

# What if Maryellen lived in Columbus, MS?

If Maryellen Larkin lived in Lowndes County in 1954 she would have listened to Rock and Roll music, including a new singer named Elvis Presley, and danced along with the music-performance show called American Bandstand on television. She would have also gone to the Varsity Theater to watch just released movies such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, all while imagining herself as the hero of each film.



In the 1950's there were almost 38,000 people living in Lowndes County, and roughly 17,000 in the city of Columbus. Some of the city's main industries were lumber, cotton, tourism, dairy, and the railroad. A new company, American Bosch Arma Corporation, just opened in Columbus in 1954. The plant made motors, window lifts, and windshield wipers. At one time, the plant covered 43.5 acres and employed over 1,700 people!

Maryellen would have loved walking downtown with her dog, Scooter, and shopping in stores such as Ruth's Department Store, Andrew's Shoes, and Peggy Joy's Ladies Shop. At that time, cars could park down the center of Main Street! Maryellen could also peer into the elaborately decorated window displays of businesses such as Banks Hardware Company. The store advertised sporting goods, builder's hardware, and farm supplies.

For refreshment, Maryellen could stop by either Straight 8's Restaurant or even Bob's Place for a hamburger with fries and some music on the jukebox.



Her parents would have bought groceries for the family at stores such as Brown Brothers Grocery Store. Located at 2008 Seventh Avenue North, it was owned and operated by O. Franklin and Walter L. Brown.

Maryellen would have attended Franklin Academy, the oldest public school in the state. In 1939, Franklin Academy replaced their 1886 school building with the current structure that still stands. Later, she would have attended Stephen D. Lee High

School. The school was located on the exact spot where the public library is today!

At that time, however, both Franklin Academy and Stephen D. Lee High School only allowed white students to attend. Maryellen lived during a time in which children attended separate schools solely based on the color of their skin. In Columbus, Union Academy and Robert E. Hunt High School were schools designated for African American children. The government labeled this system as “separate but equal”.

Racial separation, or segregation, extended to other areas of life as well. In the South, Caucasians and African Americans had legally segregated churches, businesses, water fountains, and even bathrooms!



In 1954, the United States Supreme Court, or the highest court in the country, ended the laws that allowed for separate school systems based on race in a case called *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. That meant that all children, no matter what color they were, would go to school together. Maryellen would have been excited at this news as it meant that she could meet a lot of new people and make new friends!

Compiled by Archivist Mona Vance-Ali with the Local History Department  
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