Emma Spencer Gooch Exhibit Promotes The Importance Of Voting



Bringing local history to life, Dottie Reed visits with Coffeeville High School students during their Sept. 18 tour of the Emma Spencer Gooch exhibit at Bozarts Gallery in Water Valley. The 45 students learned about the courageous efforts of the Yalobusha Voters League to help Black residents register to vote during the civil rights era.



Dottie Chapman Reed, a Water Valley native and 1970 Davidson High School graduate, is the author of Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County. Her award-winning North Mississippi Herald column inspired the book and research projects preserving Yalobusha County's African American history. A University of Mississippi graduate, she lives in the Atlanta area and continues her historical research and writing.

Seeing the Coffeeville High School bus pull up to Water Valley's Bozarts Gallery with 45 students brought joy to my heart and a deep exhale. We invited all public high school students within a 40-mile radius to attend the Emma Spencer Gooch Exhibit on Sept. 18, the first day of a two-day affair. We offered 18-year-olds the opportunity to register to vote, hoping they would be inspired after seeing the impact the members of the Yalobusha Voters League made in 1968 by registering Blacks to vote for the first time.

Annette Trefzer, the gallery owner, welcomed the students, their principal and two history teachers. Mrs. Emma Spencer Gooch's granddaughter and namesake, Emma Faye Gooch, provided an overview of the exhibit. When the students walked around, they called out the names they recognized on the scrolls from Water Valley and Coffeeville. They asked questions, which their teachers helped us field, and acknowledged the churches where their family members worshiped and where Voters League meetings were held. They noted that league members paid $1 at the meetings to cover the use of the churches and to support the statewide voter registration efforts of Aaron Henry, the president of the Mississippi Democratic Party, and the work of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer and others.

Fortunately, one of the articles in the exhibit told the story of how Ollie Beth Brown Whiting and two other students integrated Coffeeville High School in 1970. In addition, the students met and chatted with other members of the Gooch family, some 30 strong, who came from Chicago, Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio; Raleigh, North Carolina; Davenport, Iowa; and Marietta, Georgia.

The students ended their visit with group pictures and took home a few giveaways to express our appreciation for their presence and participation.

Folks came in throughout the first day, remarking about the pictures, especially the photo of the Water Valley all-Black baseball team. We could only identify Mr. Watt Campbell.

Visitors were also taken with another photo that appeared to be a lodge meeting of about 20 well-dressed, handsome Black men with Mr. Oscar Spencer. Mrs. Allie Maude Steen, the 94-year-old daughter of Emma Spencer Gooch, said her Uncle Oscar was smiling so brightly because he had just gotten new teeth! She could not identify any of the other distinguished gentlemen.

Brittany Brown, a public safety and justice reporter with MLK50.com, came from Memphis. As an Ole Miss graduate student, she participated in the Black Families of Yalobusha oral history project five years ago. She remembered Mrs. Emma's story and her interview with Emma Faye for an oral history article published in *Mississippi Today* about the last year of high school segregation in Water Valley.

Mrs. Rosie Wren surprised and delighted many of us because she knew everyone on Yalobusha's Scobey Precinct scroll. She was in awe of seeing the names of those brave individuals, along with the Voters League members who attended those nightly registration meetings at 11 different churches. She was quite proud and spoke of the importance of voting, which was our goal. It is our hope that the exhibit encouraged folks to check their registration and vote in the upcoming midterms.

During the midday break, Emma treated all of us to lunch at Sweet Mama's, and boy, did we fill that place up! The food and hospitality made for a great day.

On Saturday, Sept. 19, the main program opened with the singing of the Negro spiritual, "Shine On Me" in honor of Mr. Stephen Brown, who often opened the registration meetings. The names of the Voters League members from the minutes, left behind by Mrs. Emma in the 29-cent notebooks, were read aloud. Mrs. Emma's 94-year-old daughter, Allie Maude Steen, was introduced along with the grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews and more.

Reverend Stacey Goliday, the pastor of Miles Memorial Church, one of the 11 churches where the Voters League held meetings, read the scripture. Our local historian and author, Rev. Calvin Hawkins, led us in prayer and songs. The pictures of the churches in the exhibit were taken from Rev. Hawkins' book, *Under the Dusty Sand, a history of Blacks in Yalobusha County from 1870 to 1970.*

As the program closed, the mayor's office proclaimed Sept. 19 "Emma Spencer Gooch Day," a fitting announcement as we sang "We Shall Overcome" surrounded by the spirits of our ancestors, especially those whose names were listed on the Water Valley, Coffeeville, Oakland and Scobey precincts scrolls displayed on the walls at Bozarts Gallery.

After the program, District Attorney Scott Colom, the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, joined us for a well-received fireside chat.

Dr. Louise Gooch, Mrs. Emma's great-granddaughter, had spoken on Sept. 19, and afterward she wrote the reflection below about the event.



Four generations of the Emma Spencer Gooch family gathered for the exhibit honoring her legacy at Bozarts Gallery in Water Valley. Pictured, from left, are Elsie Reed, Jelena Wiley, Jodi Boussard, Allie Maude Gooch Steen, Rev. Calvin Hawkins and Jasaan Wiley. Steen is Gooch's daughter, Reed is her granddaughter, Boussard is her great-granddaughter and Jelena and Jasaan Wiley are her great-great-grandchildren.



Water Valley first lady Liz Reynolds (right) presents a proclamation declaring Sept. 19 as 'Emma Spencer Gooch Day' to Gooch's granddaughter, retired U.S. Army veteran Emma Faye Gooch, during a ceremony at Bozarts Gallery. Emma Faye helped share her grandmother's remarkable story.

From Emma Faye Gooch:

The Emma Spencer Gooch exhibit is a testament to our ancestors' devotion to voter registration, a time when Black Yalobushians could have lost their lives exercising their rights to vote.

Thanks to everyone who visited the exhibit. Your presence truly made this event memorable. A special thanks to Dottie Chapman Reed, organizer and Annette Trefzer, Bozart Gallery. The Gooch family's hearts are full of gratitude.

The Honor of Being Emma Spencer Gooch's Great-Granddaughter

Being the great-granddaughter of Emma Spencer Gooch has always been an honor, but learning this part of her story has given that honor a whole new meaning for me. My great-grandmother was helping Black Mississippians register to vote in Yalobusha County from 1968 through 1970. Think about that for a moment. The Voting Rights Act had only been passed in 1965. It was still new, and the right it protected was still being challenged. And there was my great-grandmother, right there in her community, helping people register and helping them understand that their voices mattered.

What really touched me was seeing the voter-registration cards and the logs, seeing the names of Black men and women who were saying, in their own way, "I want to vote. I want to have a voice. I want to be counted."

When I looked at those documents, I wasn't just looking at history anymore. I was looking at real people. I was looking at people who had made the decision to step forward and exercise a right that so many before them had fought and sacrificed to obtain. And knowing that my great-grandmother was part of that work was incredibly humbling. It made me see Emma (Big Mama) not just as my great-grandmother, but as a woman who understood the importance of community, participation and having a voice.

And honestly, it makes me think about what voting means to us today. We cannot take this right for granted. There were generations of Black people who were denied the opportunity to vote, and there were people who endured intimidation, discrimination, violence and so many other obstacles simply because they wanted to participate in the process. My great-grandmother lived through that history, and then she became part of the work of helping others claim their rights. So when I think about voting today, I think about Emma (Big Mama). I think about those registration cards. I think about all those names in those logs. And I think about the people behind those names who were willing to stand up and say, "I want my voice to count." For me, voting is not something I can look at casually anymore. It is a responsibility. It is a privilege.

And, in a very personal way, it is part of my family's legacy. Every time I vote, I am reminded of my great-grandmother and the people she helped. I am reminded that somebody came before me and helped make sure that I would have a voice. And I want to make sure that I never take that voice for granted.

Louise E. Gooch, Ed.D.
Great-granddaughter of Emma Spencer Gooch

In a separate note of appreciation Dr. Gooch added how meaningful it is to have the Emma Spencer Gooch Collection preserved at the University of Mississippi: "Seeing all the items displayed in the gallery made my great-grandmother's story feel tangible – not just as family history, but as a vital part of the community's history."

For more info about the Emma Spencer Gooch Collection, contact the Archives and Collection Department at the J.D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi. You can find a link at https://blackwomenofyalobusha.com