A Tale Of Two Cities

Water Valley's Connection To Tulsa's Black Wall Street

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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James Henri Goodwin (right) is pictured with his son Ed Goodwin, Sr. at the Oklahoma Eagle office.

Visiting Tulsa, Oklahoma was never on my bucket list because I really don't have a bucket list. However, my first trip to Oklahoma occurred during Thanksgiving last year when we celebrated with my son, Army Captain Donald, who is stationed at Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma. This would also be my first-time seeing prairie dogs, longhorn cattle and the unbelievable rock formations Oklahomans call mountains. The drive up to the top of Scott Mountain with an elevation of 2,464 feet provides either a breathtaking view of the area or a horrifying experience for those like me who are afraid of heights.

More recently, I returned to the area to stay with my seven-year-old grandson while Donald was away in the field. I dared to drive the 190 miles to Tulsa in Donald's F150 truck because I could not miss an opportunity to visit the former Black Wall Street area. I had arranged to meet Victor Luckerson, an author and Montgomery, Ala. native, who moved to Tulsa while working on his book about the area.

Victor's book, "Built From The Fire" provides an in-depth look at Water Valley's connection to Tulsa. When he contacted me several years ago seeking information about the history of Water Valley's Black Community, I didn't have much to offer. Nor did I understand the scope and value of what was to come. This would be my first time learning about the connection with the Goodwin family, the Water Valley natives who became the owners and publishers of The Oklahoma Eagle, one of the premier black newspapers in the nation. I was aware of a couple of articles about Water Valley published in the Eagle in November, 1972, that were saved by the late John Herod – one in particular about the integration of the schools. (See article, right).

My grandson, Donald III, whom we call D3, and I arrived at my cousin Freddie Pritchard's house in Tulsa exactly three hours from Donald's home in Lawton. Freddie was born in Water Valley and left abruptly at age 14 to save his life, according to his grandfather, my Uncle Tom Pritchard. My father, Alvin Chapman, and Uncle Tom got him out of the Water Valley jail and put him on a train to Chicago the same day. You see, Freddie was in and out of Water Valley's white neighborhoods more than any other black kid in town and, on one of those adventures, he cursed out a white man. That was a no-no in Mississippi in 1969.

I hope Freddie will share his story with us one of these days.

Driving into downtown Tulsa we saw plans underway for the city's Juneteenth celebration. D3, Freddie and I met Victor for lunch at Fixins, a new restaurant in downtown Tulsa owned by a black NBA basketball player. Victor enjoyed hearing about Water Valley from Freddie's perspective as he fielded our questions about his experience living in Tulsa for several years writing his book. From there we headed to a meeting with Mr. Jim Goodwin at the historical Oklahoma Eagle offices in what is now referred to as the Greenwood District, America's Black Wall Street.

Victor gave us an Eagle and Goodwin history lesson as soon as we walked in the front door, amplified by all the photos covering the office walls. We marveled at pictures of the Goodwin heirs and siblings, famous visitors like Julian Bond and President Joe Biden, articles documenting the history of the newspaper and the role it has played in documenting the birth and demise of "Black Wall Street."

Jim Goodwin is the son of Edward Goodwin and the grandson of James H. Goodwin, who migrated from Water Valley to Tulsa in the fall of 1913. The story of his migration to Tulsa is where Water Valley comes into play, and it is this Water Valley connection that I pray we continue to share and appreciate.

The first picture in Chapter 1 of Victor's book is a 1909 postcard picture of the Illinois Central Railroad depot in Water Valley. As Victor writes, James was born in Vaiden, Mississippi on July 12, 1873, and moved to Water Valley as a young boy. At 12 years old he worked as a "callboy" for the Illinois Central Railroad in Water Valley. Every morning, he had to go to the homes of the engineers who might have been trying to skip work and bang on their bedroom windows to wake them up. He also had to look for or round up hungover firemen and lure them to the railroad station. As a young man, likely in his early 20s, he was promoted to the job of brakeman, a dangerous and dirty job with long hours, inadequate and unequal pay.

On Christmas Eve, 1887, James married Mississippi native Carlie Greer, and the couple began a growing family of four children. Eventually, James and Carlie opened a grocery store on Main Street. They expanded the store in 1906, which was celebrated in the white newspaper, The Water Valley Progress, as well as in the black community.

By 1910, he opened a funeral home above a livery stable. The couple owned their own home and were able to purchase additional property in town. Fueled by post-Civil War racism and Jim Crow restrictions, the Goodwin's major concern was providing a proper education for their four children. At that time, the black children in Water Valley could not attend school beyond the eighth grade.

From copies of the black newspaper, The Oklahoma Safeguard, they read about life in the west. The Safeguard publisher, C. A. Buchanan, had to relaunch the paper in 1906 after being run out of Mississippi by white folks who obviously did not agree with his points of view. Buchanan continued to distribute his paper back home and often included activities of James and Carlie, who were part of the black elite, officers in the Knights of Pythias, a black fraternal organization that promoted professional growth. Buchanan included sick lists and social events in Water Valley but more importantly he reported on the vast opportunities for blacks in Oklahoma.

These opportunities prompted James and Carlie Goodwin to leave Water Valley and move to Tulsa, Oklahoma in March, 1914. According to Luckerson three-quarters of black farmers owned their acreage in Oklahoma. With a higher literacy rate than any southern state, more than 80 percent of black people in Oklahoma could read. Blacks made their way to Oklahoma on foot, by train, by wagon

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"We Make America Better When We Aid Our People"

VOLUME 55 NUMBER 19 THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1972 122 N. GREENWOOD AVE. TWO SECTIONS TWENTY PAGES — PRICE 15c

Integration In a Southern Town

White Supremacy Dies Hard But It Dies

EDITOR'S Note: Citizens of Tulsa have met the challenge of school desegregation with all manner of divisiveness short of physical violence. The city's historical dualism seems bound to continue through increasing polarization of black and white, rich and poor, north and south.

Last week, Eagle Reporter Ken Mays visited an unlikely showcase for practical integration--Water Valley, Mississippi. The first of his two part series deals with education.

By Ken Mays

WATER VALLEY – Clinging vines are conquering plantation ruins along state highway seven between Oxford and Water Valley. Their prevalence is an apt metaphor for social progress the deep, rural south. The wall of white supremacy is being pulled down as tendrils of equality and freedom creep into the cracks and crevices created by federal school desegregation lawsuits.

When Water Valley High was integrated two years ago, lunch hour shrunk to trouble-free 20 minutes.

From all outward appearances and attitudes, Water Valley exists in a time warp. During the five minute drive down Main Street the visitor is gripped by a surprising sensation of nostalgia. No long hair, boutique fashion, new buildings or other signs of the seventies. Most of the Water Valley and its 3000 residents look as if they stepped out of the fifties.

Language is another southern tradition that dies hard. There are no blacks in Water Valley, only the "colored" and "nigras" who comprise nearly half the population.

In recent years, this bastion of racism has seen its black citizens become enfranchised, educated, and employed on equal terms with whites. Yet there have been no shotgun blasts, bombs or crosses burning in the night. The streets have seen no marches or demonstrations, and the jails have held no civil rights activists.

John Herod, Assistant Principal of Water Valley High School, explaining the key to understanding: "Black and white people are born and raised side by side in Water Valley, they know one another, and they are honest about their feelings. We have been able to work out our problems because their people are kept informed and have confidence in their leadership. They know there will be no surprises."

"I've known most of the white leaders all my life. If something is wrong, I can go right to the source and talk about it. We have good working relationships."

Perhaps the most important working relationship in the Water Valley Schools is the team of Herod and School Superintendent Clovis Steele. They are generally credited with the success of desegregation.

Steele came to Water Valley in 1960, and immediately won the community's respect by pushing through a bond issue and personally manning a bulldozer to erect two new high schools, one white, one black. Five years later, he saw time running out for the long-discredited separate but equal doctrine and adopted a "freedom of choice" policy for the school district.

Water Valley's change-resistant social fabric did not accept full desegregation without a fight. "In 1967," Steele recalled, "Investigations from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare came here and said we had to move the black and white kids together or they'd cut of our federal funds. I didn't think we could peacefully uproot the whole town."

The federal edict roused strong rebel sentiments in Mississippi. Since secession from the Union had proven disastrous, Water Valley took a less radical but painful course of action: "We went out of compliance with the federal guidelines and lost $125,000 from out school budget," Steele said.

"We stayed out of compliance for two years, until June of 1970, when the board of trustees finally were convinced there was no choice: we either had to comply or face a lawsuit."

Conversion from a dual to unitary school system met with considerable resistance, Steele said, "but we had sound leaders in the PTA, Lions Club, Rotary, and among the blacks. They recognized integration was the law of the land and reason prevailed."

The plight of nearby Coffeeville was fresh in the minds of Water Valley citizens as they faced the integration crisis. The neighboring town had suffered lawsuits, demonstrations, school boycotts, and the exodus of white students to a private school.

"We posed one question to the hotheads," Steele said, "What better do you have to offer? The answer was just live with it."

Rules of compatibility in the new 42 percent black Water Valley High School included black representation in sports, cheerleading, faculty, and student government.

"There are no more sacred cows," remarked Steele.

The superintendent doesn't believe integrated education is superior to the old segregated system. "Some of the things we've done here are very ridiculous," he frowned, "but there is no reason why integration should destroy education."

To ensure peace and tranquility at Water Valley High, Steele has imposed stern discipline over idle time where friction may develop.

A fleet of school buses whisk the students to and from classes with no time for loitering or socializing outside.

Teachers complain of their added lunch hour duties. Classes are marched single file to the cafeteria, allowed 20 minutes to eat, and marched back to the classroom again. Before integration, high school students enjoyed a leisurely noon hour at the drive-in. Now, students are not permitted to leave school grounds.

After two quiet but uneasy years of desegregation, Water Valley is ready for a return to normalcy. "The first year, black children acted as though they expected to be abused. They were uprooted and scared," Steele said.

"The second year, we had more trouble with white kids complaining about the school dress code and other minor misunderstandings. This fall we are off to the best year Water Valley as ever had.

"I think the attitudes are improving. We are starting to respect people for what they are and how they behave."

Next: Votes, dollars and honest bigotry.

Reporter Ken Mays published a two-part series about integration in Water Valley in the Oklahoma Eagle in November, 1972. Mays' second article is on the next page.

and anyway they could between 1900 and 1920 and the black population tripled.

By 1916 James Goodwin was hired as the business manager for The Tulsa Star, a black owned newspaper, which described him as a Mississippi native with a fourth grade education.

Following the Black Wall Street race massacre on May 31, 1921 which destroyed the Tulsa Star offices, a former managing editor salvaged the printing press and equipment and opened what is now known as the Oklahoma Eagle.

In 1933, James H. Goodwin's son, Edward L. Goodwin Sr., expressed interest in buying the newspaper, and by early 1938 he gained control of The Eagle. It became a family business that continues to impact the Tulsa community and the nation.

James O. (Jim) Goodwin, James and Carlie Goodwin's grandson, is now the publisher of the longest running black-owned newspaper in Oklahoma, and the tenth oldest black-owned newspaper still publishing today across the United States. Their mission is, 'To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial is the cornerstone of our continued success.' Jim and his sister, Jeanne, believe they have more than enough materials, pictures, and memoirs detailing the Goodwin family to make a great movie and I agree.

Freddie and I were thrilled to sit in The Eagle office – located in the heart of the Greenwood area at 122 North Greenwood Avenue – and hear about the life of a man born in Water Valley, Mississippi. The family patriarch, James Henri Goodwin passed away in March, 1958, leaving a remarkable and distinguished legacy. We were humbled yet so proud of the history reflected on the surrounding walls, though I can't help but wonder what Water Valley could have been like if James and Carlie Goodwin and C. O. Buchanan had remained in Mississippi and poured their energy and talents into our small town.

Our visit ended on a sad note when we walked down Greenwood Avenue to see where the businesses were burned down. Some locals told us that the Oklahoma Supreme Court had just ruled against reparations for the two lone survivors of the massacre, each of them nearly 110 years old. I already had mixed emotions about viewing the area, and the traffic noise on the expressway above was an annoying reminder of how the community was displaced and divided for the sake of transportation.

Victor's book, "Built From The Fire," – not only captures the Goodwin family's story, but also illuminates that vibrant community before the fire and its efforts to rebuild in the difficult times after. The New York Times named the book a 2023 top 100 Notable Books and The Washington Post named it top 50 Nonfiction book in 2023.

Victor offered special thanks to Calvin Hawkins and Jack Gurner for their assistance with the Water Valley information. Jim and other Goodwin family members visited Water Valley last year. You can find that Herald article dated July 6, 2023. Consider adding the book to your library and Tulsa to your bucket list. Here is a link from TIME magazine excerpt about the Goodwins' journey from Mississippi to Tulsa. Enjoy!

https://time.com/6282051/greenwood-tulsa-massacre-history

In Closing

Earlier this year Emma Faye Gooch and her family gave the University of Mississippi documents featuring the history of the Yalobusha County Voters League of the Democratic Party. The Emma Spencer Gooch Files/Mississippi Voter Registration and Education League, Yalobusha County, Mississippi Collection is now available in Archives and Collections at the University. It contains membership lists and cards, meeting minutes, and a few pieces of correspondence related to African American voter registration in the 1960s and creation of the racially integrated Mississippi Democratic Party in 1970. You can see familiar names of activist citizens of Yalobusha County who held meetings at black churches throughout the county registering people to vote. Here's the link: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/finding_aids/723/

Even More Good News: the full documentary featuring many of the Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County and their stories is also near completion. Plans are underway for screenings, so stay tuned. You will not want to miss this historical and powerful documentary featuring pillars of our community.

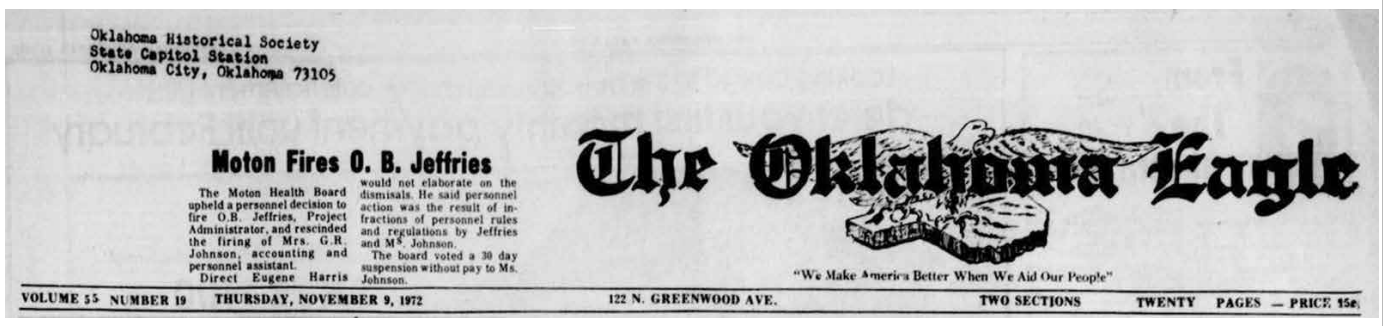
Editor's Note: Reed has previously written about different experiences with the integration of Water Valley Schools. The articles include:

- *Article 9 – Hervey's Integration WVHS -11/29/18*
- *Article 14 – Segregation Side Effects – 2/7/19*
- *Article 16 – A Star Teacher -3/14/19*

8 Article 24 - Segregation Side Effects Revisited 7/11/19

The articles are available online in the Herald archives at, yalnews.com or at Reed's website, blackwomenofyalobushacounty.com.

Dottie Chapman Reed (right) visited the Oklahoma Eagle newspaper office during a visit to Tulsa earlier this year. Pictured with Reed are (from left) Freddie Pritchard, Victor Luckerson, Donald L. Reed III and Jim Goodwin.



Oklahoma Historical Society
State Capitol Station
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

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Ken Mays
WATER VALLEY PART II

WATER VALLEY — Scarcely a half-generation has passed since Yalobusha County was unwillingly yanked out of the King Cotton Era into the harsh glare of the civil rights limelight. Some folks have never quite adjusted to the change.

"I miss the old days," admitted one prosperous, lifelong resident. "On these bright fall days we would drive out in the country where the field hands would be waist-deep in the rows of cotton. It was so picturesque, and they seemed happy. Cotton-picking wasn't really so drudgerous, because the hands worked by the pound, not by the hour. Now all the work is done by machine."

This is the legacy of King Cotton, a gentle, draft animal paternalism which many blacks accept with a shuffle and a smile. The leaders of Water Valley's black community would just as soon not discuss attitudes. Instead, they can point with pride at the great educational, economic, and political strides of recent years.

Through per capita income in Water Valley still hovers at the poverty level, the employment picture is bright. A chicken processing plant employs some 80 percent black workers, and 300 more new jobs will be available when an auto parts factory locates in the area early next year. "Nearly anybody who wants to work can find a job," said one man from behind the wheel of his new car.

When nearly half of Water Valley's citizens were slowly enfranchised during the NAACP voter registration drives of the mid-sixties, white politicians suddenly swallowed race-oriented rhetoric and started courting the black vote. Their fears of drastic upheavals were never realized.

Mississippians seem to regard the U.S. government with extreme paranoia and have yet to really tap the brimming vat of federal funds available to economically depressed areas. Housing is one exception. Modest new 235 homes dot the landscape, somewhat equalizing the black and white standards of living. Open housing has never been a problem in Water Valley.

Perhaps the most significant black accomplishment to date is the election of James Harris to the Water Valley Schools Board of Trustees last year. Harris, a 78-year-old funeral director, was elected by a white majority which recognized his ability to avoid controversy with the other board members. In order to qualify for the post, he attended special classes at the University of Mississippi and received a high school diploma at age 76.

At home, amid the orderly clutter of a strong religious and family life, Harris explained his philosophy of gradual improvement: "Some troublemakers, organizers from the Southern Christian Leadership Council have come here. They said they were going to see that we'd get better schools, better jobs, all that was coming to us."

"But I shooed them off," he continued. "I didn't listen because I thought time would bring all the things we enjoy now. And it did. Nobody was put in jail, or run out of town, and there was no bloodshed."

Some racial taboos are still in force in Water Valley. No black men work in the professions, or in municipal or county government; the churches, cemeteries and most public facilities are segregated de facto, and interracial dating or other social interaction is still as unthinkable as miscegenation. Harris was shocked at the suggestion.

"It hasn't come about, and I would hate to see it happen," he said. "We haven't had any racial tension in Water Valley, no marches or demonstrations. We are building a livable spot here in Mississippi, and I really don't know of anything I'd like to see improved."

Edward Shearer III, editor of the weekly newspaper, the North Mississippi Herald, sees the paternalism as a vestige of the old order. "There are encouraging signs of respect, but attitudes change slowly. It will take at least a generation to complete. The only antagonism we have is between the adults. The kids don't seem to have any problems getting along."

The shape of things to come can be witnessed in Water Valley at the Mug and Cone drive-in restaurant, the only integrated eating place.

The Mug and Cone was built soon after Water Valley High was desegregated in 1970, and quickly became the gathering spot for the town's young people, natural integration was a radical departure from the old ways.

Strangely, Shearer, the white, third generation editor of a family newspaper, was the only Water Valley citizen who made even passing mention of black pride.

"If I were black, I'd feel a certain loss of identity. Their children have been uprooted, some of their organizations have been lost. The black vote has never really materialized along racial lines.

"Social life, of course is still split. We have our institutions, and the blacks have theirs. There's not much pressure for the status quo, but I don't expect personal preferences to change in my lifetime.

"But it will change. Twenty years ago, racism was the rule and integration the enemy. Now, all we have left is a paternalistic attitude, and it is slowly changing. We have faith in social evolution."