

The Passing of a Subiaco Trailblazer

by Fr. Jerome Kodell, OSB

Earlier this fall we received the news that Lemuel Collins, Class of 1960, had died in Harvey, Illinois, on October 4, 2020. His passing brought to mind a significant era in Subiaco history in which he played a decisive role. He was the first black student to graduate from Subiaco Academy. He and his class registered their 60th graduation anniversary last May, though the reunion celebration had to be cancelled because of the pandemic.

Lemuel had entered in the fall of 1957 as a sophomore, along with William (Curly) Franklin, a freshman. These two young men from Gray Rock, a small community north of Paris, Arkansas, were the trailblazers in the integration of the Academy. They would soon be followed by Walter Collins, Lemuel's younger brother, who entered in 1960 and graduated with the class of 1964.

That was a very difficult time in our state and nation. While Lemuel Collins and William Franklin were entering at Subiaco, the Little Rock Nine were attempting to enroll in Central High School in Little Rock, and the struggle would become the focus of national and international news. It took great courage for these two young men to enroll in an all-white school at any time, but especially at that time.

The Supreme Court had ruled in 1954 that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Bishop Albert L. Fletcher of Little Rock responded immediately by ordering that Catholic schools in Arkansas be open to accepting black students for the 1955-1956 school year. Bishop Fletcher would follow up by writing *An Elementary Catechism on the Morality of Segregation and Racial Discrimination*. After informing the monks in a meeting of the Monastic Chapter at Subiaco in April, 1955, Abbot Paul Nahlen directed that Subiaco Academy would be



Lemuel Collins, Class of 1960

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open to young men regardless of race. The first black students to apply were the two who entered in the fall of 1957.

I interviewed Curly Franklin by phone at his home in Chicago after Lemuel's funeral. He told me that when he and Lemuel were getting close to high school, they had a dream of playing football, but they knew they wouldn't have a chance in the public schools of that time. Their only hope was Subiaco, but that seemed out of reach. They were members of St. Joseph Parish in Paris, and when Coach Reynold Maus, also a member of St. Joseph, heard about their dilemma, he helped them enter the Academy to fulfill their dream.

They both achieved distinction in football at Subiaco, Lemuel at left end and Curly at fullback. They could play only five of the ten games on the schedule. The teams in northern Arkansas were open, but not Fort Smith or Little Rock or the teams in between. Even though playing only five games, Curly Franklin was named All-District in his senior year. He is best remembered for crashing his way through the line for a two-point conversion which gave the Trojans a 21-20 victory in the Catholic League championship game and brought the trophy back to Subiaco.

Curly said that though the boys encountered some racism outside Subiaco, when they were on campus they were never

mistreated. Once, when a busload of Academy students stopped at a restaurant and the manager refused to seat Collins and Franklin, Father Robert Lazzari called all the students out of the restaurant. The manager watched as his revenue reboarded the bus and moved on.

After graduation from the Academy, Lemuel and Curly, and later Walter, moved to Chicago. Lemuel was drafted into the U.S. Army to serve in Korea, but later he and Curly had long careers with the Chicago Transit Authority. Walter joined the Chicago police force after service with the military police.

At the time of his death, Lemuel had been married to his wife Mary for 52 years. Curly and his wife had been coming to Subiaco Homecoming regularly, but shortly before they were to travel in

*William "Curly" Franklin,
Class of 1961*

2005 his wife had a heart attack and died a short time later. Curly is planning to come to his 60th Anniversary Reunion next spring.



Lemuel Collins, Class of 1960 and wife Mary

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