

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Annie Zachery Remembers



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[Living in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where she was born in 1916, Ms. Annie R. Zachery reflects on her life from being in a sharecropping family, to going to college, to becoming a teacher and settling back in the community in which she was raised.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- What hardships did Ms. Zachery endure as a child of sharecroppers?
- What were the positives, if any, of living in the type of community of Ms. Zachery's youth?
- Students today are as concerned with financing their education as Ms. Zachery was when she was young. What characteristics or personality traits of hers would you choose to emulate as you make decisions that affect your education future?
- What does the difficulty Ms. Zachery had as a teacher at Walter Hill Elementary School tell you about the social climate of the day?
- Why do you think Ms. Zachery sees the integration of the schools at that time a negative thing for blacks?

I was born June 10, 1916 in Murfreesboro, Rutherford County, Tennessee, the fifth of nine children, five girls and four boys. My parents, Council Prince Rucker and Fannie Lawrence Rucker were sharecroppers and resided on Lover's Lane, now known as Twin Oak Drive. Our family unit was a very stable one. Everyone in the family shared in the planting, cultivating and the harvesting of the crop. My parents were not educated beyond the sixth grade, nevertheless, they had a lot of common sense. My mother encouraged education. Even when she was pregnant, she worked in the fields in place of her children so we could go to school. She did not want her children to have to work like she had. Being the child of a sharecropper, I was not a stranger to hard work. At the age of eight years, I was responsible for the family meals. By age twelve, I was doing the washing for the entire family on a scrub board.

The community I grew up in was very close knit. Everybody knew everybody. When we were children and if we did something that was not right or becoming, it was reported to our parents and there was no explaining. When we arrived home, we were chastised for whatever was reported.

There were three churches in the community, one Baptist and two Methodist, and our family attended them all. The reason being is that the churches did not meet every Sunday, but on different Sundays during the month, and the families went to all of them. We were all Baptist except for my father, but no one could tell the difference. The women in the churches sang and prayed just like the men. We had homecoming activities and the women would be responsible for cooking the dinner, serving it on the grounds, outside, and taking care of the children.

We had few recreation activities. There was no radio or television. We played ball as children and went to ballgames on Saturdays. On Saturday nights, we would go to church and march around and sing Christian songs. Later, there was the introduction of debate during the Saturday night gatherings, as for the subjects, I am not sure. During the debates, I would say the welcome. Other activities I remember were plating the maypole and Bible study, where we learned the books of the Bible.

When I was three, I lost my right eye in an accident, but I could not let this deter me from accomplishment. I did not get to start school until I was eight years old because of illness. My older sisters and brothers would help us younger ones with our school work if we had trouble with it. My elementary school was a one-room school with all grades, one through eight. There were about thirty students. We would walk two and a half miles to school by cutting through the woods. On rainy days, my father would load us up in the wagon and carry us to school. Elementary school was split up during the year due to sharecropping, and it took two years to complete one grade. The county was so poor that our parents would have to pay the teacher to teach straight through cotton-picking time. I was almost disenchanted with school in the seventh grade. There were two students in my class, myself, and a young man. The young man did not go during the pay period and at the end of the year, he passed to the eighth grade right along with me, and I had continued in school all year. I thought this was very unfair.

I started working outside the home when I was in the eighth grade. I worked in private homes for three dollars and fifty cents per week. While working, I started Holloway High School. Due to lack of transportation, I boarded with a woman in the city, close to the school, during the week, for one dollar and twenty-five cents per week. On weekends, I went home. It sometimes meant walking three and a half miles when there was no one to pick me up. During my high school years, I had to work to maintain myself in order to obtain my education. I served at parties given by whites. At school social gatherings, I helped with the refreshments. I also babysat for money to help pay my way. I also substitute taught in the elementary schools, for experience, not for pay. I maintained the highest average in my class and received an academic award for best all-around student in 1937 from Holloway High School. My senior year, the honor was given to a male student whose family had more money than my family.

I graduated from Holloway High School in 1939, and started on a new journey in my life. I enrolled at Tennessee Agriculture and Industrial State College in Nashville, Tennessee, now **Tennessee State University**. Tuition was ten dollars. I lived with a cousin the first year in college; this was a real adjustment. As I recall, the morals were not as high as I expected. The fact that some of the girls were slipping out of the dorms to go drinking with the guys from Meharry was not what I expected to see or not at all what I was used to. The same things were happening then as now, except then, they were hidden. Getting oriented into college life was difficult at first. My grades were not the best, but after the first year, my grades began to improve. The curriculum consisted of subjects such as English, science, geography, home economics. I remember only one course on blacks or Negroes. My major, home economics, was what most of the girls majored in. Otherwise, they studied some related teaching subject, but no professions such as medicine or law. One requirement for Home Economics majors was home management. The students, ten girls, would stay on campus for three months and take care of a house, including bringing a real child in for them to care for. This was in preparation for them to know how to manage a home.

My second year in college, I boarded with a Ms. Porter on Eighteenth Avenue in Nashville, which was closer to school. I either walked to school or caught a Jitney, an illegal taxi. Ms. Porter took good care of me. Some nights, I studied until four in the morning after working until twelve midnight, serving parties. Ms Porter would knock on my door and tell me to go to bed because I had studied long enough and I needed my rest. During my junior year at college, I worked for this real nice white lady. I cooked, cleaned and kept a little boy who was very fond of me. The white lady would buy clothes and wear them one time and then give them to me. I recalled having been

given an evening dress which I shared with my sisters. My bust was always bigger than theirs, so I added a piece in the dress and when my sisters would wear it, I would take the piece out.



In 1943, four years after beginning, I graduated from A and I College with a degree in home economics, which was unusual because I carried eighteen hours a semester and finished my curriculum in four years.

After college, I could not find a job, so I went to Monteagle, Tennessee, and worked as a cook. In September 1943, I got a job as a teacher in Decaturville, Tennessee, where I stayed until Christmas. I then got a job in a two-teacher school in Celina, Tennessee. Celina is located near Cookeville, Tennessee. It was a little town about six miles in the hills with nothing but black people and no social outlet. There, I taught the upper four grades. The teachers were responsible for taking care of the school building and building their own fires. The towns surrounding the school were very prejudiced, and I was told not to get caught in them after dark. I stayed in Celina until an opening in my field became available in Winchester, Tennessee, at the high school there. I taught in Winchester about two years. From Winchester, I went to Vienna, Georgia, a plantation town. There, I actually lived on a plantation. This was during the late 1940s. I remember that a bell was rung for everything that the blacks did on that plantation including eating. My father wanted me to move back closer to home, so I returned to Celina, Tennessee, the closest position I could get to Murfreesboro. I returned home in 1952, when my father became ill and died. A game warden named Mr. Walter Taylor was influential in getting me a job teaching in the Rutherford County area. I started teaching at the Dillard School located in the Barfield area. I also went back to school and received an Elementary Teaching Certificate in 1952. I stayed at Dillard School until getting a job at Emery School. The position at Emery was based on the number of students enrolled, so I picked up students and brought them to school so I could meet the attendance requirement. I taught there until the Shiloh Elementary School opened where I taught second grade.

I enjoyed teaching very much, but was highly disappointed when integration of schools came about. Integration was hard on the black children, because the white teachers categorized the black children as being hard to learn and having bad behavioral problems. The black students were not pushed to perform to the best of their abilities because of low expectations from the white teachers. Integration also dampened my enthusiasm. When I was placed at Walter Hill Elementary School, a result of integration, I was the only black teacher there for one year. Upon my arrival there, the principal, a poorly educated white man, gave me nothing to do for the first two weeks. After two weeks, I was given a position team teaching; then given thirteen of the worst students they could find, perhaps to discourage me. I stayed with it and after two years, I was assigned the second grade. I am proud of the fact that I stayed in the teaching profession for thirty-five years. I am also very proud of the fact that three of my family members finished college by helping each other. Only the girls finished because the boys were pulled out of school to help in the fields. Today I reside in Rutherford County at the family home place, as a retired school teacher. I delayed marriage until age forty-nine, and have been widowed for over twenty years. I am a member of the Retired Teachers Association, Better Living F.E.A. (Family Education Association), Smithfork District Women Association, Senior Women Missionary of the Tennessee State Missionary Baptist Convention, Trustee and Mothers Board of Walnut Grove Missionary Baptist Church.

As for Murfreesboro and Rutherford County, I have enjoyed living here. There are not very many black people here and their involvement in politics has never been too much. The one thing that has been a noticeable change is the fact that more black people are going to college.

