-

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ers in her area and said that she should make their acquaintance. She equated "brothers" meaning his school friends. "She did and that made all the difference in finding a new supportive environment" for Valerie (The Herod Family Chronicles: A Mississippi Tale).

After four amazing years at Alcorn, Dad earned his Bachelor of Science Degree in Education with a concentration in Mathematics. Now with his college degree in hand, it was time to find a job, but he wanted it "John's way."

He wanted to go back home. However, the memory of a previous trip home made a profound impact, influencing his cautious, measured and calculated decisions as an adult. In Water Valley that night, he along with two friends went out on the town wearing their signature cool-looking hats. They were accosted by a policeman, for some unknown reason. Dad said the policeman put his gun in their faces. They were terrified! This was a situation that may have occurred to others before, but now it had happened to him. He always tried to be aware and somewhat in control of his surroundings. But that night he discovered that even with his military service and education, he was not immune to the unspoken rules of the Deep South, even in his hometown of Water Valley. This experience transferred over the years to the protection of his children. Dad would not allow us to stay out late or overnight at anyone's house. He stated he could not control what happened "in another man's house." His and Mom's only exception was with our grandparents.

John met his first wife, Yvonne Turner, a schoolteacher from Louisiana, while attending Alcorn A. & M. College. She lived in Natchez, Mississippi, a town near campus. They had a daughter, Charessa Diane Herod (Brown). Unfortunately, they separated and ultimately divorced.

After crisscrossing Mississippi teaching mathematics and science and coaching girls' basketball, John finally landed a job closer to home at Central High School in Coffeeville. That was when Dad met our mother, Rachel. She was a graduate of Davidson High School where he would later become the school's principal. Mom and Dad began their married lives in Water Valley, living with his mother in her house on Calhoun Street. Their five children started their lives there, too - Johnny Wayne Herod, Barbara Lynteen Herod-Hence, Michael Glenn Herod, Valerie Racine Herod Belay and Anthony Bernard Herod.

John coached basketball during those early teaching years in Coffeeville. One of the high points occurred when he and several other coaches met and eventually, through their area schools, became the founders of the Big-12 Athletic Conference for colored school sports in their member district. Another proud moment came when his Coffeeville team won the 1963 state girls' basketball championship.

One of the requirements of becoming a teacher was to complete continuing education hours to maintain his license. To keep up his credentials, John often had to balance a summer job to help feed the family with attending a college class somewhere to get the accredited hours. This is an excerpt from "The Herod Family Chronicle: A Mississippi Tale."

*Summers were for either work or school. Some summers found John working as an Agricultural Surveyor for the Soil Conservation or as the CETA Coordinator for Summer Youth Jobs Programs. Other summers, John attended classes at: Southern A. & M. University in Baton Rouge, LA; Mississippi Valley State College in Itta Bena, MS; Houston Tillotson University in Austin, TX; and the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS."*

After several years of working at Central High School in Coffeeville, John and Rachel decided to move there. Dad enjoyed his work in Coffeeville, but it still was not his hometown of Water Valley. Two years later, a similar teaching position and job offer miraculously opened at Davidson High School in Water Valley and Dad gratefully accepted. Mom also found a job and for a year they both commuted to Water Valley while their older children attended school in Coffeeville. They were constantly on the search for a home in Water Valley. Their youngest two children started attending a new program in Water Valley called Head Start. It was "designed to help break the cycle of poverty. It gave preschool children from families with low income a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and educational needs." (Google, 23 June 2022). In addition to Dad's teaching responsibilities, he served as the director of the Yalobusha County Mississippi Action for Progress and was involved with the launch of Head Start. Because of his activities in these programs, he was targeted by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission which "was a state agency in Mississippi from 1956 to 1977 tasked with fighting desegregation and controlling civil rights activism. It was overseen by the Governor of Mississippi". This is documented in the MDAH - Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Mom and Dad purchased land in 1967 at 828 Thornton Street in Water Valley to build their dream house. (This later became 827 Thornton Street.) Dad learned how to draft house plans, determined to draw them for their new home. Little did they realize the difficulty they would have finding someone to build that home - a two-story house. Dad eventually found Mr. Herman Smith, a local architect and contractor, to accept the task on one condition that he changed the plans to a one-story. Dad made the necessary revisions, and their home was built. In later years, several local families asked Dad to make plans like his design with various alterations.

After several years at Davidson High School, the cur-



**The Herod family (back row, from left) Rachel Herod, Anthony Bernard Herod, Johnny Wayne Herod, Michael Glenn Herod and John Watson Herod; and (front row) Barbara Lynteen Herod-Hence, Diane Herod Brown and Valerie Racine Herod Belay.**

rent principal, Mr. Joseph Ford, announced that he was accepting an equivalent job at a larger school in Tupelo, Mississippi. The Water Valley School Superintendent, Mr. Clovis Steele offered the position of principal to John, as he believed he would be able to communicate and work with him. Dad considered the offer, but in his view, he lacked administrative preparedness. He thought he should respectfully decline the offer. That was when Mr. Steele told him, "What if the next person I offer the position to does not want you?" That was when he accepted the offer and started planning to further concentrate on his future administrative educational needs.

The Davidson community had an established home for the principal and their family but we didn't need it. Dad decided to update the home to remedy the housing shortage non-local teachers experienced when they tried to find temporary lodging within the boundaries in and around Water Valley. The careful updates to the one-time principal's home resulted in a residence better suited for several women teachers.

After years of the unsuccessful idea of "separate but equal" school systems, in 1965 Water Valley was forced to offer a "freedom of choice" alternative to all students. A few heroic black students accepted the challenge to attend the white school, but no white student would accept the opportunity to attend the black school. Two white teachers were assigned to the staff at Davidson High School. Two years after Dad became principal, the Supreme Court forced total school integration in the South to begin in the fall of 1970. The Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Steele, carefully rolled out school integration plans and welcomed community suggestions for its implementation.

Dad pushed for the integration and job security for the entire Davidson School faculty and staff. The process was successful and peaceful, and in addition he accepted the position of assistant principal of the newly integrated Water Valley High School. Residents from schools in neighboring Coffeeville severely protested and carried out demonstrations against their school integration plan. This resulted in the cancellation of the entire year of school for at least most, if not all, of the high school students at Central High School. Many of the parents of white students, instead of conforming to the federal order, quickly formed and enrolled their children into private schools. From that time on Dad remained an integral part of the new Water Valley School System. He was dedicated to the smooth transition of the integration of black and white students and faculty in their educational environment. As the years rolled on, Dad prepared himself for retirement.

In 1988, days before retirement, Miss Paula Carr, a Water Valley High School student, decided to highlight Dad's teaching career for the Water Valley High School's paper, Devils Diary. In her interview she revealed:

*Mr. Herod was employed at Marion County Training School in Columbia, Mississippi, where he taught math, science and coached the girls' basketball team for one year. He then taught at Mount Zion High School in Kilmichael, Mississippi, for a year, Central High School in Coffeeville, Mississippi for thirteen years and Davidson High School in Water Valley, Mississippi for six years. Mr. Herod then joined the Water Valley High School as Assistant Principal and Math Teacher for eighteen years.*

Dad did not rest in his retirement and neither did Mom. They were serious gardeners and now even ventured into large quantity fishing to offset their income needs. Fortunately, all of the gardening was done in their backyard. They would venture out of town to fish and the large amounts of fish they caught then needed to be cleaned and packed to sell. Mom did all this gardening and fish processing in addition to holding a full-time job at Holley's. On top of these tasks, Mom and Dad felt there was a duty to provide meals and deliver them to select area elderly, their version of "Meals on Wheels" (prior to the start of that national program). Mom would cook enough Sunday dinner to provide extra meals to those whom dad had determined were in need of assistance and deliver them. These meals would sometimes include Dad baking his special yeast rolls. They were caring people and shared what they had to bring comfort to friends and neighbors in need.

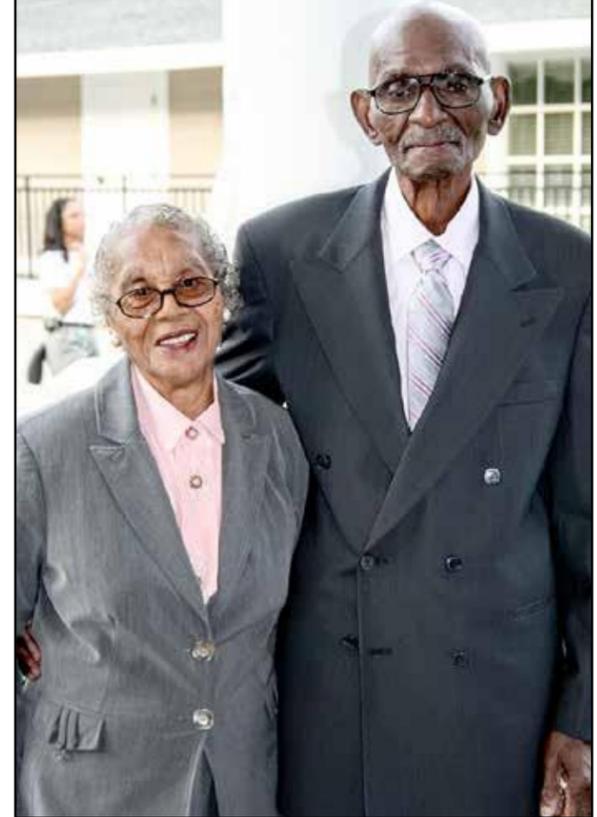
Mr. Junior Nicholson, one of Dad's closest friends (known to our family as Cousin Junior) was elected a Yalobusha County Supervisor. When Mr. Nicholson died, his position needed to be filled. Dad was appointed as his replacement to serve out the term until a special election could be held. Dad declined to run for this po-

sition. This continuous dedication to serving his community led to Dad receiving and treasuring many awards and accolades during his twilight years. He received the Braswell Hatcher Citizen of the Year Award for the Year 2001; served as a member of the Board of Directors for the North Central Council for the Aged; was a charter member and former Director of the Economic Development Foundation and served on their Board of Directors; was responsible for raising funds to help pay off the indebtedness of the Gardiner Industrial Park; and both Mom and Dad had the honor to serve as the Grand Marshals for the Annual Christmas Parade in 2001 for their combined service to the community. They were only the third black community members to be so honored, which was a testament to their combined community stewardship.

A highlight moment for John, in his retirement years, was the honor of attending his Golden Graduation Ceremony at Alcorn State University. He was very proud! After fifty years, there was a breath of nostalgia and an awareness of how much the school had changed as he walked the hallowed grounds of the university in his gold cap and gown. This visit and the reunion with old pals meant more to him than words could say.

Throughout Dad's upbringing his mother made church a central part of his life. Their local church home was Everdale Baptist Church, just a couple of houses down the street and the Davidson School buildings away from their home. He ingrained in his family that God must be central to all that we do and believe. Dad served as a deacon, treasurer and the architect for the expansion project at the church by drafting and directing the building progress using the church's building funds. As children, we participated by becoming junior deacons, choir members, a church organist, Sunday School and Baptist Training Union members and/or leaders. Our Christian upbringing included regular visits to Mom's family church of Zion Springs Baptist Church in Bruce, Mississippi. In their later years of life, Mom and Dad returned together to East Providence Baptist Church in the Abbeville suburb of Oxford, Mississippi. This was the Herod family's home church and they both enjoyed communing with John's side of the family there.

John Watson Herod was a proud Water Valley resident and always wanted the best for his community. Dad dedicated his public life to the betterment of those residents. He was adaptable to different issues occurring in his environment. He learned quickly, could easily organize his thoughts, make measured decisions and was a problem solver. He was energized by the many accolades he received and the recognition of being "Mr. Herod". As his children, we understood that his contributions were important for the masses but came at a personal cost to our family as he was often not present. He did get important things right. He kept us safe. He instilled in us the value of hard work. He planted in us the value of continuous learning. He made us believe that by taking a chance we could accomplish anything. He made us understand to never allow anyone to take away our power. Most of all, he did it "John's way".



**Rachel and John Herod are pictured at a grandson's wedding in 2012. John passed away in 2017 at the age of 90. Rachel died two years later.**

## In Closing

Again, we have recorded the story of yet another Outstanding Black Man of Yalobusha County, as first promised in January 2022. This hardworking, accomplished, multi-talented gentleman gave back to his community in multiple extraordinary and different ways. Special thanks to Johnny Wayne and his wife Cynthia, not only for the article, but for doing what we continue to ask of others - share your stories of individuals past or present who have made a difference in your life or the lives of others. You can also find an article about Mrs. Rachel Herod in my book and on the website - Article 26, written by her daughter Valerie Belay and published here August 8, 2019.

Finally, we owe it to the younger generations to document our stories so they will know our history and understand our past. It is more important now than ever as we witness efforts to stop teaching Black History and the banning of certain books in schools and public libraries. Murders and gun violence are raging in this country, even now occurring more often in Yalobusha and surrounding counties.

We must continue to pay it forward - to pay it back or to pay our dues. Let me hear from you!

P.S. I'll be in town in October - Lord willing! Hope to see you then!