

It's A Small World If You Ask Enough Questions

Thanksgiving is often thought as a time for family. In the small community of Jones, Alabama, people care deeply about their ancestors, but a lack of written history can make it hard to find where you come from.

That's where Katherine Colee comes in.

The 93-year-old great grandmother is the respected and loved community historian who has over 40 years of collecting knowledge.

It all started when Colee found a family tree in an old trunk in her grandmother's, Laura Reed, house. "This little paper was folded and torn up and had disintegrated in the bottom of that trunk... I pieced it back together, and then I had it laminated, and that's when I became interested in collecting history."

After finding out where her grandmother came from, Colee suddenly found a whole new family to be a part of. She realized she would have never found them if she didn't stumble across that family tree, so she decided to collect as much history as possible in case she or anyone else ever wanted to know more about their ancestors.

She kept mail from neighbors, took notes of who went to church where, and wrote down what she could remember from her childhood neighbors. Then she carefully started storing the fragments of history in organized file boxes.

She told two neighbors that they were actually cousins, and word soon spread that if they had historical questions, they should come to her.

She gets calls and letters all the time asking her questions about where someone is buried, or what happened to a certain aunt or how their grandparents met.

Colee has gotten visitors from as far as Virginia to ask her questions and see letters to find out their ancestors who had lived in Jones.

Colee has now made or helped create four books, one published and three unpublished, about four different families in the community: the Reeds, the Jacksons, the Wyatts, and the Cooks. One of those books is called "Reed Data" written by Thomas Willis.

When someone brought up "Reed Data" to Colee, she responded, "Yes, I know all about Thomas's book... He got every bit of information from me. When he finished it, he sent me a copy of it and said, 'Sis, look at this, and if there are any corrections you need to make, make it, and thank me for it.' I still have his letter in the back of the book."

Researching four families requires research on a lot of people, which is surprising given that it was for a very small un-incorporated rural community 20 miles northeast of Selma. (Map shown below)

Colee shares most of her information orally and in-person. She worries she acts stingy, but she won't let any of her artifacts or information leave her home due to too many people borrowing something to make a copy and promptly losing it.

"I'm just so afraid it won't get back. Don't let things out, or you may never see your information again. I'm glad to share it, but as far as letting it out..." Colee says. This valid worry is the reason most of her information hasn't gone beyond stories around the dinner table or phone calls to friends.

Yet, Colee isn't worried that her information will just be forgotten after she passes away. She believes her family will take care of her artifacts and notes after her and can keep it safe enough for it to become public knowledge.

Colee even has her eye out for who will continue her legacy. Her daughters Gale and Sandra visit regularly trying to convert her information to computers. She is comforted in her history being passed on to them calling them "future historians."

"I think it is good that the younger generations are interested in it and are treasuring when they find more information. Because you can't go to the original source anymore since they are dead," Colee says.

This Thanksgiving, she had several people call her or drop by her home to ask questions while they were in town. She even turned Thanksgiving dinner into a storytelling session explaining another sect of the Reed family that she found out went back to England.

Colee's research never stops. While she's always diving deeper into the families she already researched, she has started a new project on the local Gallagher family after finding out that they were distantly related to the Reeds.

Colee left the interview with a powerful statement about why researching comforts her: "It's a small world if you just ask questions." It can feel like an overwhelming big world until you find out where you come from and gaining new family members often helps.

TWEETS:

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Great grandmother Katherine Colee is the beloved community historian who has over 40 years of collecting knowledge. It started when she found out where her grandmother came from and discovered a whole new family to be a part of. After that, the research never stopped.

Audio Recording: (right mouse click, then hit "Play" option)



Pictures:



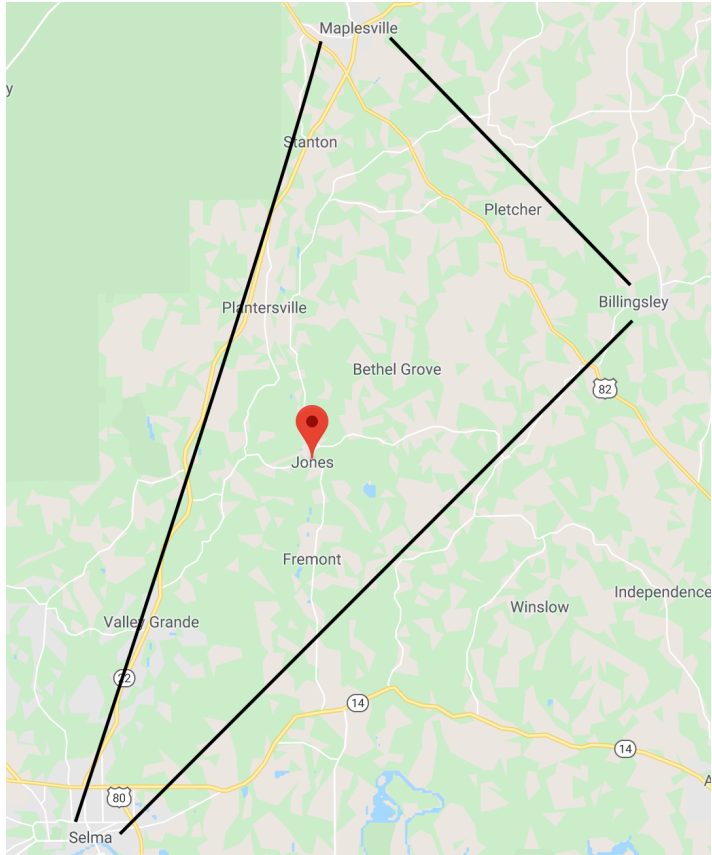
Katherine Colee, pictured on the far right, telling stories at Thanksgiving.



Katherine Colee researching new files about the Reeds.



A close up of Katherine Colee



Where Jones, Alabama is in relation to Selma, Maplesville, and Billingsley.