

Lettie Polite

Side 1:

Her mother came from Woodruff, NC and attended Allen Home School. She finished 8th grade. Her father was born in Asheville. They slipped off and got married but went back to their own homes that night and didn't break the news to their parents for a week. They moved into her great grandmother's house on Madison Street in Stumptown. Her father's baby sister did the same thing.

[26] She was born Jan 5, 1930 at home - delivered by the father of the present Dr. Holt. She was reared in the neighborhood, going through high school in the same area. She was one of two students to skip a grade. Her 2nd grade teacher said she was ahead of the class. [Dr. John Holt, Lucy Harrison]

[47] The old Hill Street School was run down. Tiny desks were bolted to the floor. After the 6th grade she went to school on Asheland Ave. (where doctor's buildings are now.) She then attended the old Stephens-Lee. Mrs. Rita Lee, for whom she did a lot of paper work, told her that if she ever finished college she could have a job. She graduated in 1947 as the salutatorian. Hers was the first 12th grade class to graduate. (Had ended at 11th grade before because of the Depression.) Her high school teacher turned students to colleges as there was no college for blacks here. She went to NC Central College and loved it. Her father, away in WWII at this time, had saved money for college for her. She wanted to go into business administration but was persuaded to go with math. Her husband graduated before she did and, being afraid of losing him, she got her MLS as well as BS. They had a son and then a daughter. They were living in New York but it was hard finding someone to stay with the children and the city was becoming unsafe. The new Hill Street School opened in 1953 (grades 1-8) and Mrs. Lee (principal) asked her to be her secretary. She later became a teacher/librarian and received a teacher's certificate from the State because of experience and became certified as a librarian through the Allen University. [Rita Lee, Ruth Carolina, Harold Polite Jr., Harold Polite III, Joyce Polite]

[178] Her husband, unable to find a job in Asheville went back to NY. She set up a library in a Catholic Boys School in Connecticut, but when social conditions in NY became unstable, she returned to Asheville and stayed.

[218] She taught at Hill Street School until it closed and merged with Asheville Middle School. Her daughter went to Catholic School until it closed, and her son and daughter went to Lee Edwards. Her son got a degree in Special Ed and Physical Ed at NC Central University. Her daughter went to Forsyth in Winston-Salem (18 black and 400 whites - which she found difficult) and then to A-B Tech. She is a surgical technician. Her son, a recruiting officer, will, on retirement, go into CIA, FBI or law school.

[261] She started having trouble with blood pressure and, when guns started appearing in Asheville Middle School and one student threatened to hit her, she retired in June 1992.

[279] She spends time tutoring students in the Delta House. Shirley Whitesides showed her how to teach art classes. One day a week she worked for "First Call for Help" at the United Way. She is president of the Asheville Alumni Deltas and works with workshops started by Ollie (died several years ago). A management workshop is given on banking, another on teen pregnancy. Red Cross has given workshops on health. [Shirley Whitesides, Ollie McCool Reynolds]

[340] Last year an African/American library was started. There are plans for expansion. [Lucy Harrison]

[350] She worked at Pack Library on a story telling program. [Suzanne Williams]

[359] She is educational chairperson for pastoral council at St. Lawrence, coordinating education for children and adults.

[364] She is chairperson for the National Trans-Commission of LINKS - to try and get her people out and involved in the community.

[380] Through her daughter-in-law she became interested in ARC (Association for Retired Citizens) in the United Way building.

[400] Alfred Whiteside's mother picks her mother up every day to go to church and during the week to go to the Reed Center Program (see Oralene Simmons tape) [Alfred Whitesides]

[442] Her mother (still alive and living independently at 85) attended Allen Home School - a small Methodist boarding school, which also took day students, located across the street from the Berry Temple. Later the school was called Allen High School, ceased taking boarders, and then closed. Allen University, also a church school, is in Columbia, SC and not related.

[471] She is a Catholic convert and attended St. Anthony's. The school closed when the order left the city. The church merged with St. Mark's and when St. Eugene's was built, the Catholics went there, along with students from St. Joan of Arc and St. Lawrence. The name was changed to the Asheville Catholic School. [Bishop Waters]

[544] She is on the board of the Asheville Catholic School and two nuns are coming this year - the first for a long time. When Howze was sent to St. Lawrence, some members left, but now that he has been named a Bishop they "glory in it." At first the whites would not shake hands with the blacks (see Marjorie Maxwell tape) [I attended an 11:30 Sunday service and there were less than 10 blacks there - they may go to an earlier mass] [Father Joseph Howze, now Bishop]

Side Two:

Her mother sang in the Hopkins Chapel for 50 years and Lucy's father used to be superintendent of the Sunday School. [Lucy Harrison]

[2/37] Her daughter attended the Asheville Catholic School when it was on Victoria Road (see Mother Potts and Sister Winters tapes).

[2/43] There is a small population of Catholics in Asheville. The young people have not been joining orders as they have in the past, resulting in a decrease in demand for Catholic schools. She thought her son might become a priest, but when he entered Asheville High School he became more interested in sports.

[2/111] With integration she was given the choice of teaching in either Hall Fletcher or David Millard. She said the blacks always feared West Asheville - it was "daresome to go" across Haywood Road. While there were a few blacks on the other side of the River (Burton and Buffalo streets), they were not welcome. She went to David Millard to teach with two other blacks. With few exceptions, the teachers were unfriendly. The shop instructor was accepted and the black coach's wife was liked (because of a coach's standing). She was fortunate in that the white teacher, whose room was next to hers, was kindly. [Arthur Jackson, Sadie Moore]

[2/149] Some parents went to the principal protesting having a black teach their children. He stood by his teachers. [Gil Lance]

[2/172] Police toured the school when there were rumors that High School students were going to riot at the Jr. High. Some whites set fire to papers in black teachers' classrooms.

[2/186] Black teachers were told to ask to speak at PTA meetings. Some parents took their children out and sent them to Asheville Country Day.

[2/199] There were no meaningful workshops preparing for integration. This is a hard time for students and teachers alike. [Glenda McDowell, O.L. Sherrill]

[2/218] A white male teacher in a room next to hers never offered any assistance or welcome. He passed out during a class, she was called and summoned the ambulance. He returned several days later - never offering thanks or any comments - only to pass out again - this time he was dead.

[2/269] Her children, having had experience in NY with blacks, whites and Hispanics, did not have any trouble with integration. She feels the problem lay in poor preparation for the change and in that parents often said, "You don't have to do what she tells you because she is black."

[2/297] The first real "Stumptown" reunion was this year (1994). She and Phyllis were out of town (see Phyllis Sherrill tape by Sylvia Robin). The Stephens-Lee reunion (see Lucy Harrison tape) brought the class of 1947 back - many had not seen the city since then and had trouble finding their way around. [Phyllis Sherrill]

[2/340] She was attending a 10-week National Science Foundation Course at Duke during the building of I-40.

[2/345] When her son returned to the city, he was pleased to see the new airport and so many black football players (see Terrell tape). [Bob Terrell]

[2/392] The black elementary school children had to buy used text books. Her father bought good books for her. [Margaret Fuller told me that old text books were destroyed - this is not true - only if unusable]

[2/430] The West Asheville Branch of the library is encouraging black participation. The Asheville Colored Library before integration was in the YMI building. Mrs. Irene Hendrick (deceased) encouraged the Delta sorority sisters in the program called "Ride the Winged Horse." Every Saturday children would be picked up by car and taken for story telling time, cookies and hot chocolate. When the libraries merged the blacks got lost in the system even though the blacks joined Friends of the Library and Mrs. Hendrick kept the blacks as involved as possible. Doris went to Milwaukee with the Black Caucus of American Library Association. [Rob Neufeld, Irene O. Hendrick, Doris Brewer, Mary Parker]]

[2/490] There are still few blacks in the audience in Pack Library programs. Doris suggested her name to work with the West Branch to work with Black History. Suzanne Williams went with her. [Suzanne Williams]

[2/551] When the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (all black) was closed as the expressway went through College St., the blacks didn't go any place. Thelma Caldwell went door to door to get the blacks to go to the new Y. When asked why she didn't attend the Booster's Club anymore, she said that, with the retirement of Thelma, the club has gotten so white she, who had always been a member, didn't feel welcome. [Thelma Caldwell, Lucy Harrison, Julia Ray, Ollie McCool Reynolds]