

Julia Ray

Julia Ray was born in Marion in 1914. She graduated Barber-Scotia College in Concord and later attended the University of Pittsburgh. After graduation and before going to Pittsburgh she came back to Marion. While there she would visit her aunt in Asheville because Marion had “little social opportunity”. Because the South was still segregated at that time blacks “made their own social events”. They weren’t able to meet in restaurants or bars so they met at each other’s homes and churches. It was at one of the events that she met Jesse Ray, an embalmer for a local funeral home. She had been accepted to the University of Pittsburgh but returned after a year to marry Jesse.

They were married in 1935, during the Great Depression. She recalls that times were tough then. They were forced to work second jobs to make ends meet. She waited tables and worked as a hostess for dinner parties to earn extra money. They found it particularly hard to get money for insurance.

By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 the Ray’s had a small daughter. Mr. Ray was exempt from serving in the military since he was an embalmer and their daughter was much too young to serve. However Mrs. Ray had two brothers and Mr. Ray had five that were of age to serve. Upon hearing the news of the attack their first concern was which, if any of the brothers, would be called up. In the end only Mrs. Ray’s two brothers served. One served in the Merchant Marine in the Atlantic and saw quite a bit of action during the war. The other was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen who had just completed training as a fighter pilot with the Army Air Force when the war ended.

The war also affected those that remained at home. Mrs. Ray remembers that food and gasoline were both rationed. Between the two, gasoline was the more important which meant they tried to walk anywhere they could and saved the gasoline for important uses. The food rationing imposed hardships also and Ray remember that there “was not as much food (as before the war) and you wanted more.”

Despite being home in Asheville, Mrs. Ray found a way to contribute to the war effort. She volunteered at the USO where she, and other volunteers, provided food and entertainment for servicemen. They tried to make them feel at home by dancing with them and talking with them about their families back at home.

Her daughter also wanted to contribute and asked Mrs. Ray if it was possible for them to go down to the bus station and see off the young men going into the military. Mrs. Ray agreed and so on many mornings they would get up early and take coffee and donuts down to the departing men at the bus station. Mrs. Ray recalled that it was a sad time as the young men went off to war. It was made even sadder because she realized that all of the men, no matter their color, were going off to fight for the same purpose and yet they remained segregated at home. Interestingly she doesn’t remember a big celebration when they returned because they tended to return home in small groups and there never was an opportunity for a homecoming celebration.

While Mrs. Ray and her daughter saw the young men Asheville off to war, Mr. Ray worked at the white officers club in Asheville as a barman in addition to his job as an embalmer. After the war he learned of an opportunity to travel to Europe with the Graves Registration Service. Mrs. Ray explained that in the immediate aftermath of a battle the U.S. dead were quickly placed into temporary cemeteries throughout Europe. After the war was over the family of the dead were given the choice of having their loved ones returned to the U.S. for burial. Mr. Ray took a job as a supervisor of embalmers whose job was to prepare the bodies for shipment home. Despite the fact that the U.S. Army was segregated at the time, the Graves Registration unit was desegregated.

Mr. Ray was surprised at the number of people who wished their loved ones to remain buried in Europe. Despite this he still had much work in preparing those remains that were being transported home. He recalls only preparing the remains of one soldier from Asheville.

This job took Mr. Ray into France, Belgium, Holland and Frankfurt, Germany. In addition he spent a good deal of time in Cambridge, England. While there befriended a local family, the Andrews, who took him in as a boarder. He had met the family when Mrs. Andrews had visited the Graves Registration worksite. They had become friends and he had given her a box of 24 Hershey candy bars. She told him later that they were so popular with the family that they were gone by the next day. It was a good relationship as they provided him a nice place to live while he was overseas. In exchange he paid them rent and was able to get certain food and luxury items at the local Army bases' post exchange. In post-war England conditions were still pretty tough. Food was scarce and electricity was unavailable for certain times of the day. One of the very useful items he bought them were army blankets, Mrs. Andrews used some to make winter coats.

While he was in England he managed to find time to travel. He was relatively well paid and bus fares were cheap. He visited Westminster Abbey among other places. He also tried to write and phone Mrs. Ray when he could. He would normally write to let her know what day he would be calling. While there Mr. Ray did not experience overt racism such as he had in the segregated South. He was still aware of covert racism in his travels.

Mr. Ray was gone for over a year. When he returned, Mrs. Ray traveled to New York City to meet him. She was surprised to find he was not on the airplane, he had been bumped off with some other soldiers to make room for crates of china a general was having sent back to the states! He arrived the next day and fortunately Mrs. Ray had family in New York City she could stay with overnight. They traveled to Washington, DC the next day so he could be discharged and then returned home to Asheville.

Once home they bought the Asheville Colored Hospital and began Jesse Ray Funeral Home. They ran this successfully for many years. However the army still had a need for Mr. Ray's expertise. During the Vietnam War they requested that he return to service to handle the remains of the U.S. soldiers killed overseas. Normally, with a thriving business and young family, now including two daughters, he would have declined.

However when he worked for the Graves Registration Service after World War Two he thought he would be eligible for government benefits, he later found out he wasn't. The army had changed and now Graves Registration Service employees did receive government benefits. For this reason he considered going back into the service. Mrs. Ray had other ideas and told him "you can go anywhere you like...as long as you are home at night." She also added that they had been many years without benefits and could go on without them. Mr. Ray wisely decided to heed his wife's advice and declined the offer.