

# Untold Stories



## OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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### IT JUST WASN'T RIGHT : REV. ALBERT L. JONES IN HIS OWN WORDS

A little told story of civil rights activism in Montevallo can be pieced together from an oral history interview of Rev. Albert L. Jones (1938-2022) recorded in 2019. His own words reveal a man energized by love of God's word and commitment to doing the right thing. "I knew what we were going through. It just wasn't right." "I just thought that all peoples ought to be treated right." Pride, dignity, decency, and a powerful sense of justice propelled him to the front of the civil rights struggle in our town in the 1960s and 1970s.

He was one of the co-founders of the local Suburban League, a "step down," as he put it, from the better-known National Urban League. Their mission was specific: to work for equal employment opportunities in our area. Other members included Leon Harris (Sr), E. E. Vassar, George Craig, and Rodger Smitherman. Three of the leaders -- Vassar, Craig, and Jones -- were preachers. Rodger Smitherman, the only member still living, is now a state senator.

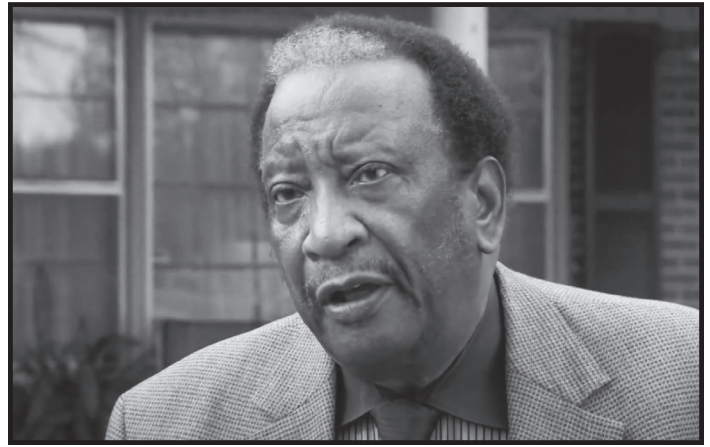
An early effort was to move beyond the menial jobs assigned to African Americans in grocery stores. "Black folks wasn't doing nothing but cleaning up, sweeping up, mopping, stacking groceries. Why can't they be on the cash register?" The threat of a boycott was enough to convince one grocery store owner to let Black citizens work the registers. Amazing. Black folks calculating sums, handling money, and working directly with customers of all races. A small change, perhaps, but with huge implications.

A campaign addressing discrimination in the school system produced an episode of racial intimidation not uncommon in the Jim Crow South: a front-yard cross-burning.

The trouble began when Jones and others went to the principal to protest unequal treatment at Montevallo HS. A federal decree had ended segregation but "there wasn't a black principal nowhere. There wasn't a black assistant principal nowhere. They took all the coaches, all of them white. They took all the cheerleaders, they had to be white. The majorettes were white." Black students complained: "That's not right." Jones agreed. But it was the plight of an aggrieved lunchroom lady that spurred confrontation with the principal. For years she had been lunchroom supervisor at the "Negro" Prentice HS. Now she was stuck with wiping up dirty dishes. "Integration" turned a supervisor into a dish washer. That wasn't right either.

*And you know at this time I didn't really care what my life been no more, I mean, things that wasn't right, I mean you got to really feel it, the things that was going on, the injustice was going on. So we go over . . . and said, look here, black folk been pushed into the corner, and now you all gonna make this girl wash dishes.*

The principal declined to take action, so the group walked out. "That night they burnt a cross in my yard. Right there in my yard, right there." His wife and children were terrified. "They see that big ole cross a-burning out there, and all the



**REV. ALBERT JONES**

barking, all the dogs barking and everything." Jones got out his gun.

He was told the cross was the work of the local police. His mother-in-law up the street, outside at 2 AM to use the outhouse, recalled seeing "a police car coming down here, and they had lights on in the inside and they was laughing, coming on down driving slow and laughing." Jones took up the matter with the mayor and police chief, and that brought an end to cross burnings. Some police came and cleaned up the charred remains and promised it would not happen again. It didn't.

The League was effective in other ways. A biracial grievance committee was formed at the HS to address conflicts. The school agreed to include Black students in the cheerleading and majorette squads and came up with a plan to introduce Black students into the student government. It took work, a lot of work, but integration started to penetrate more deeply into the experience of students and faculty at Montevallo HS.

Eventually the practice of hiring Blacks to work grocery cash registers spread throughout the county. Bank tellers were next. The League helped place a man who became our first Black mail carrier, according to Leon Harris Jr. Its leaders worked with Mayor Ralph Sears to get roads paved in our African American communities and to name streets with "mostly black names," especially "some of the forefounders."

The work of the Suburban League went on for years. It was a struggle, but a nonviolent and necessary one inspired by Martin Luther King:

*There wasn't nobody really stepping in front trying to get change. There's got to be somebody up front trying to get it changed if you're going to get it changed. So we knew a lot of things wasn't right, you know . . . So we wanted to do it peaceful and keep God in front . . . because with God with us we could get things done.*

Rev Jones answered the call to step in front for change. "I just wanted things to be fair, now, for my children, my children's children."

**Sources:** We relied on an oral history interview recorded in Feb. and Dec. 2019 at Rev. Jones's home and preserved in UM's Milner Archives and Special Collections. Thanks are due to Carey Heatherly, Archivist, for his assistance.

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