

**University of Mississippi
Center for the Study of Southern Culture**

**Black Families in Yalobusha County
Interview with Keon Burns**

**March 10, 2021
Interviewer: Anita Covington
Length: 40:39**

Anita Covington: 00:05 **[Interview Begins]**
But I would tell him, sometimes he would have a problem about me using the car when I go down to different schools like I went to the elementary school. And I went to the high school. One thing I can say, he respected me; he would question me, but he respected me. A couple times I would go into the classroom and talk with the teachers and see what they needed and stuff. I would come in there, and some of the other people would be in there and some of the other people would be in there. He would see me, and he would say, "I have to wait on you later, I got to talk to this lady right here." He did respect me because he knew but I was coming there to see if everything was up to part for those children in those classrooms. He did respect me for that, and I really appreciated that. It was an experience. I believe the lord seen fit for me, to want to get involved in the community and get involved in children's life. Because somebody had to do it, somebody had to want to.

By being in the school district, and by caring a lot of the teachers in the community did you used to call and let me know--. One man in the community was having a problem with day son, and he had got throwed out of school. He knew what had happened. He wanted us to give the child a chance, you know. He had had a behavior, and They had the alternative school. You know, where they put them in the alternative school. They would call me, at the time there was three of us, three blacks on the school board at the time. They

would call us and asks us to have lenient on their children. It was good to have somebody in your community who can speak for you, you know. Because see, some people in the community are not for you, so it was good to have somebody that is for you. I really thank God. They really respected me for that, for wanting to be on the school board and too for the children in the community. And that was a blessing right there.

Keon Burns:

As someone who went to a segregated school when you were in elementary school, then your children went to an integrated school in Coffeerville [Mississippi] right? So, the first time we interviewed you talked about a lot of your teachers were also in the community, and they were your church members. So you would even begin lessons at church.

Anita Covington:

Yeah

Keon Burns:

3:00

Do you think, were a lot of your children's teachers also members of the community or because it was an integrated school were they not part of y'all's same community?

Anita Covington:

Oh yeah, they was. Because there was a young lady, she and I were really good friends, Helen Hamilton. Well, it was Helen Jones. Her husband and I belong to the same church. She was my children's teacher. And then a lot of them too were in the district like Mrs. Kee. She is in the district, and her Church of Pleasant Grove is in the district too. a lot of them were in the community. Now, for my school when I went to my school in Grenada, Willie Wilson and Kerry Dawson high school. Yeah,

they was in the community also. Like Mrs. Keys and a lot of them belong to New Hope church where my mother and I, we all went to church at. A lot of schoolteachers belong to our church there also when I went to school up there at Kerry Dawson and Willie Wilson. It is a lot of them, but you want me to distinguish between the two? It was good to know that you had them to talk to like if your child--. Like how are used to go sit in the schools, and ask Mrs. Kee to talk to Pam. Sometimes like with my mom Mrs. Keys, and she would ask my mom, they was working together in the church.

They was working together in the church. And I know if I did do something wrong, they were going to tell it. Mrs. Harvey if I did something wrong, they were going to tell Madae. That is why you had to walk upright that is why you have to walk upright and that is why you have to walk upright with your own children too. The things have really fallen so short now, but you have to walk upright for your teachers and for your principles and your children. especially, if your teachers are in your church, your principles go to your church and teachers go to your church. We had to walk upright, and Same thing with mine. They had to walk upright. It needs to be like that now, it really needs to be like that now. Things have really changed.

Keon Burns:

Let me shift gears for a minute, I want to ask you about growing up in Grenada, and there being, I know you talked about the church. The church that y'all went to, your church home, was there also a community of beauty shops, Barber shops, grocery stores that black people owned as well.

Anita Covington:

6:00

Yeah. Mrs. Green she owned a beauty shop and we used to go to her right there on Union St. they used to go to her house, I mean go to her shop and do her. The beauty shop that I had it

was owned by the (06:18) they renovated for me to put my beauty shop in it. it was a black man, the name of it was Watson's grocery. And he was black he used to rent that from them. Lee Watson em' that was their brother; they own that grocery store. Then there was the BBQ place. It was a lot of businesses up and down Union Street. The theater was owned by a black man, the Grenada theater; It was owned by a black man. Then the Walker Cafe that was owned by a black man. It was a lot of black businesses up and down Union St. We stayed over from Union Street.

Then we had a lot of cafes, it used to be Willow café, then chat and chew café. It was a lot of black businesses during that time. It was thriving at that time, black businesses, it was a lot of like businesses. But it ain't black businesses like it used to be up in black communities. a lot of them are not in black communities like it used to be. They kinda scattered them out now in different places. They are kind of next dough to other peoples now, but they used to be right there together, in a huddle. It was a black hotel in Grenada, I can't think of the name right now. It got burned down. It was a lot of black businesses during that time.

Keon Burns:

To talk some about the mass protests that took place in 1966 in the Grenada freedom movement, I know when you spoke earlier you told me that you were part of this movement, right?

Anita Covington:

08:24

Martin Luther King and Jose Williams and Reverend Abernathy, they came down there at that time, and they marched those little girls trying to segregate schools. That is when I told you, my sister was the one who went to jail. They was marching, this church that Martin Luther King used to speak to in Grenada name of it was Bell Flower. He used to speak at Bell Flower M.B. church. He used to speak there all

the time, and we used to be standing outside listening. We was real young then; we were teenagers. We used to be sitting out there listening to him speak, but they used to march up and down the 51 highway. They always marched to that church, and he would speak at that church. It was Jose Williams, Martin Luther King, and Reverend Abernathy. They all used to be there marching up and down the street and speak at their church in Grenada. I think when you look at that history, you will find it at the church where he used to speak at all the time, Bell Flower.

Keon Burns:

That is why I remembered the name, Bell Flower. The Greens? Was something else that I read that he was doing a speech. It was a night rally. On the Greens, he was standing in front of this confederate monument.

Anita Covington:

That is Uptown, now they have put a cloth over it now.

Keon Burns:

Over the monument?

Anita Covington:

Yeah, they was Uptown. He will speak up there if he was not at Bell Flower, he would be Uptown.

Keon Burns:

Did you see any of the, I was reading that there were was like a--. When they were doing the protests and marching, there was a white mob on a specific day, September 12, 1966. They started attacking people as they were trying to integrate into the schools. Some people got into the schools, some people were assaulted, beaten, broken bones. Then they just kind of

went on home and waited until lunch time, and some people that did make it in. They came out and attacked those students as well.

Anita Covington:

I didn't get a chance to see it, but I know my sister got attacked. Juanita got attacked, but I had gone home. I had went back home. She had got attacked because she came home bleeding, but she never did stop she went back again and that is when they got a bus on her. I did see the bus load of em', they put a busload of them for jail and took them to Parchment [Mississippi Prison]. I did see that, but I was not in that march. She was in that march, but I wasn't in that march. But I did see them; they did attack them. But I didn't see them attack them, but I knew Juanita came home. And she was bleeding because she never did stop. She was very persistent. [Laughter] She was very persistent; she wouldn't stop for nothing. I did see them about to load them up and take them to Parchment.

Keon Burns:

That seems to be a characteristic that all of y'all had Juanita, your mom, all of y'all seem to be really, really persistent. Was your mom around at this time?

Anita Covington:

11:40

Yeah, because my mom used to stand up in that door and she would call me, "Look at Juanita. Look at Juanita, but that's my daughter. That's my daughter" [Laughter] She would say, "That's my daughter, that's my daughter." She couldn't make her stop because that was for a good cause. We used to sat up in the door. I was kind of a person that was just kind of look on the outside and look in, but she was always telling me, "Come on. Come on Anita. Come on. Come on." She would

get me into a whole lot of trouble. [Laughter] She would get me into a whole lot of trouble, but I would just go on anyway. Yeah, I used to see it. Madae used to sit back and look at her, but she didn't say anything. She would just say, "Look at my daughter. Look at Juanita." I think in so many words, she was proud of her. She was making history really. She was making history.

It was all for a good cause, back then you had to go to the back door whenever I would go pick up Madea. we would go to the back door, pick her up from Monte Cristo. not only her, a lot of people were working at Monte Cristo. Mr. West, his children had to come to the back and pick him up. They would have them so white, everything was so white. They had white chef hats, white dress, white stockings, white shoes, everything was white. I mean it was pure white because my momma used to wash her dresses in bloom. They called it blooming to make a white. But we all used to have to go to the back door to pick them up. It was one of the most top notch restaurants in Grenada; it had a swimming pool and all that kind of stuff. We used to look at the people in the swimming pool, swimming. we wouldn't dare in the swimming pool. We could not get into the swimming pool. We would sit there and wait until Madea comes out, and daddy would go pick her up, when they did have a car. We'd wait until Madea, come out then we would have to go home because we could not participate in nothing like that.

We as young people, we were curious and stuff like that and when they did start doing that everybody wanted--. We had to go to certain stores and places, and they would hand us stuff through the window. We couldn't even go in there and pay for our stuff; some of them used to throw our stuff to us. They would get our money and throw our change to us, but they wanted our money. But they did not want to be around us.

Sometimes, takes a toll on a young person back then during that time. It took a toll on them. Madea couldn't do anything, but take it because they had to provide for their family.

Sometimes that was the only job that people really had if you did not have a job out sharecropping, especially in those little small towns like that.

That was the only job they had was cooks. Cooks and janitors, Mr. West was a cook too. Janitors, people used to clean up the hotel rooms and the maids and stuff. That was the only job that people had back then, especially if you have a large family. we didn't stay out in the country. Some people stayed out in the country, they could farm or go half with other people. When I moved to Oakland, this white man, once again another member of my church, had peas. Peas and butterbeans and stuff like that I would go half with this white man. I had my beauty shop at that time. Mrs. Sophia told him about me. Me and my few children would go out there and pick peas and butter beans and go half.

He get half of the beans and whatever we pick I used to tell him, look, my Mama had told me how to defreeze one half meat and one half of vegetables. We not gonna go out here and pick these peas and butter beans and this white man get all the peas and butter beans. [Laughter] One year I picked 22 bushes of peas and 12 bushes of butter beans. He would divide whatever it was, and every year I still have my beauty shop, Anita you gone pick peas and butter beans on have with me this year? I say, "Yes sir." we will go out there; my children would get so mad. We would be on our knees picking them peas and butter beans, but that was showing them how to provide.

It was showing them how to provide. Sometimes I have so many peas and butter beans, I used to give them away. We

went out there and pick those peas and butter beans for that white man every year, and we was going on half. I was not going to get up there and do five and I didn't get none. You know. We would come home and shell them peas, your hands and fingers used to be so purple. [Laughter] My son used to say, "My hands is so purple; my fingers is so purple." He used to get mad at me, but we did what we had to do. I did what I had to do to provide for my family.

At the time, I was a single mother and that man wanted me to pick. one of my church members told him about Anita, "Anita will do it. Anita will do it. Her and those children will do it." And shall nuff, I said, "Yes ma'am." We went out there and picked them peas and butter beans, and I was working down there at the beauty shop with Mrs. Kaluga. I would take them down there to Mrs. Kaluga, and "Anita what you doing with all those peas in butter beans?" I say, "I picked them off from a white man."

Anyway, I would give them away. She would say, "Why are you giving them away? You should sell them." I say, "Nawl, I am not going to sell them." I would give them to them, but every year he call us. And we would go pick those peas and butter beans; we would put something on our knees. When I was young they were around 10, 12, or 13 years old, let them no they know how to provide and survive. if they don't know how to survive now, they didn't get it from me because they know how to survive on those peas and butter beans.

[Laughter]

Keon Burns:

They probably don't want to eat peas and butter bean to this day after that.

Anita Covington:

Some of them don't care nothing about them, but you got to know how to provide. I got that from my mom and dad. You got to know how to provide.

Keon Burns:

So, I am curious, what made you not want to sell them? What made you decide that you were going to give these away? You didn't put all this labor in hard work into picking them, but you wanted to give them away not sell them.

Anita Covington:

18:50

Because I had gotten what I want out of them, and I had so many left over. I could have sold them to them, but it just wasn't in me to sell them. I don't know why, it just wasn't in me to sell them, you know. I was doing her with Mrs. Kaluga, and people come in there, "We shall would like to have some peas and butter beans." And I was taking them down there, but I just don't know. It didn't dawn on me to sell them. I just gave them away because I had already got all what I needed. I just had more than enough. I just gave it to somebody that needed it.

I gave it to some of the young women who were coming in there getting their hair done, and some of the old ladies coming in there to get their hair done. Mrs. Bane says, "You hey get no peas and butter beans this year?" I say, "Hold on, I am going to have some." And I would give them to them. It didn't really dawn on me to sell it to them, at the time. Now sometimes we would sell watermelons for the church over here, but during that time I didn't think about even selling it to them. I just gave them away.

Everybody would get on me, " Why did you--? At the time, I didn't even know how much a bushel of peas was. I didn't know how much a bushel of butter beans was. I really didn't know; I just know that we had more than enough, we picked more than enough for ourselves, for me and my family. It

wasn't no idea that I wanted anything for them because whoever wanted them they could have them.

Keon Burns:

How did your mother, Madea, kind of explain the way that you had to take some of the discrimination in the public like did they kind of sit all down and talk with y'all? Or was it more of a comma you learned through seeing it?

Anita Covington:

20:37

That and that, both of them really. Madea used to tell us about what was going down at the Monte Cristo. How people was coming in there to eat, and sometimes, the black people would come in from up north. The black people would come in from up north, and they would stop in there and want to eat. Black people back then, it wasn't segregated up north like it was down South. She would tell us, "Some black people came in from so and so, and wanted to eat and stuff. They would put them out and stuff like that. That was one way of her showing us too. Plus you would see it when you go into stores like my mother had this account at Dallas.

She was, my mama was very nice. She was a class woman who was going to tell you the truth, she was a classy woman. She had this account at the store, and this woman, she would go into the store and want to get a nice dress for Sunday or something like that. The woman would put it on her account, she had an account with those people. Anyway, whenever we would go in the store, we had to wait. We had to wait in line; I would come to pay on my mother's account and stuff like that whenever I was sent to pay on her account. Sometimes we would take her up there to pay on her account and then what she used to tell us when she would come home. She had a lot

of stories to tell us when she came home from their job about how people--.

Once, this young man was dating one of the owners' daughter, and they wanted to get married. they had to leave Grenada because they was discriminating. They didn't want them to get married, and they had been going together for a while. My Mama used to talk about how, because she knew the young man he supposed to be some kin to us some kind of way. How Harvey, his name was Harvey, you bring in a lot of things up. [Laughter] In my memory. How Harvey had to leave because if they didn't, they were going to kill him. If he didn't get out of Grenada, they was gonna kill him because that owner didn't want him dating his daughter. They left and went up north to get him out of Grenada because that man knowed that he was going with his daughter. They probably was going to kill him and go head and kill him.

A lot of things she told us about what was going on when she came home. Then a lot of things we would see out in the community for ourselves. We was young too, we were in our teens, but we still keep things, how people acted toward us and stuff. We could tell. I had left, I came back I went to Chicago and Jose and King were still there. I have bought me a leather coat; my auntie or somebody brought me that leather coat when I was up there. I forgot how I got that leather coat. And Jose say, "Ain't nobody got no leather coat around here like that." And I was walking, and they stop me. "You better hide that leather coat, then people gonna take that leather coat from you." You know, because black people don't have stuff like that. They don't have stuff like that.

It was probably a long time before I wore that leather coat again, but things were different down here then they were up north. It was totally different. You could see it, then you could

see it in your family, you could see it in your children. People went to church to release a lot of that stuff. If we didn't have the church, I don't know what we would have had. If we didn't have the church, we would go to church on Sunday. And we would be there to fellowship with one another and lift one another up and support one another. I don't know what we would have did if we didn't have one another to support one another and lift each other up because there was so much going on during that time. But a lot of stuff, between those times you could see that other people were discriminating.

Keon Burns:

Right, I don't know this is going back, but when you would see these things and when you would hear these things as a teenager, would it like frighten you? Would you be afraid? Would it make you mad? Would it kind of confuse you? Do you remember kind of, what feelings you had around a lot of things that were happening?

Anita Covington:

24:45

Well, you know, I used to be the one who would wonder why. I used to wonder why. We were not bought back up in the 30s and 40s, and I used to wonder why life was like that until Madae sat down and and tell us about what was going on. Then another thing too, you were in school, the teachers would tell you about a lot of that stuff too. We knew we had to be careful, we knew we had to be careful. You knew you had to gone do what you got, you had to go home and you couldn't be walking out at night. You couldn't be out at night. We didn't have a lot of things; we didn't have a TV. I remember when we didn't have no TV, we used to, the lady across the street had a TV. She had first got a TV. We used to sit on her porch and look through her screen door and watch the TV.

Because we could not afford a TV, all of us sat on the porch and watch the TV through her screen door.

Keon Burns:

She didn't let y'all come in? Or y'all didn't--.

Anita Covington:

27:06

Nawl, she was a lady; she had children herself. So, my Mama would not let us go in the house; she just tell us if we wanted to watch TV, we would watch TV sometimes to dark. Then go home. we didn't go over her house all the time, you know. Say shows came on, we would watch TV and stuff like that over to other people's house. But it was on the porch; we didn't have no TV because Mama and daddy could not afford a TV. Like I said, them little jobs they didn't pay that much. Then you had a lot of children, if you had a lot of children, it took a lot for a lot of children. Then you had to improvise on other stuff besides that little money, go to little lockers and stuff and get peas and stuff. People head stuff out in the country, you had to buy stuff from them. They had their little markers on the side of the road. You had to go get greens and stuff from them.

You know what, we didn't have a whole lot, but we were happy. We were not sad about it. We were not sad that we didn't have anything, but it taught us how to appreciate stuff that you do have. How to appreciate stuff that you do have that is one good thing about it. Appreciate stuff and help one another. If you see somebody else need some help, that is why I say help one another because she knew we didn't have a TV. And she knew that we wanted to watch TV because her children had told us about the TV. Then her children told us about the TV, so she knew we wanted to go watch it. And so, "Y'all come on over. Come on over. Y'all watch TV. Y'all watch TV."

I remember, we were living in this apartment. Two rooms on this side and two rooms on this side, you go into a hall, and it

is a door right there in the hall. And two rooms on this side in two rooms on that side, and we had all the children in that two room apartment. And back on the back was the outhouse; we would use the outhouse. The whole community was using the outhouse, and we would get oranges and apples for Christmas. I didn't get no dolls, or we didn't get no clothes. Nothing but the clothes Madae made. now, Madae sewed all of our clothes, but whenever Christmas come, we looked in that door in the hall. And there all the oranges and apples were in there being nose and found it. [Laughter]

Keon Burns:

I remember when I interviewed Mrs. Lillie Mae Roberts, she was telling me that some of the things they would get fruits for Christmas, and she told me that those fruits were different. They could smell those fruits from around the house.

Anita Covington:

Yeah. You could smell them. we knew something was in there because you could smell them, sure can. It wasn't no hard, hard, hard time. It's just that we had to wait on the Lord to bless us and appreciate what we did have. And we didn't miss no meal, because she would always make something out of nothing. We didn't have to go starving; we went to school sometimes and we didn't have a lot of shoes. But she made our clothes, and we went to school. We had one bicycle, and it was used. Juanita used to have to, she used to jack me off that bicycle all the time. she would scar my knee up because she said it was her turn. [Laughter] She said it was her turn, but anyway, it was my turn but she wanted to do my turn in her turn too.

I always been the quietest one, but she was on the rough side. she would fight in a minute now, she didn't let nobody get nothing over her. She would fight the other race; she would let

nobody, no. If she knew you were wrong, she would tell you that you were wrong. It was some good times. I wouldn't say it was some hard, hard, hard times. Some people have endured a lot of stuff back in those days. How people would talk back to them, call them names and stuff like that. I never did endure that, all them kind of names and stuff. I never did endure that. I am thankful to the Lord that I didn't, if my sister did Juanita would get a 2x4 in a minute.

We had a fruitful life; we had a good life. Most of my sisters, older sisters, they were up north and all the youngest ones, I think it was my sister Ellen on down. It was about six of still home the rest of them, were up north. They had migrated to up to Chicago to Milwaukee during that time. We youngest ones were still at home. It was a long time before I even knew that I had any other sisters and brothers. I had a brother in the army as a matter of fact two brothers in the army that I had never seen before. Because they were older than we was like I said my mother had (33:17) of children. But we still didn't have anything, and the ones of north they really didn't have anything either because they were probably just getting on their feet trying to have something to. They could not send anything back to mama and dad. They were trying to get their families too. I wouldn't say it was a bad time, it was just a learning experience. it was all about what you wanted to do with your life, and how to treat people. You treat people like you want to be treated.

Keon Burns:

34:04

When would y'all have to interact with other races with white people? so would y'all like, I know y'all didn't go to the same school as white people did so when would y'all interact with other white children. When would y'all see them?

Anita Covington:

We never dare really see them because we went to, there were three black schools in Grenada. It was Willie Wilson, Kerry Dawson, and John Row. That was the three black schools, Willie Wilson, Kerry Dawson, and John Row. We didn't go to school with them; I didn't go to school with them. During my time, we was not segregated, but I think during my husband's time, they came in segregated the school during his time. But during my time they didn't. Only time we see children, like walking during the time on the Green or out. We see them out shopping with their parents and stuff like that. Or we would see them at different places eating and stuff, but as far as going to school with them, I never had any in my day.

Keon Burns:

I remember you saying that Juanita wasn't going to take no smack off of anybody.

Anita Covington:

But you know we'd be out shopping and stuff, and some people was just staring at Juantia. They used to have this little store, (35:59) if a person stare at her, "What in the ___ you looking at me for?" I say, "Juanita why you say that to that woman?" She ain't got no business looking at me. Sometimes I used to tell her, be quiet girl just shhh. She ain't got no business--. Sometimes people would stare at you, especially when you were getting stuff and they don't know how you getting it, especially that other race. They be wondering. Juanita where is getting two pair of shoes because they were on sale. We were standing up in the store, and they were wondering how she was going to buy them two pair of shoes. She was just sitting around there staring, and Juanita caught her staring at her, you know. And Juanita say, "What in the so and so you looking at me for?" I would be embarrass really, well she ain't got no business standing up here staring at me,

gone get her some shoes and don't be looking up at me. That was Juanita, but that was the only time that we would see other people when we go out.

It used to be Shane Bird and a lot of places. They had different hardware stores, dry good stores they have clothes and like denim, shoe stores and stuff they used to have them on sale. Back then, they had a lot of sales, and they had good quality stuff too. We be in the stores, and sometimes they would look at us and wonder how we get in this. Or how we are buying this and that. She would not bite her tongue when somebody is standing there looking at her. They was wondering how we bought this and how we bought that. Mother and daddy been done worked hard for that money and gave us that money. We would go down there and get some shoes for church. Juanita, they would tick her off in a minute. I would say that it was hard, hard, hard, hard times; it was just sometimes that we went through. We went through it; we sure did. And we came out on the other end.

A lot of stories like this, our young kids need to know. Maybe it should be some kind of way that our children need to know about history. because a lot of them don't know about our history. A lot of them don't know about our upbringing, or what we went through. They need to know that. I don't know how we can do that to bring them to that remembrance of what we went through, and what we endured. But it should be some kind of way that they should know.

Keon Burns:

38:38

I am hoping that this is one of the ways. just being able to put these stories on the record, on the wax, so future generations will be able to listen to it. And hopefully, put it in a way that they can take it in even, if that is entertainment. Just putting it in a way that they can take it in. I agree. Is there anything else

you want to say just for the record before we end the interview.

Anita Covington:

Well, the only thing I want to say is that I hope this helps somebody. I hope that this helps somebody and be appreciative of how we came up. And how the Lord has blessed us and them now. They are blessed. They are really really blessed. It wasn't that we were crying or anything. We didn't cry anything, but we endured a lot of things. I just hope it helps somebody by this experience and motivate somebody. If she can do it, I can do it too. It is a young lady out there that is single, maybe it is a young man out there that is single, let them know that they are not alone. They could be doing the same thing about the education, about trying to open up their own business by getting involved in the community. They are not alone; they tried to endure too. Let them know, it is an example for them to know that they can persevere too. Be persistent and they can persevere. That is it.

[End of Interview]