

Sanders, Bunny: Serpents and Doves ^[1]

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Bunny Sanders: Serpents and Doves

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/16/2004. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Elmer Vanray "E.V." Wilkins was a legendary educator and black political leader in Roper, in Washington County. I recently visited with his daughter, Bunny Sanders, to learn more about his life and the small town that made him one of the first black mayors in the South.

Remembered as the state's "godfather of black politics," E.V. Wilkins served as mayor of Roper for 20 years. He never aspired to higher office for himself, but he was a brilliant tactician and trusted mentor to a generation of black leaders who entered electoral politics after the civil rights movement. He was also friend and confidant of governors from Terry Sanford to Jim Hunt.

Education was E.V. Wilkins' lifelong passion. He was a schoolteacher and principal in Roper from the early 1930s to 1974. His motto--"Don't get mad, get smart"-- is carved on his headstone.

Following in her father's footsteps, Bunny Sanders was elected mayor of Roper in 1997. Dedicated especially to the needs of poor children and the elderly, she told me that, "Every generation stands on the shoulders of the previous generation. I've just now begun to be called Bunny instead of 'E.V.'s daughter,' and I don't mind a bit."



Bunny Sanders. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission to [reproduce or purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.](mailto:bunnyt@sandersandwoudshouse.com)

My daddy told me a story of the old days when he first came back here to teach. The chairman of the school board was a farmer, and he used to make my dad come out to the field to get the teachers' checks signed. My daddy would stand d
Finally, the chairman of the school board would come over. My dad would hand him the checks, and the chairman of the school board would put his X on the checks because the chairman of the school board could not write.
My daddy used to say they had to "stoop to conquer." In my later years, I thought to myself how scriptural that is. And I'm telling you, he not only said that, I saw him stoop in many ways. He was often torn between what he knew he had to do
That is not something he wanted to do. He hated it. In fact, as a little girl, my sister and I used to lie in our bedroom and late at night I would hear my dad cursing in his sleep. He would be cursing white men. I guess in his dreams is where he
My father and my Aunt Willie Mae's goal was that my grandfather would vote before he left this earth. My grandfather's name was Tom Lazarus Wilkins. He worked on the railroad, but he was determined that his children were going to be edu
So every year my granddaddy went down to the polls to vote and they would say, "Ain't nothing has changed, Tom." Meaning, you can't vote this year like you couldn't vote last year. He knew that was going to be the answer, and he would sti
That tore at my father and Aunt Willie Mae. It really ate at her. She was a teacher. She was gentle, very quiet, a lady. She saw her role as organizing the NAACP in this town. She organized the adult chapter, and she gave me and my cousin
They -- the NAACP -- brought a court case for the right to vote here in Roper. They got the vote in 1952. Then it was registering to vote. Then it was getting more people to vote. Then it was getting black officials elected. My father was the fir
Back then there were a lot of black people who could not read, so getting people elected was a challenge. But what they did was, there was a church in Pea Ridge and the ladies there said, if you can't read, here's what we're going to do. The
Dad had more votes than anybody because they only voted for him. Without knowing it, that little church in Pea Ridge was the beginning of single-shot voting, which is a political strategy now. He said it was such an ingenious thing to watch th
There was a store right in the middle of town that my father owned. Oh, it was wonderful. It was the center of things. There was a potbelly stove in the middle of the store, people around it, conversations about politics going on. So when they
We had a little Black Panther group too. They weren't really Panthers, but they were about five real mean brothers. I mean real, real, real mean brothers. They were quiet and they didn't do anything unlawful, but they did not play. I'm telling y
Dad said one night he was at the store, and he did not understand why these guys just sat around all night. They waited until the store closed, then they came back next day and said, "You know why we stayed around last night? You were s
One of the town drunks was always around, too, and I loved him to death. His name was Fleet King. Now the guys who drank a lot used to sober up on election day. Fleet was doing the pickups -- picking up people to bring them to the polls.
The thing is, nobody was better than anybody else. Fleet drank a lot, but he was standing up there right beside Daddy, right beside Aunt Willie Mae, right beside Miss Leora, right beside everybody. Everybody was equal. Everybody was good

Sanders, Bunny. 2015. "We had the NAACP. They had the Klan." PBS: American Experience.<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/blog/2015/01/10/klansville-bl...> ^[3]

Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina. 2011. "Resolution honoring Estelle 'Bunny' Sanders."<https://old.northcarolina.edu/news/images/200882.pdf> ^[4]

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