

## INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: Ethel Lee Colburn M/F: FemaleAddress: Rt. 2 Box 422 Red Bay, AL 35582Phone number(s): (205) 356-2660Approximate age or date of birth: Nov. 28, 1924Mothers name: Pearly Lindsey PendegraffFather's name: John G. PendegraffPlaces lived and when: Red Bay, AL, Zion, Ill.Education: Through eighth gradeReligion: Missionary BaptistBusiness, political and social memberships (past and present): Ethel Colburn is  
a registered, voting democrat, but votes the man; not the party.Present occupation: RetiredFormer occupations: Cook, Field hand, SeamstressSpecial Skills: gardening, quilting, catches obscene amounts  
of catfish.Major Accomplishments: Raising three wonderful sons alone.

National Events in which interviewee has participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Local Events in which interviewee has participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National born U.S. citizen?  Yes  No Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No

Country from which he/she emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee:

Copy of photograph, deed of land (copy)

Individuals recommended by the interviewee who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Gift and Release Agreement

We Ethel Collem and Rose Shawbart-Ledbetter  
 Interviewee (print) Interviewer (print)

do hereby give and grant Jacksonville State University, Oral History Archive, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at

Ethel Collem's home in Red Bay, AL.

on the date(s) of April 6, 1996

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Mrs. Ethel Collem Date: April 6, 1996  
 Interviewee's Signature

Address Rt. 2 Box

Red Bay, AL. 35582

Phone (205) 356-2660

Rose Shawbart-Ledbetter Date: April 6, 1996  
 Interviewer's Signature

Address 400 W. Hwy 200 N.W. #3

Jacksonville, AL 36265

Phone 205-435-1843

# The Hills and Hollers of Ethel Collum: An Oral History

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April 9, 1996

Prepared for  
Suzanne Marshall

by  
Rose Ledbetter

### **Note to the Reader**

The only reason I interviewed Ethel Collum was because my original interview fell through. I am glad it happened, because I spent one of the best afternoons of my life on Ethel Collum's front porch.

Most of the paper comes from the tape, but for some reason: either she was more comfortable when the tape wasn't rolling, or I was better at just talking instead of interviewing, some of the best parts were not on the tape.

I hope you enjoy listening to the tape as much as I enjoyed making it.

\*the other voice on the tape is Ethel's first cousin, Mavis Haygood.

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# Life on Bubble Gum Hill

It is a quiet and peaceful evening on “Bubble Gum Hill.” Ethel Collum rocks gently on her porch swing, as she does most afternoons. She is still dressed for going to town; this morning she went and got groceries. She wears a homemade dress, sewed herself for Easter a few years back, and dark, sagging stockings, and “house stompers,” her slippers. Her hair is mostly grey. Her skin is splotched and marked with dark spots from years in the fields and in her gardens. She wears glasses, but they do not hide the blue of her eyes, still brilliant and twinkling with intelligence at seventy-two years old. “I surely do love this place,” she says thinking back. Ethel has lived most of her life on this hill. Officially it is Red Bay, unofficially it is Halltown Community, and to the people in the families born, lived, married, had children, and died here it is Bubble Gum Hill.

## History of The Hill

This hill, and the holler (valley) it overlooks, got their name about fifty years ago. Then, what we would call a peddler, made the rounds and the many children who lived on the hill flocked to buy bubble gum. Treats were scarce for them, but they could afford the old-fashioned peppermint sticks and the sweet, sticky bubble-gum. The childrens’ mothers took to calling the place “bubble gum hill,” after the peddler’s name for it, and the name stuck.

In the mid-eighteen hundreds Frannie and William Lindley bought a large parcel of land. Today that land holds bubble gum hill, all of the land to the south at the bottom of the hill and a major highway. William Lindley had a call to preach and built a small church at the bottom of the hill. William Lindley called the church New Union Baptist Church and today it houses a large congregation, many of whom can boast some relation to the founder. After one-hundred years the

church still stands on its original site. New buildings have been built and added, renovations have been made, but all of the members remember their church's humble beginning. The last renovation and redecoration was planned around the color scheme of a quilt. The quilt hangs in a giant frame in the back of the church; it was sewn and pieced during Sunday School by the Lindelys' children and other members of the church. The quilt is faded and worn, but on each square you can still make out the signatures of the people who settled and worshiped on this hill.

Seeing how they were drawn here is easy. The hill is steep on one side and gently sloping on the other. At the bottom of the hill three of the Lindley's children inherited land. At the top, it is perhaps, a mile across the hill's gently rolling plateau where another four of the Lindley's eleven children inherited land and settled down to raise families. The land boasts the outlets of two natural springs, where the water is still so pure and tastes so fresh and sweet that even today the great-great grand children of those who built here haul drinking water rather than drink from the taps hooked up to city water. Bubble Gum Hill is lush and green and at this time of year beginning to blossom. Most of the houses have a plot of newly plowed land in their yards and Ethel Collum's is no exception.

From the front porch we can see the beginnings of cabbage, radishes, and other plants in their neat rows on her lawn and across the road, almost over grown by the apple trees planted yeas ago, is a run down house. The roof was once red slate but has now faded pink and the once white - washed concrete is chipped and marred by the weather. The windows have been boarded up and "No trespassing" signs block each door. "I was born in that house," Ethel said and she pointed with her work roughened hands to the little white house across the road where it stood overgrown in the fading afternoon light, "I grew up there."

## Growing Up on Bubble Gum Hill

John G. 'Doc' Pendergraph and Pearlie Lindley married in 1916 and had seven children: Oneal, John, and Agnes, who are deceased, and Pat, Fred, Maxine, and Ethel, who still live on or near the hill. Ethel, the middle child, was born in 1924. Ethel's mother, Pearlie, was born on the hill in 1898 and she never left it. The Lindley's divided the land in 1928 and deeded it to their children; her daughter and son-in-law built a house on thier parcel. Ethel and her six brothers and sisters enjoyed life while they were growing up on the hill. The children and their cousins, most of whom also lived on the hill, played baseball and hide and seek. They pitched washers a lot. Washers are like horse shoes but instead of pitching a horse shoe toward a stake in the ground; they pitched washers toward three holes in the ground. The holes were dug in a row and each was worth a successively higher number of points. Played singly or in teams, the winner was the player or team with the most points. The family still plays today at family reunions.

Growing up during the depression, life for the children wasn't all fun and games. In fact, listening to Ethel's voice tell the story, you wouldn't think they had any time to play at all. "At home we had to bring water home every day in lard buckets. We got up about foru-thirty and ate breakfast. There was no plan. . . they had us somethin' to do. When we was at home if we didn't have nothin' to do well, ya know we'd help them."

Ethel Collum attended the Halltown Community School. The building still stands today, grey and worn, it is falling apart, but still has the look of a school. Back then the school only went through the eighth grade, anyone who wanted to go to high school had to go over to Vina. Today Vina High School still operates as a school. Vina is still a very small community school graduating classes periodically as small as eight members, but during the 30's and 40's most



children did not go on to high school. Parents needed their children to work the fields too much for them to waste time in high school. Ethel Collum was no exception; she quit after the eighth grade. However, Ethel was a basketball player, a damned good one, and in north Alabama, basketball means everything. Ethel quit after the eighth grade, but she went through that grade three times so that she could continue to play basketball. This wasn't quite the same game we see now. The young people played most of the games on outdoor, dirt courts. The girls wore no uniforms, and most of them played in overalls, the only clothes they had that weren't dresses. The games got really vicious especially against arch rivals, then and now, Red Bay. Ethel remembers getting thrown out of a game at Red Bay for kicking a girl "in her seat." The girls' team from Halltown often practiced with, and won against, the boys' team, and Ethel recalls one incident from a game with the boys: "I scratched a boy upside his face. . . He said you scratched the hell outta me. . . they didn't see it." As she recalls this, her eyes twinkle. You can see the young woman inside her. A picture emerges of a young girl, brown and barefoot, with long black hair flying as she runs down court, barefoot to make a lay-up. Then Ethel shakes her head. She moves on to another subject, and again she is ancient and swinging on her porch with her can propped against her, laughing at her childhood memories.

Ethel recalls the education she received as simple: reading, writing, and math. Still, she makes it clear that she received a good education and she did well in her studies, when she wanted to, that is.

School memories are happy for Ethel, but looking back she recognizes how hard it was for her family during the depression. Most days they brought lunch in a pail, at least two biscuits each and some eggs. The family had it hard, but they never went hungry. Doc and Pearl Pendergraph raised all of their own food. The family tended a large garden and raised hogs and

chickens. Often they traded the surplus of eggs to the peddler for goods they needed like baking powder, flour, and lard. The children wore many hand me downs, and they never had store bought clothes. Ethel remembers wearing dresses made of flour sacks and that shoes were very hard to come by, but mostly she remembers the good times.

Her family never missed church services. They walked the mile and a half down the hill to New Union every Sunday, morning and night. "Our boyfriends could walk us to church. Theys[sic] on one side of the road and we walked on the other. We was scared of boys back then." Ethel was saved at fifteen and has always been a very religious woman. Ethel's faith in God has gotten her through many hard times, and she still goes to church every Sunday, morning and night, only now, a neighbor or friend drives her to service.

## **A Woman on Bubble Gum Hill**

Ethel didn't just play basketball when she was young. She also played baseball, and it was at one of these games on the hill with her cousins that she met a man who would be very important to her. Johnny Ben Collum was a spectator at a game in which she played. "We'd go to church Sunday morning and play baseball ever [sic] evnin'." He walked her home and they courted for a year. They had always talked of marriage, and about a year later Johnny proposed. It wasn't fancy. Ethel describes it very matter of factly, "Well, I guess it could be counted that (romantic) He just told me he loved me and he wanted us to live together happy," but as she speaks her eyes are faraway and she still loves Johnny Ben in her memories. Her father, Doc Pendergraph, wanted her to wait. The boys were soldiers and he needed Ethel as a hand on the farm, but she wouldn't wait. Ethel and Johnny were married on August 21, 1942 in the courthouse in Russeville. On the same day Ethel's first cousin, Mavis Boyd, and her beau Willie Haygood

were married. Ethel and Mavis have remained good friends even today. As Ethel recalls the story, Mavis sits on the couch just inside the screen door and adds a comment here and there, sometimes correcting Ethel's memory and sometimes elaborating on it. The four of them rode the bus to Russeville. It was like riding in a limousine for the four of them, and although Ethel is sure it cost fifteen cents, Mavis insists that it was a whopping thirty-five. The two old friends dicker back and forth and slowly the tale emerges. Ethel and Johnny were married by Judge Edgar Underwood and Willie and Mavis signed the marriage certificate as witnesses. In return, Ethel and Johnny were witnesses for Mavis and Willie. The beginning of the marriage was a happy one. After two years of marriage Ethel had her first son Carl Wayne Collum on November 11, 1944. Two years later Mack Gerald was born and Johnnie Mike followed in March of 1950. Ethel had hoped for a daughter back then, but after Johnnie was born, she knew he was her last.

Johnny was a good husband, but he just couldn't settle down. He never held one job for very long although, he always found new work soon, and provided for his family. Ethel still worked the fields and together they made a life for the boys. Johnny's wanderlust strengthened, and he began to find work out of state. Again the jobs didn't last long, and then Johnny was off to a new place and a new job. He came home sometimes and lived as if nothing had happened, and when he was gone he sent money home. It was no set amount, no official child support mandated by the state, just what he could afford and what he thought Ethel needed. Still she loved her husband and sometimes Ethel and the boys followed Johnny to his new job. Johnny was a good father and a deeply religious man; he just couldn't settle down. In October of 1920, Johnny fell from a train while the family was moving from Zion, Illinois back home to the Hill . . . Ethel was a widow at the age of 31 with three young sons to raise.

## Hard Times on The Hill

Johnny's death is a matter of mystery on the hill; the people romanticize and question his death even today. They whisper over the clotheslines that Johnny didn't fall. He jumped. Those who remember them say that Johnny was a man on the run. Many believe that Johnny had a call from God to preach, but that he ran from it all of his life. They whisper that God gave Johnny a choice: heed My call or be haunted by it. Johnny was haunted and jumped from the train as it took him back toward the home he was trying to avoid. Ethel won't say much about his death, only that he fell from a train and that she misses him even today. In our times a woman might not have lived like she did: an absentee husband, hard work, and raising the boys on her own, but Ethel never considered a life without Johnny until he was taken from her.

Ethel speaks of the hard times after her husband died with her head and voice low. She tugs at the folds in her dress, and talks about the life she gave her boys. "The Lord took care of me. I done what I could and he done what he could. Yes, I did work hard. I pulled corn when my hands would bleed all over." Carl was eleven, Gerald was eight, and Mickey who was five, have few memories of their father. Ethel seems to grow and strengthen in front of you as she talks about life after she was widowed. Her shoulders square and the determination she used to survive shines on her face. Her boys never went hungry and they never wanted for anything they needed. Doc, as her father was called even by his children, advised her when she needed it, but she provided for her boys on her own. Ethel worked as a field hand picking cotton, as a cook in restaurants, hotels, and nursing homes, and she worked long hours in the local textile mills. Ethel never learned to drive a car, but she managed to buy each of her boys a car in turn when they were old enough to drive. God was always watching over her and helping her provide for her boys, she

says. Somehow, she never missed a day of work because she couldn't find a ride. Always, she stayed close to her boys and tried to teach them right from wrong. The boys got small social security benefits and later, Ethel received a check for two-thousand dollars in benefits. Dr. Weatherby, the only doctor in town until the hospital was built in '68, told Ethel it was time she bought a house for herself and her boys. Ethel liked the idea and let Dr. Weatherby bring her to the bank one Saturday to arrange the financing. The bank was family run and Mr. Flippo took a down payment that still left Ethel some savings and arranged payments they were small enough to be met by the boys social security benefits each month. The house is small, it sits on land that was once her father's and from it she can see the house in which she was born. There is no hallway; all of the rooms open one into the other. The house boasts no fancy carpeting, just old and worn linoleum. On the outside it is plain and white, with no fancy embellishments except the fenced in a flower garden around the low, front porch. Across the yard is the vegetable or "kitchen" garden that she works over every summer.

Ethel is not very educated, but she is intelligent. She was not involved in politics, but she voted in almost every election. She has seen many policies and politicians come and go. Ethel remembers when Roosevelt began the Tennessee Valley Authority. One of the Boyds on the hill got a much needed job with the TVA. They were all proud of the plan and even today get their power from the TVA. Ethel voted for John F. Kennedy Jr., but says she did not like him as a president. She doesn't speak much on the matter, but there were just some policies with which she couldn't agree. Mavis tells me that Ethel just couldn't trust a Catholic. She remembers JFK's death and remembers crying with her boys when they heard it on the radio.

Ethel is an individual. You realize how much when you hear her speak about civil rights. Maybe it comes from living up north for a short time, but, unlike most southerners her age, she

thought the battle over civil rights was “foolishness.” This amazing woman, unlike the rest of her family is determined to judge people like God does . . . by what lies under the color of their skin.

Ethel remembers George Wallace fondly; she voted for him every election. Ethel isn't sure exactly what it was, but Wallace pushed a piece of legislation through that provided her with the benefits that let her buy her little house on Bubble Gum Hill and provide for the boys.

### **Ethel on her porch swing**



## **Life Today on Bubble Gum Hill**

Her boys are grown now. When she speaks of them, there is a mother's pride in her voice. Carl, Gerald, and Mickey are all happily married and have given her seven grandchildren. They have good lives and know that their mama gave this to them. They went to church every Sunday and Ethel speaks proudly of the fact that her boys sat in the same pew with her even when they were teenagers and young men. She knows the bond with her boys is special. Ethel put Carl and Gerald through college and graduate school, and tried to convince Mickey to go. She didn't force him though, and he is happy working at the same job he had when he started after graduation from high school. He is a supervisor at Tiffin's, the trailer plant that is one of the area's main sources of employment.

One of the few things Ethel will speak of specifically as something she thinks was better in the old days was the way families took care of each other. Children never even considered putting parents in a nursing home. Ethel recalls that for a while her grandparents lived with her family when they were no longer able to fend for themselves. Her boys have their same values. Carl and Mickey let mama keep her house, but they call constantly to check on her and one of her sons or grandchildren is there every night to check on her.

Ethel is "Maw" to her seven grandchildren and spends time every day with her great-grandchild Seth. Her oldest granddaughter Deanna, a star basketball player just like her grandma, is expecting Ethel's second great-grandchild, and Ethel hopes for a boy. It is easy to see that her heart lies with her boys.

Ethel is alone now in the little house on Bubble Gum Hill, but her family lives in "hollering

distance.” Even now, Ethel never regrets her choice not to remarry and says that she never even considered it. She and Johnny had a quiet, undramatic love that Ethel never wanted to replace. She putters around her garden, she quilts using pieces of old dresses, and her bible is never far away.

It is getting warmer and on any day this spring you can stop by. Ethel will be in her garden or fishing out back. The TV her sons gave her sits unused, so they built her a catfish pond out behind the house. The black rotary phone will ring, and she will amble through the screen door and as it shuts with a hiss-bang you can hear her talking to one of her boys on the phone, “Yes, I was in the garden. No, I am fine. No, I am not goin’ to sit and take it easy. Carl Wayne, you mind your mouth when you talk to your mother!” Outside the breezes sing across the trees on the hill. The dogs bark and the chickens mutter in high pitched voices as they scratch in the yard. Spring fades and summer comes in. August sneaks by . . . hot dry days fade into breezy rockin’ chair evenings and Ethel will be on her porch swing when you drive up . . . Ya’ll stop by and she’ll jaw awhile.

*Excellent  
Beautifully written*



# The State of Alabama, Franklin County.

J. A. Boyd a N.P. in and for said state and county, hereby certify that Wm. Lindley and wife whose names is signed to the foregoing conveyance, and who is known to me acknowledged before me on this day that, being informed of the conveyance, they executed the same voluntary on the day the same bears date.

Given under my hand this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Jan. 1928  
J. A. Boyd  
 Notary Public

# The State of Alabama, Franklin County.

J. A. Boyd a N.P. in and for said county and state, hereby certify that on the 2 day of Jan. 1928 came before me the within named Fannie Lindley known to me to be the wife of the within named Wm. Lindley. Who being examined separate and apart from the husband touching her signature to the within conveyance, acknowledged that she signed the same of her own free-will and accord, and without fear, constraint or threats on the part of the husband.

In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand this the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Jan. 1928  
J. A. Boyd  
 Notary Public

**WARRANTY DEED**  
 State of Alabama, Franklin Co.  
 I hereby certify that \$72.50 in value  
 Tax has been paid on the within instrument  
 as required by law.

**THE STATE OF ALABAMA**  
 Franklin County  
 FROM  
Wm. Lindley and  
Fannie Lindley  
 TO  
H. A. Elam, Jr.  
Fannie Elam

**THE STATE OF ALABAMA**  
 Franklin County  
 OFFICE OF JUDGE OF PROBATE  
 I hereby certify that the within Deed was  
 filed in this office for record on the 1  
 day of June 1928 at 8  
 O'clock A.M., and duly recorded, in book  
52 of Deeds, pages 503 and examined.  
 Given under my hand this 1 day of  
June 1928  
 JUDGE OF PROBATE

H. A. Elam, Jr.  
Fannie Elam

Ex 50  
Rec 90  
1928

WARRANTY DEED

The Johnson Printery, Red Bay, Ala.

The State of Alabama,

Franklin County,

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS, That

*Wm Lindley*  
And wife *Fannie Lindley*

for and in consideration of the sum of *Two Hundred and fifty* Dollars  
to *us* paid in hand by *W. O. George*

And wife *Jannie George*

the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, do grant bargain sell and convey unto the said

*W. O. George and Jannie George* the following described property, to-wit:

*10 Acre more or less of land bounded as follows  
to commence at a point 35 Rod East of the South West Cor  
of North East 1/4 of Sec 14, T7 R15. thence North 80 Rod  
thence East 50 Rod thence South 80 thence west along South  
line of quarter 20 Rod to Starting point*

situated lying and being in the County of Franklin and the State of Alabama.

To Have And To Hold the same unto the said *W. O. George and Jannie George*

*there* heirs and assigns, forever. And *we* do, for *us* and *our* heirs exe-  
cutors and administrators, covenant with the said *W. O. George and Jannie George*

*there* heirs and assigns, that *we* are lawfully seized in fee simple  
of said premises; that they are free from all incumbrance, and that *we* have a good right to

the said property; that *we* will and *our* heirs, executors and adminis-

Given under Our hand and seal this Jan 2 day of Jan 1927

Attest

W. M. Lindley

Seal

Fannie L. Lindley  
made

Seal

Seal

