

McSwain Sisters tell the story that predated the Clinton 12 (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 5, 2006)

The excellent film, *The Clinton 12 – A Documentary Film*, premiered on August 24, 2006 and the equally excellent exhibit, the Green McAdoo Cultural Center and Museum, opened to the public on August 26, 2006 in our neighboring city of Clinton. Hundreds from our local area attended the historic events surrounding the 50th anniversary of the integration of Clinton High School.

These historic events also brought four sisters all the way from Los Angeles, California to their original home town of fearful memories and anxious nights of dynamite blasts - the home town they left nearly 50 years ago to find a better way of life for themselves and their children. They came all the way here to help the City of Clinton and the Green McAdoo Organization celebrate the historic completion of the documentary film and the grand opening of their museum. However, they brought with them more than just themselves, they brought a package of information that documented the historic events preceding the "Clinton 12."

The name McSwain may not be all that meaningful to many of you readers. However, this family was an integral part of the celebration in Clinton this weekend. Alvah McSwain Lambert is one of the Clinton 12 who made history in 1956 when she was among the Clinton 12 who were the first Black students to enter Clinton High School – the first public school in the south to integrate after the Supreme Court decision in the now famous Brown versus Board of Education case decided in 1954. But there was a lawsuit before Brown - the McSwain lawsuit in Anderson County!

It all started several years earlier, in 1950. The Joheather McSwain versus County Board of Education of Anderson County, Tennessee case No. 1555 was filed on December 5, 1950 and first came to trial on February 13, 1952 in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee, Northern Division, Knoxville, Tennessee. The decision against the McSwain lawsuit was handed down by Judge Robert L. Taylor on May 19, 1952. The case was taken to the Court of Appeals in Cincinnati, Ohio on June 13, 1952.

However, all parties agreed to await a decision by the U. S. Supreme Court in the case of Oliver Brown versus Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas. Chief Justice Earl Warren, on May 17, 1954, read the unanimous Supreme Court decision against the "separate but equal" doctrine. The person initiating this early action in Anderson County was Joheather McSwain's mother, Winona McSwain.

Winona Jones McSwain was born October 4, 1904. She was the daughter of Lela Worthington Jones who was born in 1889 and died in 1972. Lela was the daughter of Maggie and Lafayette Worthington. Lafayette was Cherokee. So Lela was half-Cherokee. Her picture included with this article shows the high cheekbones, large nose and other features routinely associated with the Native Americans.

The McSwain's are thus one of the families of history where African Americans and Native Americans intermarried. This was not an uncommon occurrence in our history as both African American slaves and Native Americans often found themselves working in partnership against the white settlers.

So, what does this have to do with the documentary or opening of the museum? At the documentary's premiere showing, I was fortunate enough to have been sitting directly behind Joheather McSwain without any idea that was the case. When the movie was over, she stood and turned facing the rear of the theater as she began her exit.

I was busy taking photographs of the crowd and dropped my lens cap. The lady with her picked it up and returned it to me. As I thanked her, I asked them what they thought of the movie. They both said they liked the movie just fine and then Joheather McSwain turned to me directly, looked me square in the eye, and said, "It is truly great that the young people are taking such an interest in our history even if they have only a portion of the actual history."

Well, you must know that remark struck a nerve with me as I am always on the hunt for material for *Historically Speaking*. So I asked her what she meant by that. She said, "It started a long time before the Clinton 12." She continued, "It started with my Mother!"

Okay, now I was really interested. "Who was your Mother?" I asked. "Winona McSwain," she replied as if I should surely know that name. Trying very hard not to upset her as I did not have a clue who "Winona McSwain"

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might be, I said, "Tell me more." She asked me if I knew about Joheather McSwain versus the Anderson County Board of Education? I began to see where this was going and said, "Tell me about it." She said, "I am the person named in that lawsuit and I have the documentation to prove it."

Now, remember we are in a theater, it is dark, people are talking, everyone is trying to get out of the theater and all are excited about the movie we have just seen. I was not fully aware of the ramifications of what she had said to me, but I knew it was very important to her. I did know that there was another lawsuit before Brown versus the Board of Education and I recalled it had the name "McSwain" in it.

So, I thought the best thing to do was to see if she would talk to me on the next day so I could capture her story. She agreed and her companion said that she would have the other sisters there as well. I did not even know what she meant by "other sisters" at that time but agreed it would be a good idea.

The next day, Fanny and I went to their hotel and there I began to understand what was going on. We meet five of the sweetest ladies. One was a local lady from Oak Ridge who was a friend of the McSwain family, Bonnie Henderson. Fanny learned that she was Gary Henderson's wife, someone I had worked with at Y-12 and in Boy Scouts – small world!

The other four were the McSwain sisters. Lela McSwain McCoy is the oldest at 83 years of age. She is named for her grandmother, Lela Worthington, Winona McSwain's mother. Una McSwain Turner is 69 years of age and is the reason all the McSwains moved to California. Alvah J. McSwain Lambert is the youngest at 65 years of age and was one of the Clinton 12. Joheather McSwain who is 73 years old is the person named in the 1950 lawsuit filed by her mother Winona McSwain.

Joheather showed me documents that told the story of the original lawsuit. She showed me photographs of Rosa Parks and her mother who were close friends. She also had photographs of her family. She is one of 19 children, 12 of whom lived to be adults. There were seven girls and five boys. The girls are four years apart and there is a boy between each of the girls. Imagine that!

Winona McSwain was born October 4, 1904 when her mother, Lela Worthington Jones was 15 years old. She grew up in Youngstown, Ohio and was raised by Lizzy Jernigan. She also worked with the Salvation Army in Kentucky and was a part of the Marcus Garby Movement that was planning a trip to Africa. She was 14 years old when she married.

Joheather explained to me how her mother desired a better school for her children. That is why Winona approached Clinton High School principal, D. J. Brittain and Superintendent Frank Irwin regarding her desire to assure her children got the best education possible. In August 1950, four students attempted to register at Clinton High School and were told to attend the colored school in Campbell County.

Winona McSwain's complaint was that the Campbell County Colored High School at LaFollette, some 24 miles from Clinton, was a "Grade C (or D in one reference)" school and Clinton High School was a "Grade A" school as was Austin High School (an all Black school) in Knoxville.

Anderson County was in a fix. There were only 30 Black high school students in the county. The state law required a minimum of 75 students to form a school. So even if the county had desired it, they could not create a separate high school for Blacks.

The Board of Education of Anderson County agreed, in the first board meeting after five Black students tried to enroll in Clinton High School in August 1950, "to pay all expenses (transportation and tuition) for any Anderson County Negro child desiring to attend Austin High School in Knoxville, Tennessee, or an equivalent amount for attendance at any other high school." During 1947-1951 Anderson County only paid tuition, not transportation for Joheather and the other children to go to school, there was not a school bus, they used public transportation. They had to pay to ride the Tennessee Coach, or the Greyhound bus to school. They paid \$1.80 per week. After 1951, Anderson County furnished a school bus for the children to go to Austin High school and paid their tuition. Whenever they were late paying tuition the children could not go to school until tuition was paid. Prior to 1951, many Black students did not attend high school because of the cost to their family.

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When on May 31, 1955, the Supreme Court ruling was announced that schools should be desegregated, attorneys for the McSwain lawsuit asked the U. S. District Court to require "admittance of Negro students to Clinton High School." As the students named in the lawsuit, including Joheather McSwain, had already graduated from high school by this time, the school's lawyers argued the case no longer had merit.

Eugene Joyce, Oak Ridge's own renowned and highly respected lawyer, presented a final decree to the Anderson County School Board who authorized its submittal to Judge Robert Taylor. This decree restrained the board from refusing to admit any student on account of race.

Judge Taylor ruled on January 4, 1956, that the McSwain case was not limited to the names of the students listed but applied to all Black students. The Tennessee Supreme Court ruled that all statutes requiring segregation in public schools of Tennessee were unconstitutional.

This led to Judge Taylor's ruling that Clinton High School would desegregate by the fall of 1956 with the resulting events memorialized during August 24 – 27, 2006 on the 50th anniversary of the historic first integration of a public high school in the south. Little Rock, Arkansas did not integrate until the next year and then with reluctance on the part of the local officials to the point that the federal government had to call in the National Guard. This was significantly different from the Clinton experience where the local government officials and many of the local citizens desired to uphold the law, even if the law was not one they necessarily liked. Of course, Oak Ridge had quietly integrated at least a year before Clinton. But the Oak Ridge government school was not considered a public school.

The story told me by Joheather McSwain is what I have attempted to convey in this article. In addition to her personal recollections, I have relied upon an article from the Clinton Courier-News dated September 9, 1976, *The History of Clinton Senior High School* by Snyder Roberts written in 1971, *The Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Spring 1994 issue and *The Children of the South* by Margaret Anderson, 1966.

As a footnote to the story, I should tell you how the McSwain family came to be in Los Angeles, California. I mentioned at the beginning of this article that they had returned to their home town of fearful memories. Probably the most fearful was the dynamite blast of September 26, 1956 that exploded near the McSwain home at 432 West Broad Street.

Una tells the story of how the family came to locate in California, "My mother had planned to move to California before all the problems started with the school. She wanted a better life and good education for all her children, so she and my father planned to make the move but no date was decided. My husband was in the military stationed at Fort Irvin near Barstow, California. California is where we wanted to raise our family. He liked Los Angeles, so after getting out of the army he planned to come back to California to live. He moved here in November 1956 and I joined him January of 1957. We did not want our children to have to face the problem we had to face to get an education. My mother, father, and the rest of the family came to California in June of 1957."

Alvah did not finish Clinton High School, but moved to California along with the rest of the family in 1957. They have lived very full and happy lives there, yet they now speak of wanting to return to Clinton, stating that it is nothing like what it was when they left but is a most friendly and encouraging town.

When we were completing our time together, Joheather made a few remarkable observations much like she did regarding the documentary film when I first met her. She said a number of times with regard to God working in one's life, "You can't put a question mark where God has put a period!" I like that saying a lot! She sees the events of the past in Clinton as having a "period" placed on them by God and does not look backward with regret, only forward with thankfulness and forgiveness.

She concluded our discussion by saying, "Mother is sure smiling down on Clinton today!" Don't you know Winona Jones McSwain, mother, visionary, determined change agent and yet virtually unknown but deserving figure in history who basically wanted a better life for her family would be proud of what she would see in Clinton today. The documentary film, the cultural center and the enormous effort the community has put into memorializing a time in history filled with strength, courage and resolve are tributes to those early pioneers such as Winona

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McSwain. Clinton citizens can be proud of the McSwain family and their place in the unique and historic Clinton desegregation story.



Winona Jones McSwain, Joheather McSwain's mother, when she was actively seeking quality education for her children



The McSwain sisters - Joheather McSwain (named in McSwain Lawsuit), Lela McCoy (named for her grandmother), Una Turner (first to go to California) and Alvah Lambert (one of the Clinton 12)

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Lela Worthington Jones – Winona Jones McSwain’s mother of mixed Cherokee heritage



Winona Jones McSwain after living in California a number of years