

Lorene Williams White recalls Juneteenth of the past

Cover Story

written by Maxine Session

Lorene Williams White remembers the fifties and sixties and Juneteenth celebrations of that time as if only a few years have passed.

The summers were long and hot. School was out a little past the middle of May and didn't start again in Texas until after Labor Day. Most

teenagers around Rusk spent the summer at home with the exception of a few who spent a week or two in the cities visiting with relatives. Summer jobs were just not available except for the few washing dishes in local restaurants or peeling tomatoes at the local cannery. A few of the boys.....brave souls, picked up on money for fall school clothes by picking cotton, tomatoes, and catching chickens from 1:00AM to 4:00 or 5:00AM three to four nights a week at the local chicken houses.

For others who couldn't find a job, mostly girls, the days were spent giving their parents an extra hand with chores around the house. This usually consisted of washing laundry by hand and hanging it on the line, starching and ironing clothes, preparing meals and of course, washing dishes.

In the early sixties a big Oak tree in the front yard of Lorene's Cafe provided a cool, shady spot for the community teenage boys, Sonny Watts, Cleo Craig, Iville Thompson, Billy Thompson, Charles Thompson, Thurmon and Floyd Smith, Junior Martin, Jessie Simmons, Joe Arthur Teague her son Charles Lee and the others who gathered there in the afternoons to shoot the breeze. Some days Thurman Smith (Monk) brought the guitar and the French Harp and the singing would commence.sounded like Muddy Waters and B.B. King in person.....

Lorene Brown grew up in Beckville, Texas, a little place near Carthage, Texas. Her Mom and Dad, Mammie Lee and Nathan Brown sent her and her two brothers and four sisters to Beckville Schools. Life was good to them. She recalls, there were no problems that couldn't be easily solved. Nobody ever saw a hungry day.....if you were hungry you went to the smokehouse for fresh pork or beef or to the kitchen or to the garden to get freshly canned or freshly grown vegetables..

Lorene moved to Rusk in the early forties. Rusk was a lot like Beckville. The community was peaceful and safe. You could stand in one place and see for miles around. She met her husband Richard Williams through his mother Carrie Williams. She said, "He was in the army and I wrote letters to him for her." When he came home we got to know each other and we were married.

Juneteenth was really something back then. We had parties everywhere. Different people had them at their houses. P. Joe Cobb, Fannie B. and Lonnie Watts, Willie and Lizzie Watts all lived in the Sawmill Quarters near Edward Brother's Saw

mill. Irma Jean Thompson and a bunch of us walked the dirt roads to get there and then back here. The big thing was to have barbeque and red soda water with all the trimmings. . A lot of families hung a goat and dressed it right in the backyard at home and barbequed it for the celebration.

There were several cafes that provided a place for entertainment. In the fifties, Frommie and Oscar Bradley had one on the corner of Beale Street and Foreman. They sold Armadillo Sandwiches. Believe it or not, they were good, people actually bought and ate them. Big Boy Williams had one on Williams Street. He sold Hog Head and hog head Cheese sandwiches. Then there was Ollie and Irene Majors Cafe where they sold the best greasy hamburgers and people played dominoes all night long. Harvey Martin had a cafe on the corner of Collins and Williams Street and May Liza and George Young had one next door called the Palimino. I worked at the Zackery Cafe in town and Richard worked at the Rusk Motel. We lived on Whiteman Lane but had moved to Valley Street in this community. We had the experience to cook and run a cafe, so in 1958 we bought the Palimano Cafe from George and Mae Liza Young. All of the cafes had jukeboxes and they sold good food. We sold all kinds of food from barbeque and fish with all the trimmings to hamburgers, chilli and hot dogs. We served breakfast, too. Thurmon Smith (Monk) taught Sonny (her son) how to play a guitar right under that big Oak tree out there. Sonny started a band. All the schools around had jazz combos, too, so it was easy to have a live band play at the cafe from time to time." People played cards and dominoes and danced to the music. We had a big pool table and just about everybody shot pool."

Mrs. White continued by saying, "Kilgore was jumping back then. Nancy Thompson was always, as we use to say, my "Ace Boon Coon" buddy. Where one of us went the other went. Usually on Juneteenth after we partied around here, a bunch of us piled in cars and went to Kilgore. They had cafes and clubs like the Elgreco. We went to Laird Hill, to a little hole in the wall. Kilgore was the only place around where you could buy liquor. I always drank 7UP. If somebody wanted to bring alcohol back to Rusk, we had to go through all kinds of trouble. It meant we had to go Bloody 31 to Tyler and back. The Laws would stop you, take anything you had and put you in jail. They were tough times in that sense.

Integration of the late 1960's and early seventies caused the closing of many small minority businesses. The Palimino Cafe and the others around the community closed one by one. Lorene's husband Richard Williams



Lorene Williams White

in 1980 and moved to Nebraska. She lived there until he passed away in 1986.

The cafe building was torn down while she was away. The good memories that she and a lot of others have from that era are all that is left now. Ms. White enjoys sitting in the swing on her front porch. Anybody who visits Rusk stops by to visit with her. She is the tie that binds most to the past.

On Sundays and Wednesdays you can find her at Mount Olive Baptist church where she has been a member since 1947. Being one of the oldest members, she serves as Church Mother. Her church family is her extended family. Over the years, Lorene has remained active serving in positions from usher to secretary. Every now and then people get a taste of her delicious barbeque when she has a barbeque fundraiser to support projects around the church. She spends a lot of time on the phone with her son Charles Vanzandt who lives in Tyler and like most grandmothers, she visits with her granddaughter Chondra, daughter-in-law Louise and the two great grandchildren by phone and trips.. A longtime family friend, Memphis Lowe, had been in a local nursing home a few years. When he expressed to her recently that he wanted out, she brought him home to her house to take care of him. She just takes everything in stride with a smile.

And about this Juneteenth, she said, " I will still have to have a strawberry soda. Its just always been a tradition from childhood."