

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



Everybody's stories matter. It's not just a matter of nostalgia, it powers us into the present and the future. -- Barack Obama

REMEMBERING BLANCHE M. COGER

She poured her heart out into her students. That's what I was looking for. She poured her heart into her students. And she didn't see the color. -- Ethel Mae Thompson

Talk to people who attended Prentice HS, originally Montevallo Negro HS, and one name always comes up. Blanche M. Coger, a teacher of history who insisted on the highest standards for her students. She retired in 1974 after teaching for 44 years, the final four years at the desegregated Montevallo HS. In 1965 she was honored as Teacher of the Year for Shelby County. To this day her name is spoken with respect. "When B. M. Coger name come up . . . it's a good name," says Ethel Mae Thompson.



BLANCHE M. COGER
*Shelby County Teacher
of the Year for 1965*

The following remembrances come from a conversation between Ethel Mae Thompson and James Salter recorded by Kathy King in February 2023. Ethel Mae counts Mrs Coger as one of three teachers who changed her life. (The others were Mrs. Onnie Dell Fluker and Mrs. G. C. Massey.) James, who lived with and drove Mrs. Coger after her husband died, provides glimpses of her life away from the classroom. Here are some highlights of the conversation.

Ethel Mae remembers her as a "tough teacher, very. But she was loving. I mean she was just extremely demanding that we get an education. She didn't play. If you was in her room you just had to do your work." And if you didn't? "She would give us a paddling." (This was during the 60s and early 70s when parents still supported physical punishment -- paddlings, smacks with a ruler. Both Ethel Mae and James report that if you got paddled by Mrs. Coger, you could expect a beating at home. "If you got a whipping at school, by the time you got home you were gonna get another whipping," James confirmed.)

She was especially strict with the girls. She wouldn't put up with short skirts or makeup in her classroom. Ethel Mae remembers one incident where a girl dared to come wearing red lipstick -- "when I say it was red, it was red" -- and when she didn't completely wipe it off herself, Mrs. Coger finished the job with a rag she kept close by. "You don't come in Mrs. Coger's room with no lipstick on."

She encouraged everyone. "She just wanted us to get that education. And she demanded that we do our work and that we could do it." "I don't have dumb students," she repeatedly insisted. "Without an education you can't get anywhere. But if you bust these books open and you get it up here [Ethel Mae gestures to her head], nobody can take it away."



James was in her 8th grade class in Montevallo HS in 1970, the first year of full integration. "She treated the black and the white the same in that class. She still had the paddle at the high school. So no matter what color you were, if you didn't bring your homework in or did your lesson, she wasn't gonna get up now from her desk. She would call you to her desk and you would get it." He chuckles, and Ethel adds, "she wouldn't do no chasing." James agrees: "No, she didn't get up from that desk. She had a ruler too. She would use that ruler. You would hold out your hand."

James got to know Mrs Coger as well as anyone in town in some ways. From the 10th grade until the start of his senior year in college -- he was a Business major at UM -- he spent much of his time at her house. After her husband died, she asked his parents if he could come stay with her at night. She wanted company. "And you know, I didn't have a say in it, because it was Mrs Coger."

He describes going "up the hill, past the Mason Hall, past Leon Harris's house, past Shiloh, to where Mr. Goldsmith lives now, that's where Mrs Coger lived." Every evening he walked over there, every morning he would return home and get ready to go to school.

Little did James know how living with Mrs Coger would advance his education. He learned how to make a bed -- with fitted sheets, no less. "Wow, this was a new experience for me." She put him to work in her garden, after a Mr. Johnson who lived in the community had dug it up. James would plant flowers and then the weeds came. "And she would sit there on the back porch while I'm back here pulling up the weeds." On Saturdays he would "clean house for her, vacuum and sweep the floor, dust, all of that. Mopped up the kitchen floor."

James would drive her to church in her green Dodge and all over Shelby county. "Turn here," she would say, "turn there." He never knew where they were going. The first time he drove her to Montgomery to visit her sister was a scary new experience: "I was so nervous gettin' on that interstate."

Mrs. Coger was hard and demanding. She struck fear in the hearts of some of her students but Ethel Mae and James agree that she inspired warm feelings as well. She earned her students' respect, white kids and black, and they all loved her. "That's the woman we're talking about. She poured her heart into her students. That's what I was looking for. She poured her heart into her students. And like James said she didn't see the color. You was just her student. And that meant a lot to her."

Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims. Do you have a memory of Mrs Coger to share? Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome corrections of fact and interpretation.