

The Russells

Coffeeville Early Black Educators

In my research and conversations to compile the 45 articles now featured in my book, *Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha - Their stories and their contributions to a Mississippi Community*, I have discovered that obituaries are often the best and - most of the time - the only source of information about one's life. This is particularly true of blacks born before the mid 1900s. Generally, only the famous are prone to write an autobiography or spark enough interest for a biography. This makes it even more critical that we research and know our family histories and document our life stories. We must take advantage of the available tools and opportunities to find our roots and leave a record and legacy for generations to come.

Fortunately, I continue to find information that reflects the reality of life for blacks in America in the early 1900s such as this from the May 2nd, 2009 obituary of Rosie Allean Russell, who was born in 1923. "During a time when blacks were denied equality and hindered from education, her parents placed high value on education and made enormous sacrifices to ensure that their children received the best possible education." Thank God for parents like hers.

After completing her early education in the Coffeeville Mississippi Colored School District in Yalobusha County, Allean - as she was known - attended Alabama State College in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1947 she married George William Russell, and together they raised four children. Mr. Russell served as the principal of Central, the black high school in Coffeeville and Allean worked for the school system as school secretary for 23 years. But she did much more. She was a volunteer for the American Cancer Society, a Heroine of Jericho, an honor given by the Royal Arch Masons, a member of the Order of Eastern Star and an accomplished seamstress. An active member of Zion Grove Missionary Baptist Church, she was a soloist and president of the Mount Moriah Baptist Association choir.

Allean's life mirrored that of her husband's - both were community activists. Before working at the school, Allean integrated the Kellwood Manufacturing Plant, which opened the door for other blacks. George was a deacon, a Sunday School teacher, a Master Mason, and like his wife, a member of the Heroines of Jericho and much more. He was a World War II veteran who traveled overseas and then served as an Army recruiting officer. George earned his Bachelor of Science Degree from Alcorn State University and a Master of Education Degree from Tuskegee University in Alabama. He worked as a Newton County Agent in Decatur, MS before relocating to Coffeeville, where he began a 36-year career in education. He served as the principal of Central High School for 15 years from 1955 to 1971 while still finding time to teach veterans Vocational Agriculture.

Growing up in Water Valley I knew the Russell children and their father from school and a few church activities. I had cousins who attended school in Oakland, MS, and I knew of Mr. Jimmy D. Walker, who was the principal of the black school on that end of the county. Having written about Professor E. C. Davidson and his role in educating black children in Water Valley, I became curious about George Russell. I had heard over the years and recently that when the courts forced Mississippi to integrate the public schools ASAP, the Oakland schools were combined with the Coffeeville schools. At some point, Mr. Russell was appointed assistant superintendent of the Coffeeville, Oakland and Tillatoba schools until his retirement in 1972. He passed away on November 17th, 1984 just a few weeks shy of his 78th birthday.

Yearning to know more about how this all transpired, I began my quest to connect with the Russell siblings to discover more about their parents and what they remembered about the integration of the schools and their childhood in the segregated south.

I remembered I was given Shirley Oatis' name in March, 2019 as an outstanding woman who should be featured in my newspaper column. A few days later Shirley passed away. I did not follow up, wanting to give the family time to grieve. In July 2020, as I was deciding to close out my column after two years, Shirley Oatis crossed my mind, and I decided to try the numbers I had for her two children. It took a while to reach her son, Julius, and it was in my conversation with him that I learned his mother was one of George and Allean Russell's three daughters.

By December 2020, I had spoken to the youngest Russell daughter, Barbara Jeffery, and she agreed to share what it was like growing up in the Russell family in Coffeeville in Yalobusha County during the sixties and seventies. During this process the name Ollie Beth Brown came up. I knew that Beth was involved in integrating Coffeeville High, and there was mention of a lawsuit. Beth, now Ollie Beth Whitling, lives in Georgia. She has agreed at last to share in writing her experience as one of the three black students who integrated Coffeeville High School. Her father and family were intimately involved in the process and should be recognized for their determination and bravery during a very volatile time in Mississippi. The total detriment, sacrifices, and threats to the core of the black families and the black communities in Yalobusha County will never be known. We continue to share these stories in hopes of encouraging healing, reparations and forgiveness.

One of my friends who has visited Yalobusha County and read my articles says that these black Mississippians are the hardest working and strongest people she has ever seen. I am inclined to agree. With each story another unfolds.

No doubt George and Allean Russell, the Browns, the Walkers and many other early black leaders influenced many lives and the lives of their own children and grandchildren. Will these legacies live on?



Allean and George Russell

The Russell Family Remembered

By Barbara Jeffery

My father, George William Russell, was born two days before Christmas in 1906. His parents, Millard and Melvina Bailey Russell, had three other boys and a girl. The boys were Prentiss, Gilbert, Matthew and the girl, Mattie Bernice. Mattie Bernice and Matthew were twins. After Dad received his Bachelor of Science degree from Alcorn State University, located in Lorman, MS, he earned his Master of Arts in Education degree from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, now known as Tuskegee University.

My father's professional career and volunteer experience included serving as a Sunday school teacher, a church Deacon, and a Newton County Agent in his hometown of Decatur, MS. He was an officer in the army, serving during World War II, and completed a tour overseas. Dad was an Army Recruiter, and after he left the military, he taught veterans vocational agriculture classes for several years.

My mother, Rosie Allean Bailey Russell, was born June 20, 1923 in Coffeeville, MS. Her parents were Virginia Kimble Scurlock and Major Scurlock. She was number six of 10 siblings, four sisters: Mary, Willie Ruth, Naomi, Leona and five brothers, Joseph, Benjamin, Daniel, Vernon, Major, Jr. - all deceased. She received her formal education in the Coffeeville School District and attended Alabama State College. On March 3, 1947 she married George William Russell.

In her first job she became the first black woman to work at the Kellwood Clothing Manufacturing Plant in Coffeeville. Once she broke the color barrier, set reasonable production goals and more black women were hired, she moved on, joining the school system as a secretary to my father. He had taught for a few years before his promotion to principal of the black schools, Central High School in particular. Mom was also active in the commu-



The Russell sisters, left to right, Barbara, Betty and Shirley

Written by Dottie Chapman Reed, The Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County column ended in July, 2020 with the promise of occasional articles. The mission of the project was to compile and share information about black women of Yalobusha County who made an impact on the African American community. All of the previous articles are published in Reed's book, *Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: Their stories and their contributions to a Mississippi Community*, available for sale at Violet Valley Books in Water Valley, Square Books in Oxford and online at www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com.

Reed is a native of Water Valley. She graduated from Davidson High School in 1970 and the University of Mississippi in 1974. She can be reached at quaye_reed@bellsouth.net.

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By Dottie Chapman Reed

nity, a member of Zion Grove Missionary Baptist Church and the Mount Moriah Baptist Association. She was a soloist and president of the association choir.

My parents placed high values on education and made enormous sacrifices to ensure that all four children received the best possible education. Education was in my family's blood. My grandmother, Melvina Bailey, taught school in Mount Bayou, MS, an all-black town. My granddad, Millard Russell, taught in Decatur and became an assistant principal.

Life in the Russell Household

Growing up in Coffeeville, we were very sheltered. There were three girls and one boy, my sisters, Shirley and Betty and my brother, Glenn. We were never allowed to spend the night at anyone's house - not even relatives or friends. Now that I am older, I understand why. In my child's eye, we did not experience a lot of racism, but of course it was in full force as we survived the turbulent sixties and emerged into the uncertain seventies. When we went to town, we entered the stores from

the back, and I being only five or six did not think anything of it at the time. We were always with one of our parents when we were young and out in public.

We were in church some place every Sunday. At that time black churches in our area met only once a month so we visited different congregations, many of them members of the Mount Moriah Baptist Association. My father's church held services on the third Sunday of the month and so did Zion Grove Baptist, my mother's church. Glenn would often join my dad at his church.

On Sunday evenings, we would visit my mother's cousin, Benjamin Scurlock, who lived in Tillatoba. Other than that, we were home. Once a month we went

to my dad's homeplace to check on his 237 acres of land in Decatur. When we went my mother would have to bring food and purchase groceries to prepare our meals while we were there.

Betty and Shirley took piano lessons from Mrs. Edith Wilson Boyd, who lived in Water Valley and taught business education at Davidson High, the black high school. When it was my and Glenn's turn for piano lessons, Ms. Boyd suffered a serious health issue that forced her to stop teaching. She was a great role model, very loved and highly respected.

Continued On The Next Page



George William Russell standing in front of the school.

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Integration and the High School Years

Life at Central High School was fun. Glenn was involved in HI-Y, FHA and basketball at school. We were all involved in different school activities such as choir, 4-H club, Tri-Hi-Y and youth activities at church. We attended basketball games in surrounding areas. Monroe Walton, our biology teacher at Central, took us on various science fair trips to Florida and Tennessee. Betty and Glenn made the trips to Chattanooga and Look Out Mountain, Tennessee. I went on the science trip to Florida.

Everyone knew my dad, the principal. Needless to say, no one could ask my sisters or me out without the entire Russell family coming along. I remember my sister, Shirley dating a young man in Water Valley, and when he visited, the entire Russell family visited with him. And the same held true when we stopped by his home in Water Valley – the whole Russell family in tow.

In 1969 three students, Earnestine Allen, Ollie Beth Brown and Martree Horton integrated the white school, Coffeeville High. By the fall of 1970, my junior year in high school, the schools in Yalobusha County were forced to integrate. Unlike what happened in Water Valley, the Yalobusha County Seat, the school board decided to separate the students by sex. The girls were assigned to the former white school, Coffeeville High, and the boys were relegated to the former black school, Central High School.

There were no junior or senior proms in the spring of 1971. Many black students refused to attend the first year of integration and stayed home. I had very few friends, aside from Linda Bland, who remains one of my closest friends to this day.

I remember one day when Coffeeville High was being inspected for accreditation. A white woman, Mary Moorman, was the principal at that time. As all the big shots walked through the halls, I saw my dad leading the group around and explaining things. I wondered why he had that task and then realized he was the assistant superintendent!

By the fall of 1971 my senior year the student bodies had been merged but still no prom in the spring of 1972. We were all at Coffeeville High, including students from the Tillatoba and Oakland schools - in fact, the Oakland schools had closed – a sign that marked the creation and expansion of private white academies that cropped up in Yalobusha County and throughout Mississippi.

The Russell Offspring

We Russell siblings all graduated from Alcorn. There was no other choice! My parents and more specifically my mom's sister, Naomi encouraged us to pursue job opportunities in St. Louis, Missouri after we graduated. My mother had three sisters and two brothers and lots of cousins living in the area. Thus, three of us ended up in Missouri.

Shirley, the oldest child earned a bachelor's degree in business education and stayed in Mississippi. She married Julius Oatis, also an Alcorn graduate with a degree in Vocational Agriculture. She taught at Central High the first year of integration and then moved over to Coffeeville High the next year. Shirley taught at Coffeeville High until her untimely death in 2019. She was a well-respected educator and entrepreneur in Yalobusha County. Her children, Lashonda and Julius, still live in the area. Her daughter-in-law Robin teaches sixth grade at Como Middle School in Como, MS. Her grandson, Jarell, is a senior at Mississippi State University in Starkville, Ms., majoring in Mechanical Engineering.

Betty and her husband, James Patty live in St. Louis. James is also an Alcornite who earned his degree in Music. Betty earned her bachelor's degree in business education and a master's degree from Webster University in administrative leadership. Their daughter Melanie is a social worker and is the CEO of a Home Health Care company. Daughter Amanda is an educator and school administrator carrying on the legacy of education.

Glenn earned his degree in Vocational Agriculture and has retired from the Department of Agriculture, also in the St. Louis area.

Glenn and his wife, Regina, are the parents of Glenn Jr. and grandparents of five beautiful children.

I, Barbara Jeffery, earned my bachelor's degree in Home Economics and a masters of education from the University of Mississippi. I taught high school at Hazelwood West High in Hazelwood, MO until I retired in 2009 after 31 years. My husband Jimmie and I have five children and six grandchildren. My children are professionals serving in various roles: an English teacher, a YMCA director, an insurance administrator, two of my sons are ministers and another is in the military. My first granddaughter, Jaylin, recently graduated from Jackson State University. Since retirement I have established a seamstress business and am carrying on my mom's legacy as a seamstress.

As I look back, I thank God for my parents and family and the values and morals they instilled in each of us.

The Integration Of Coffeeville High School

By Ollie Beth (Brown) Whiting

Before I get into the details of the actual integration, I feel compelled to give a little background as to what led to my decision to attend the all-white Coffeeville High School.

I was born and reared in a small farming town in Mississippi called Oakland. My parents were Stephen and Lillie Holman Brown, who together had eight children, of which I am the youngest. Most Black families were on the lower income realm and the majority lived on the white man's land. I can only recall five Black families who actually owned their own land in Oakland during that period. My father was blessed to own his land, which was one of the reasons he became a key plaintiff in the lawsuits in 1969 thru 1973 against Coffeeville Consolidated School District. Owning your own land was so important then, because those who owned their land felt more empowered and more willing to voice their opinion. We had three schools that served the Oakland area - the all-black School (Walker High School), and two white schools, Oakland Elementary School and Oakland High School. Walker High School housed all grades from kindergarten thru 12th grade and at one point was a very thriving school with extracurricular activities, a fairly good basketball program, a shop for boys to learn a trade and Home Economics for the young ladies. There were also debate teams and other clubs where students could compete against other All Black schools.

I mentioned that Walker High "was" in its earlier days a thriving school. However, the school was controlled by a white school board in Oakland, so the Black parents really had no input into the overall operation of the school. In other words, the money that was allocated to the school was budgeted and distributed by the local authorities and the state. As a young girl I often heard my father, Stephen, speak of the school and lack of control by Black parents. Thus, over the years I observed how the school had begun to academically decline and how the building itself was deteriorating. The one clear thing to me was the textbooks that we were issued had almost always been used by others (whose names I did not recognize) and the majority were not in the best condition. Getting a brand-new textbook was a treat for us.

An Unusual Decision

I had attended Walker High since kindergarten. It was April of 1969 when I took a hard look at our school - observing the administrators, teachers, condition of the classrooms, Biology Lab (where nothing worked anymore), Home Economics Classroom, the Shop, and the outside trailers that housed the broken typewriters). Each day I would go to school and basically conduct an assessment for myself of our school. I was not pleased but didn't know what could be done other than occasionally mentioning things I observed to my parents.

Beginning in 1965 Freedom of Choice, or Free Transfer Plan, were two of a number of plans developed in the United States aimed at the integration of schools in states that had segregated educational systems. Each year the teachers distributed these forms for students and their parents to complete and return to school. In April 1969 when the teachers informed us that we would be receiving The Freedom of Choice forms, I started thinking about what I would do. On the day the forms were distributed we were told to complete them in class. I told a classmate, Earnestine Allen, that I was going to select the white school (Coffeeville High). At first, she thought I was joking until she saw me fill out my form. Word quickly spread throughout the class, and she and several more students decided to do the same. I believe it was 11 of us in all. The look on the teacher's face was priceless as he took the forms up and reviewed them. Of course, he wanted to know if we knew what we were doing or had done. I could not speak for the other students, but I definitely knew what I was doing, even without discussing it with my parents. To my surprise my parents supported my decision when I told them that night and stated "IF you want to go you can go." **God leadeth me.**

Oakland High School To Coffeeville High - How We Got To This Point

Fall of 1968: Talk of integration floated all over the county and state. In order to prevent (or so they thought) integration from happening in Oakland and Coffeeville, the two school systems decided to combine the All-White Oakland High school with the All-White Coffeeville High, later to become The Coffeeville Consolidated District. We soon surmised this was done to prevent the mixing of the races (white girls and Black boys.) I understand some white parents in Oakland did not agree with combining the schools but did not object. The Coffeeville students and parents were opposed to Oakland sending their children there, but they too wanted to prevent integrating their school and went along with the plan. Oakland High School was completely dissolved into the Coffeeville School System. Bussing began in Oakland, 20 miles to school in the mornings and 20 miles back to Oakland in the evening which STILL exists to this day.

The Unsolicited Summer Visits Of 1969

Summer of 1969 was revealing as various white men of Oakland paid visits to homes of the 11 Black students who had signed the forms to attend the all-white Coffeeville High, my home included. I remember at least three visits by different white men to speak with my daddy. But daddy would not change his mind. He and my mom, Lillie, stood by my decision, and my daddy said to me at one point, "You may be going by yourself" because he was hearing some parents had signed another Freedom of Choice form for their child



Ollie Beth Whiting

to return to Walker High. The only other student I knew for sure who was going was Earnestine Allen. Her mother assured my dad Earnestine was definitely going IF I was going. However, in the end only three out of the 11 of us who signed up showed up to board the bus to Coffeeville High in the fall of 1969: Earnestine Allen, Martree Horton and I.

The Journey

The system was designed to transport students from their respective bus route to the former Oakland High School. Then one bus from Oakland would transport all the high school students over to Coffeeville High and back each day. My house was about a mile from Highway 51 so I had to either walk to catch the bus or my daddy sometimes would drive me to Highway 51 to catch the bus every morning and evening or sometimes my mother, who worked at Walker High School's cafeteria, would wait on me in the evenings. Some evenings I would walk home alone through the woods. Whew! **God kept me.**

The first day I caught the bus amidst stares and strange looks, but nobody said anything to me. The bus driver was the pastor of the local Baptist church in Oakland. Being brought up in the Baptist church and faith I felt somewhat safe having him as my bus driver, but little did I know what was ahead for me as time went on. The three of us rode different buses to Oakland High School where we would catch the bus to Coffeeville. What a relief to see Earnestine and Martree that morning, but we could not believe we were the only ones enrolling. Initially we thought some of the others would enroll after they realized we did, but that never happened.

The Integration

First day of school: We sat together on a mostly quiet bus full of students. I think we sat in the second or third seat, which became "our" seat for the rest of the school year. The ride was uneventful unlike what we had heard on the news about the integration of other southern schools - no police escorts, hecklers, rock throwing, virtually nothing. Upon our arrival a few whites stood and stared. The principal and assistant principal were waiting as we departed the bus. I kept waiting for something to be thrown or hecklers, but we were escorted peacefully into the building to complete registration and then escorted to our first period class. We were, however, met with more stares and hateful looks from students.

We had some laughable moments of students walking into things staring at us and some would even turn their backs and walk sideways facing the walls in the halls to keep from looking at us. We usually had the stairs to ourselves "initially" as they would not walk up or down the stairs at the same time. When we went to the bathroom the girls would scurry out real fast, sometimes without using the bathroom. We mostly sat together in our classes and anywhere we went. The assistant principal, Mary Moorman, did escort us to our classes until we knew our way around. As we got acclimated and were allowed to go to classes on our own some students would turn and go in the opposite direction when they saw us coming. (We stuck together for sure - there were 1,000 of them to the three of us.) Occasionally a spit ball or pencil would be thrown our way in the hallway but nothing major happened at school.

Most of the teachers tried to be nice, even though we could see the prejudice in their faces. A few students eventually started to speak but were incredibly careful to not get too friendly since they wanted to stay in with their friends. I believe the fact that we soon showed the entire school that we were smart, intelligent, and friendly young ladies helped smooth things out a lot for us, with the teachers especially. One teacher in particular, Mrs. Pace, who taught Geometry took interest in us right away and would seemingly snap on some of the white students who were not as smart as us and not scoring as high as we did on her exams. I soon recognized I had not been taught enough Algebra to handle Geometry so that class proved really, really hard for me. I made my first "C" in all of my years in school that first semester, but with Mrs. Pace's tutorials, along with my friend Earnestine who seemingly understood the concepts better, I was able to pull a "B" the second semester. Surprisingly, a couple

Continued On The Next Page



Ollie Beth Whiting pictured in 1971 as a student.



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.