

Powell, Sallie: Determined To Teach ^[1]

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Sallie Powell: Determined To Teach

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 2/11/2007. Copyrighted.
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I visited Sallie Powell in Elizabethtown, in Bladen County, in the state's southeast corner. In the era of segregated schooling, she was one of a remarkable generation of African-American teachers who came out of the state's mill villages, tenant farms and black neighborhoods. Together, they prepared children intellectually and morally for leadership in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and for all of life. At her home, I asked her how she did it.

A pleasant 78-year-old with a delightful laugh, she began her story in the 1940s, during the historic strike of mill workers at the Greene Brothers Lumber Co., then the largest lumber mill in the South. Urged on by the same 'Red Scare' that inspired the McCarthy hearings, company supporters viciously attacked the loggers and mill workers. They fired, arrested, blacklisted and often beat union sympathizers.

They did not, however, kill Mrs. Powell's dreams. She told me, 'I certainly hope that telling my life story will enlighten somebody else to feel like that can make it. You know, if you can think for yourself, I don't think there's ever a time that all the doors are closed.'

In Sallie Powell's words:



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My daddy's name was Boney Hayes. He moved here because he worked at the Greene Brothers Lumber Company. He worked in the mill with the lumber, and the company had what we called 'The Quarters,' which is where we lived.

They were trying to get the union in, and my daddy, he spoke his mind. He was all for the union, and Greene Brothers did not want the union. They fired him. I remember somebody coming up to our door and saying, 'We want you off our property.' My daddy was not an educated man. I think he had a third-grade education. But he was a very good father. He taught me many things, but one thing in particular, and that is, to work for what you intend to have.

I guess I will never forget this: I was asking Dad for a quarter to go to the movie. I might have been in the seventh or eighth grade. He gave me such a hassle over that quarter, I made up my mind right then, oh no, no, no, no, I will earn my own money. Now, when Greene Brothers fired my daddy, I was a senior in high school. But it did not deter me in the least. Because, you see, I had made up my mind that I was going to college some way or the other. I saved my money and made my own money. I was working down at McKoy-Neal's grocery store. I worked there every day after school and at the soda shop on the weekends. On Sunday I'd leave church and go straight to work and back home.

I worked at Jones Lake one summer too. Jones Lake was owned by the state, and always and always it had been a black beach. There was no integration in those days. The sign said, 'Jones Lake State Park. Negroes Only.'

People enjoyed being at Jones Lake, though. They came all the way from Wilmington! My husband and I even met at Jones Lake. Later, he was the first black superintendent out there. His name was Dewitt Powell, and the local kids called it But I was determined to be a teacher. I thought I was sort of smart. At one time, I could look at a page and tell you almost everything on it.

In high school, instead of getting substitute teachers, they would get students to teach the class. I was one of the students that sometimes taught. That's when I decided that I wanted to teach high school forever.

The principal's name was Dr. Charles Ulysses DeBerry. He taught a class, and I was out of his class teaching other classes so much! Then, when he gave a test, I scored high, so he did not understand. He said, you haven't been in here that I was valedictorian of my class and my principal could have gotten me a scholarship, but no, he thought I was going to get married. Oh nooo, I wasn't going to get married! I wasn't going to marry the president's son before I got my degree! I w I got a job after I got to Shaw University. I worked in the infirmary. Believe it or not, room and board was \$35 a month. My mother had a job cleaning houses, so she paid my room and board, but I paid my own tuition.

I would make most of it during the summer. Buses would be going to the beach, and they'd say, Sallie, you can go to the beach. I'd say, Mr. G.E. Jones is going to be looking for my money in the fall and I cannot go to the beach! G.E. Jones v I knew I had goals, and they were not to clean somebody's house, like my mother was doing. Oh, no! She sent me to clean house one day. The lady said that she was very pleased with my cleaning. I said, this for a living? Uh-uh!

I liked math and I majored in math, but I had not had algebra. Can you imagine not having algebra? I had had geometry, but I had not had algebra. So, no, I was not prepared. Those other kids could work rings around me. But before it was al I taught World War II veterans first at night at Bladen Central High School. That's where I had gone to school, but it was called the Bladen County Training School when I was there. Then I was accepted on the regular faculty. I started working I always taught math. I have been at the sink in my kitchen many, many, many times trying to decide, how can I say this so that some child who is having difficulty could learn? I wanted all of my children to learn. I felt that was a reflection on r For me to grow up in 'The Quarters' and become a teacher, I guess that was determination. But like I said, I give my daddy credit for that, because I was determined not to have to beg for a quarter to go to a movie.

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