

Archie Lee, Part Two (Sit ins, Proms and other life experiences)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column of September 1, 2020)

Benita Albert brings us the conclusion to 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. Enjoy her interaction with Archie and learn about the special 65th Anniversary events soon to be happening. Please remember that many elements of the planned recognition are having to be modified because of the COVID-19 situation.

From memories written by the Class of 1956 concerning the first day of school at Oak Ridge High School, September 6, 1955: "The smooth transition from segregation to integration may have disappointed the national news services. Dick Green, who served as student council vice-president, remembers receiving a phone call after the first day of school that September: "The reporter, I think he was from the Associated Press, asked me what had happened there that day. I told him nothing happened, no problems—we gathered in assembly to be welcomed by Mr. Dunigan (ORHS Principal) and then we all went to our classes. It was like any other first day of school. The reporter thanked me and hung up."

The national news agencies would have been wise to pay attention to the good things going on at ORHS: excellent academic classes; wide-ranging musical, visual, and literary arts opportunities; superior sports programs; and, though no means least, at last an integrated student body where skin color no longer presented a barrier against a good education." (By Connie (Jordan) Green from Class of 1956 memories in the book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1943-2018.")

Archie Lee was there on that first day as a rising junior at ORHS. He was one of the eighty-five students, grades 7-12, who transitioned from Scarboro School to either Robertsville Junior High School or ORHS. It was not Archie's first visit to ORHS as he and Dorothy (Strickland) Patterson (Scarboro High School Class of 1955) had served as student representatives in pre-planning meetings on desegregation.

In addition, Archie remembered visits from ORHS students to Scarboro School in the school year 1954-55. Such visits encouraged and organized by the ORHS journalism teacher, Reef Waldrep. Waldrep, gave the Oak Leaf (ORHS newspaper) student editor a challenge to involve the Oak Leaf staff in a project to facilitate a successful transition to integration.

That editor, Sue (Reger) Mason, and three other journalism students spent a day at Scarboro High School meeting future classmates and writing about them. Mason later remembered, "We tried to include the funny teenage things the students told us and to capture their unique personalities in order to encourage ORHS students to want to meet them and make them feel welcome." (Class of 1956 memories in the 75th book, cited above) Their stories, published in the Oak Leaf in February 1955, ultimately earned the students the respected All-American Award from the National Scholastic Press.

Archie remembered his first day as an ORHS student being filled with some anxiety, but it helped that he knew several new classmates from community sports activities and previous school meetings. He was eager to become a part of the student body, an ORHS Wildcat.

However, he also remembered seeing a derogatory, hand painted threat on a window of the waterfall stairs between the auditorium and classrooms which read, "n-----, go home." He said that Principal Tom Dunigan made an intercom announcement to the student body threatening suspension for such acts, and he never saw another such message.

Archie said, "I was there to get through school and get a good education...I had a lot more homework at ORHS, and many more science and math offerings than I had at Scarboro that fitted my plan to be become an engineer."

Archie moved to Oak Ridge in 1953, beginning ninth grade at Scarboro High School. His transition from rural Mississippi to Oak Ridge was an eye-opening experience, a new place where many more opportunities seemed open to him. Archie said, "When I got to Scarboro in 1953, there was a skating rink, theater, recreation center, and a building called 'the block' which held a barbershop, pool hall, two restaurants, and a grocery store. The swimming pool and recreation parks were integrated since they were run by the Atomic Energy Commission.

In town, the Oak Terrace Restaurant would serve us if we were in the company of other white customers. The Davis Brothers Cafeteria had black waiters but allowed no black diners...

Archie Lee, Part Two (Sit ins, Proms and other life experiences)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column of September 1, 2020)

I carried newspapers for *The Oak Ridger*, and I won a trip to Washington D.C. for securing the most, new subscribers. I saw President Eisenhower at the D.C. train station, I had my picture taken in front of the Lincoln Memorial, and I shared a hotel room with another *Oak Ridger* carrier, a younger, white kid."

Later, Archie reported, "My friends and I were involved in sit-ins at Davis Brothers Cafeteria and the Holiday Inn restaurant. We tried placing orders inside the Dairy Queen while being sure to exit early from all of those establishments when the police were called. We could go to the town theaters if we were in a mixed-race group."

Archie recalled a group of his friends sitting in for the first time at McCrory's fountain, a local dime store, where they were pleased to be allowed to order food and to be served. The ORHS cafeteria was integrated, and Archie remembered many mixed-race, shared lunch tables, but he also remembered controversy swirling around the 1956 prom.

According to Archie, a survey was conducted where parents could choose between two segregated proms or one integrated prom. The majority vote was for segregated, and thus, the school offered the black students a separate location where they would share the one live band hired for the evening. The band would play half of the evening at one prom and then transfer to play the other half at the other prom.

The black students rejected the school's proposal and did not have a prom. Archie did attend the integrated 1957 prom held in the Oak Ridge High School cafeteria in the spring of his senior year. Archie was his homeroom's representative to student council, and he enjoyed attending ORHS games to cheer for the many great athletes and friends he made.

Archie reminisced about an ORHS science field trip to Huntsville, AL where he was the only black student on the trip. When the group stopped at a restaurant for a meal, the restaurant refused to serve him. Archie was touched by the actions of his fellow students; they all walked out without eating.

Archie took as many math and science courses as his schedule would permit. He praised his teachers and his guidance counselor, Wilson Lindsey, who helped him search for post-secondary opportunities, encouraging Archie's dreams of a college education. The University of Tennessee refused his admission application, not because of his academic record, but because of his race. (UT would not admit the first undergraduate, black student until January 1961.)

The General Motors Institute (GMI) accepted Archie for a cooperative program in engineering. (GMI is now called Kettering University, located in Flint, MI.) The GMI Co-op Path was designed to be a work/study split year where for one-half of the year Archie had to have a job. Though Archie pursued many job possibilities, the best that was offered, as he put it, "...involved menial work and insufficient pay to fund his education."

It was through the Oak Ridge chapter of B'nai B'rith that Archie received a \$500 scholarship supporting him in his first year at the Indiana Institute of Technology (IIT) in Fort Wayne. IIT had an accelerated three-year path to an engineering degree which required that Archie take eighteen hours of course work each semester.

Archie lived in integrated dorm housing, and he worked several odd jobs to further finance his first year. However, returning to Oak Ridge the following summer, Archie was unable to secure work enough to finance a second year at IIT. He stayed in Oak Ridge for the next six years, finding employment at a variety of places, but still hungering to get back to his education and to make progress toward a future career in science.

In the summer of 1958, Archie found his first job at a downtown shopping center clothing store, receiving and stocking goods for 65 cents an hour, subsequently followed by a raise to \$1 an hour at another retail store. His next stint was as a relief worker through the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies, a job which lasted a year before an ORNL scientist invited him to work in a new program being funded by the National Science Foundation, the Traveling Teachers Program.

Archie enjoyed this chance to get back to science. He set up labs, watched teacher training and lab work, and traveled to schools to assist with programs in the early 1960s when science education was undergoing great change.

Seeing a newspaper ad for a lab technician, Archie interviewed and was hired by a newly formed company, ORTEC, to build surface barrier nuclear radiation detectors. Archie loved his job, but it was when he vicariously learned that his hourly wage was one-half of his work partner who did the same job, that he decided to speak up.

Archie Lee, Part Two (Sit ins, Proms and other life experiences)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column of September 1, 2020)

Archie said his boss told him the earnings difference was due to the higher cost of housing for his white coworker. The sting of that comment still torments Archie who replied that he would like the chance to live in such housing. Archie would later train two more workers on the project before learning of funding cuts and impending job cuts. He strongly felt that he should consider other career opportunities and that he should look outside the South.

He floated job applications, and on Christmas Eve of 1962, he received a phone call from the vice-president of Solid-State Radiation in West Los Angeles seeking an interview with Archie in Oak Ridge. California became Archie's home from that point on.

His new job was in developing surface barrier detectors for university and other research labs. New opportunities opened up for Archie. He not only returned to his education part time at Santa Monica College, but he also moved to Korad Corporation, the first commercial laser company founded by Theodore Maiman, the acknowledged 'father of the laser.'

Archie worked in the development of semi-conductor lasers. A supervisor at Korad convinced Archie to follow him to work at Douglas Aircraft, continuing research and development in semiconductor components. Archie continued his studies through extension courses at UCLA, courses in such as: laser technology, quantum mechanics, and semiconductor theory.

During a 1973 period of threatened layoffs at Douglas (later merged to become McDonald Douglas), Archie moved to Hughes Aircraft. During the next fourteen years at Hughes, Archie expanded his resume' by purchasing equipment and setting up his own lab, the Lee Semiconductor Processing Lab.

Some of his work was subcontracted through Hughes while Archie also took other projects such as work for a fiber optics company. Archie loved this opportunity to do further research and experimentation on extended applications. It was his independent lab work on cutting and polishing a geodesic lens from light transmitting, optical material, and an attempt by a Hughes coworker to claim the work on an invention disclosure that led to a serious workplace rift and Archie's reassignment.

Ultimately, Archie filed a workplace discrimination lawsuit, a grievance that the company eventually settled out of court with a nondisclosure agreement between the parties. Archie would do other contract work through his lab, but as of 1990, he settled into retirement mode being thankful for the security of the generous stock options he selected while at McDonald Douglas.

Over his career, Archie recounted, "I worked for five top research labs, and I was immersed in fascinating, state-of-the-art scientific applications. I personally met with Theodore Maiman at least two to three times a week on project work while at Korad. I assembled and tested a laser used to prevent missile attacks on aircraft in the mid-1960s when this technology was new. I was involved in thermal/sublimation testing of materials appropriate for safe reentry of space capsules carrying astronauts. I fabricated a thinner detector needed for use on a patient with brain cancer, work contracted through the University of Southern California for Solid-State Radiation." Though there are numerous other creative projects in Archie's work experience, the technical nature, proprietary constraints, and sheer number of examples hinders a further listing.

Archie and Mary, his wife of more than sixty years, enjoy their home in Santa Monica. Their two adult children and two grandchildren live close by. Before pandemic constraints, Archie enjoyed golf outings, and an occasional meet-up with one of his favorite entertainers, Smokey Robinson, who often shared the same greens time. Archie mused over his love of the game of pool, remembering that he first learned the game at the Scarboro recreation center, and much later, he played in a competitive league in California. Now his time is spent researching and finding rare collectibles and online trading.

Archie loves keeping up with his many lifelong friends from Oak Ridge. The Senior Directory in the 1957 Oak Log yearbook described Archie as: "Agreeable and friendly...admired and well-liked by all his classmates." These traits continue from all I have learned from several talks with Archie and, also with his ORHS friends.

Archie Lee, Part Two (Sit ins, Proms and other life experiences)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column of September 1, 2020)

His last visit to Oak Ridge was in 2016, and he was at the fiftieth ORHS class reunion in 2007. He sincerely hopes to be able to return in the summer of 2021 to participate in further ceremonies honoring the first eighty-five students to integrate the Oak Ridge Schools.

These students are overdue for acknowledgement and celebration of their important place in the history of the Oak Ridge Schools and the community.

There you have a wonderful story brought to us by Benita Albert telling the story of Archie Lee. My, what an amazing career and what tremendous obstacles Archie has overcome. It is good to see his interest in keeping in touch with Oak Ridge and his desire to see the appropriate recognition for the Oak Ridge 85. Please be aware of the opportunities for public involvement in these events during the coming weekend and throughout the coming 65th Anniversary year.

Archie Lee, Part Two (Sit ins, Proms and other life experiences)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column of September 1, 2020)



Archie at his wedding reception

Archie Lee, Part Two (Sit ins, Proms and other life experiences)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column of September 1, 2020)



Archie and Mary at their wedding