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Interview Summary

Interview: Alfreda Watkins
Date of Interview: 5/5/08
Interviewed by: Carrie Kline
Place of Interview:
Summary by: Jan Searls

Alfreda Watkins was born, raised and has lived all her life in Pleasant Grove, Alamance County, NC. In this interview she reminisces about her home, parents, family, education, marriage, and the daily life and events of her youth.

She was born May 15th, 1934, in a house on Potilla Church Road in Pleasant Grove, the third child of Heddie Martin Burnett, born 1902 and the 11th child of her father Walter Burnett. Her father had been widowed when his first wife died a week after the birth of their 7th and 8th children, twins, one of whom died a few months later.

Watkins' parents met in 1928 and married in 1929. Her mother loved children and took care of all of them as one family, although with so many older siblings, some of Alfreda's half-nieces and nephews were born about the same time as she, or shortly thereafter.

Her father was a tenant farmer who sharecropped his tobacco with landowner, Mr. McCauley. Their house was off McCauley Road, and the children were good friends and played together when their parents were in the fields. Sharecropping was hard work, and 50% of the profits of the tobacco went to the owner. She remembers her father worked long, hard hours in the fields, and sometimes slept at night in the barn to feed the fire for drying the tobacco. However, they also raised their own animals – chickens, hogs and two mules for plowing and pulling the wagon (their only transportation) – and vegetables, and had numerous fruit trees. Her mother preserved everything and they smoked their hams. Watkins remembers that although they were poor, her mother was a renowned cook and there was always an abundance of food on the table at the farm.

Events marked the farm year – the seasons and holidays full of food and community, or church events and family events such as corn husking, or putting shoeboxes out for Santa Claus to fill. Their parents always bought the children toys for Christmas, and they did not feel poor. But Watkins recalls that her mother made their clothing, and she remembers washing flour sacks for pillowcases.

Her father died when she was in third grade – she does not remember him being sick, but that he was in bed when she went to school and he told her he “always saw her sitting on a star.” Her brother came to get her at school that day and when he got her home, the funeral home had already taken her father away.

After that, her mother could not maintain the farm, so the school principal got her a job there as custodian, and they moved to a house near the school. Watkins' mother continued to raise her three children on the \$20 a week she earned there, plus the leftover food the cafeteria would give her at the end of the day.

Watkins attended the Pleasant Grove Colored School, which was well staffed with good and caring teachers but had to make do with passed-down books from the white school. One year her schoolbook bore the name of her playmate's older sister, Jane McCauley. Until Watkins was in 3rd grade, the Colored School had no cafeteria, and only had outside privies, and pot-bellied coal stoves for heat. The indoor plumbing addition to the school was a great event.

Watkins was an excellent student, and her mother had great hopes of her going to college. But although she got a perfect score on the SAT when she was a junior, and was offered a full scholarship, the Alamance County School Superintendent would not let her accept. He insisted that she had to do her Senior year first. When she graduated, the scholarship was no longer available. It still upsets her and she has never forgotten the superintendent's name: Mr. Young.

Watkins has strong memories of her classmates, teachers, the subjects she loved, the daily routine, and the order and discipline of her schooling. A devotion in the morning with a class of good singers was very enjoyable (although she was not blessed with a voice). She remembers learning French, and meeting French students when she was on a class trip to Washington, D.C. and Mount Vernon. She was able to correspond with them because she knew French.

After she graduated high school, Watkins went to work at NC Mutual Life Insurance Company in Durham until she married. While in Durham, she remembers hearing about the sit-in at the Woolworth's in Greensboro, and she and her good friend, Shirley Jefferies, decided to try it. They went to the Durham Woolworth's and sat at the counter and ordered their lunch. They were served - without question - and ate their lunch in peace. While they were paying they asked if the store served colored people. The staff said no. So when the girls said, "Well, you do because you served us," everyone was shocked. Apparently, the store didn't know they were "colored."

Watkins can still recite part of the Gettysburg Address and remembers her classroom discussion of its significance, while she reflected to herself about the injustice of "separate but equal." And when she went to a class at A&T, the students there treated her and her friend Ruth differently as well, calling them "Red Bums." The problem others had with her light complexion bothered her. It was painful to be blamed for something you couldn't help.

Her maternal grandfather, Joe Martin, was of Indian heritage. He was known for his skill with herbs and making healing teas, walking through the fall leaves without making a sound in his moccasins, gathering his supplies. He died before Watkins was

born, but her mother's older sister May (Wilson) learned his ways and cured Alfreda's jaundice when she was small. May was married to a preacher and lived to be 102. Watkins knows she has this Indian heritage, but has no consciousness of being a part of a particular tribe. She does remember stories about her other forbearers, such as her mother's grandfather being white, but not married to her grandmother.

Church was a very important part of life, although they only had one service a month. Watkins' father was a Deacon. Her family was at Martin's Chapel – built on land donated by her great-grandparents – although her father had been at the other church, Jeffries Chapel before that. The church baptized in ponds near the churches, and she remembers her baptism in 1954 at Lord Jeffries Pond.

Her husband Alton Watkins was also part of the Pleasant Grove community, and they played together as children. She stayed with him during the days one summer after he was in a severe car accident. They became, friends, confidants, and fell in love. She feels the success of their long, happy marriage has been the result of working out their problems instead of blaming each other for them. Watkins stayed home to raise her two children, but later went to Alamance Community College and worked for 26 years for Sears as Office Manager. She retired in 2004, but after three months they asked her to return. She still enjoys working there.