

Archie McArthur, an unsung hero, makes history

By Linda Rodgers McArthur, contributing writer

When most people hear of Mt. Airy, North Carolina, they first associate it with Andy Griffith and *The Andy Griffith Show*. However, there is another lesser-known chapter of Mt. Airy history that should not be overlooked.

On August 4th, 2005, Mt. Airy lost one of its native sons. On that day Archie Olandrus McArthur departed from his life on earth. Although he had not lived in Mt. Airy for many years, he kept a keen concern and interest on the pulse of Mt. Airy and would visit his parents Nathaniel and Leona McArthur often. Perhaps there are other stories similar to his across this country, but what distinguishes his is that it took place in Mt. Airy.

Archie was a man of character, integrity and great courage. He was the first African American to attend the Surry County Schools, and he was **alone**—the only one in 1963. What strength of will and determination must it have taken for him to go to school every morning knowing that he would see no one who looked like him and being uncertain of what abuse and insults he would suffer? We who have not had his experiences can only imagine. Undoubtedly, those experiences helped to shape the man he would become. I told him that he was a trailblazer, a **pioneer**.

One of his dear friends and co-workers for many years who spoke at his "Celebration of Life" later told me that he never even knew about that part of Archie's life. This friend, who happens to be white, said to me, "Archie was black and I was white, but we didn't see color. Race didn't matter; we were friends." To have suffered the indignities he did and still emerge from it unfilled with hatred is a testament to his moral fiber and faith in humanity.

Archie Olandrus McArthur should be remembered for what he did to lead the way for others who would follow him. Here is his letter, which appeared in the Mt. Airy News last year:

In September 1963, at the age of fourteen, I, Archie O. McArthur, affected a bit of history by entering the ninth grade at Mt. Airy Junior High School. It was historic and important because I was the first Black student to attend school there. Moreover, I integrated the Surry County School System, as I was

the first black person to attend any white school in Surry County.

Anticipating my first day in this new environment, I was anxious and afraid. I did not know what to expect, whether I would be welcomed or cast out. I soon found, however, that the latter would be the case. I can remember arriving at school and everyone standing around looking at me as though I was not supposed to be there. I guess to them I wasn't. I had entered a previously white world of at least 700 students. I felt as though I was a decayed spot in a perfect set of white teeth.

That first week, there was only one student to show me compassion, "John

Reese." John quickly befriended me. He introduced me to class changing and getting around school. He went out of his way to talk to me and also invited me to his home. John was one person who helped with my transition.

My first day was just a hint of what the rest of the year would be. Once in class, I was the target of spitballs and racial slurs such as "nigger," "jungle bunny" and "blackie."

I can remember standing in the lunchroom, staring at tables filled with students, and then wondering where I could sit to eat lunch. It then occurred to me that I could sit anywhere I wanted because once my tray was placed on the table, all the other students would pick up their trays and leave,

which they did. Then I had a table to myself. In the hallways, I was pushed, taunted and made the butt of racial jokes, and yes, I had to fight.

That year I tried out for and made the junior varsity football team. Little did I know that I would have two opponents, my teammates and the opposing team. One night after practice, I was pinned against the junior high school gym by a car containing four high school varsity players. I fought them off as best I could, but I was badly beaten and my clothes were torn. My compensation for this torture was the replacement of my clothes by one of my assailant's father who at that time was the manager of Belk's Department Store.

In the 9th grade, I enrolled in Algebra I. My instructor was Morgan Stanley. At the end of the grading period, my grade report included an "F" for that class. I approached Mr. Stanley and told him that my grade was incorrect. He responded, "That's what you got." Although I had successfully completed his class, and my parents and I had carefully documented my progress, it became necessary to contact the Superintendent of the Surry County School System to accurately reflect the grade I had earned on my official school record.

I had no social life in school, and I could not wait for the end of the day when I could go home and to my neighborhood and friends.

This was not an experience I would wish to relive; however, I realize that my being the first black student to attend a Surry County School was essential to the equal education opportunities for all people—Black, White and other races. Someone had to be first; that someone just happened to be me.



Linda & Archie McArthur

Baby's World Daycare

"Where Children are #1"

30 Yrs. of Serving the Community

- Summer Camp
- Before & After School Care
- Food Nutrition Program
- Security Surveillance Cameras
- 1st & 2nd shift
6:30am-12:30am

291-0198

378-1885

2510 Randleman Road
Greensboro

2 locations:
2601 Phillips Ave.



Join The Greensboro Times
in Celebration of
Black History Month

To advertise call 254-8725

PREFERRED REALTY



2003 BOULEVARD ST., SUITE E
GREENSBORO, NC 27407

V.M. (336) 558-9077
Ofc: (336) 854-4442
Fax: (336) 854-4415
Email: rita_27402@lycos.com