



"...They didn't want to hear me crying about the snakes and worms in the field, so they sent me to the house to do the cooking".

- Mary Blackburn

Voice From The Past 95 Years Of Living... Loving...Teaching

By SHERIDAN HILL
Chronicle Assistant Editor

Mary Haywood Blackburn discovered early in life how to turn her fears into an advantage. She grew up in the country, and was expected to work all day on the farm beside her three brothers and sisters.

"I was afraid of snakes and worms," she says, "and they didn't want to hear me crying about the snakes and worms in the field, so they sent me to the house to do the cooking."

Blackburn's rural roots did not prevent her from completing her education, all the way to receiving her M.A. Ed. from the University of Minnesota.

She has seen many changes in the 44 years she taught full-time and substituted in the High Point school system. From 1929-1976, she taught full-time and substitute taught. For the past year she has lived in Knollwood Hall nursing home on Shattalon Drive. Her comfy room is filled with letters, plaques and mementos from grateful students and public organizations.

One of her legs was amputated three weeks ago, but the surgery hasn't seemed to slow her down very much. She talks about the letters she must write today, and current issues of Time magazine are stacked by the bedside. "Yes, I read them," she asserts. "I watched the debates, too. I'm going for Clinton."

At 95, her memory of dates and events is still impressive. Blackburn was born in 1897 in Spead, N.C. She can recall her childhood with vivid clarity, especially the difficulty she experienced in getting an early education.

"My father had his own team of horses, and he sent me to school. It was eight miles into Tarboro to the school, and my cousin would drive me in the wagon. The (white) people in cars would drive real close to us and toot the horn and scare the mules. That's just the way it was."

Through 5th grade, she attended a one-room school heated by a pot-bellied stove. Her father went into the woods, cut the wood to heat the stove and often stopped by the school early in the morning to stoke up the stove so the school would be warm when the children arrived.

Today's teachers might not be thrilled with the way class size fluctuated 70 years ago.

"She had to teach everybody

that came," said Blackburn. "If it was 50, she had 50, of all ages and sizes and grades."

Many students couldn't come every day, because they were needed on the farm to work.

Neither her father nor mother could read, except for the Bible. Even people who could read nothing else could read the Bible, she remembers.

"God was directing their lives. They lived by principles, by the ten commandments. God was just with us."

Listening to Blackburn recall the way things were not too long ago, injustices of the past are brought painfully to mind — as well as the knowledge that some things haven't changed much at all.

"Wherever the whites went to school was so superior to ours, a black could never attend or teach there. The white man had everything: cars and farms, huge farms with hundreds of acres. Most of the county was owned by four or five white people, and they had Negroes tending it" she says. "They had children by the Negro women. Now I'm just telling you the way it was. If they wanted a Negro woman, they took her. Most of the children around Tarboro had white fathers. The husbands, they couldn't say nothing, didn't say nothing."

Her family lived in a two-story, four-room house on a farm her father was buying. They made their own clothes from coarse cloth they wove on a loom in the house. She remembers eating well.

When she was old enough to attend high school, North Carolina had three "normal" schools for black children: Winston-Salem State, one in Elizabeth City, and one in Fayetteville. She went to Elizabeth City.

By 1920, she returned to Tarboro to teach in the same one-room school she had attended. Her monthly salary was \$75.

Five years later she took the train from Tarboro to Dunn, N.C. to take a teaching position there. Two teachers met her at the train station, both nice men, she recalls. One of them, Victor Blackburn, fell in love with her immediately. Later that year they married and moved to High Point.

She substituted in the High Point schools for four years, then in 1929 was hired as a full time teacher.

Things were different then, she

recalls.

"Teachers and mothers worked together. And we prayed in school. You could whip children then. After integration, we couldn't whip them."

Whippings or no, many students are grateful to her for her teaching methods, judging by the mementos in her room.

A plaque from the Carl Chavis YMCA in High Point commends her for her volunteer work teaching night classes.

A framed letter from High Point businessman and power broker Robert Brown notes that she touched and influenced many lives in High Point, and thanks her for her attention, patience and caring.

She was recognized by a former student with a mock report card which thanks her for being a "positive role model, seeing talents and gifts in us we did not know we possessed, motivating students to strive for excellence, and exposing us to an appreciation of the arts and religious values."


Other than her friend and fellow resident, Marge Jordan, Blackburn's most frequent visitor is Patricia Jeffries. Jeffries volunteers her time with Knollwood residents through her church, and she has become particularly attached to Blackburn, whom she calls "such a beautiful lady."

Blackburn plans to keep up with politics and world events from her corner of the world. She also reads the Bible and several religious magazines.

"I read the Bible," she says, "and honey, I'm sticking with it."

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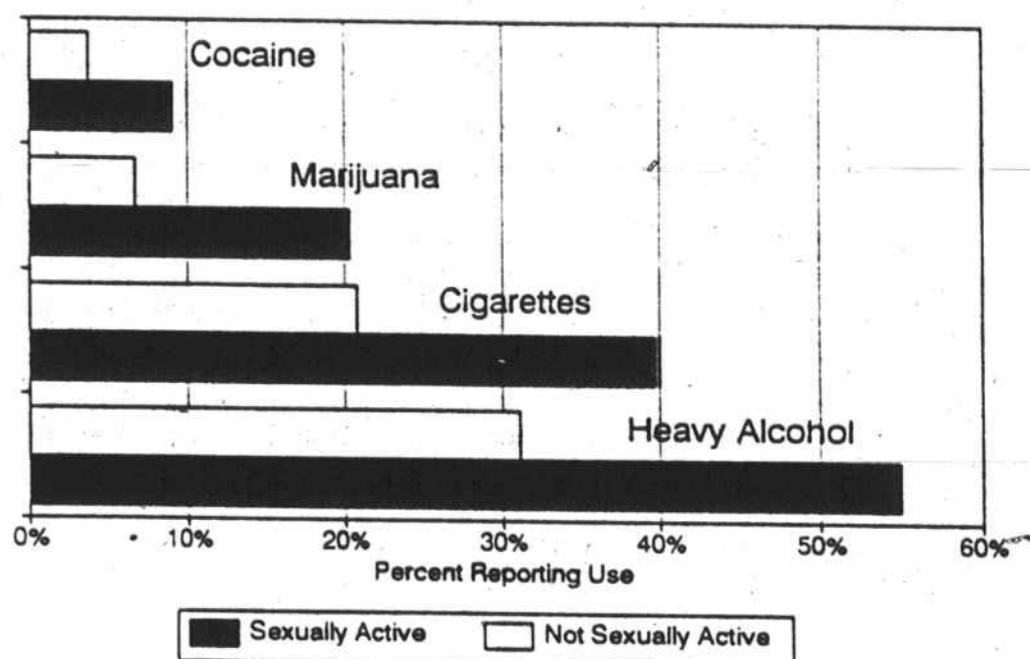
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Sex, Drugs & Rock 'N Roll may be a popular punch line, but when you look at the problem of teenage pregnancy, it's no joke. Our survey of 1,269 youths in Forsyth County found that maybe we need to change the line to read, "Sex, Drugs & Rock 'N Babies." Sexually active teens are more than twice as likely to use and abuse alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana and cocaine than teens not having sex.

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Winston-Salem Chronicle
The Twin City's Award-Winning Newspaper
617 N. Liberty Street
Winston-Salem, NC 27102
(919) 722-8624

Single Copy 75¢

Mail Subscription Rates (payable with order)

In County	Out of County/State
2 years \$40.95	2 years \$45.95
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Mail to: **Winston-Salem Chronicle**
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The **Winston-Salem Chronicle** is published every Thursday by the Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co. Inc., 617 N. Liberty St.

Mailing address: P.O. Box 1636
Winston-Salem, NC 27102

Phone: (919) 722-8624
FAX: (919) 723-9173

Second class postage 051 paid at Winston-Salem, NC 27102

The **Winston-Salem Chronicle** is a member of:


- Audit Bureau of Circulation
- National Newspaper Publishers Association
- North Carolina Press Association
- North Carolina Black Publishers Association

National Advertising Representative:
Amalgamated Publishers, Inc.
(212) 869-5220

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