

Strollin' down Memory Lane: ECSU's first homecoming queen remembers the good old days

By Julie W. Osmon

ECSU has come a long way since 1938 when Mrs. Izetta Redmon was elected the school's first Homecoming Queen. "Back then, boys had to wear ties and the girls wore dresses. No overalls nor jeans were allowed," Redmon recalls. "Males and females socialized at school socials," she adds. "But boys and girls weren't allowed to dance as we do now, face to face, in each other's embrace."

Instead, students did a dance called "the cake walk," which involved walking side by side to the beat of a piano player's music, or of the neighborhood or school combo.

"Dating was done under supervision," says Redmon. "You had to have chaperones. The boys had to come into the house, meet the family, sit and court in the presence of parents or older children. You really only went out on dates to socials."

In 1938 ECSU was known as Elizabeth City State Colored Normal School. (In 1939 the legislature changed it to Elizabeth City State Teacher's College.)

When asked about the possibility of "premarital sex" on the campus, Redmon laughed and responded with: "Are you kidding? It probably occurred as it does today; but it was hidden, not thrust at children. Now sex is all over the TV and kids can watch it openly."

Redmon says that the environment of her day allowed children a time of innocence and fantasy.

"They had nursery rhymes, fairy tales, Bible stories and daily readings of these at leisure or bedtime. Young people then had more respect for their elders. The problem with children today is a lack of moral training, thus respect is broken down. It's not the children's fault; it's the fault of their role models for depriving them of a knowledge of Christian ethics, for creating broken families, for providing insufficient basic needs and for exposing them too early to the dangers of perplexing adult life which include pornography, bigotry and hate."

The ECSU campus life of 1938 represented a time of innocence for the University family as well, Redmon recalls.

"The whole school community relationship provided a safety net for everyone. Little children could play on or off campus without fear of danger. Teenagers and adults could go and come any hour of the day or night without being



Miss Izetta Redmon, ECSU's first Homecoming Queen. Circa 1938.

assaulted or molested. If rain threatened or fell, neighbors who had hung out laundry before going to work would often times return to find it taken in and neatly folded."

It was also a time when the campus enjoyed widespread community support.

"The community was very active in helping to provide scholarships, food and resources to the school," she recalls. "The school raised crops of vegetables, hogs, cows and chickens on its own farm. Every year it held a fair and invited farmers in the area to display their wares. Black farmers could not participate in the Pasquotank County Fair, so they were very happy to be given this opportunity by President Bias. This was after all one of our annual 'big affairs' which drew large attendance and continued interest in the growth and development of our school."

Faculty, students and community members all pitched-in to support the school, says Redmon. "I remember how Mrs. Beverly Clark, the artistically adept and extremely energetic wife of James A. Clark, our beloved science instructor and renown band leader, sat down to her Singer sewing machine and made the school's first band uniforms for every member including drum majors and majorettes.

Those snazzy blue-and-whites, in the vernacular of today, were *bad*," she says.

Although the school personnel worked "in dedicated partnership with the whole

"The community was very active in helping to provide scholarships, food and resources to the school. The school raised crops of vegetables, hogs, cows and chickens on its own farm. Every year it held a fair and invited farmers in the area to display their wares."

Mrs. Izeta Redmon

northeastern North Carolina area," local businesses failed to recognize State Normal as "their most valuable source of income," says Redmon. "The hiring of locals, the influx of students, the promotion of cultural and athletic activities for both public schools and colleges...brought many dollars to this economy."

Housed on campus in those days was a grade school nicknamed "The Chicken Coop" by locals. "It got its name because when the doors were left open at night, loose chickens would roost in there and then fly out when teachers and children entered the next morning. People in the community would keep a look-out for the children as they walked from their homes to the school."

One of her fondest memories of those days was of "The Po' House," a county home located across from the new Science Complex where both white and black indigents stayed. (The small jail is still standing on the property behind the House of Prayer Church which now owns the property.)

"The Po' House was a home for mental and physical handicaps and incarcerated juvenile delinquents," wrote Jimmy Midgette, in his foreword to *Oaks and Acorns*, a booklet about that era. "All families living in the vicinity, from Elmer Brothers' Store to the Shields' farm were known as Po' House Folks." Midgette continued: "For we were a closely-knit community cemented by uncompromising circumstances."

The "uncompromising circumstances included the harsh conditions created by a society segregated by race.

"Segregation was obvious," recalls Redmon, "but somehow the pain of neglect and disregard for us as human beings did not dissuade our utmost desires to prove our worthiness.

"Nowadays, you can hardly tell the difference between a black community and a white one," says Redmon. "Then the beginning of the black community was obvious in that the pavement ended and the dirt road began. Neither was there electricity, a water system, or sidewalks. Every so often white prison guards would bring a black prisoner to the cedar tree near the library on Sundays, release the bloodhounds at the jail and let them track him in a training exercise."

"Schools too were segregated," she recalls. She found it ironic that after all the marching, all the struggle to integrate the races, that there is now a trend toward a return to segregation.

"Some of the people talk about African American," she says. "I was born here. I grew up here. I am an American." Naturalized citizens born in Africa are Afro-Americans. Blacks born in America are Americans. Whites and other races born in America are Americans. With all the interracial sex acts during and after slavery, who is to say what any person is.

Redmon says she has difficulty understanding racial hatred. "Hate perpetuates hate. At some point you have to let it go or suffer its poison."

Although she acknowledges that the university has enjoyed "many positive upward changes" since she was a student, she adds that the school needs to "revert back to working together with the total constituency. There's been a breakdown of rapport between the school and the community, yet the school continues to seek our financial support."

Another change the university should make, according to Redmon, is to encourage guest speakers to address more issues than just those related to historically black institutions. They should include issues of interest to the growing number of white students now enrolled. "To enhance attendance, cultural programs should be of interest to all races and not just one." The University should also "survey students and members of the community for their areas of interest in cultural and religious activities," declares Redmon, "and implement a more