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**Interviewee Background Information**

Name: Minnie Ross  
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Phone Number(s): 205.238.0301  
Approximate age or date of birth: 10/29/48  
Mother's name: Penny Lancaster Moore  
Father's name: Rev. T. J. Moore  
Places lived and when: West Point, GA, Auburn, AL, Anniston, AL

Education: BS Alabama State, MA UAB

Religion: Baptist  
Business, political and social memberships (past and present):  
NEA, AEA - The National Councils of Social Studies - SCLC Women, Twigs of Calhoun County  
Present occupation: Teacher  
Former occupation(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Special skills: \_\_\_\_\_  
Major Accomplishments: Made a quilt with 26 9th graders, Mother of two daughters

Local events in which you have participated: Walk America, Last 3 years - SCLC Thanksgiving dinner, Twigs fundraiser for Childrens Hospital

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

International events in which you have participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes/No  
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Country from which you emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_  
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: \_\_\_\_\_

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Growing Up Through The Civil Rights Movement:  
An Interview with Minnie Ross**

**Roderick Lee Pope**

**HY442**

**Dr. Jackson**

**April 1, 1996**



Dignified, concerned and eloquent are all words that describe Ms. Minnie Ross, a history teacher at Oxford High School. Born in West Point, Georgia in 1948 , her family moved to Lafayette, Alabama not long after her birth, where they still reside today. As a teacher in a public school, she is concerned about the lack of knowledge African American children have of the Civil Rights movement. "This year we happened to have been in school on Martin Luther King's birthday," said Ms. Ross, " . . . and I asked, 'Why would we be out of school today if it had not snowed? Why do we celebrate Martin Luther King's Birthday? What did he do?' And I was hurt that black children didn't know."

It is a struggle that she knows very well, for she lived through the most tumultuous years of the civil rights movement. Her memory of the movement began on Thursday, December 1, 1955, when a middle-aged black seamstress, Mrs. Rosa Parks got on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama to ride home. She was tired so she took a seat near the front of the bus in a section reserved by custom for whites. When a white man got on the bus, the bus driver ordered Mrs. Parks to give up the seat. She refused. She was arrested, jailed briefly, then tried on the charge of violating segregation laws. The Montgomery bus boycott began and lasted a year. Legal action, combined with the boycott, was successful in ending the bus segregation in the city. 1

"I remember, my mother talking about it." Says, Ms. Ross, " That there was this woman . . . my mother thought she was such a big hero . . . there was this woman that

refused to give up her bus seat and she was arrested. . . I guess she was kinda my mother's role model. My mother would talk about Rosa Parks when she was emphasizing how important it was that we have good moral character and be a strong person . . . "

However, it was the mid-1950s, a volatile time in American history, a time when African Americans had to be strong. The town of Lafayette was in it's own respects divided into two sections, white and African American. "In most southern towns there's a rail road track that separated the blacks from the whites," says Ms. Ross. "We lived on the edge of the white neighborhood, because there was the white high school . . . and on the other side, the only thing that really separated us was a road. The children as we were younger . . . children are children . . . would come out in the road; we'd all skate together, ride our bicycles and at night we all went home. We never crossed the road, they never came over and we never went over. We just played in the road. It was the common ground . . ."

The idea that a white child was different from an African American child was sometimes foreign to the eyes of a Southern child at this time. "Black and white children have always played together. And it was not until someone said, one of the children . . ." recalls Ms. Ross. ". . . and I don't remember how the incident came up . . . said that we were not as good as they were. And when this incident happened, because I went home crying that day when someone called me a 'Nigger' . . . and I went home and asked my mother . . . and I looked in the mirror and I asked my mother, 'Am I a Nigger? What is a

Nigger mother?' She said, 'Baby, your not a Nigger. Someone is mispronouncing the word. You are a Negro. You are a beautiful little Negro girl. We may not have everything that . . . ' and the person that she was working for at the time was the Talberts. She said, 'we may not have all the money and stuff that they have, but his children are not any better than my children.'

Things were bad for the African American across the United States. The freedom they gained through the Emancipation Proclamation really did nothing for them. Life was separate, but not always equal. White restaurants were off limits to African Americans, as were white schools. "Now Lafayette . . . only had Roger's Cafe . . . and the black people that cooked in Roger's Cafe were black, but if a black person wanted something to eat at Roger's they had to go around to the back door to get it," remembers Ms. Ross. "They couldn't go inside. . . There was a big sign that said, 'Coloreds around at the back door.' You could never sit down to eat."

Things did not change after the United States Supreme Court passed down the Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka ruling. In this the court over-ruled the Plessy v. Ferguson decision. The justices unanimously declared separate educational facilities to be "inherently unequal." They requested further argument concerning the means to achieve desegregation. In 1955 they ordered local authorities to "make a prompt and reasonable start" and instructed the federal district courts to "proceed with all deliberate speed" to end segregation in public schools. 2

Even though the decision to end segregation was passed in 1954, it didn't reach certain areas until the late 1960s. In an interview given by the Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth he discusses the Pupil Placement Law. "The school board could test students and decide what school to put them in. It was a subterfuge to keep blacks out of white schools." <sup>3</sup> He tried to make a test of the school system so that he could get the case into court. So, he took his children to the school to be enrolled and was met by ". . . more Klansmen than police - 15-20 white men milling around. I got out. My wife got out. One of the kids, Ruby, attempted to get out, but someone slammed the car door on her foot. Then the men jumped on me. One of them said: "This is the son of a bitch; if we kill him, it'll be all over." <sup>4</sup> After it was over, the struggle for integration in Birmingham began. A struggle that would last two decades and court cases that would drag on into the late 1970s.

In Chamber's County it was not until 1965 that the schools began the process of integration. This occurred through freedom of choice. "Lafayette has two . . . had two high schools then." explains Mrs. Ross. " I walked by a white school everyday, because I lived within one mile of school, so that meant the children walked to school . . . and I could never go in it until my last two years of my high school. And then I didn't want to go because that would have meant I would have been graduating with children that I really didn't know. And so I selected to stay at Chambers County Training School." However, her younger brother, Jim, decided that in order to get the higher math classes



he wanted he would have to go to the white high school.

"Oh, they had riots everyday when they first integrated Lafayette High," remembers Ms. Ross. "The policemen were called everyday. . . we were not as bad as Arkansas. They didn't have to escort the children in." However, in 1968 her brother was one of the first five African American students to graduate from Lafayette High School. The road to graduation was not always an easy one for an African American trying to get an education at this time.

The best known case took place in Little Rock, Arkansas. Governor Orval Faubus intervened to prevent desegregation. Claiming he was acting to prevent violence and was justified in doing so by the doctrine of interposition, Faubus dispatched the Arkansas National Guard to maintain order at Central High by preventing blacks from enrolling. On September 24 President Eisenhower reluctantly federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent units of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock to maintain order in and around Central High and to ensure the enforcement of the court order to desegregate the school. 5

At Lafayette High School things were not as bad, but certainly still not easy for a fourteen year old boy. Mrs. Ross remembers, " He came home one day, there had been a fight at the high school. He came running home, blood just running down his face where he had got . . . somebody had hit him, something had happened at the high school and it almost convinced my father that his child didn't need to be up there in that. But my brother said, 'Daddy, I made this decision and I have to stick it out, no matter what.'"

This was not the only time that trouble had come from her brother's decision.

"We got a couple of threats when the white high school was integrated with my brother. My father made it very plain to whoever it was on the phone, that if anything happened to his child, that he would personally kill the person or kill somebody. 'Cause nothing was going to happen to his child. Because all his child was trying to do was get an education."

In addition to not being able to enter white restaurants, ride in the front of a bus or attend white schools, other aspects of African American life were segregated as well. In Lafayette, Alabama, as in other towns and cities across the United States, movie theaters were segregated. Although African Americans could enter the same theater they had to sit in the back or the balcony. "A little small town like Lafayette," recalls Ms. Ross, "would only have one. The whites were down stairs, the blacks were upstairs. And you could never, blacks could never go down stairs. But one day, some teenagers decided that they would do that. And one of the teenagers happened to have been my older brother. They went downstairs, the manager called the police, the police took them to the city jail, but they didn't arrest the children. They called the children's parents or if they didn't have phones, took them home. And they closed the movie theater. It never reopened."

Another place that was segregated in Lafayette at the time was the doctors office. Dr. Wheeler was the only doctor available in town. He was used by both whites and African Americans. The African Americans however, were to use an entrance designated

"coloreds around at the back." There was a separate little area that blacks had to go around to the side door to go in. This waiting room was one with only blacks waiting. And on the other side, up to the front, was a waiting room just for whites and I don't remember there being a water fountain for us to drink from. You didn't drink while you waited to see the doctor to see you. You waited a long time to see Dr. Wheeler. But you did eventually get to see him and he was the same man that had seen the white patients. Because he was the only doctor in Lafayette."

There continued to be in the south a collision between the hopes raised by the 1954 Brown decision and the persistent discrimination and segregation. A leader for the civil rights movement came in the form of a twenty-seven year old preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King said, "We will not retreat one inch in our fight to secure and hold onto our American citizenship." 6 "King's philosophy of civil disobedience fused the spirit and language of evangelical Christianity's sacrifice and redemption with the strategy of non violent resistance in authority." 7

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began his campaign for direct action, secretly called Project C, in Birmingham in 1963. During a whirlwind tour of sixteen cities he announced that, "as Birmingham goes, so goes the south." To begin action in Birmingham it was necessary to have at least three hundred Birmingham citizens who were willing to go to jail. His associates, the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker and the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, relied on the most loyal and fearless Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (A.C.M.H.R.) members as their recruits.

The city of Birmingham held city elections on March 5. In order to avoid having the direct action program turn into a political issue, the civil rights leaders planned to begin demonstrations on March 14. With delays in the election, direct action did not begin until April 3, 1963. Sit-ins were staged at the lunch counters which refused to serve African Americans; pickets outside the targeted stores encouraged shoppers to boycott the establishments. Twenty African Americans were arrested the first day on charges of trespassing after warnings from five retail stores.

As the boycott, picketing, and sit-ins continued the second phase of Project C - street demonstrations - were initiated, April 6, 1963, with a march on city hall. "Palm Sunday, April 7, marked the first open conflict between Negro demonstrators and white policemen. A peaceful prayer march, lead by Reverend A.D. King, younger brother to Dr. King, developed into violence when policemen waded into the crowd with night sticks and police dogs." 8

Ms. Ross remembers asking her mother at the time, ". . . was what they were doing, was it so bad that they had to be treated like that? All they wanted to do was to sit down at the lunch counter and eat. And be treated like anyone else and to be able to work in downtown Birmingham."

The Birmingham Post-Herald quoted Governor George Wallace on May 8, 1963 as saying, "he was 'tired of the lawlessness in Birmingham and whatever it takes will be done to break it up.'" 9 The article goes on to quote Dr. King as saying, ". . . the demonstrations would continue until the Negroes achieved their goals. He said the drive

aims to desegregate downtown public facilities, set up a bi-racial group with authority to solve racial problems and equal employment opportunities." 10

Finally on May 10, African American and white leaders aided by officials of the Kennedy administration, announced a settlement that provided for desegregation of public facilities and lunch counters and for improvements in job opportunities for African Americans. A bi-racial committee was created to deal with employment practices. The settlement broke the segregationist log jam in Birmingham and the city started on a steady though uneven course toward desegregation. 11

In 1967 Ms. Ross left Lafayette and moved to Montgomery where she was going to attend Alabama State College. Not many women of the day had the monetary means to attend college. At this time, however, Ms. Ross' mother say to it that her daughter would indeed have a future. "My mother probably made twenty-five dollars a week, if that much. But out of that twenty-five dollars a week my mother saved some of that money so that I . . . she wanted to make sure that her daughter had a formal education. So that if . . . when times got better I would be able to have a good paying job. I wouldn't ever be anybody's maid. "Cause she said she wanted better for her daughter than she had. And the first year I went to school, I didn't know anything except to go to class. I didn't have to worry about where the money was coming from, because my mother had saved that and it was not until my senior year that I had to borrow just a little money to graduate from college. I was my mother's first child to graduate from college. "

The most crushing blow to the African American community, as well as the entire

civil rights movement, came on April 4, 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated outside of his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee. Most white people can recall without much effort where they were the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. This is also true for Ms. Ross on the day Martin Luther King was assassinated. She says, ". . . I was at home making up the bed. I had the television on and I heard over the news that Dr. King had been shot and they thought he might possibly be dead." At this point the ramifications of this action went through her head. She says, "I truly believed that there was going to be a huge racial war in the United States. Because there would not be anyone that would be able to convince blacks not to retaliate."

Almost immediately riots did begin. The Associated Press announced on April 6, 1968 that, "Negro reaction to the slaying of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. erupted in violence in cities throughout the country in the early part of the weekend." <sup>12</sup> "Ghetto blacks in nearly one hundred twenty-five cities surged through the streets in anger." <sup>13</sup> "The nationwide rioting left forty-six dead, more than three thousand injured, and nearly twenty-seven thousand in jail." <sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Ross says, "I don't think he worried about dying anymore. Because the possibility was always there, and I think African Americans worried about somebody killing him all the time. And I truly believed if had not been assassinated . . . we wouldn't be any further than where we are."

"In August of 1965 the President signed the Voting Rights Act. It's provisions gave the Attorney General the power to appoint federal examiners who would supervise voter registration in those states and voting districts that had literacy or other qualifying tests." 15 This meant a lot to Ms. Ross who recalls the first election in which she took part. "My mother got very involved in registering blacks to vote. When I turned eighteen you couldn't vote then, the voting age was, still is twenty-one in our state. And in 1972, when the amendment was passed I was in Auburn working. I rushed back to Chambers county to register to vote. So that I could vote for the President of the United States. That was such a thrill to me; to be able to vote. Because I knew how difficult it had been for blacks to register to vote. And I remember how my grandparents went through the ordeal of struggling to read sections out of the Constitution. Having to pay poll taxes in order to vote.

Living through integration taught Ms. Ross the importance of the rights of African Americans. She has passed the importance of the movement on to her two daughters. "I make it a point to give them that black history that they need." She says, I talk about it. I tell them this is why this person is so important to you. This is why this person should be important to you. And I don't . . . I don't teach to my children that you are better than somebody, just because of your ethnic origin. Because we have all contributed something very good, something very useful to the American society. And you should be extremely proud of who you are, and don't let anyone ever take that away from you."

The civil rights movement may have come to a close, but the struggle against racism is slow. Ms. Ross said that still today she has problems with racism. "... since I started teaching," she says, " I have had parents not to want their children in my room, because I was black. Or I've been called a "Nigger" a couple of times." She goes on to say that her "children have asked quite frequently, 'Mother, if I had not been black would I have been treated this way?' Or have I pushed black students harder because I want them to succeed? Because I know what it's like out there. And young people today, they take, especially black children, they take all the rights and privileges that they have today for granted. They don't know how they got them. They don't appreciate them."

The civil rights movement touched so many African Americans of the 1950s and 60s. Ms. Minnie Ross is certainly no exception. She has carried her experiences with her into the classroom. As much as possible she emphasizes the importance of African American studies in the classroom. Perhaps this is what is needed to boost the confidence and pride in African American children. However, as long as racism exists the battle continues. Ms. Ross says, "I keep telling myself that one day before I get to be a really old lady, that skin color won't matter anymore. But racism is just as strong now as it was when I was a child." Indeed, though much has been gained the struggle continues in some form or another.



## ENDNOTES

1. Lee Edmundson Bains, Birmingham 1963: Confrontation Over Civil Rights, p.5.
2. Harold J. Spaeth & Edward Conrad Smith, The Constitution of the United States, p. 140.
3. Anne Braden, The History That We Made, p.50.
4. Ibid., p. 51.
5. William J. Cooper & Thomas E. Terrill, The American South: A History, p.713.
6. Paul S. Boyer, et. al., The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People, p. 1034.
7. Ibid., 1034.
8. Lee Edmundson Bains, Birmingham 1963: Confrontation Over Civil Rights, p.22.
9. Birmingham Post-Herald, "State Police Ordered Into Birmingham", May 8, 1963.
10. Ibid.
11. William J. Cooper & Thomas E. Terrill, The American South: A History, p.728.
12. Associated Press, "Violent Reactions to Slaying Reported from Coast to Coast", April 6, 1968.
13. Paul S. Boyer, et. al., The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People, p.1092.
14. Ibid., p.1093.
15. William J. Cooper & Thomas E. Terrill, The American South: A History, p.732.

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## **Chronology sheet of Civil Rights Events**

**1865** - Thirteenth Amendment is ratified

**1866** - Fourteenth Amendment is ratified

**1869** - Fifteenth Amendment is ratified

**1896** - Plessy v. Ferguson decision is handed down.

**1909** - NAACP is founded

**1939** - Marian Anderson sings at Lincoln Memorial

**1947** - Jackie Robinson signed to the Brooklyn Dodgers

**1954** - Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision handed down

**1955** - Rosa Parks is arrested for not giving up her bus seat to a white man/ the Montgomery bus boycott begins

**1956** - Montgomery bus boycott ends integrating the buses

**1957** - The first attempt is made to integrate Birmingham schools

- The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) founded by Martin Luther King, Jr.

- The Civil Rights Act established a permanent commission of civil rights

**1961** - The Freedom riders bus is burned in Anniston, Alabama

**1963** - Governor George Wallace stops two African American students from entering the University of Alabama.

- President John F. Kennedy goes before America defending the African American civil rights struggle.

- African Americans march on Washington DC, where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his famous, "I Have A Dream" speech.

- Birmingham church is bombed killing four little girls.

**1964** - The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlaws race discrimination in places of public accommodation that affect interstate commerce.

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**1965 - Civil Rights Act of 1965 bans literacy tests when voting**

- President Lyndon Johnson signs Voting Rights Act.

- African Americans march on Selma, Alabama to Montgomery

**1968 - Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.**

1948 - Born in West Point, Georgia

1952 - Family moves to Lafayette, Alabama

1965 - Lafayette High School is segregated under freedom of choice.

1967 - Graduated from Chambers Country Training School.

1967 - Enters Alabama State

1971 - Votes for the first time

## **Questions for Ms. Minnie Ross:**

1. Where were you born?
2. How many brothers and sisters did you have?
3. Integration began in 1957, but didn't reach certain areas until the 1970s. When did it take place in your community?
4. Some studies have suggested that integration was an economic problem. Where the black family could not live in the white school zones. With this in mind. Do you think that this was the situation in your case?
5. Were you or your siblings bused to school far away from your home?
6. When was the first time that you knew black people were treated differently? Did a family member sit you down and explain it to you or was it explained at all? If it wasn't explained how do remember knowing?
7. Do you have any recollection of school before integration?
8. When do you remember integration occurring in your area? What grade were you in?
9. Were your experiences in integration good or bad?
10. Did your family fear for you or any of your siblings?
11. Can you recall and talk about your first few days in an integrated school situation?
12. What school did you attend prior to school integration and what school after?
13. Could you discuss in particular any situations that may have occurred at school that particularly stand out your mind over all of the others?
14. Did the church play a role in preparing you for the integration process?
15. Do you recall the March in Selma, the Anniston bus burning or the church bombing in Birmingham? What do you recall of each of these events?
16. Have you ever had the opportunity to meet, see or talk with a person who was famous in the integration movement?
17. Do you remember where you were the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated?
18. What was your mood and those around you at the time?
19. What, in your opinion, do you think would have happened if he had lived? Do you think that things would have progressed better?