

School Integration in Swain County: Background, Events, Recollections, Thoughts

Don Casada May 18, 2023 (updated July 21, 2023)

Author's foreword

I assembled some thoughts related to the internal pushback that I felt when preparing this review of the slow process of school integration in Swain County. That internal pushback was completely unrelated to gut punches taken from some of the research findings; it was a resistance to record what I found because of some of the odious circumstances with which we're surrounded in today's world.

I elected not to include those thoughts here because they are personal in form, and what some might see as political, although in truth, politics has absolutely nothing to do with them. They will likely be offensive to some (while others will likely agree).

Within the domain in which my professional life was practiced, engineering, it was extremely rare that personal judgments and biases had even the remotest chance of affecting my work. My work products were almost exclusively driven by the combination of data and longstanding, well-proven, principles of science and engineering. On rare occasions, gut feel played a role, but even then that gut feel was largely driven by previous engineering experience.

In the research of local area history (since retirement), I've attempted to apply an engineer's mindset to matters. That is impossible in this case, and I've elected to separately post those personal thoughts and views related to the internal pushback, so as to minimize or at least segregate their taint from the writing which follows. The reader is welcome to read or ignore them (true of everything, of course!). They're found [HERE](#).

Instead of focusing solely on what transpired in this town and county in which I was raised and once again call home, underlying national and state background will be discussed. Linkage is provided to other records and my own brief documentation concerning events which took place about 60 miles to the north, in Clinton, Tennessee, a town my wife and I lived in for a period when I first worked at Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

The Clinton experience occurred at precisely the same time that the first, unsuccessful, attempt to integrate Swain County Schools was made. From personal observations, the people and the nature of life in general in the Southern Appalachian communities of Bryson City, North Carolina and Clinton, Tennessee are much more closely connected than Bryson City is with, for example, the area around the Research Triangle of North Carolina, where I lived for almost two decades or even in Asheville, 60 miles to the east of Bryson City. Both the similarities of the communities and the parallel timing make the Clinton experience one which provides a pertinent and poignant frame of reference for what could have been in Bryson City.

National background

The U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous May 1954 ruling was structured around not just the *Brown v. Board of Education*¹ case in Kansas by which it is commonly known, but similar cases in South Carolina, Virginia and Delaware. Chief Justice Warren, writing for the court:

"We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Those thoughts followed precisely the line of argument offered in a dissenting opinion of jurist [Julius Waties Waring](#) in the Clarendon County, South Carolina case, *Briggs v. Elliott*. Waring, a native of Charleston, SC, was grandson of a well-heeled Charleston banker who owned 18 slaves at the time of the 1860 census. His dissent was highlighted in a simple, underscored statement:

Segregation is per se inequality.

Waring's dissent resulted in his being "cut off" (his words) by former associates; he noted "No one would dare back me openly because he would be ruined socially and financially."

An unrelated case from the previous decade may have been instrumental in setting Waring on this course. On February 12, 1946, Sergeant Isaac Woodard, a 26-year old black man who was a native of Winnsboro, SC and on his way home after returning from distinguished service in WW II, got into a dispute with a Greyhound bus driver, and was ejected from the bus in Batesburg, SC, about an hour from his home. Police Chief Lynwood Shull beat Woodard with a blackjack, blinding him in both eyes. Shull was charged with violation of Woodard's civil rights. Waties Waring was the presiding judge in the case. The all-white jury returned a verdict of innocent after only 15 minutes of deliberation. According to U.S. District Judge Richard Gergel, in [Unexampled Courage](#), Waring described the trial as his "baptism by fire." The event also infuriated President Harry Truman and set both men on courses in support of civil rights. Truman issued an [Executive Order](#) banning segregation in the military.



[Judge Julius Waties Waring](#)

Source University of South Carolina
Joseph A De Laine Papers

Waring issued a ruling which outlawed the South Carolina Democratic party's exclusion of Negroes from voting in primary races. Crosses were burned in front of his house and rocks were thrown through the home's windows. He and his wife ultimately moved out of the state, even though he [chose to be buried in the place he had known as home](#) for most of his life.

A full year after the Supreme Court's original *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, on May 31, 1955, the Court ordered that admission to public schools be conducted on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with "all deliberate speed."

In Swain County, it would take more than a decade to arrive with "all deliberate speed."

¹ [347 U.S. 483 \(1954\)](#)

State background

When the State Constitution was rewritten in 1868, Article IX was devoted to Education. Section 2 specified that Public Schools would be provided, tuition free, “to all children of the State between the ages of six and twenty-one years.” There was no reference to race or color anywhere in the entire Constitution.

However, Chapter 184 of the 1868-69 General Assembly specified that “*The school authorities of each and every township shall establish a separate school or separate schools for the instruction of children and youth of each race resident therein, and over six and under twenty-one years of age.*”

Interestingly, Chapter 81 of the 1868-69 session specified that the county commissioners of Buncombe, Haywood, Jackson, Macon and Cherokee divide the respective portions of their counties where the Western Turnpike Road was to run into parcels, and that workers, composed of residents of the counties², were to provide equal labor and “no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or previous condition.”

The State Constitution was amended in the Constitutional Convention of 1875. While the 1868 Constitution made no reference to race, Section 2 of Article IX (Education) of the amended Constitution read:

The General Assembly, at its first session under this Constitution, shall provide by taxation and otherwise, for a general and uniform system of public schools, wherein tuition shall be free of charge to all the children of the State between the ages of six and twenty-one years. And the children of the white race and the children of the colored race shall be taught in separate public schools; but there shall be no discrimination made in favor of, or to the prejudice of, either race.

Thus began the North Carolina version of “separate but equal.”³ In Chapter 234 of the 1876-77 session of the General Assembly, provisions were made to establish a pair of normal schools – one for the white race and one for the colored race – for the purpose of training teachers for the state’s common schools. Up to \$2,000 was to be made available from the state’s treasury for each.

In its 1879 session, the Legislature passed Chapter 139, *An act to regulate the practice of dentistry and to protect the people against quackery in relation thereto in the state of North Carolina, and providing penalties for the violation of the same.* The antiquackery bill required that, with the exception of regularly authorized physicians and surgeons, anyone practicing dentistry in the state must be certified by a board of examiners of The North Carolina Dental Society. The act included a provision that no one could be denied a license “on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.”

² During the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries, road maintenance was supervised at the county or township level and particularly in the 19th century, was performed by citizens. Chapter 83 of the Public Laws of 1879, for example, required all able-bodied men between 18 and 45 to work on road maintenance four days each year or optionally provide \$1 in lieu of a day of service. Jailed individuals could also be used for work on roads. An 1887 act provided for working certain classes of convicts (those whose incarceration would be in county jails or in the state penitentiary for less than ten years) throughout the state on public road construction. Jackson, Swain, Macon, Cherokee, Clay and Graham Counties were exempt because of railroad construction priority.

³ “Separate but equal” is used to describe a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)

1955 State Response to Brown v. Board of Education

In the 1955 Session of the North Carolina General Assembly, a major undertaking was [S.L. 1955-1372, "An Act Rewriting, Rearranging, Renumbering and Amending Chapter 115 \(Education\) of the General Statutes, and Repealing Certain Obsolete Sections Thereof."](#) The 106 page act was ratified by the General Assembly on May 26, 1955. One significant change was that the school year was extended from six months to 180 days over a nine month period.

While that act was an overhaul of the state's legal educational provisions, an independent response was made by the legislature to the Brown v. Board of Education decision. In August of 1954, Governor William B. Umstead created the Governor's Special Advisory Committee on Education, headed by Rocky Mount's Thomas Pearsall. Pearsall had served as both appointed and subsequently elected representative in the State House of Representatives from 1940 to 1947; he was Speaker of the House in the 1947 session.

The Committee, composed of sixteen white and three black members⁴ issued a report on December 30, 1954 entitled [Report of the Governor's Special Advisory Committee on Education](#).

That report provided the foundation for [S.L. 1955-366, An Act to Provide for the Enrollment of Pupils in Public Schools](#), which gave the local board of education full authority with respect to student assignments, with the option of appeal first to the board, then to Superior Court, and from there, through the standard court system appeals protocol. The act would have logically been folded into the broader educational framework overhaul implemented by S.L. 1955; but by separating and fast-tracking its adoption (ratified on March 30, almost two months before the comprehensive act), the legislature ensured that it was law before the close of the 1954-55 school year. The registration law and burdensome process of appeals were configured to counteract and delay desegregation efforts.

That the intent was, indeed, to retard progress was confirmed by Thomas Pearsall's widow. In a [1988 oral interview](#), Elizabeth Braswell Pearsall acknowledged *"He kept saying 'We must buy time.' That was his philosophy about everything."* She went on to observe: *"Things have to evolve.' He had the patience to wait for things to evolve. That's a rare thing, a rare commodity right now."*

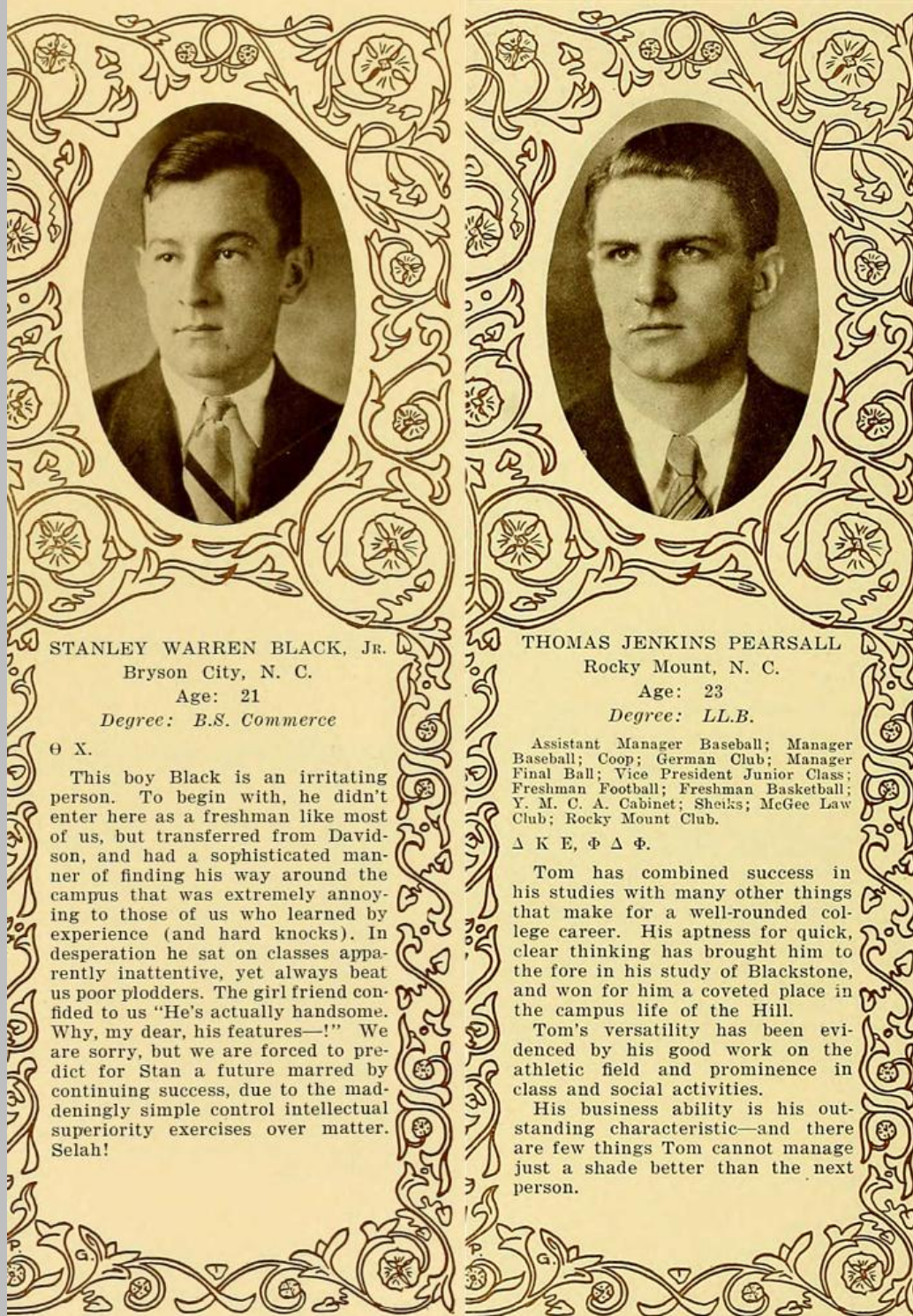
The [Right Reverend Edwin A. Penick](#), Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church diocese of North Carolina and Senior Bishop of the United States, corresponded with Pearsall in September, 1954, as Committee discussions were underway. He advocated deliberateness on the part of the government, noting that the experience of northern states, where segregation had not prevailed, was of little value given centuries of segregation in the south. Along with his counsel of deliberation, he also suggested that the membership of the original Pearsall committee was flawed, noting that *"At the present time, Negro representation on your committee is a gesture only. This, to my mind, is unfortunate, because it suggests that the Negro's point of view is not being heard. Token representation by Negroes on the committee can hardly be satisfactory to the Negro citizens of the state."* Penick was in a position to speak with considerable personal knowledge. He served as president of the board of trustees of an historically black college with Episcopal Church affiliation, St. Augustine's College (now University).



Rt. Rev. Edwin Penick
([archive.org](#))

⁴ It should be noted that all three black members were also employees of the State.

[Thomas Pearsall](#) was a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill, law school class of 1927. A fellow 1927 graduate was Bryson City native Stanley Black, Jr. It appears that during their university years, Black's focus was as much on having a good time as academics; Pearsall, on the other hand, was quite involved in organized activities.⁵



STANLEY WARREN BLACK, JR.
Bryson City, N. C.
Age: 21
Degree: B.S. Commerce

Θ X.

This boy Black is an irritating person. To begin with, he didn't enter here as a freshman like most of us, but transferred from Davidson, and had a sophisticated manner of finding his way around the campus that was extremely annoying to those of us who learned by experience (and hard knocks). In desperation he sat on classes apparently inattentive, yet always beat us poor plodders. The girl friend confided to us "He's actually handsome. Why, my dear, his features—!" We are sorry, but we are forced to predict for Stan a future marred by continuing success, due to the maddeningly simple control intellectual superiority exercises over matter. Selah!

THOMAS JENKINS PEARSALL
Rocky Mount, N. C.
Age: 23
Degree: LL.B.

Assistant Manager Baseball; Manager Baseball; Coop; German Club; Manager Final Ball; Vice President Junior Class; Freshman Football; Freshman Basketball; Y. M. C. A. Cabinet; Sheiks; McGee Law Club; Rocky Mount Club.

Δ K E, Φ Δ Φ.

Tom has combined success in his studies with many other things that make for a well-rounded college career. His aptness for quick, clear thinking has brought him to the fore in his study of Blackstone, and won for him a coveted place in the campus life of the Hill.

Tom's versatility has been evidenced by his good work on the athletic field and prominence in class and social activities.

His business ability is his outstanding characteristic—and there are few things Tom cannot manage just a shade better than the next person.

Individual profiles from 1927 Yackety-Yak, UNC-Chapel Hill's school annual ([DigitalNC](#))

⁵ Both men had accomplished careers – Black as a banker, Pearsall as a politician.

Bishop Penick's perception was prescient and on point. An editorial⁶ appearing in the May, 1956 issue of *North Carolina Teachers Record*, a publication of the North Carolina Teachers Association (NCTA), observed:

The committee was not representative of the people of the state in that one whole clearly defined segment of the population was ignored in its composition and no representative sympathetic to the aspiration of the omitted segment of the people was included to give balance to the deliberations of the advisors.

[NCTA](#) was a statewide organization of black school teachers and administrators, formed in the early 1880s. William Lawrence Greene, who taught math and physics at Shaw University prior to taking the position of Executive Secretary of the NCTA and Editor of the *North Carolina Teachers Record* in 1941, was presumably the piece's author.

The editorial noted that a U.S. Supreme Court ruling⁷ had once approved a "separate but equal" standard, but that "*The states themselves forfeited the rights granted to them by the federal courts in 1896 by one sided compromise. They enforced only the 'separate.' They deliberately refused to provide the*



equal." The photo here⁸ is illustrative of the separate, but not equal state of affairs. The white fountain dispenses chilled (and likely filtered) water from atop an enclosed refrigeration compartment, while the colored fountain offers straight tap water. The difference in maintenance is striking, and poignantly, even the drain lines were kept separate until reunited somewhere behind the wall.

On May 31, 1955, five days after the conclusion of the 1955 session of the NC State Legislature, the [U.S. Supreme Court's implementation ruling](#) was issued, to "*enter such orders and decrees consistent with the opinions of this Court as are necessary and proper to admit to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed the parties to this case.*"

1956 State Response to Brown v. Board of Education: The Pearsall Plan

A second smaller Advisory Committee was appointed by Governor Luther Hodges in 1956:

[Thomas J. Pearsall](#), Rocky Mount, attorney, businessman, former Speaker of the NC House;
[William L. Crew](#), Halifax, attorney, former State Chairman of the Democratic Executive Committee;
[Robert O. Huffman](#), Morganton, businessman, Chairman of the Board of Drexel Enterprises;
[William T. Joyner](#), Raleigh, attorney, Colonel in the NC National Guard, Chairman of the State Board of Elections, Chairman of the State Highway Commission;
[William Clinton Medford](#) (Bryson City native), Waynesville, attorney, State Senator at the time; he was later appointed Western North Carolina District Attorney by President John F. Kennedy;
[H. Cloyd Philpott](#), Lexington, businessman, Lieutenant Governor of NC;
[Edward Yarborough](#), Franklin County, attorney, Captain in the Army during WW II, Lt. Colonel in the NC National Guard, Representative in the State House.

⁶ A copy of the editorial is archived [HERE](#). A transcribed copy is available [HERE](#).

⁷ Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896). This involved a Louisiana state law which required separate rail coaches for black and white riders.

⁸ The photo appears in a [U.S. Army magazine article](#).

Six of the seven all male committee were Democrats. Huffman was a Republican, although his political involvement was limited to mayor of Morganton and he spoke of himself as “a Sam Ervin Republican.” This committee lacked even the “token representation” noted by Right Rev. Penick with respect to the earlier committee. University of North Carolina President Gordon Gray, a member of the 1954 Advisory Committee, asked Governor Umstead to be relieved his appointment to the new committee, noting that had he been consulted, he would have declined. The reason he expressed for declining was that he would be charged with implementing whatever policies were developed.

The Legislature called an extra session in July of 1956; or as Resolution 6 of that session labeled it, “*The 1956 Extraordinary Session of the General Assembly.*” With a minor exception, the focus was entirely on delaying, mitigating and even obviating the Supreme Court’s ruling, and followed the so-called [Pearsall Plan](#), which had been developed by the Advisory Committee.

The seven chapters of laws passed during the heat of the 1956 summer provided for use of public funds to pay for private, non-sectarian education if parents of a student didn’t want their child to attend school with students of another race, to suspend operation of local public schools by local vote, suspension of the long-standing state compulsory education requirements if parents did not want their child to attend a school with students of another race, and most importantly, to assign complete and final authority regarding school assignment to the local school board. Parents had the right to appeal the board’s assignment, but had only five days to apply for a hearing.

Beyond the acts enacted in accordance with the Pearsall Plan, the Legislature launched a hissy fit load of resolutions. Session laws and resolutions are posted [HERE](#).

Seen through the lens of today, that 1956 “extraordinary session” seems surly and stiff-necked. But to this decidedly apolitical viewer, the legislation which was crafted, and in particular, the local school board assignment provision, was simultaneously strategically brilliant and morally corrupt.

If parents objected to the school assignment of their child and appealed to the board, the board could simply confirm its decision. At that point, the only resort of the parents was to the court system. The adjudicative delay could easily use up much of a school year, rendering judicial appeal an untenable situation. Further, any action at the federal level would have to be directed to the multiplicity of school board districts, creating mess for federal intervention. That is, unless a case could be made that the entire law was unconstitutional

Ultimately, that is exactly what happened, but it was a decade later.

Local background, Part 1: Personal memories and reflections

In some respects, Bryson City area kids were integrating voluntarily – at least when it came to playing in pickup games and just playing in general. A [series of photographs](#) taken by Kelly Bennett on the town square in the early 1950s provides visual evidence that a group of several dozen kids, both black and white, were fully capable of self-integration when left to their own devices. Herman Thomas, one of those gathered, recollected that after a safety inspection and training, there was a race. His brother, Pat “The Cat” Thomas came in first in the 26-inch bike class and Herman was first among the 24-inch bikers. He laughingly recalled that his prize was eight flashlight batteries.

But beyond the photographs, many local youngsters, of all races, played football, baseball & softball, and basketball pickup games involving black, white, and Cherokee kids. My brother Jim recalled numerous pickup basketball games in our front yard (actually, it wasn't our yard – it was on property owned by the Bryson family, but which we were allowed to use). One of the regulars was Freddie Howell (also seen in the bicycle photos); Jim, his teammate and star guard Jackie Corbin independently opined that Freddie was such a good player that had he been on the Swain High basketball team of 1958-59, which made it to the state quarter finals, Swain's chances of bringing home a state championship would have been dramatically improved. Herman Thomas recalled pickup football games played along Bryson Branch, and specifically remembered one of those involved being Corbin, an all-conference player who went on to play collegiately at Tennessee Tech.

I'm basically a decade younger than br'er Jim, Herman Thomas and Jackie Corbin. I personally remember playing both organized and pickup games on the baseball/softball field on Black Hill, across the road from and above our house. Like the lot next to our house where my father installed the wooden post basketball goal, the ballfield above the house was owned by the Bryson family at the time. It had been used for decades as a ballfield before I was born. One of its uses was as a playground for the “Colored Elementary School” prior to the construction of the Van Raalte Plant in the late 1940s. Even after the plant was built, it was used as an official ballfield and on at least one occasion in personal memory, a circus grounds until the early 1960s. The last summer that it was used as the official Little League diamond was the summer of 1961. But it continued to be used for pickup games through the mid-1960s. In the late 1960s, Jim Thomas, with permission from the Brysons, enclosed it with an electric fence and kept horses.

With passing decades, memories have dimmed, but there are several specific recollections I have related to playing on that diamond with not only black and white kids, but in one case, with two black adults. On this particular day, there were a handful of us boys - not enough to make teams, so were playing roly bat, and it was definitely a mixed race gathering. I'm fairly sure that Mike Jones was one of the fellows; I distinctly remember Mike batted cross-handed⁹. Two grown men (I can't recall who they were) came by the field, wanted to get in some batting practice, and asked if we kids would like to help field and retrieve the balls, I suppose partly so that we'd go along with them taking over the space we'd been using. All of us agreed, and we spread out. It was great fun; even though it was softball (we used a baseball). Of course, the adults could hit the ball harder and further than we could, so the fly balls in particular were on a different scale than we were used to. I wasn't as big as some of the other kids and they could outreach me on fly balls, so I decided to hang around where the shortstop or third baseman would normally be, and got a fair amount of action with both ground balls and an occasional pop-up. Then one of the fellows hit a one-hop liner in my direction. Somewhat surprisingly, I managed to catch it backhanded. It had enough oomph to twirl me about half way around. At first the fellow who was pitching just hee-hawed, both from my surprise at having

⁹ Batting cross-handed is when a right-handed batter holds the bat with his left hand on top (vice-versa for a left-handed batter). A fair number of, perhaps most, professional golfers of today putt cross-handed.

caught the ball and likely more so, the ensuing pirouette. But after a bit of reflection, he told me that I better get on back out in the outfield with the other boys – obviously concerned that I could've gotten hurt. I didn't know who he was at the time, and still don't, but recall thinking along the line of "I just proved myself – why should I have to back up?" But he was an adult, and adults were in charge. I backed up.

Even though we voluntarily played with one another, that was not the case with organized leagues, whether in school or out. Up through the winter of 1964-65, there were no black kids who played Little League baseball, Midget football, or youth basketball – all of which were activities with no connection to school other than the fact that football and basketball were played on school grounds. I'm not sure about Little League baseball; I'm inclined to think that the Lions Club might have had something to do with it originally (1950s), but by the early 1960s, according to Smoky Mountain Times articles in 1963, there was a City Recreation Committee which ran it. Beginning that year, the field was located on the river, across from Carolina Wood Turning Plant. It stood just east of where the sewer plant is today. Midget football and youth basketball were both organized by the local Jaycees. For whatever reason, it never occurred to me to wonder "where are the black kids?"

I suspect that there was an unspoken rule or understanding that the youth sports leagues were not open to black kids. I recall a few Cherokee kids played baseball. If it had been kids organizing the teams, would black kids have been allowed or encouraged? I'd like to think so, but there's no way to know now.



Boy at right shows the flood high water mark at the depot. Note "COLORED" above the door at left.

TVA Photo 12515A, 30 Aug 1940 Source: [National Archives at Atlanta, TVA Kodak Collection](https://www.archives.gov/atlanta/collection/tva-kodak)

Local background, Part 2: Education

Early schools for black students in Swain County

Historically, there were at least¹⁰ two schools designated for black students in Swain County – one in the Birdtown area and the other in Bryson City. Both were for elementary students only. Little is known about what was called the Birdtown School, but it seems likely that it was located toward the head of Goose Creek. Chrisenberry Howell acquired 65 acres of land in the upper west Goose Creek area in 1894 and again¹¹ in 1909. In 1910, he and his wife Sarah deeded about one acre of property to the Pine Grove Baptist Church; in 1911, they deeded an adjoining acre to the Swain County Board of Education. Both mentioned Town House Branch; based on a combination of circumstantial data (primarily deeds), it appears likely that this was in the general vicinity of the intersection of Locust Road and Goose Creek Road – near the current location of Living Waters Lutheran Church.

It might be noted that this was not the Birdtown School which was located within the Qualla Boundary, just east of the mouth of Adams Creek, where Bethabara Baptist Church stands today. That school operated for Cherokee students until around the early 1960s.

An early location for the Bryson City Negro School was on top of Black Hill; it was on property owned by the Bryson family at the time, and was located on the west side of Black Hill Road, across from the location where the Van Raalte Plant¹² was erected in 1947. In 1948, the Board of Education purchased a lot from Fred and Della Powell near Bryson Branch, and a new brick building was erected by 1951. This structure served as the elementary school (grades 1-7) for the black student population until the schools were integrated. No local high school instruction was made available.

Beginning in 1945, black Swain County students enrolled in grades 8 and up began to be bused to Sylva¹³. This practice continued for almost two decades. Victoria A. Casey McDonald¹⁴ records that in 1955, Central Consolidated School Principal John Wade “assured the Board (Jackson County Board of Education) that all blacks in Jackson County wanted the continuation of a segregated school system.” A new Jackson School for black students was opened in September of 1956.

The arrangement may have been acceptable for the Jackson County community, but for Swain students, attending school there involved a 45-minute bus ride each way.

Swain County Board of Education and interactions with the black community

At the July 2, 1951 meeting of the Swain County Board, an Advisory Committee for the Bryson City Negro School composed of Julius McDowell, Hilda Inabinett and Stacy Coleman was appointed; they were re-appointed in 1953. On April 4, 1955, the Swain County Board appointed George Moore, Albert Thomas and Alma Jackson members to the Bryson City Negro School Board. However, based on a community petition to the County Board, at its April 19, 1955 Board meeting, Rev. Julius McDowell, Albert Thomas and Lillie Inabinett (wife of Hilda) were appointed to the Advisory Board.

It should be noted here that this “Advisory Committee” was just that. That was not the case for four local school boards, or to use the language of the state laws, committees – for Whittier, Almond, Alarka and Bryson City. Those groups selected teachers and made other decisions such as whether to allow school property to be used for non-school purposes, such as midget and mite football and youth basketball, which were organized by the Jaycees. There was also a district school board,

¹⁰ In 1887, an acre of land on Peachtree Creek was deeded by Ruffin and Susan DeHart “for and in consideration of cause and promotion of education of the colored race.” No records of the school have been found, but school records in general for that period are also extremely sparse; the first records of the Board of Education are in 1908.

¹¹ There were several back-and-forth deeds involving Howell; it seems likely that these were basically deeds of trust, since the Howells had land interest in that section for almost two decades (1894-1913).

¹² The Van Raalte plant stood west of the previously mentioned ball field.

¹³ Board of Education minutes, June 25, 1945

¹⁴ *A Pictorial History - The African Americans of Jackson County, From Slavery to Integration*, p. 80

comprised of representatives from the local school boards. Decisions were made at both levels. These were all subject to oversight and change by the County Board of Education, which was appointed by the state legislature and which in turn, appointed the local boards. But in practice, the County Board almost always supported the local board decisions.

On the other hand, the Advisory Committee had no clearly defined authority to do anything other than to recommend the one teacher or to request (for example), from the main school board, use of the school building for community functions. It does appear, however, that the Advisory Committee was expected to “elect” the sole teacher of grades 1-7.

On August 23, 1955, four of six members of the Swain County Board met at the Colored School. Members of the black community present were Lillie Inabinett, Rev. & Mrs. Julius McDowell, Mr. and Mrs. James Powell, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thomas, and Mrs. Stacy Coleman. Swain County Board members present were Chairman J.A. Sutton, C.C. Wright, Mrs. Ora Lee Sossamon and Mrs. Frances Colville. Board members not in attendance (reasons not given) were Bob Carson and A.J. Jones. Also in attendance was Superintendent of Schools, T.L. Woodard.

A note concerning Board minutes

Superintendent Woodard acted as Secretary to the Board with regard to keeping minutes. This practice was not peculiar to Swain County – it was actually mandated by state law that the superintendent of schools in each county (or city) be ex officio secretary to the board.

Thus, what was – and was not – recorded, and even the manner in which it was recorded, was filtered by the superintendent. It is common practice for the secretary of some organizations to be a voting member; for example, this author was secretary to two different national nuclear standards committees. My job was to record proceedings, distribute minutes for review and take care of most committee communications, but I was also a voting member with the same rights and duties as other members. My job was to take care of the bulk of the committee correspondence and to record minutes. But the minutes only became official when approved by the committee.

The inherent conflict of interest in this school board situation is striking. The superintendent was a non-voting member, but charged with implementing Board policies as well as being subject to hiring, firing, and discipline by the Board. The specific wording of minutes could potentially be used by the superintendent for how he conducted his business.

Incredibly, although the Board chairman’s name was almost always typed at the end of the recorded minutes, it was not a standard practice of the Board to either review and approve previous meeting minutes or for the chair to even sign them. On a consistent basis, the only signature appearing on the minutes was that of T.L. Woodard. This gobsmacking type of conduct had also occurred in the first decade of the 20th century with respect to minutes of the County Commissioners, as noted in the article on the [burning of the Swain County Courthouse](#) (see third paragraph, p. 4) and that mode of operation almost certainly factored into the burning of the courthouse.

Inferences drawn from the recorded minutes must thus be considered as an edited version, with significant potential for the editing to reflect Woodard’s own desires. On the flip side, a careful consideration of multiple minutes might reveal Woodard’s personal views and biases. That is an avenue which will be explored later.

That August 23, 1955 meeting was in response to a petition from the black community, although no details about the petition were provided in the minutes. However, from what was discussed, it is clear that the petition was related to the busing of students to Sylva. The Brown v. Board of Education decision was an unmentioned elephant in the room; or at least it was not mentioned in the minutes.

According to the minutes, Rev. McDowell indicated there was no concern about the elementary school operation (for the black students in grades 1-7), but asked “What can be done to better the high school situation?” Chairman Sutton’s response was that new facilities would be available at Sylva for the next year. Concerns about the lack of accreditation and the travel were expressed. The minutes recorded that “Mr. Woodard stated that the longest route in the county was 60.1¹⁵ miles. The Sylva route would be 42 at the most.” Rev. McDowell observed that the Sylva school was not accredited, children came out unprepared for college or to change schools to another county, and that there was a poor standard of instruction.

Keeping in mind that Woodard was the recording secretary, some of the views expressed are still telling:

- J.A. Sutton asked “Would your children be pleased and satisfied to attend the Swain County High School?” James Powell said that his children would be.
- J.A. Sutton said that discussion on integrating should have been started in the previous spring (obviously ignoring the fact that the “all deliberate speed” ruling by the Supreme court wasn’t issued until May 31). He also noted that “*it would be very hard on the colored children since they would have so few.*”
- Albert Thomas responded that while they would be in the minority, they wanted their children to become as good citizens as possible, and they needed a good education.
- Sutton observed that the teachers would not be prejudiced, but that they should’ve been told earlier. He also indicated it would take time to get used to the idea and “*that they should be talked from now if intergration (sic) was to take place next year.*”
- Frances Colville responded, with some apparent exasperation, that there had been time, but it had not been used.
- Ora Lee Sossamon said that she felt none of the Board wanted colored people held back. She also suggested that adult education was needed.
- Carroll Wright said “*the effect of intergration (sic) on the colored pupil would be more harmful than beneficial since they would feel insecure with so few in the high school.*” He noted that schools were more than equipment and materials – that they needed to feel secure and that there emotional and mental health was important to get the most out of school.
- Albert Thomas told of an experience he’d had when delivering some goods to Alarka Creek. The fellow to whom he was making the delivery had a small child in his arms, and asked Albert to try to get the child to come to him. Albert held out his hands and the child came, and noted there was no prejudice in small children.

The general impression left by the balance of the minutes was that the black community agreed that it was best not to rush things, but clearly wanted to see progress; Albert Thomas asked “Will the same Board be here next year?” The answer was in the affirmative. The black community trusted the Board to set a course for integration.

There was some reason for optimism regarding that trust; two months later, at the Board’s October 1955 meeting, the subject of integration and the concept of a committee to study the matter was discussed. The Board agreed to name members at the November meeting. At the November meeting, these individuals were named:

¹⁵ This was an absurd claim. The longest conceivable route would be to the county line in the Nantahala Gorge, a distance of 21 miles from the high school. It is about the same distance to the head of Tow String or Smokemont.

Walter McHan, Willard Smith, Rev. Julius McDowell, Ed Whitaker, Edgar Fisher, Dr. J.L. Woody, Robert Varner, Stacy Coleman and Carrie Abbott were named to the committee, with J.A. Sutton and T.L. Woodard to also serve. Woodard was to notify the selected members.

There was no further mention of that committee in subsequent board minutes, and in fact there is no record that the special committee ever met at all. Neither the Board nor the Superintendent did anything to move toward integration or providing for any relief whatsoever.

The next mention of school matters for the black portion of the community was a full nine months later, at the August 5, 1956 Board meeting. Even then, it was the last subject on the agenda. The minutes noted that *“At a recent meeting of the Colored Committee held to elect a teacher for our colored school, it was disclosed that the colored parents were very much dissatisfied with the school at Sylva and that they were not going to send their children there if they could help it.”* Woodard was tasked to “get in touch with Raleigh” to see if a boarding arrangement (instead of the daily bus trip) could be worked out.

At an August 18 Board meeting, Woodard reported that the Controller for the State Department of Instruction, C.D. Douglas, indicated that a \$25/student (per month) stipend for boarding could be provided in lieu of busing, but that the parents would have to make the request.

In the meantime, Asheville attorney Harold Epps had written the Board, noting that he’d been contacted by a group of parents regarding their children having to take a daily bus trip of about 46 miles to attend an unaccredited high school. According to Epps, the parents indicated that the “best interest of all of the children, white and colored alike, and the harmonious relationships of the community will be best served and preserved if the high school in Swain County remains all white as it has been.” He went on to state that the parents would like a stipend of at least \$35/month to attend a private boarding school or in private residences where they could attend an accredited school. He requested a response within five days. There was no record of response included in Board minutes – only a copy of Epps’ letter.

On August 22, 1956 the Board called a special session. All Board members were present, with two visitors, Rev. McDowell and Ed Whitaker, County Attorney. McDowell indicated that the \$25/student boarding stipend wasn’t sufficient, and also that while some might accept it (presumably supplementing with their own funds), it would deprive others of rightful educational opportunities. There was discussion regarding school accreditation and whether a student attending an unaccredited school would be ready for college work. Board members Carroll Wright and Ora Lee Sossamon and county attorney Ed Whitaker all stated that it was dependent on the student, and in Whitaker’s own experience, it was his mother’s foresight in selecting subjects that helped him.

The minutes indicated that only Mrs. Coleman on Galbreath Creek was unwilling to accept the \$25 (note: other parts of the minutes seem to contradict that). The bottom line was that the county would provide either a bus to Sylva or \$25 boarding stipend. Chairman Sutton was reported to say “we would have to solve the problem some time in the future.”

Two days later, on August 24, 1956 the Board met again. The minutes recorded: *“Rev. Julius McDowell, Negro minister, presented a petition to the Secretary of the Board requesting that Negro children be allowed to attend Swain High School this coming school year.”* The petition was discussed but action deferred until all members were present (Ora Lee Sossamon was not in attendance). [Here is a transcribed facsimile of McDowell’s petition.](#)

On August 28, the Board again met. The petition submitted by Rev. McDowell was officially presented to the Board and Dr. Harold Bacon spoke in favor of the Board acting affirmatively on the petition. According to an article which appeared later, in the August 31 *Asheville Citizen*, Bacon said:

“This is a moral issue. It is either right or wrong. I think the people of this community recognize the basic rightness of this thing. They know it is coming eventually. I feel that if we went ahead and complied voluntarily our problems would be over.”

The Board rejected the petition, giving two reasons in the minutes:

1. *The assignment of all students to specified schools for the 1956-57 term was made by the Swain County Board of Education at the close of the 1955-56 term as provided by law; that no protest was made to said assignments and no request was made for a change of assignment within the time allowed by law therefor.*
2. *That the type of petition which was being considered by the Board was not in compliance with the assignment statute, according to JOYNER v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 244 N.C. 164. The Board, under the law, is only authorized to consider applications from or on behalf of individual students.*

A follow-on enrollment attempt

Early in the morning on August 30, 1956, an attempt was made to enroll five black students in Swain County High School and Bryson City Elementary School. They were Betty McDowell (14), Julius McDowell, Jr (15), Barbara Ann Powell (14), Carolyn Powell (16), and Herman Thomas (14). The grades to which applications were made ranged from 8th through 12th. The McDowells were children of Rev. McDowell; the Powell girls were daughters of James and Agnes Powell; Herman Thomas was a son of Albert and Grace Thomas.

Superintendent of Swain County Schools, Thomas L. Woodard was on hand to rebuff the enrollment attempt.

Multiple daily papers from across the state reported on the episode, and included photographic coverage. These included [The Asheville Citizen](#) and [Raleigh News and Observer](#). Since the enrollment attempt took place shortly after 8 am, the presence of one or more professional photographers is prima facie evidence that the plan had been shared with the news media ahead of time. That, in turn, suggests a level of coordination and planning which extended beyond Swain County. Karl Fleming, author of *The Asheville Citizen* piece, wrote “The Negroes apparently have no connection with the NAACP.” Fleming did make reference to the involvement of Harold Epps in the case. It is unknown whether Epps had established relations with the NAACP in this regard, but he had personal experience with NAACP intervention in a previous case which involved him as a student.

In rejecting the enrollment effort, Superintendent Woodard was quoted as saying:

“If you want to apply for admission again next year, you will have to register within 10 days after the close of the school term, according to the 1955 Legislative school assignment law.”

This was a duplicitous assertion; there was no such requirement in the 1955 act. The use of the word duplicitous might seem harsh, but it is warranted in light of the fact that the Swain County School Board actually cited the Joyner v. Board of Education case before the NC Supreme Court. In that case, the Court explicitly noted the need of county (and city) school districts to have a reasonable amount of notice in order to plan for the following year, and noted:



Superintendent T.L. Woodard
[1957 Ridgerunner, DigitalNC](#)

“It would seem that some rule or regulation might well be promulgated by the county and city boards of education fixing a date reasonably in advance of the opening of school for filing such applications. Judicial notice will be taken of the fact that boards of education must of necessity employ teachers in advance of the opening of school. Teachers are assigned to their particular schools on the basis of the enrollment information in the hands of the respective boards at the time the assignments are made. Hence, it would seem to be extremely desirable if not imperative for the orderly operation of the schools that applications for admission to schools other than those theretofore designated by the board of education or city administrative unit, be made reasonably in advance of the opening of school.”

In other words, the Court clearly recognized the need for some notice, but both the original law and the court in its ruling placed the burden on the county board of education to establish such a date. The court’s advice was not heeded by Swain County in 1956, so Woodard’s claim was not only duplicitous with respect to the 10 days; Swain County had not adopted a policy at all. This was borne out by the fact that Woodard reported to the Swain County Board on May 30, 1957 that he had been to Jackson County to see how they were handling the assignment law, and reported that they notified pupils by public announcement in the local paper. The Swain Board decided *at that point* that teachers would write the following year’s assignment on the individual pupil’s report card. That practice was begun in 1957.

The only ten-day matter addressed in the 1955 student assignment act¹⁶ was a ten-day limit for *appeal* to Superior Court once the board of education had denied a request. The law¹⁷ passed on July 27, 1956 did specify that the local board of education was to make the school assignment, and was also required to notify parents or guardians of the student in writing, “*on each pupil's report card or by written notice by any other feasible means, to the parent or guardian of each child or the person standing in loco parentis to the child, or may give notice of assignment of groups or categories of pupils by publication at least two times in some newspaper having general circulation in the administrative unit.*”

The 1956 enrollment attempt and local “journalism”

Woodard’s false claim was cited in multiple newspaper accounts. Even more disgusting than the duplicity was Woodard’s patronizing statement to the parents of the black students: “*We know you parents want the best for your children and **we are not angry at you** for coming here. Maybe in the next year or two something can be done.*” (emphasis mine)

The *Smoky Mountain Times* of August 30, published a claim which was farcical on its face: “Woodard said that he did not consider race in his refusal.” The article was published on the same day as the attempted enrollment; discussing happenings of publication day was (and still would be) exceptionally unusual.

An editorial in the following week’s *Smoky Mountain Times* offered congratulations all around. That is, all around to the white portion of the local population. It observed that Woodard “deserves a great portion of the praise for his handling of the situation” then went on to praise the high school students, and faculty. The *Times*’ take with respect to the students and their parents who only wanted access to the same education opportunities as their white counterparts was: “The whole affair seemed ill-advised for the negroes and from all indications everyone was glad it ended so swiftly and

¹⁶ NC S.L. 1955-366 § 4.

¹⁷ NC S.L. 1956-7 §§ 1-3.

peacefully.” The Aug. 30 article and the Sep. 6 editorial are transcribed [HERE](#). That praise of the white community is exactly the sort of thing that appeared in a [public statement by Birmingham clergy](#) with respect to how Bull Conner’s police handled the peaceful protests taking place there.

No mention was ever made by the *Smoky Mountain Times* about the fact that the day after the enrollment attempt, “A crowd of 25-30 white adults and students gathered at the school this morning when a rumor was spread the Negroes would try again to be admitted.” (reported by the September 1 *Winston-Salem Journal*).

There was no coverage by the *Smoky Mountain Times* regarding the fact that Albert Thomas, father of young Herman Thomas who had attempted to enroll, was laid off (if reluctantly) by his employer, furniture store owner Humphrey Browning. According to relatives of both Browning and Thomas, Browning was both friend and employer of Thomas, but community pressure was such that his business would have been devastated had he retained Thomas as an employee.¹⁸

Likewise, *Smoky Mountain Times* made no mention of the fact that young Herman was sent to live with relatives and attend school in Chattanooga because of the combination of his desire to attend an accredited school as well as the family’s fear of retaliation for the attempt to acquire that education in his home town.

Interestingly, in the fall of 1956, the first court-ordered integration in the south began sixty miles northwest of Bryson City, in Clinton Tennessee, a town similar to Bryson City in many respects. There is simply no way to know if the same sort of scenario would have played out here that occurred there, but it is certainly possible. See [Integration comes to Southern Appalachia](#).

A year later: 1957

In the summer of 1957, applications were made for six students to attend Swain High instead of being bused to Sylva again. In this case, the applications were made for the individuals, following the legal procedure outlined by the law and sanctioned by the NC Supreme Court. There was apparently no attempt made to again cite the (false) 10-day limit. On July 12, 1957, the School Board met with eight adult members of the black community, including the three Advisory Committee members, Wade Howell, Harrison Jackson and Lillie Inabinett. The minutes recorded by Secretary Woodard about the meeting are somewhat confused, but appear to suggest that there was a lack of unanimity among the parents as to what they desired for their children.

On July 30, the Board, comprised of Chairman J.A. Sutton, Willard W. Smith, Carroll C Wright, Claude H. Cunningham, Frances Colville and Ora Lee Sossamon discussed the options for the black students. The Chairman stated that “the Negro community would be torn up, that the colored people do not want to integrate.” Other comments were made with expressions of having the welfare of the children in mind (although the expressions of what constituted their welfare were generally at odds with the previously expressed desires of the black parents). The end result was that busing to Sylva continued in 1957-58, and then on throughout the first five school years of the 1960s.

School Integration arrives in WNC: the 1960s

Mountain counties in Western North Carolina finally began – very slowly – to integrate in the 1960s. In 1961, the Asheville City School Board admitted five black students to first and second grades of Newton Elementary School. Newton Elementary was located in South Asheville, across Biltmore Avenue from Mission Hospital; it was located at the former site of [Newton Academy](#), a school built shortly after Buncombe County was established. The Board established a plan for

¹⁸ According to Herman Thomas, after a cooling off time, his father was rehired. The Thomas family understood the situation that Browning faced, and held no resentment.

gradual integration, beginning with the early grades. But that same Board turned down requests from a half-dozen other students, including three requests to attend fifth grade at Newton Elementary.

Brevard High School integrated in the 1962-63 school year. Jackson County stuck a tentative toe in the desegregation water in the 1964-65 school year; six of thirteen students who applied for reassignment (from Jackson School) were accepted, with four being assigned to Sylva-Webster and two to McKee Laboratory High at Cullowhee.

At the September 2, 1964 meeting of the Swain County Board of Education, a resolution published by Jackson County concerning integration of Jackson County Schools was read. The minutes recorded: "*There was some discussion about colored players on some of the athletic teams we will be playing this year. No conclusions were reached.*" The context of the discussion wasn't offered; the reader is left to his own devices to consider¹⁹.

There was no further mention of integration until the February 15, 1965 meeting of the School Board. Members present were Chairman C.C. Wright, Marshall Smith, Mrs. Jim Biggs and Jim DeBord. The Board approved the wording of five steps to be taken and submitted to demonstrate compliance Section 601 of the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#):

Step 1: Attendance areas be bounded by rational and reasonable lines and be a part of a system of unitary, nonracial zones.

Step 2: Initial assignment, transfer and reassignment operate without regard to race, color or national origin of any individual.

Step 3: Freedom of choice cannot operate in our system since we have only one colored school with 19 elementary and 6 high school students. (The 6 high school students attend school at Sylva.) The school will be closed as of the end of 1964-65 school term. All students in Swain County will be assigned in accordance with step 2.

Step 4: Timing: Since we cannot afford freedom of choice to either colored or white and since we have only a small number of colored students, the Swain County Board of Education plans to discontinue the colored school at the end of this school year. We have had partial integration for 15 years or more, but at the beginning of the 1965-66 school year the Swain County unit will be totally integrated.

Step 5: Public notice: We have been concerned over publicity of this action. We believe that the less said about integration of schools the smoother this transition will be. We will give the colored parents notice that the colored school will be discontinued at the end of this year.

The claim of the county having had "partial integration for 15 years or more" would be laughable if it weren't so pathetic and embarrassing.

In regards to Step 5, there was, in fact, not only little, but nothing said – either in Board minutes or the Smoky Mountain Times, with one exception, which will be discussed later in the context of character.

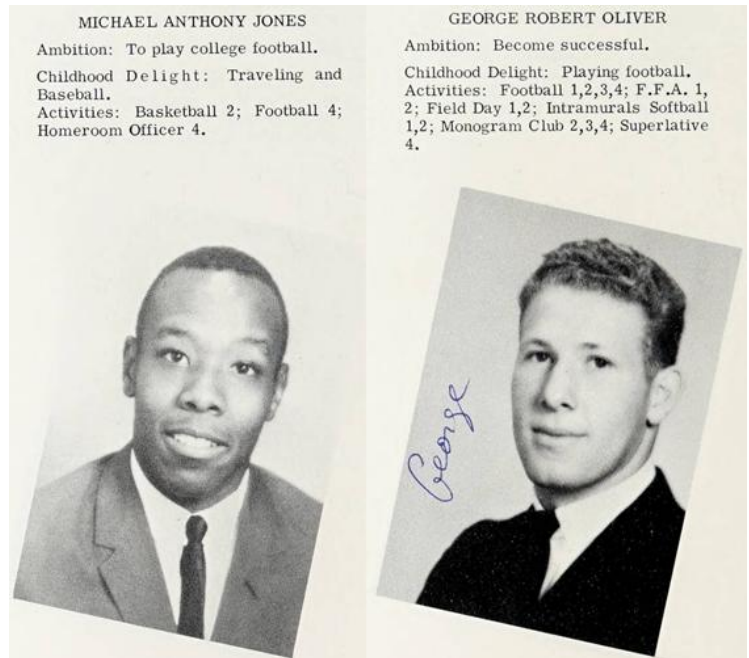
Nine years after black students had been turned away at Swain High and 8th grade in Bryson City Elementary School, in the 1965-1966 school year, both schools were fully integrated. This writer was a freshman at Swain High that year. Based on personal memory and all accounts that I've been able to collect, including both teachers and students, the year went remarkably well. One classmate recalls an ugly word exchange – which took place in a classroom of Lillian Thomasson, but that is it.

¹⁹ I've been told, by folks who attended Sylva-Webster at the time, that the athletic abilities of Leroy Jackson and especially Tommy Love were major reasons that Jackson County got a year's head start on Swain County in school integration. There's no way to prove or disprove that, but it is altogether believable, given the nature of local culture.

On the contrary, there are multiple evidences of friendly assimilation. One anecdote, as told by high school business classes teacher, Jean Sandlin Douthit, is telling.

On the first day of classes in August of 1965, the first student to arrive in her home room class was Mike Jones, a black student who lived not far from my family's home on Black Hill. Mike introduced himself and asked Mrs. Douthit where he should sit. She waved her hand across the room and said "Mike, you're the first one here – you sit wherever you want to." He took a seat at the back of the classroom. A short time afterwards, George Oliver, another senior who lived on East Alarka, came in. He walked to the back of the room, sat down beside Mike and struck up a conversation.

Mike was a likeable fellow; he was elected an officer of their home room class. He and George played on the Swain football team together that fall. George laughed and said that Mike's stated ambition in *The Ridgerunner* (Swain's school annual, [available on DigitalNC](#)) of playing college football²⁰ "wasn't going to happen." The two became friends and when time came the following spring for seniors to make the trip to Washington, DC – a pilgrimage which began for Swain seniors in the early 1950s and continued for over six decades – Mike, George, and two other boys roomed and goofed off together, as evidenced by a photo someone took of the group in group "uniform" in their room (below). The photo at right below is when they were reunited at their 30th class reunion. (photos courtesy of George Oliver)



Left photo, L-R, top: William Shuler, Mike Jones; bottom: Jim Nations, George Oliver
 Right photo, L-R, front: William Shuler, Jim Nations; rear: George Oliver, Mike Jones

²⁰ Oliver did play college football at Western Carolina.

Pearsall Plan Ruled Unconstitutional

In 1966, the Pearsall Plan which had provided the foundation for retarding integration was ruled unconstitutional in a case involving the Mecklenburg County School System. [Bill Medford](#), who had been on the Pearsall Committee, was at this time US District Attorney for Western North Carolina. He acknowledged its unconstitutionality. Of course, by that time it was a moot point for Swain County.

An Attempt to Grasp Community Perspectives from Writings of Locals

Lillian Thomasson (1900-1995), a native of Bryson City, daughter of Sallie Keener and attorney Andrew Jackson “Old man Jack” Franklin, received her undergraduate training at Meredith College in Raleigh, where she was voted “Most Artistic” in her graduating class of 1921. In her work *Swain County...Early History and Educational Development*, she reports on early integration attempts. The book was first issued in 1965, when integration did come, but a second edition was printed in 1977.

T.L. Woodard, in his state-designated role as ex officio Secretary of the County Board of Education, recorded the minutes of Board meetings.

Those two records provide a window into not just facts, but the mindset and thinking of the time, so I made an effort to study what they wrote, not just in terms of their discussions of events, but for any insights that their words offered about *how* they were thinking. Trying to see how someone was thinking is, at best, a soft science – not the hard disciplines of nuclear and mechanical engineering in which I was trained or the professional career which included both of those as well as occasional ventures into electrical, measurement, instrumentation and control, and computer programming gave me any sort of ability to do. So I certainly can’t make claims in terms of ability to read others, with the exception that I’m a human being who grew up in the same location as these folks, and from that, have a general idea about the way folks viewed matters at the time.

Prior to the preparation of this document, I basically had no thoughts, one way or the other about T.L. “Tommy” Woodard. He was Superintendent of Swain County Schools during all the time I attended Bryson City Elementary School and Swain County High School, but in my eyes, he was just some figurehead in a remote position who had no impact on me. As a student, the teacher, and on a couple of occasions, the school principal, were the individuals with whom I had personal interactions. The only personal bit about Tommy Woodard that I knew was that in our family collection, there were a pair of photos taken which included him, my Uncle Hall Casada and my father, Commodore Casada as teenage boys on a camping trip (early-mid 1920s).

Lillian Thomasson taught me first year French in 9th grade. My grades in French were fine and at least today, don’t retain any ideas about whether she was a good, bad, or indifferent teacher. I’d lean toward good, but have nothing concrete to back up that inclination. When I began, as a retiree, to study and research local history, her *Swain County...text* was a go-to resource; after all, she’d been named Swain County’s Historian in the 1970s, and she had both personal memories and some research to inform what she wrote. But as I did my own research, largely based on primary sources, I came to realize that her reporting on the area’s history had some fairly significant flaws, from multiple aspects of her discussion of Big Bear’s 640 acre tract to her claim that Lucy Ann Cline *donated* the land for the county seat of Charleston. While I’d never had Mrs. Thomasson on a pedestal, it was more than a little disconcerting to realize that unless what she said could be backed up, to place full reliance on the accounts of *Swain County* as an historical authority was to build on quicksand. So it’s entirely possible that perspective could influence my own views on her account regarding integration.

Caveats emptor aside, my thoughts on their writings are available at [Woodard](#) and [Thomasson](#).

We were all responsible

In the December 4, 1956 issue of the Knoxville News-Sentinel, a [guest commentary](#) was offered by a south Knoxville resident, F. Woods Beckman. Beckman was a native of Sweden who had studied at Yale, where he acquired a degree in Forestry in 1909. At the time his piece on the [school integration effort in Clinton, TN](#) was published, he was 70 years old and retired from TVA.

He was responding to the attacks on black students at Clinton which had led to their halting attendance at Clinton High School in late November, 1956. On the very day that Beckman's article was published, Clinton First Baptist Church Pastor Paul Turner and two members of his church had escorted six of the students to school. Turner was mobbed and beaten after leaving the school.

Beckman couldn't have known what was to come when he submitted the article, but the events actually bore out his central theme: *"You may say that it is only a small minority who perpetrate these acts of violence and bad citizenship, but I say it is the entire community that is responsible."*

In Clinton, there were villains like Columbia University graduate and KKK member John Kasper and not-so-good old boys like Alonzo Bullock, carpenter and erstwhile preacher. There were heroes like Paul Turner and Clinton High Principal D.J. Brittain and his wife Clarice. A group composed of mostly World War II veterans had, months earlier, kept a mob at bay until the Tennessee National Guard arrived on Labor Day weekend. And, of course, it took incredible courage and heroism for the black kids and their parents to endure both physical and verbal abuse.

But seen big picture, Woods Beckman was exactly right – it was the responsibility of the entire community. It is clear that there was a good deal of ambiguity in the community support at the time. Had there been clear and abundant support for the rule of law, the troubles would have almost certainly been greatly diminished.

The troubles in Swain County related to delayed integration were borne by a small subset of the overall population, and one could argue that, setting the black community aside,²¹ we fared better than did Clinton. But did we, really? I can't imagine a serious person would suggest that the way in which matters were handled in Swain County from Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is something in which to take pride.

There were individuals and organizations which failed in the task of doing the right thing – as judged by today's lights. That included the school superintendent, the board of education, elected town and county officials, community leaders and civic organizations. But most particularly and poignantly, churches throughout Swain County: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Church of God, Episcopal, Catholic et al were fully in synch with the [Alabama clergy of seven years later](#).

Dr. Martin Luther King's [brilliant, convicting response](#) to those clergy – and by logical extension to Swain County - warrants reading and periodic re-reading. The truth of the matter, in the words of Woods Beckman, with the exception of Dr. Harold Bacon, *we were all responsible* for standing by in silence.

Today, the Clinton community has the [Green McAdoo Cultural Center](#) to remember, honor and inspire the moral courage demonstrated by the students and their families. Bryson City and Swain County has nothing of the sort. That's because our predominately white community did nothing which was either honorable or inspirational. Like so many others in the area, we integrated not because it was right, but only when the law mandated it.

I wish I could say that we've changed and gotten some community gumption with respect to difficult issues of today. But I can't.

²¹ Of course, setting the black community aside is EXACTLY what Swain County did.