

# Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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

## **CALLED TO TEACH: THE LEGACY OF BLANCHE COGER**

*She made a difference. She made a difference in my life.*  
-- former student, Rev Albert L. Jones

*There isn't a word I don't think in the vocabulary that I can use to describe Blanche Coger. She was just a phenomenal woman.* -- former student, Dr Annie McClain

The "Brown v. Board of Education" decision ended legal racial separation in the public schools. This was a gain for Black children but brought losses as well. Historian Annette Gordon-Reed, who lived through mandated desegregation in Texas, explains: Many Black teachers in the segregated South looked upon teaching as a calling. Women in the classroom, like men in the pulpit, felt they had a mission to prepare "the next generation of Black children to take the steps toward community advancement" (*On Juneteenth*, 50-51). This Untold Story honors that generation of teachers who saw teaching as a call to service, a mission to encourage and uplift the next generation of Black leaders.

One was Blanche Coger, featured in an earlier Untold Story. Tough but loving, feared but beloved, she pushed students of all colors to learn to their fullest capacity. (After teaching in "negro" schools from 1934 to 1969, including Prentice High School, she was transferred in 1970 to the newly integrated high school in Montevallo.) Some of her Prentice students were inspired to go into education themselves. Two shared their thoughts on her shaping role in their lives.

The Rev. Albert L. Jones, tireless champion of education for children of all skin colors, never forgot his first encounter with Mrs. Coger. She hit him over the head in the hallway of Prentice High School! But she turned out to be his "best friend."

*I remember at the Prentice High School this big old lady standing in the hallway, and she was tough. I had heard about her, and when I got there, she knew me. I said, uh oh. She hit me over my head, and she said, now Albert, we ain't going to have no trouble like we had in the school over there. What do you mean by that? She said, I heard about you.*

*But anyway, she turned out to be my best friend 'cause she kept me on the path right. She see me doing something wrong and she would get me. She didn't let me get by with nothing. But that helped me though. She made a difference. She made a difference in my life.*

Long-time Montevallo resident Dr Annie McClain, retired registered nurse, police officer, counselor, teacher, and school principal, attended Prentice High School from 1958 to 1965. She recalled in a telephone interview the nurturing role Mrs. Coger played in her life. She puts it beautifully: Mrs. Coger and two other teachers, Mrs. Junnie Mae Craig and Ms. Lillian P. Gibson, "were my leaning poles; watching over me as though they were my mothers, especially Mrs. Coger, especially her."

Mrs. Coger taught her how to respond to bullying without self-destructive anger. She made sure that there was enough food at home and that Annie had all the personal items she might need. When graduation came, she and Ms. Gibson helped with expenses. Mrs. Coger was there for others as well, offering everything from encouragement to financial help, and she made herself available at all times of the night.



**BLANCHE COGER**

*She had a big heart. She loved everybody, it didn't matter the color of your skin, or your ethnicity. She just had an open heart and open door. 12 or 1 o'clock at night if you needed Mrs. Coger you could call her.*

*It didn't bother her. It was a gift she knew God had given her, an act that she had to perform; her ministry. A lot of people think ministering is preaching from a pulpit, but not always. The call can come in many different ways. Mrs. Coger was doing just that, being there for the students at Prentice who needed a solid person in their life, someone they knew they could trust with their heart.*

A recent article in *Education Week* argues that "schools should embrace the rich pedagogy and practices that were common among black teachers in segregated schools." The example of Blanche Coger surely helps make the case.

Sources: Oral history of Rev Jones recorded Feb and Dec 2019 and preserved in UM's Milner Archives and Special Collections; telephone interview with Annie McClain recorded April 4, 2023. The article from *Education Week*, "65 Years After 'Brown v. Board': Where Are All the Black Educators?" (May 14, 2019), is available at <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/65-years-after-brown-v-board-where-are-all-the-black-educators/2019/05>.

*Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims. Do you have an untold story you'd like to tell or have told? Contact us at [MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com](mailto:MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com). We want to hear your stories and welcome corrections of fact and interpretation.*