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Preserving our history to help us understand the past and present: Launching Phase II, Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County; From the Ole Miss Classroom to the Yalobusha Community

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Preserving Our History To Help Us Understand The Past And The Present

Launching Phase II – Outstanding Black Women Of Yalobusha County

The past is past, right? We can't do anything about it, but we can learn from it and use it to understand the present and perhaps make for better days ahead. The Spanish writer Javier Marias put it so well when he said, "The past has a future we never expect."

2019 has presented challenges and concerns that many of us have never experienced before. The issues are plentiful: racism remains rampant and continues to plague our daily lives. I believe that we can work to relieve some of the current pressures by sharing life stories that show that we have much more in common than most can imagine.

Since I was a student in the 70's at the University of Mississippi, I have felt that the school could do more for Water Valley, especially its black residents, for no other reason than the town's proximity to Oxford. Beyond that, over the last 30 years many of them have earned degrees and taken advantage of other university programs, and more students, teachers and retirees – black and

white – have migrated to Water Valley or communities in between. I am biased, I know, and I have said often how special I believe Water Valley and Yalobusha County are primarily, in my opinion, because of the outstanding black women who were the foundation of the community. The life stories of more than 20 have appeared in this column, and we will continue to feature others.

Now I believe we have found a way to connect the community more deeply with the university by using its resources to record and archive oral histories of black families in Yalobusha County. We will be filling gaps, documenting and showcasing untold stories that can be handed down to inform and motivate the generations to come. And we will all be better for it.

It has been said that God has given each of us spiritual gifts, talents, skills and experiences to serve wholeheartedly behind the scenes or in the forefront. Please accept this personal invitation to participate and make a difference. I hope I can count on you. Ole Miss History



By Dottie Chapman Reed

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

From The Ole Miss Classroom To The Yalobusha Community

by Dr. Jessie Wilkerson

About a year ago a friend told me about the "Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County" column by Dottie Chapman Reed. To say I was rapt is an understatement. Ms. Reed's articles gave me a glimpse into the rich history of black women in North Mississippi, something that I especially appreciate as a scholar who studies the South and U.S. women's history. I soon had the opportunity to read the backlog of articles with curiosity, deep interest, and appreciation, and Ms. Reed and I began a conversation about the possibility of building a collaborative project to document the history of black families in Yalobusha County.

I am a historian and professor at the University of Mississippi, where I have worked for the past five years. One morning over breakfast, during the weeks that I was considering a job in Oxford, I read that several students had placed a noose on the James Meredith statue.

"Where exactly am I about to move?" I thought to myself. "What does it mean to take a position and accept a salary at an institution that has consistently held up, defended, and bred white supremacist policies and actions?" But because I am a historian of the South, I know the story is always more complicated. In my five years here, I have learned and taught about the long history of oppression, but I have also yoked myself to the progressive history that has also always been part of the undercurrent at the University of Mississippi, and the state as a whole. The history of how people, especially black Mississippians, have fought against oppression and envisioned a more just society has become a fundamental part of my research and teaching.

Over the last five years, I have heard stories of how black Mississippians have struggled for fair treatment by and access to an institution that is supposed to be a shared resource. I read about how black women laundry workers at the university, when faced with horrendous working conditions on campus, went on strike in the 1940s and won. I learned that civil rights leader Medgar Evers, before becoming the NAACP director for Mississippi, attempted to enroll at the University of Mississippi Law School in 1950. He was denied, but that did not take away the power of his action: He fought to claim the resources that were his birthright. I heard stories from black Oxonians about how the struggle around James Meredith's integration did not end when he enrolled but continued for a year. Federal marshals went to school and church with Meredith to provide security, a reminder of how loathe many white people were to black people accessing public resources. The university celebrates Meredith's integration as the single-greatest turning point, a break from the segregationist and white supremacist past. But the story of black students who protested a racist climate during the 1969-1970 school year suggests a different story: the struggle was and is a hard-fought slog and continues into the present.

With the help of Ms. Reed's column, I have expanded my knowledge and now know many more stories of resilience across North Mississippi: of black people finding a way to make a living, raise their families, take care of one another, fight for equality, and build community. Such stories are integral to our shared past, and as a historian at the University of Mississippi, I see it as my responsibility to do what I can to document and preserve Mississippi



Dottie Reed is collaborating with Dr. Jessie Wilkerson of the University of Mississippi on an oral history project to help preserve the stories of Yalobusha County's black citizens.

stories, especially those of black people and other marginalized groups.

In this spirit, last fall I proposed to Ms. Reed that we collaborate on an oral history project to document the history of black families in Yalobusha County. Oral history is a recording of a first-person account made by an interviewer and interviewee. Recording oral history interviews with regular people about their daily lives and family stories will help us weave a broader story of black families in Yalobusha County, stories that we will supplement with

professor, Dr. Jessie Wilkerson, describes how the process will work below. She and I attended the Homecoming Services at Everdale Baptist Church in July and were so well received that we are planning to visit more congregations on our next trip to Water Valley in September. To participate or for more information contact me or Dr. Wilkerson. Her contact information is listed below.

other types of research.

My hope is to work with Ms. Reed to bring public, university resources to the valuable work she has already begun. Our project will rely on relationships between students and faculty at the university and community members in Yalobusha County. I know that we have work to do to gain your trust.

Here is what the project will look like in its first phase: I am teaching a class on oral history in the fall 2019 semester, and I will work with a team of graduate students to document black community history in North Mississippi. Many of the graduate students in the class are working toward their master's degree in the Southern Studies program, an interdisciplinary program that investigates the complexity of the American South. After undergoing training on how to conduct and record oral history interviews, we will work with Ms. Reed to see who might be interested in participating in the project.

As part of that process, Ms. Reed, the team of graduate students, and I will be in Water Valley on Sunday, September 29. In the weeks and months after that, students will record interviews with individuals, asking them about their lives in Yalobusha County and the history of their families in the region (interviews usually last between one and two hours). Students will then transcribe the interview and provide the person with the transcript of the interview and an audio recording. If the person so chooses, we will archive the interview at the University of Mississippi, helping to preserve black history of North Mississippi and making the interviews accessible to historians, students, and community members interested in Mississippi, southern, and African-American history. We also hope to organize an exhibit—online or at a community space—where we can share what we learned and hear your questions.

I and my students take seriously the mission of the university to "devote its knowledge and abilities to serve the state and the world." I train my students to listen for the lesser known stories, those that have been muted in dominant histories of the South, but that are vital to understanding the past and present. The interviews that we collect will help us tell a richer, more diverse, more nuanced story about North Mississippi. We hope that you will consider joining us. If you have any questions for me about the project, or if you know you would like to participate, please don't hesitate to reach out. My email is jcwilker@olemiss.edu and my office number is 662.915.3371.

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WEEKLY Health Tips

Don't Sleep With Your Contacts

A recent report by the CDC cautions against sleeping while wearing contact lenses, as it increases the risk of dangerous infections of the cornea.

In some reported cases, patients developed corneal ulcers, perforations or scarring. Many people had damage that permanently impaired their vision.

Certain ulcers such as Pseudomonas ulcers can even lead to blindness. Experts say sleeping with lenses (even extended-wear lenses) may raise risk of contact lens-related eye infections six to eight times.

Doctors warn that even if someone has slept wearing contacts many times without problems, they should stop this practice immediately.

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