

Annette Penland Coleman – June 16, 2005
Interviewed by Deborah Miles with Monique Scott
At First Citizens Bank in Asheville, NC

Mrs. Coleman was part of generations of families from Leicester, North Carolina. Her family attended church at the Alexander Chapel Baptist Church off of Short Sluder Branch Rd. The property for the church was given to the black community by the Alexander family. Many of her relatives are buried there and the community celebrates a homecoming each 2nd Sunday in September. All the elders are gone now except her generation. It was remodeled a few years ago. “We did not have much money but we always had plenty to eat. Potatoes, Tomatoes and Cabbages would be wrapped in paper and we would eat them all year long. My family also had land with a tobacco allotment.” There were other family names there – Penlands, Roberts, Fergusons. “We played with all the children in Leicester. We did not see color. When someone needed a barn raised we would all do it. We would all sit at the same table and eat together. I did not know there was a difference until it was time to go to school and I could not go to school with my friends. We were friends but the law said we had to be “separate but equal”.

Mrs. Coleman’s sister attended the one room school house that was for African American children. The teacher was Ms. Glen from Newberry, SC who she remembers with great fondness. “We were always taking her food and all the other neighbors in Leicester. When I go out there I still take boxes of food.” The first time she recalls leaving the mountains was when they went with Ms. Glen to visit her family. “We were sitting at the table with Ms. Glen’s family. In the same bowl they were serving friend chicken and fried rabbit. I picked up a piece of rabbit. When they told me what it was I threw it across the table. I got a spanking for that.”

There are younger members of generations of families that have started to move back there. Glen Penland moved back from California and Wanda Roberts moved back from New York. “I have still have three acres out there I just sold the tobacco allotment about 6 or 7 years ago. I think the property is a good investment with what is happening to land prices around here.

When Annette was old enough to go to school her parents decided to move into town so she and her sister could go to Hill Street School. They lived off of Courtland.

During her Junior and Senior year at Stephens-Lee she became involved in a student group that was working to desegregated Asheville. She recalls with great fondness Mr. Roland. “He was so sensitive and I admired him so much. He was a mentor. He always reminded us to remain non-violent and under no circumstances to hit back – even if they called us a nigger. He stressed not to retaliate. He encouraged us far beyond the issue of how unfairly we were treated as citizens and reminded us that and education was about power. “There were others that were involved during that time:

Carolyn Jackson Taylor
Sandra Harrison Robinson
Latricia Galloway

Stanley Beard
Bynum Griffin

There were other people that participated too. One was a student at Warren Wilson whose last name was Thompson. "I remember one warm afternoon he walked me part of the way home. Other students too. There was a girl with dark hair from Oak_____ but I don't remember her name. Folks from the Jewish community supported us too and other parts of the white community. "My parents were supportive but did not get involved. " They wanted to me to do it but always told me to be careful. They would not have had the money to bail me out of jail. All the folks worked in peoples home – cleaning – or at the Grove Park Inn. There were just no other places to work and no money."

After school the students would gather at Mr. Roland's grocery store each week. Someone would make a progress report and then we would discuss all other kinds of events. She particularly remembers when President Kennedy died "We sent Mrs. Kennedy a telegram expressing our sorrow. And she wrote us back. I remember it was on a white card with a black border."

There were two actions that the students took during her two years with ASCORE. One was the boycott of the grocery store across from the courthouse which would not hire blacks. There would also be several us – maybe 5 or more at a time. Never two as that is not enough in case something happens. "I remember one time someone was pushed off the side walk". They carried signs and for the most part the black community stopped shopping there. A number of people would go the Schandler family grocery around the corner but they did not carry as much as the big A & P. The boycott went on for a long time. It was announced in the churches and everyday the students would go to walk the picket line. "I remember the first bag boy they hired was Cy Young. We thought that was such a big deal – to be a bag boy. Girls had no opportunities for jobs – like at a restaurant or so. All I could do to get money was baby-sit. That is in part, while it is hard for me to understand young people today who get into drugs for money. There are so many jobs they could get and every where there is opportunity.

The other action she participated in was the integration of the Burger King on Tunnel Road. She recalls the manager who as soon as they got there called the police to get them out. The police told me "I can't do anything about this. Just go ahead and serve them. The funny thing is no one had in money to order anything. No one ever had any money like that. We finally scrapped something together to buy something! I would see that man for years around town. He always had that mean look on his face".

She also recalls many visits to Warren Wilson from Stephens-Lee students. "This was the only college around that we were allowed to visit. [Warren Wilson was the first college to desegregate in the south in 1952 – ed.note]. Our teachers would take us there for musical events, ball games anything to give us a sense of college life. I especially remember this one light yellow corduroy pants suit I wore – girls did not wear pants much in those days. I was so excited to get the chance to wear it – it looked so good. It is funny the things that we remember. It has been over 40 years by now."

Ms. Coleman also remembers going to the basement of Trinity Episcopal to visit and hear music. "They opened the doors for us". Someone would bring a guitar and play music and sing. In that circle folks could say anything you wanted to. One time she recalled a young man saying that he did not like black people. "That was ok. At least we knew how he really felt."

Mrs. Coleman felt that the involvement in ASCORE "helped me to embrace all people. I know people don't always like me because of my color. I felt OK about myself. It is OK. I know how to deal with it – no hard feelings – just leave it be. Whether you are White, Hispanic, Jewish – whatever – we all bleed the same way. It is not what happens to you but what you do with it."