

# Archie Lee Story, Part One (1 of first graduates of OR High tells his story)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 31, 2020)

Benita Albert brings us an intriguing story of Archie Lee, graduate of Oak Ridge High School and one of a special group of 85 people who made history in Oak Ridge in 1955 when the Oak Ridge High School and the Robertsville Junior High School were both first integrated. Enjoy her interaction with Archie Lee and learn about his amazing life story.

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In September 1955, eighty-five black students in grades seven through twelve transferred from the Scarboro School to Robertsville Junior High School and Oak Ridge High School. This history-making event, now sixty-five years later, will be commemorated with a year-long series of varied educational projects in the Oak Ridge Schools. Also, there will be special community observances as well. Look for these events to be publicized throughout the year.

Archie Lee, ORHS Class of 1957 alumnus, was scheduled to be a keynote speaker for a now-postponed, summer 2020 event honoring the eighty-five students. Archie was one of those students who began their Oak Ridge High School education on September 6, 1955. I had the privilege of meeting Archie via numerous phone conversations while writing for the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation's book, *Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1943-2018*. In the Class of 1957 contributions to the book, Archie observed, "We didn't get our place in history...Oak Ridge was the *first* public school to integrate in the South. Perhaps our transition was too well-planned and community supported, meaning there was no National Guard called in and no obvious acts of disruption to catch media attention."

Thus, I have chosen to reconnect to Archie and to present his amazing life story to the community as one of the first-hand witnesses to the Oak Ridge School's desegregation. Archie sincerely hopes to return to Oak Ridge to be a part of the community observances now being planned for the summer of 2021, saying, "At present I am fearful of flying (from his home in California) and of a possible chance of exposure to the corona virus."

Archie Lee is a storyteller, a problem solver, and a lively and engaging person. Though he lives in Santa Monica, California, he holds dear his many Oak Ridge friends and family, maintaining phone and/or online access to many. His childhood memories, first in rural Mississippi, then Oak Ridge, offer a candid view of social and civil rights issues of the 1940s and 1950s. This first part of his story will share his memories of the life of a young, black male growing up in the South.

Archie was born in the late 1930s, and he lived, until age 15, in northwestern Mississippi in his maternal ancestors' community of Shiloh, near Batesville, MS. His teenage mother and Archie lived in several homes around the rural, black school he attended for grades 1-8. When his mother chose to find work in Oak Ridge during his early years, Archie stayed in Mississippi with his grandparents.

Archie's schooling was in a small building with a central corridor containing a cloak room and tables and chairs. Extending perpendicular on both sides of the corridor were two classrooms, one for grades 1-4 and the other for grades 5-8. Archie remembered having to walk to school early enough to gather brush for kindling in the pot-bellied stoves that barely warmed each classroom.

The two schoolteachers were relatives of his, but Archie said, "It made no difference that I was kin when it came to discipline." Archie recalled the school schedule was interrupted each year by October cotton-picking season. When I asked how long a break this entailed, Archie answered, "We got to go back (to school) when all the cotton was in." His classmates, approximately thirty children in all, came from many families still living and working on plantations. Archie said that the nearby Smith Plantation had twelve to fifteen families residing there.

Archie further described his school as having no lunchroom, so students brought their own lunch. Or, if they had money, they could buy lunch from a nearby market. "A slice of bologna and two crackers cost five cents, a soda was five cents, and a candy bar--five cents." Archie's grandfather was his role model in his early years; a man who owned his own farm and who sharecropped on other farms.

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He also ran a barbershop in Batesville on Fridays and Saturdays. Archie especially loved accompanying his grandfather to town where he could enjoy all-day, Saturday movies, from the segregated seats in the theater balcony. Archie laughed when sharing that cowboy movies were a favorite of all the kids, black or white, and he observed, "This may have been the only place we were together in an assembly, but we entered and exited through separate doors."

Archie learned tough lessons of racial discrimination in his young life. His thoughts returned to an incident in Batesville: "My grandpa had a post office box in town. One day he asked me to go get his mail...I'm looking at the mail, stepped back, and bumped the heel of a white woman. She angrily turned and said, "Little n-----, if you do that again, I'll have you lynched." Archie was nine years old.

He also remembered objects thrown at them from white kids who had school buses to ride to their schools, while Archie and friends were walking to their school. And he bitterly recalled a white family who chose to release their aggressive dog from its chain when the black students walked by on their way to school. "I kicked the dog when it tried to bite my younger sister, and the next day I was threatened with a beating if I ever did that again."

However, Archie also remembered a good friend, Ralph, one of four children in a neighboring, white family. Archie said, "Ralph and I played together, loved the woods, and shooting at frogs on the creek sides...When I didn't have enough money to visit a great aunt in St. Louis, Ralph loaned me ten dollars. When Ralph's older brother, James, turned eighteen, Ralph's father informed me that I would thereafter have to call him 'Mr. James'."

Archie's uncle joined the U. S. Army in 1943, during World War II. When he came home in 1946, he told his father (Archie's grandfather) that, "He wanted out of the cotton fields, that he was going to Oak Ridge, TN, because there were jobs and it would be a step up." Ultimately, both Archie's uncle and aunt (from two different families) left for Oak Ridge, to be followed in 1947 by his mother.

Archie stayed in Mississippi with his grandparents and saw his mother return two times before he would finally move to Oak Ridge. His mother returned to provide help when his grandfather was disabled by a broken leg in 1948. She returned to Oak Ridge in early 1949, staying until her mother suffered a brain tumor and died in 1950. In June 1953, at the end of Archie's eighth-grade year, his beloved grandfather had a stroke, and due to a lack of hospital services in Mississippi, his children brought him to Oak Ridge where he soon passed away in the Oak Ridge Hospital.

Archie had a younger sister by three years, Jo Ann, and a ten-years younger sister, Sharon. After his grandfather's death, Archie stayed in Oak Ridge with his uncle and began ninth grade at Scarboro School. Archie and his mother and sisters eventually established their own Oak Ridge home in 1954. Archie's mother, Edith Marie Wilson, died in the mid-1990s.

She would see all of her children graduate from ORHS: Archie (1957), Jo Ann (1961), and Sharon (1966), and in addition, Sharon's daughters, Daphne (1983) and Julie (1987). Both Archie and Jo Ann were part of the first group of eighty-five students to desegregate the Oak Ridge Schools, Jo Ann beginning at RJHS and Archie at ORHS.

Archie's transition from his Mississippi school to Scarboro School was smooth academically as he came with records showing him to be an A student, and he would continue his studious habits, graduating from ORHS with an A average. Archie said, "The big difference for me at Scarboro was the presence of male teachers; having never known my father and recently losing my grandfather, made my teachers father figures for me." Fred Brown was one of three teachers hired by the Oak Ridge Schools to teach in the new Scarboro High School established in the school year 1950-51.

Excerpts from the 75<sup>th</sup> book celebrating Oak Ridge Schools include the following historical background: "Previously (to 1950-51) Scarboro School educated black students in grades 1-8, while black high-school students were bused to Austin High in Knoxville. Forty students enrolled in the new Scarboro High School in 1950-51. Fred Brown taught science, math, and shop classes across the grades, 9-12..."

With the integration of ORHS in 1955-56, Fred Brown moved to Oak Ridge High School with his Scarboro students where he was assigned to teach 'the trades,' or vocational classes, as well as math and social studies." Archie's 'Mr. Brown'

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taught him mechanical drawing at ORHS, a class that supported his future dreams of an engineering and/or science career.

Another very special role model for Archie was Bill Scott, the Director of the Scarboro Recreation Center, a favorite hangout for kids. Scott coached a basketball team on which Archie played as well as being an important presence, a counselor and confidante to many Scarboro children.

Archie loved sports, and he played basketball and baseball in city recreation leagues, but he did not play for ORHS. His decision not to play was greatly swayed by the fact that opposing teams refused to play black players on the ORHS roster. He ran a 440-relay stretch in the Junior Olympics. He played center field and pitched for the Oak Ridge Jr. Bombers, in his first two years in Oak Ridge.

Then, for the next six years he played the same positions with the Oak Ridge Bombers, an adult, all-black team that played in an independent league called "the colored league." They played other teams throughout the Southeast, but they were excluded from competitions with white teams.

Archie said his favorite subject throughout school was math. He nostalgically remembered sitting in his rural Mississippi classroom listening to and watching the students in higher grades do their math lessons. He said that this learning environment provided him with a distinct, head-start advantage in later years. He was good at math, but he was frustrated that his first high school choices in math were limited.

He was not able to take a course in algebra until he moved to ORHS in his junior year. He loved his ORHS geometry class with his senior-year teacher, Betty Joyce Christian. The admiration was surely reciprocal, since as Archie bragged, "Whenever she had to leave the classroom, she would put me in charge."

But Archie also rued his lack of opportunity for a broader education, naming music and art programs as lacking in his grades 1-10 education. And he knew, all of his peers knew, that many of the well-worn textbooks they studied were hand-me-downs from the white schools. Archie wanted more, and he made the most of the academic course offerings at ORHS while maintaining a grade average worthy of his selection for initiation into the ORHS chapter of the National Honor Society, the first black student member to be inducted.

Archie's memories of a critical time of social change and of the joys and uncertainties of transitioning through desegregation in the Oak Ridge Schools and in the community will continue in a second installment of his story. Part Two will also pursue further challenges and accomplishments in his collegiate and professional life.

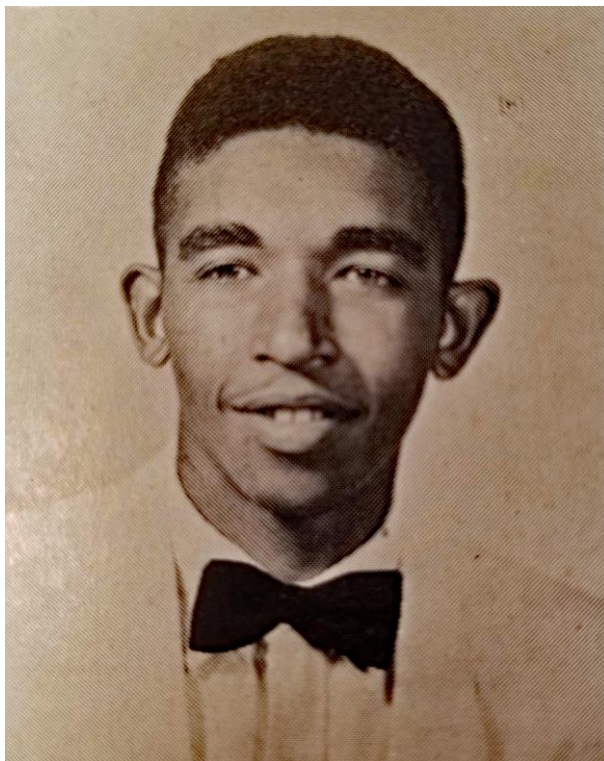
Archie's first-hand witnessing to civil rights issues past and present are especially timely, not only during this 65<sup>th</sup> year anniversary observance of the integration of the Oak Ridge Schools, but also in this time of national unrest and questioning. My thanks to Archie for his sharing voice and his candidness. To be continued...

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What a great story Benita tells of an amazing graduate of Oak Ridge schools. Archie Lee has personal experiences that give him credibility to all aspects of our past history of segregation and all its downside, and he also is an excellent example of what can be accomplished through integration. From shameful treatment as a young student to the National Honor Society, Archie is a hero, for sure! Look for the conclusion of Archie Lee's amazing story coming next in Historically Speaking.

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Archie Lee as a senior at Oak Ridge High School



Archie Lee sits on the family car – a 1955 Chevrolet

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Archie Lee, pictured among other National Honor Society members