

Rogers Cove Cousins

By Sara Jenkins

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The community center that had long been a cornerstone of African American life in our western North Carolina county was planning to collect personal stories for a book on local black history. Discussing the project with our core committee, Lin, the director, said, “Let’s include Junaluska.”

Speaking as a white person who lives in the Junaluska community, I said, “No black people ever lived there.”

Lin said, “My father grew up there, in Rogers Cove.”

I was stunned. Rogers Cove is just around a curve and down a hill from my house. As a child, it was my idea of heaven, a secluded valley of small farms surrounded by mountains. Of course, as you go farther into mountain coves, the poorer the land, the poorer the people. Any black people, I was sure, would have lived in the farthest, poorest part.

“His grandfather farmed 85 acres, right at the corner of County Road,” Lin said. “My daddy and his brother took produce around to sell to the hotels.”

That corner is prime farmland. I was stunned again, and embarrassed at my assumption.

One day Lin and her father, Hilliard Gibbs, took my brother and me to the cove. We spent a delightful time walking and talking, Mr. Gibbs pointing out the site of his grandfather’s orchard, smoke house, tobacco barn, vegetable garden. At the creek where

we'd played as children, my brother asked, "Who did you play with? Wasn't it all white people out here?"

"All white people, yes," Mr. Gibbs replied. "I didn't realize I was black until later when we moved into town." Describing how he and friends—not knowing they weren't supposed to go into a restaurant—were called names and attacked, he said, "Then the black jumped right on me!" We all laughed.

A few years later, the community center published our book of interviews and photographs, *Lift Every Voice: African American History in Haywood County, North Carolina*—Vol. 1, Honoring Our Elders. The local bookstore invited interviewees to speak, and Mr. Gibbs went first.

Extra chairs had to be brought in for the audience, mostly white people. Mr. Gibbs told about his early years on the farm and responded openly to questions. When someone asked about segregation, Mr. Gibbs began the story of being thrown out of the restaurant. It became very quiet.

This time he didn't laugh. He said, "That really hurt. That was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I've never gotten over it."

What in that room made it possible for a black man to tell the truth about hurt and humiliation, and white people to *really hear* it? Lin and I felt we'd never before witnessed that depth of *telling* and *hearing*, of presence to one another. In interviewing for our project, we noticed that black people often chose not to go into personal detail about what they endured. And white people resist hearing it. I recognized that in myself, disguised as certainty in already "knowing" that black people did not live near me.

That day after we walked and talked out in Rogers Cove, Lin said, “If my family hadn’t moved into town, you and I would be neighbors.” I still tear up over that. Over the years, my brother and I have become friends with her family, and when Lin smiled and said, “We’re Rogers Cove cousins”— that is a connection I treasure.