Untold Stories OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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"WE JUST WANTED THINGS TO BE FAIR": The Suburban League and the Fight for Equity in Montevallo, Alabama

Black folks wasn't doing nothing but cleaning up, sweeping up, mopping, stacking groceries. Why they can't be on the cash register? – Rev. Albert L. Jones, founding member of the Montevallo Suburban League

Montevallo never made national headlines during the Civil Rights Era. But in the 1970s, this small town stood out as an Alabama civil rights city. The fight for equity was led by a community group known as the Suburban League. One of the League's first efforts centered on a simple but powerful demand: put a Black person on the cash register at Moss's Food Center.

Sylvia Vassar, who has written one of the only accounts of the *Suburban League* (Shelby County History & Heritage, Fall/Winter 2022), described it as "a small group of men from Montevallo that fought against racial injustice." According to one of its founding members, Rev. Albert L. Jones, the group was loosely aligned with the National Urban League. Under Whitney Young in the 1960s, the NUL focused on workplace discrimination, especially in the South.

The Suburban League's mission in Montevallo was clear: *"equal opportunity for Blacks."* But it had to be a collective effort. *"We got some things that needed to be changed,"* said Jones. *"But we couldn't do it individually—it had to be as a group."*

In the early 1970s, the League concentrated on two main areas: workplace discrimination and the inequities that accompanied school integration. Integration was a double-edged sword for the local African American community. Black girls, for example, lost out on the chance to be cheerleaders, as they might have been at the all-Black Prentice High School. A skilled food service worker with administrative experience in an all-Black setting found herself pushed to the bottom, washing dishes.

"We just wanted things to be fair—for our children and our children's children," Jones reflected.

The League decided to challenge the unwritten rule that kept Blacks off cash registers in grocery stores. *"You didn't see a Black person on no cash register,"* Jones said. *"We were cleaning up, mopping, stacking groceries. Why not the cash register?"*

That question sparked action. *"I got five more guys to work with me. We started a Suburban League—just under the Urban League,"* Jones explained. Among them were Leon Harris, Clifton Lacey, Rev. Eugene Vassar (pastor of Pilgrim Rest and father of author Sylvia Vassar), and a young Rodger Smitherman—now a state senator and the only surviving male member of the original League. Other leaders include Rev. Dwight Dillard of Ward Chapel; Mr. George Dailey; Mr. Amos Nix (possibly the treasurer); Mr. Fred Alexander; Mr. R. B. Burns; and Rev. George Craig, who pastored in Montgomery and Birmingham but lived in Montevallo's Selma Road area.

Sarah Lacey opens an early MLK Day Program with the Star Spangled Banner. To her right is Dr. Earl C. Cunningham.

Jones recalled the day they approached Mr. Moss at the Food Center: "*We said, is it possible for you to hire a Black person on the cash register?"* Moss was blunt: *"Ain't nobody gonna tell me who to put on the cash register. I'll put who I want."*

Leon Harris, outspoken and fearless as always, hinted at a boycott. "We'll just carry our business somewhere else," he said.

They left. But not long after, Moss called them back. Did they know anyone qualified? The League was ready. They had already identified three or four skilled candidates willing to step into this highly visible role. One was Sarah Lacey.

Ms. Lacey, still active in her church and community, shared with us her memories of that time. She had joined the Alabaster branch of the Suburban League in March 1970, led by Robert Tolbert and Eloise Underwood (mother of DRUM the Program's Elvie Schooley). She and three others—Mrs. Henrietta Gilbert, Carolyn Harris (daughter of Leon Harris), and Robert Grayson—had been approached by the League as potential cash-register trailblazers. She started to work at the Food Center in April 1970. She recalls that Leon Harris would come into the Moss Food Center and ask loudly, "How are they treating you today?"

Putting Sarah Lacey on the register may seem like a small thing. But it was big, and it made a powerful statement: a Black woman could succeed in a position requiring math and customer service skills, reliability, attention to detail, and integrity--to say nothing of self-control in the face of slights or worse.

Rachel Crick notes in *The Civil Rights Trail Travel Guide* (2023): "The smallest towns can set the stage for some of the biggest changes." Soon after Lacey started, three more Black cashiers were hired in Montevallo and, before long, Jones recalled with satisfaction, Black workers were ringing up groceries across Shelby County.

Stay tuned. The little-told story of Montevallo's Suburban League continues next month.

Our thanks to Sarah Lacey for sharing her role in an event that transformed little Montevallo into an Alabama civil rights city. We also relied on an oral history interview recorded in Feb. and Dec. 2019 at Rev. Jones's home and preserved in the University of Montevallo's Milner Archives and Special Collections. For expanded content and more detailed documentation, an enhanced version appears in themontevallolegacyproject.com. Do you have something to add to our knowledge of the Suburban League? We would love to hear from you at Montevallolegacy@gmail.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims.