

**CAPE Grant  
Oak Grove Elementary  
Visual History Project**

**Marijo Culwell  
Archivist  
Oak Grove Methodist Church**

Happy Valentines Day. My name is Marijo Culwell and I've lived in the Oak Grove neighborhood for 34 years. I was born in Atlanta so I'm a rare bird. I grew up in Decatur and attended school there. The school where I taught was Glenwood Elementary in Decatur. I also taught on two Marine bases, one at Camp LeJeune and one at Parris Island. I did a program here in 1973 for Special Ed called the Peabody Language Program. My association with Oak Grove School, my two oldest children were housed here when they were building Heritage Grade School and it was not finished. We moved into this immediate neighborhood the following year and my children started to school at Coralwood. Well, in 1974 Coralwood was closed and turned into a Special Ed school, not a neighborhood school. So all the children from Coralwood were transferred to other schools and my youngest son entered Oak Grove in the third grade and went all the way through to graduation.

I've was a room mother and I did work on a lot of projects with the school. Currently, as a member of Oak Grove I've been a member there as long as I've lived in the community, I am the historian or the archivist and we're working on our history because we are 166 years old. That's a long time.

Now I'd like to tell you something about Dekalb County. The pioneer families that settled Dekalb County started coming in about 1820. They came from Virginia, from North Carolina and from other parts of Georgia and from the coastal areas because there was much disease and illness there. Most of them that came here were dirt farmers. Do you know what a dirt farmer is? What's a dirt farmer?

A dirt farmer---they were primarily people who just planted crops for their families to have food year round. Many, many years later Dekalb County would become a county for much dairy farming. In fact, in the 1950's there were 157 dairies in Dekalb County and two or three closed shop so to speak were right up here off of Briarcliff Road and that was the Lively Dairy and the Shepherd Dairy. When the pioneers came to this community, it was part of the Creek Indian nation and the roads through here were all dirt Indian trails. They started north of here with what is now Shallowford Road. How many of you know where Shallowford is? All right. It started on Shallowford Road and wound it's way through here and went all the way into Decatur to the court house. In 1836 the first church was established in this community and it was right across the street from this school and it was a log cabin. It was only 20 feet by 20 feet, which was not a very big church. Some people say that that was the first school in the Oak Grove community. I'm not sure that it was actually the first school. But when General Sherman marched through Georgia he came down Shallowford Road and burned every building in this community except the school and the church. The white house that you see down on Oak Grove Road was burned to the ground, but it was rebuilt shortly thereafter and has been in the Jones family, also known as the Akin family, for over 100 years and the same family has lived there all of this time. We're so happy now that the last of the Jones family has died that descendants will be buying the house and living there.

The second church that was built, and I will keep relating to the church because it is so closely connected with the school. The second church was built on the corner of Oak Grove and Fair Oaks where Heritage Hall is. I don't know if you pass it on your way to and from school, but there is a sign over the church doors saying Heritage Hall and it is a smaller version of the large church. That was built in 1888 and they had a two school--a two classroom school for the children in the Oak Grove community and the children from this community attended there until 1927 when they built W.D. Thompson School, which is now torn down, but it was up in the Toco Hills area and the Harris Teeter has gone out where the W.D. Thompson School used to be. The children from Oak Grove attended there until Oak Grove was built.

The third building that Oak Grove built was built in 1911 and it was below the cemetery and it was just a one room building that the men in the community built themselves and the women went in and cleaned the church every week. The church furnished the Christmas tree for the whole community and everybody would gather and draw names like we do today and exchange presents. At the bottom of that church there was a spring and when the wells went dry for the farmers they would take their cattle down and the cattle would drink from the wells--from the springs. Also a very enterprising man planted sugar cane down by the spring and he turned it into a sorghum syrup mill and Mr. Pete Akin who lives at the top of Crestline remembers going down as a boy watching him make syrup.

The fourth church building still stands on the corner and that is Heritage Hall and that was built in 1954. In the 1950's all of a sudden country became very valuable because Atlanta was really growing and really spreading out and so people were beginning to come out to this part of DeKalb County. If you can believe this or not, when I learned how to drive, I learned how to drive a car on North Druid Hills Road because it was not paved all the way through and there was virtually no traffic and no people out this way. Up at the corner of Lavista was a gas station and a grocery store and that was about the only commercial thing that was out this way. Well, as people began to build subdivisions in this area of course, they had to pave the road, which up until that time was dirt road. The school system decided there were so many children coming into the community that it was time that they built a school. This was a peach orchard and Oak Grove School was built and opened in the school year of 1958 and 59. So that tells you how long you have been here.

In 1962, there were 734 students at Oak Grove, 20 classrooms and 36 plus children in each of the rooms. That's a lot of children for a class. I bet your classes aren't that big now. The houses in this area in the 1950's, you could buy a house in here for as little as \$8,000 and now the houses in here go all the way up to \$750,000.00. That's pretty much of a change isn't it?

Everybody likes to hear the story about the alligator lake. How many of you know where Watermark is? You know where Watermark is, it's a subdivision with a fence across the lake going towards Lavista on Oak Grove. There was a family that lived there and they came home with small pet alligators. The yard was not fenced now so the pond was right next to the sidewalk on the road. Well, those alligators would come out on a sunny day and they would sunbathe on the bank and occasionally they would go out in the middle of Oak Grove Road. Well, the animal control people would come by and they would get them and put them back in the lake. Then they would wander back out in the road again and they'd come back. So this went on for several years and finally when the community got so busy and there was so much traffic they feared that the alligators would be run over and so they took them and put them in a local game ranch. The houses that go down Oak Grove toward the church, starting with the rock house, all those homes belonged to the Akin family, which was really one of the largest families to settle here. You had Akin Drive, North Akin Drive, North Kirkland, which is part of that family, The Cheeks, part of that family. Eddie Kirkland lives right next door to your school and he is a descendent of the pioneers. Sheppy down here in the big brick house was a part of that family and there are several other Akins that live on Crestline Drive. So it is quite a big family. In our church you talk about anybody unless it's nice because they are all related to one another. So you have to be very careful.

In 1969 the final phase of Oak Grove Church was built and dedicated and it served this community in so many ways. We had scout troops, we had sports teams, choirs for children and youth, and Christian education and many programs that include the community. We also have preschool, a kindergarten and a child development center and an after school program. So you see the church and school are very much intertwined.

Some of them may have actually gone to preschool or after school programs there.

And there may be some who are members of Oak Grove. There was also a black community here that was in the Oak Grove community but they called themselves the Nelms community. There was a white politician who lived in Decatur and for recreation he had a farm off Lavista Road and he had a lot of black families who worked his farm. So when he died he left them quite a bit of acreage and I think today they have still 35 acres that they own. The Mount Zion AME Church that is on Lavista was 127 years old until they tore it down last year and I don't know why they didn't want to preserve it, but they wanted a newer and a larger church and some of those families have been here for a long, long time. They are the Kennemores, the Nelms, the Stokes, the Rowses and you may have seen some of them. Do we have a Rowses?

(Cross talk)

And you are Nelms?

Yes, ma'am.

So your families have been here very long too. As I said, Oak Grove is not as exciting a community as maybe Decatur or Atlanta, but we've always had a real close feeling, sort of like a small town and anything you need, any place you need to be, you can be there in a very short time and yet you feel like you live in a small town. When we moved here the traffic was rather congested at the corner of Oak Grove and Fair Oaks and it took us about 10, 15, 20 years to get a traffic light there just to get out into the road. I started a petition around the community for streetlights that went from the church to Lavista. At that time there were no streetlights and it was very dark and on a rainy night it was very treacherous. Finally, about 10 years ago the county put up streetlights for us. So anyway I think we are very fortunate to be living in this Oak Grove Community and I would like to know how many of you have lived here all your lives? Great. And how many of you think you would like to live here when you are grown and working? Would you like to stay in this community?

How many of your parents grew up in this area? I'll bet you years ago some people lived in Atlanta and someone said I'm going to buy a new house way, way, way out in a community called Oak Grove. People said you are crazy, that's too far to drive. I'll bet you that was something that happened years ago. It might be not too long ago.

Well several of those really stopped at North Decatur Road and Clairmont when I was in high school. That was the first real shopping center that was put in the area. Everything else was downtown Atlanta and around the court square in Decatur. A few high school friends of mine built houses out on Clairmont Road and they said why do you want to live so far out? And of course now, so far out is practically in. It amazes me when I drive around 285 that I can actually see the skyline of Atlanta and realize how close it is and yet it seemed so far when I was a child. I have walked from downtown Atlanta to my house in Decatur and it seemed like it was a long way. Thank you very, very much.

I have two of our church directories and I'll leave them on this table as you pass out of the room for pictures of all of the churches that have been constructed. There have been five and one just has drawings, the other has actual pictures of the churches.

.....Historical society and what did it say ...

This ... W.D. Thompson School in 1927 ... and it had a listing of all the children who were present that day and at the bottom it said those who played hookey and it listed all their names. Some of them I still know and I'm going to call them and ask them if they remember that.