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BLACK HISTORY MONTH

THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY

It was a long road to a desegregated Burke County

BY CHERYL M. SHUFFLER
cshuffler@morganton.com

MORGANTON
When Lucille Rutherford was in her 20s and 30s, she loved going to see Westerns at the Alva Theater in downtown Morganton.

The trip to town included a bus ride with friends, buying a sandwich at Dave's Café and getting popcorn at the theater.

But the excursion was not always a pleasant one.

As a young black woman in the 1950s and 60s, Rutherford lived in a "separate but equal" world compared to whites and came through the other side of desegregation with courage and fervor.

While Rosa Parks is known for not giving up her seat to move to the back of a bus in 1955 in Alabama, Rutherford, now 82, remembers not being able to find a seat on a bus ride to the theater in Morganton around the same time period. She said white people would take up all of the seats and the black people would have to stand. She also

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FILE PHOTO/THE NEWS HERALD

Lucille Rutherford (right) and the late Willette Chambers were two of seven mothers who helped integrate Morganton city schools in 1964. The women called themselves the West Concord Mothers and only Rutherford and one other are still living. This photo was taken in 2005.

Citizens recall county's past

BY JULE FANN
jfann@morganton.com

MORGANTON — Though he remembers growing up in a segregated Morganton, Larry Brewer is hesitant to discuss the details.

"My parents ingrained in me that there wasn't any difference between myself and anyone

else. There was such a strong community for us to live in. The black community was very strong," Brewer said, recalling neighbors who were mentors and the Mountain View Recreation Center which, during



Brewer

the days of segregation, was the only recreation center open to blacks.

Brewer, who is retired from N.C. Department of Corrections after 30 years of service, said he doesn't recall any signs that actually read "Whites Only", but he knew, from parental

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Separate

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remembers white people tripping the black people on the bus.

"We had to fight going in (to town) and fight coming back," Rutherford said. "We didn't back down, though."

Rutherford also remembers not being able to go into the main entrance of the theater, but instead having to walk up the outdoor staircase and wait for someone to unlock the door, even in the rain.

She and her friends had to sit in the balcony to watch the movies while the white people sat downstairs.

"They did let us go downstairs to buy popcorn," Rutherford said.

After the movie, Dave Rader's sandwich shop was a popular hangout. But black people couldn't go in or go up to the window to order.

"We had to go to the back door," Rutherford said.

Ruth Roseboro and Artie Logan lived through segregation, too.

Roseboro grew up on East Union Street and as a child rarely went to downtown, even though it was just blocks away.

She remembers the signs on the water fountains that read "whites only" and the signs on the other fountains that read "coloreds only."

And she remembers there was only one public restroom for blacks in downtown Morganton. It was located under the jail.

Roseboro described it as dark, damp and smelly.

She said she would go to the bathroom before she left her house and not go again until she got back.

All three women were pioneers in the desegregation of Morganton's public schools, Rutherford as a mother and Roseboro and Logan as students.

Rutherford was one of the women known as the West Concord Mothers who took on the mission of an equal education for their children. The others were Laura Thomas and the late Willette Chambers, Mildred Largent, Annie J. Hicks, Ruth Forney and Rose Johnson.

Out of the original seven, only Rutherford and Thomas are still alive.

It was 1964 when black students and white students started attending school together in Burke County.

The West Concord Mothers, dubbed that because they lived on West Concord Street, had children at Olive Hill High School and Mountain View Elementary School before integration.

The trip for the elementary school children from West Concord Street to Mountain View Elementary on Alphabet Lane across town was too far to walk so the mothers paid a taxi to take their children to school, which was dangerous because the taxi driver would cram too many kids in the vehicle, the mothers told The News Herald in a 2005 story featuring the women.

The mothers' preferred school after integration was the much closer Forest Hill Elementary School on Ann Street.

But they had to jump through a few hoops to get their children enrolled in school there.

The women found help from the Rev. W. Flemon McIntosh, who in 1964 was a coach and a teacher at Olive Hill High School.

McIntosh opened the basement of his home to the women and it was there that they gathered and planned their strategy for going before the school board and asking for transfers and getting an attorney to file the paperwork for them.

But getting their children in the school was only half the battle.

These women and their children faced heckling, taunting and threats once it came time to walk into the previously "whites only" schools at Forest Hill and Morganton Junior and Senior high schools.

Rutherford said white students would rip pages out of black students' text books, put their coats in the toilet and tear their clothes.

Roseboro, who was in the fifth grade in 1964, remembers her first day at Forest Hill.

She said one girl followed her around and asked to see her "monkey tail."

Later, at Morganton High School, Roseboro remembers black athletes being sought after for

their abilities on the fields and courts, but black students were not as eagerly accepted on cheerleading squads or in the chorus.

Logan said, "At a very early age she realized that skin color made a difference when I viewed employment and the lack of black workers in the stores. I became more aware when I entered school and realized that there were different schools based on your skin color."

"I experienced a lot of emotional turmoil and humiliation, specifically because I could not do anything at that time to change the situation."

Now a local mental health counselor and a former member of the Burke County Board of Education, Logan said, "I chose not to allow this feeling of frustration and helplessness make me bitter but instead it was a motivator for me to excel in life."

Rutherford said school wasn't the only thing she worked to desegregate. She fought to get black workers in local factories, too, so they could do jobs other than domestic housework for white families.

"Before, all colored people were allowed to do was sweep the floors," Rutherford said of the yarn shops and hosiery mills. "After we were done, we were able to get jobs on the machines. We broke the ice. It was hard to break, but we weren't afraid. We were bold, we prayed and we got it done."

So how far has Burke County come since desegregation?

Logan said, "We have made progress; however, I can't assign a measurement to it because I feel that the value of a 'right and opportunity' should be a natural phenomenon and not one that is assigned by man. It is what it is, and the work must continue until every man is treated with respect and dignity."

Outtakes

The North Carolina Room at the Morganton Public Library contains files, books, newspaper clippings and photos on black history and gives glimpses into what life was like during the Civil Rights movement and

desegregation in Burke County.

Here are a few outtakes from old News Herald stories. Some of the dates on when the items appeared were not available.

► Brenda Brewer in a guest column titled "Hail to you, dear Olive Hill"

"The concept of segregated schools was described as 'separate but equal.' In retrospect, it makes one wonder about the 'equality.' As Olive Hill students we accepted with appreciation the hand-me-down typewriters, the worn and torn band uniforms, the discarded textbooks and pencil-carved desks from years of use by Morganton High School students."

► The Rosenwald Fund, started by Julius Rosenwald, who was president of Sears-Roebuck Co., helped build Willow Tree, McAlpine, Rock Hill, Corpening, Rosenwald and Drexel colored schools. Superintendent R.L. Patton said at the time it was an "early lesson in race relationship."

► A Jan. 26, 1939 newspaper story tells of P.E. Corpening, the principal at Olive Hill High School, being hit with a brick while leaving school. His eye was injured and no one was arrested.

► In a 1988 story in The News Herald, Diann Tate recalled not only black and white restrooms, water fountains and bus seats, but also train seats and Laundromats.

► The late Tom McCurry wrote about black schools in a 1995 edition of The News Herald, including the Kistler Academy, The Little Yellow School House and Olive Hill. He said Olive Hill was built for \$16,000 in the mid 1920s and had eight classrooms. It closed in 1965.

► Loretta Whitesides wrote for The News Herald in 2005 that in the early 1960s she was greeted with indifference at the Woolworth's 5 & 10 and told at the Collett Street rec center that it wasn't ready for integration.

She left Olive Hill for Morganton High her senior year.

"We adjusted to the change with ease and found our own way to make a contribution to fell a part of the school," she wrote.

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