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Hannah Goode-Garmon
University of North Alabama

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Education in the Lives of the African American Community of the Shoals

Hannah Goode-Garmon

Education is a fundamental right. It is as important as food, shelter, and safety. However, in the past it was not offered to all children equally. The educational system in the Shoals before and during the era of desegregation failed to offer children of color the same opportunities that whites enjoyed. Instead, the black community had to rely on churches, unequal training schools, and black only institutions for learning. The stories of Huston Cobb Jr., Arthur Graves, and Louise Hyler illustrate the obstacles that had to be overcome in order to gain an education during this time. Their stories offer hope and an example of how a determination to learn can overcome the most trying of circumstances.

A black student in the state of Alabama had very limited options as to where they could attend school. They might be part of the segregated school system of Alabama and attend schools like Cherokee High School or G.W. Trenholm High School in Tuscumbia, Alabama. According to Vivian and Curtis Morris, “African American communities provided a good education for their children long before the 1954 Brown decision and school desegregation. African American citizens in Tuscumbia established the Osborne Academy in 1877. It was renamed Trenholm High School in
1921 and closed in 1969. Trenholm High was one of the valued segregated schools that provided a good education for African American children both before and after Brown.”¹ These children might also be part of a community that had a school that was connected to a church like in Russellville, Alabama. Or the most likely answer was that they would attend at some point in their educational career a Rosenwald School. In 1912, Booker T. Washington approached philanthropist Julius Rosenwald about his concept to build rural schools desperately needed for African American children across the segregated south. That partnership sparked an initiative that eventually created more than 5,300 schools, vocational shops and teacher’s homes across fifteen states in the South and Southwest from 1912-1932. This type of education was prevalent all over the South, especially in rural areas like Colbert and parts of Lauderdale counties.²

The subjects of the oral history project conducted by University of North Alabama (UNA) students paint a clear picture of the education that the African American community of the Shoals faced. Arthur Graves, who was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, experienced the era of desegregation in North Alabama firsthand. G.W. Trenholm in Tuscumbia and other valued segregated African American schools often lacked two important factors: an adequate physical plant and

adequate supplies and equipment. Mr. Graves remembers vividly what it was like to be treated differently because of the color of his skin and attending segregated schools where students were forced to use hand-me-down books, desks, and chairs from white schools. The school that he attended did not have use of a library, any laboratories, or counselors. The only heat that his segregated school had come from a small heater in the middle of the class room. The football equipment that he and his teammates used was from the also white high school and was so worn out that his pants split.\(^3\)

Houston Cobb Jr. shared a similar experience at his segregated school in Leighton, Alabama. His school was set up as a training school so that they could receive state funding. He stated that being in a “training school” meant that “you get all the hand-me-down buses and things. I’ve never ridden in a bus with seats in it. It just had a bench up and down the sides and one in middle.”\(^4\) Despite all of these harsh conditions, these men were determined to learn. Mr. Graves later joined the Air Force in 1945 and was trained as a pilot. He served overseas in France and, after the conclusion of his service, returned to the U.S. Upon his retirement from the Air Force, Graves accepted an academic position at the University of North Alabama. After retiring from UNA, Mr. Graves purchased the oldest African American-owned-and-operated funeral home in Northwest Alabama. Mr. Graves saved this business from bankruptcy and is currently the

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\(^3\) Arthur Graves, interview by Tess Evans, November 7, 2012.
funeral home’s director. Huston Cobb Jr. served in the Navy and later was a foreman for TVA. He also went on to serve on the Board of Trustees at UNA for over a decade.\textsuperscript{5} The stories communicated by these men illustrate that no matter how difficult an individual’s educational background may be, a person’s desire to learn and achieve can overcome any obstacles.

These men not only faced segregation at school, they also faced it in their everyday lives. Arthur Graves stated that he had to “sit in the balcony at the theater, there weren’t any cafes that you could go to, most of the cafes had a window in the front of it and you’d go there and knock on the window and they’d come and serve you through the window, but my parents wouldn’t allow us to do that.”\textsuperscript{6} Mr. Cobb remembers having “two bathrooms and two water fountains and if they had just one water fountain they had two spigots.”\textsuperscript{7} The inequality witnessed in the education system permeated all aspects of life.

Due to the fact that many black schools faced substandard conditions, much of the education came from the home or church. Mr. Graves’ parents made sure that his education continued outside of the classroom. According to Mr. Graves, his father was not illiterate, but he could not read or write. His home received two daily newspapers, the \textit{Commercial Appeal} that was delivered in the morning and \textit{the Times Daily}—which at that time it was called the \textit{TriCities}

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Graves, interview.
\textsuperscript{7} Cobb, interview.
Daily—in the evening. His family also had subscriptions to at least four magazines: Time, Life, the Saturday Evening Post, and McCall’s. The high school did not give Mr. Graves access encyclopedias and dictionaries, but he was able to reap the reward of having these materials at home. Yet, he was exposed to reference books, newspapers, and magazines all because his father wanted his children to have more of an education then he had. Graves was later hired by UNA as the director of student teaching for the College of Education. In this position, he coordinated all student-teaching assignments for the university. He later became Assistant to the President and finished his time at UNA coaching golf as well as teaching politics, administration, and health. His educational experience shines a light on the non-traditional routes in the black school system.

Traditional schools were not the only way that some black students learned. The Missionary Baptist Church in Russellville, Alabama had a school that was connected to the church. Church based education played a very important role in the black community because it was often the best education available to them. The North Alabama Baptist Academy was founded in 1896 to primarily educate incoming preachers, but the teaching was confined mainly to academic subjects. The North Alabama Baptist Association solely carried the cost of this endeavor. Many young black men and women graduated from this high school department.

Education varied from every community and one particularly

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Graves, interview.
interesting story is that of Louise Hyler.

Mrs. Hyler was born in Colbert County in the town of Barton in 1925. Hyler attended a Rosenwald school from grades one through eight. There was no high school in the Barton community at that time which meant that children had to go to school in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Many of them boarded with a white family and worked in the home to earn their keep. Due to these obstacles many black students struggled to attend school after the eighth grade. This burden was eased after Cherokee High School was founded. The now Cherokee Middle School was originally Cherokee High School and designated the segregated school for black children. It was an original Rosenwald School. At that time the segregated school for white children was named Cherokee Vocational High School.

Hyler would graduate from the new high school in April of 1944. After high school, Hyler attended Alabama State. She could not attend any other state university because they were still segregated. The University of Alabama and Auburn University would not become integrated until nearly twenty years later. Unfortunately during her time at Alabama State University, Louise’s father became very ill. Due to this, she was unable to return for what would have been her third year. One of her teachers suggested that she attend the annual Colbert County Board of Education meeting at the beginning of the school year in order to find out whether there might be a job available. The superintendent stood and asked if there
was anybody in attendance who needed a job. According to Louise “they didn’t worry about how you were qualified, I put my hand up and I got hired in Colbert County that’s where I got my first job and I taught there for five years.”

She continued summer school at Alabama State where she earned a degree in Early Childhood Education.

The first certificate that Hyler received was a “D” certificate, and by her third year she received her “C” certificate. Each time she received a different certificate she was able to earn a little bit more money. In 1953, she got married and went back to school for an entire year and finally graduated with her college degree. At this time, the NAACP had already begun the fight in the Supreme Court to desegregate elementary and secondary schools, under the familiar name of *Brown v. the Board of Education*. With the prospect of integrated schools looming large, Louise, still desiring to teach, felt that in order to be competitive, she needed to further her education and obtain an MA degree. Her opportunities to obtain her degree in the south were very limited and so she wrote to New York University (NYU) and also to Columbia University. Columbia would have required her to make take six to eight more credit hours before they would accept her. NYU did not require her make up classes, and so she decided to attend NYU for a year and earned a master’s degree in Later Childhood Education.

When she came back home, a small number of superintendents did not like the fact that she went to New

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9 Louise Hyler, interview by author, November 5, 2012.
York to attend to school, despite the fact that she only did it because she could not attend the University of Alabama due to legal segregation. Despite the stigma of attending a northern university, she was generally more qualified than many of her white colleagues. She stated that most of the teachers “didn’t need to have much [education]; some of them had never even had a course in how to teach reading.”

At this time, Hyler finally got a job teaching in Tuscumbia. After the desegregation of Alabama’s public school system, Hyler was asked to teach at R.E. Thompson, which had been a white’s only school. She had never been around white people like some the girls that worked in white homes, because her father had not allowed her to do that. She stated that she “had never thought of people being that different,” so in 1966 she began teaching at an integrated school.

Unlike some black teachers that went into the white schools, she never wanted to quit, she stated that “I wouldn’t have quit anyways. Because I wouldn’t have let something like that stop me from the career I wanted to do.” She did not have a difficult time at R.E. Thompson, even though some of the parents were initially afraid. She understood that if parents were afraid of people of color, then that was all the children understood. She stated that “you know we learn what we live and that’s all they had lived all those years.”

She was not upset because they felt that way. She recalls that

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
“it was my responsibility to change the picture. And some of them were really sad and didn’t want their child to come to my room.” Some parents were very unhappy, but most of them did not show it. Hyler believed that it was because most parents thought that if they did not act right that she might take it out on their child; the parents did not realize that she would have never done that. It was a learning process for both Hyler and the parents of the children she taught. This process is displayed in one of Hyler’s recollections,

One lady, her child came—they put the list on the door when it got time, she saw her child’s name on my door she went to the office, the principle came and told me about it later, but he wouldn’t move any kid because if you start doing that you’ve got a whole big mess. And so the next year, this was a little girl, the next year she had a little boy and she went to the office and asked Mr. Chapel if he would put him in my room, he did put him in there and she was one of my best parents. And then I had this other lady she acted real nice, but she was scared to death. By the end of the year—we had an individualized program at the time and she- on her the state test that they give them in the fifth grade class; her child scored the highest grade possible. The mother came to thank me and she just cried and cried. I think because she was so afraid that her child was going to go backwards, so you see, that’s what I had to break down.

Mrs. Hyler faced enormous challenges and had to break down the barriers between the two races. This was not easily done, but by treating people with respect and dignity she was able to show people that she was not any “different” from

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
Arthur Graves, Huston Cobb Jr., and Louise Hyler are just a few examples of what men and women faced in breaking down the racial barriers before and during desegregation. They may not have had new books, equipment, or transportation, but they made the best of what they had. We can all learn a valuable lesson about our own education from these individuals. We see that no matter what is thrown our way, no matter what odds may be against us, an education is one of the most important things in life. We must all strive to overcome the obstacles that are set before us and to never let anything deter us for our paths. The stories of Graves, Cobb, and Hyler should never be and will never be forgotten because they will live on through the process of this oral history project.