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Charlotte Downey-Anderson



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THE "COGGINS AFFAIR": DESEGREGATION AND SOUTHERN MORES IN MADISON COUNTY, FLORIDA

by CHARLOTTE DOWNEY-ANDERSON*

MADISON, FLORIDA, in the 1950s was a quiet, pretty town of approximately 3,000.¹ The courthouse square which dominates the downtown area was surrounded by stores and was lined with Sabal palms. To the north and across the street from the courthouse there is a small city park with the "Four Freedoms" monument, built in memory of Army Air Corps Captain Colin P. Kelly, a World War II hero.² Pleasant homes dot the oak-shaded streets leading from the square. Madison is and was a typical southern town. During the 1950s and the 1960s, racial and social constraints were rigid in the community.³ Blacks lived in restricted areas of the town and schools were segregated. There was virtually no social contact between the white and black communities.

Approximately one-half of Madison County's population was poor, blacks. The average annual income in 1956 was \$900, and ten per cent of the population-white and black-was on welfare as compared to the state's average annual income of \$1,723 with two per cent of the population receiving some public assistance.⁴ As elsewhere, poverty resulted in chronic ill health and inferior

* Charlotte Downey-Anderson is a social studies teacher at Madison County High School and a history graduate student at Florida State University.

1. Madison is located on Highway 90, approximately fifty miles east of Tallahassee, and is bordered on the east by the historic Suwannee River.
2. Colin P. Kelly on December 10, 1941, attacked a Japanese naval task force. The plane was hit and Kelly ordered his crew to bail out, but he could not escape the crash himself. He received the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously.
3. David Dukes, *I Have Never Lived In America* (New York, 1978).
4. Interview with Dr. Deborah Coggins, June 30, 1979, Tanning Springs, Florida. See also Alvin B. Biscoe, Jr., Elsie C. Jones, and Dale L. Moody, eds., *Florida Statistical Abstract, 1967*, Bureau of Economics and Business Research, College of Business Administration, University of Florida (Gainesville, 1967), 25 and 34; *Florida Statistical Abstract, 1968*, 89; *Welfare News*, Florida Department of Public Welfare, June 1956; and

medical care. Forty per cent of all county births were handled by older black women-midwives-who were often untrained. More than one-half of the local children had hookworm, and at least fourteen per cent had not received polio vaccine.⁵ County health services were badly needed.

On May 1, 1956, Deborah Coggins, the first woman health officer in Florida, started work in Madison, Jefferson, and Taylor counties.⁶ She was appalled at the health conditions she found and decided to try to correct them. She hired Robert Browning, a University of Michigan graduate in public health, to aid in educating the community to public and private health needs. For many blacks, housing was unsanitary, lacking indoor bathrooms and window screens. The first effort was to try to persuade landlords to furnish screens, but this was not entirely successful.⁷ Dr. Coggins next started a pre-school medical examination for children entering first grade. She found that dental care was an urgent need. There was also the problem of infant mortality, and it was this issue that indirectly catapulted her into a national figure. Madison County had one of the three highest infant death rates in Florida.⁸ The local hospital did not have an obstetrics ward, and mothers went to surrounding counties for hospital care, or they delivered at home with the help of midwives.

Coggins arranged for Ethel Kirkland, a black state board of health nurse, to come to Madison to instruct interested girls, recently graduated from high school, in the skills of midwifery. The class started on Monday, August 20, 1956. On Wednesday the doctor wanted to check with nurse Kirkland on the pro-

the *Annual Report of the State Welfare Board*, Florida State Welfare Board, Department of Health and Rehabilitation Services (Tallahassee, 1957).

5. "Fired Officer Raps Florida Health Lag," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, approximately November 30, 1956. Clipping in Deborah Coggins papers in the possession of the author.
6. Deborah Fern Reed Coggins, a native of Tampa, received her M.D. degree from Duke University School of Medicine. In 1954, she moved to Madison with her family, and two years later was hired as tri-county health officer. In 1959, she and her husband went into private practice in Gainesville, Florida. They now (1981) live in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.
7. Coggins interview.
8. *Ibid.*

gram's progress. Due to a heavy appointment schedule, the only free time Coggins had was the lunch hour. She therefore called the Hotel Madison restaurant for reservations, making it a point to apprise "everyone, even the cook," that a black nurse would be present at the business luncheon.⁹ She was told "fine, fine, just be sure to enter and leave through the alley door which opens into a private dining room."¹⁰ The women arrived, were served quickly, discussed the program, paid their bills, and left through the alley. Dr. Coggins learned some two weeks later from a staff member that there was "talk" around town about a white and a black eating together in a public restaurant.¹¹ Either the waitress had reported the incident, or, according to another report, perhaps the owner of a garage across the street from the cafe had seen them leave and had complained to the commissioners.¹²

Rumors spread rapidly, and soon petitions to have Dr. Coggins fired were being circulated. She was accused of holding a membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), of trying to instigate desegregation at the hospital, of being in favor of school integration, and of meeting and sleeping with black men in a Tallahassee motel on a weekly basis.¹³

On the morning of September 5, the Madison County commissioners met at the courthouse and passed a motion requesting that the state health board relieve Coggins of her duties.¹⁴ Later that day the commissioners met again, secretly this time, in an automobile parked near the park and the "Four Freedoms" monument, to discuss the issue.¹⁵ The following day the county

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9. Dr. Coggins, Ethel Kirkland, and a Nurse Crosby, who was observing the class, attended the luncheon.
 10. Blacks in 1956 were still denied access to public facilities and schools in most areas of the South.
 11. According to Coggins, "We went in by the back door and left by it. I don't know how we could have been more inoffensive." Coggins interview.
 12. Coggins interview, and interviews with an informant who requested anonymity, Madison, Florida, May 17, 1979, and May 26, 1979. The name of the garage owner has also been withheld.
 13. Coggins interview.
 14. Minutes Book Number 5, Madison County commissioners, September 5, 1956, Madison County Courthouse.
 15. *Madison Enterprise-Recorder*, September 7, 1956.

clerk relayed the commissioner's motion to the Florida state health board.¹⁶

T. C. (Curry) Merchant, Jr., editor of the *Madison Enterprise-Recorder* ran a front-page article on September 6 in an effort to stop both the gossip and the petitions. He addressed the story to the "fair-minded citizens of Madison County," arguing that "we find ourselves in an emotional upheaval, the like of which we have not seen since Reconstruction days." Merchant refuted the rumors and set forth the facts, but he did claim that Coggins had admitted to an error in judgment. She was, he wrote, not "acutely aware" of the "age old southern tradition" which did not allow blacks and whites to eat together at the same table.¹⁷ Had she been born and raised in Madison County, she would not have "transgressed."¹⁸

The Associated Press picked up the story, and soon papers across the United States began to carry reports. Even the service-men's newspaper, *The Stars and Stripes*, and the Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* ran news items. Highly emotional and insulting letters to the commissioners started arriving from all parts of the country. Many accused the board members of being ignorant, bigots, devils, and a disgrace to the state of Florida. Father Divine, the well-known black religious cult leader, called the commissioners "dixieRATS."¹⁹ Other writers, however, praised the commissioners and encouraged them to "stick to their guns!"²⁰ The negative publicity caused the board to feel that they were being subjected to outside pressure, and, perhaps as a result, they felt they needed to defend local traditions.

Dr. Coggins received some "hate mail" and criticism, but mostly commendation. There was support from throughout the state and nation, and even from Europe.²¹ As a result of

16. Dale M. Leslie to George A. Dame, September 6, 1956, Coggins papers.

17. *Madison Enterprise-Recorder*, September 7, 1956.

18. *Ibid.* In an interview Dr. Coggins was asked if she had admitted to an error in judgment. She replied, "Did I say that? I probably did! I did make an error in judgment-I misjudged the community." She then added, "I didn't qualify what the error in judgment was." Coggins interview.

19. Father Divine to County Commissioners (n.d., probably September 7, 1956), D. Coggins file, Madison County Courthouse.

20. D. Coggins file, Madison County Courthouse.

21. Coggins papers.

Merchant's article in the local paper, the Reverend David G. Pritchard vigorously defended Dr. Coggins in a letter to Dr. Wilson T. Sowder of the State Board of Health. In reply, Sowder noted, "I am hopeful that no further action will be taken by the board . . . and that after the immediate excitement has died down they will not see fit to remind us at the State Board of Health of their previous request."²²

On September 13, Dr. Coggins asked for a meeting with the Madison County commissioners, and this was set for October 3.²³ She met first, however, on September 24, with the Jefferson County commissioners in Monticello. Her husband, Dr. Wilmer Coggins, accompanied her to the courthouse which they found filled with spectators.²⁴ Jesse Lott, a local citizen, urged the commissioners to "fire her, fire her! When we give one inch we are going to give the whole thing. It's time to stand up and be white men, not jellybacks."²⁵ The commissioners complimented Dr. Coggins on her work, but when Judge B. Shuman asked if she intended to resign, she replied, "No sir. I don't feel I have any reason to. . . . I would be happy if you would give me the cause." "The only cause we heard is that you took darkeys in there and had lunch with them," Shuman answered.²⁶ Commissioner Norman H. Hartsfield of Aucilla argued that this action had lost her the respect of the people and made her work useless. Board clerk Ike Anderson reported the receipt of a letter from the Palatka Klu Klux Klan endorsing Dr. Coggins's dismissal, and the board passed a motion to that effect.²⁷

On October 1, Dr. Coggins met with Taylor County commissioners in Perry. When the chairman, William King, asked if she would resign, she refused. She thanked the commissioners

22. David G. Pritchard to Wilson T. Sowder, September 6, 1956; Sowder to Pritchard, September 6, 1956; Sowder to Dale M. Leslie, September 13, 1956, Coggins papers.

23. Coggins to Elzie King, September 13, 1956; Patrick S. Cantey to Coggins, September 14, 1956; Clarence P. Andrews to Coggins, September 17, 1956, Coggins papers.

24. Wilmer J. Coggins was born and raised in Madison, where his parents owned a drug store and a clothing store.

25. *Time*, October 8, 1956, 24. Jesse Lott later was elected mayor of Monticello.

26. *Tallahassee Democrat*, September 30, 1956.

27. Klu Klux Klan to County Commissioners (n.d.), D. Coggins file, Madison County Courthouse; *Tallahassee Democrat*, September 30, 1956.

for their past kindnesses, but told them she was disappointed that they did not support her. King then announced that "the local board of Taylor County will have to go along with the decision of Madison and Jefferson commissioners because Taylor County does not have the funds to provide its own health officer."²⁸

On the afternoon of October 3, 1956, the little basement room of the Madison County Courthouse was crowded with spectators and newsmen from all over the state as the county commissioners convened for their regular monthly meeting. The commissioners included Clarence A. Andrews, Greenville; Grover C. Cone, Greenville; Elsie King, Greenville; Patrick S. Cantey, Madison; and Coleman Richardson, Madison. Dr. Coggins spoke on her own behalf: "I wish you would now discuss this [situation] in my presence." When there was no response, she became more direct: "Could it be that you think what you did was unjust, illegal, undemocratic, or unchristian? Why are you such cowards?"²⁹

Robert H. Browning, a county health information officer, rose to speak on behalf of the doctor. He argued, she "has been severely persecuted and tormented. . . . The health programs in three counties have collapsed. I say is it worth it? What do you have to prove? To acquiesce at a time like this would be to sacrifice principle. I cannot and I will not sacrifice my own integrity and self-respect on the altar of economic security. What Dr. Coggins did had no more to do with spreading integration than drinking a cup of Russian tea has to do with spreading communism."³⁰

Commission chairman Clarence P. Andrews then asked for further comment. Curry Merchant also vigorously defended Dr. Coggins. He argued that she had been "subjected to the most vicious assortment of lies, misrepresentations and slander that I have had occasion to witness in this community. A physician greater than Deborah Coggins was once criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now, I am not attempting to make any irreverent comparisons, but I sincerely believe that if you fire

28. *Perry News-Herald*, October 4, 1956.

29. *Time*, October 15, 1956, 35.

30. *Atlanta Journal*, October 3, 1956.

this girl today for the reason you have in mind you will be doing an evil and unjust act." Calling the commissioners by their first names, Merchant warned, "Clarence, Elzie, Grover, Pat, and Cole, the eyes of the world are upon Madison, today. It is up to you, and you alone, to show the world what Southern white men are like."³¹

The commissioners discussed the matter among themselves for a few minutes and talked to their counsel, attorney Turner Davis. Then, when it appeared that Dr. Coggins was not going to receive a reply, she shouted: "You're fools, all of you fools. I'm going to be in Madison and you're going to have to look at me for a long time!"³² Several weeks later Coggins received a letter, according to a newspaper report, from Dr. Sowder, informing her that she was being dismissed as the tri-county health officer. The reason was that she had not been on the job for the necessary six months (May 1, 1956, to October 3, 1956) to assure permanency.³³

Reports of Coggins's firing made headlines throughout the United States and Canada. Typical were the following: "Fired Officer Raps Florida Health Lag" (*Milwaukee Wisconsin Sentinel*); "Woman Doctor Hits Back In Bias Row" (*Chicago Sun Times*); "Doctor Blasts Officials In Negro Lunch Case" (*Indianapolis Star*); "Dismissed Doctor Blasts Commissioners" (*Montreal, Canada, Star*); "Fired Woman Doctor Calls Florida Authorities Fools" (*Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*); "Fire Medic Who Dined With Negro" (Long Beach, California, *Independent*); "Women's Wrath" (*Newsweek*); and "Florida Community Quiet on Health Official Issue" (Raleigh, North Carolina, *News and Observer*).³⁴

After Dr. Coggins's dismissal, the community tried to retaliate

31. *Ibid.*; Dora Byron, "Courage in Action-On A Florida Newspaper," *The Nation*, December 1, 1956, 478-79.

32. *Cincinnati* (n.d., probably October 4, 1956). The proceedings of the meeting are described in Minutes Book Number 5, Madison County commissioners, October 3, 1956, but with all of the actual dialogue omitted.

33. Jacksonville, *Florida Times-Union*, October 5, 1956.

34. The undated newspaper clippings are from the Coggins papers. Governor LeRoy Collins also spoke out against the commissioners's actions. See Jerrell H. Shofner, "Custom, Law, and History: The Enduring Influence of Florida's 'Black Code,'" *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LV (January 1977), 277.

against some of her supporters. The Jefferson County school board called for the resignation of Mrs. Flo Way, a fifth grade teacher in Monticello, because she had publicly supported Coggins. Mrs. Way refused to resign, and since she was on a continuing contract, the board had to show just cause to discharge her, but they were unable to do so.³⁵ Robert Browning, the health educator who had defended Coggins at the Madison hearing, was released. On November 14, 1956, the Jefferson County board of commissioners notified the state board that "we do not need a health educator." Commissioners in Taylor and Madison counties supported this action, and Browning found himself unemployed.³⁶ The health services of the three counties were weakened. The mid-wife classes, as well as all of Dr. Coggins's programs, were eliminated, and it was six months before a new health officer, Dr. H. H. Ring, was hired.³⁷

In retrospect, the experience of Dr. Coggins revealed much about the southern encounter with the integration issue of the 1950s. At the time, editor Merchant, of the Madison paper, observed about his fellow citizens: "They are scared to death. What are they afraid of? I don't know and I can't make them tell me."³⁸ Years later Dr. Coggins admitted that she had not fully understood the fears about which Merchant spoke, and that she was naive about the depth of racial tension in the community. "People felt very threatened, they felt I represented something larger."³⁹ The irony of the case is that Dr. Coggins had no intention of defying local custom; she felt that she had done all that was needed to conform to tradition. She was not a rebel with a cause; only a public health officer trying to do her job for the betterment of the community. "I wasn't an activist; if I had been, in retrospect I should have done something, but I didn't-I backed off, and thought, oh! I felt not only the rights of blacks were being infringed upon, but my rights were being infringed upon. I felt I had the right to eat with

35. *Tampa Tribune*, October 13, 1956.

36. *Madison Enterprise-Recorder*, November 16, 1956; Minutes Book Number 5, Madison County commissioners, December 5, 1956.

37. *Miami Herald*, April 21, 1957; Minutes Book Number 5, Madison County commissioners, January 14, 1957.

38. *The Nation*, December 1, 1956, 478-79.

39. Coggins interview.

anyone I wanted to. I sat down at a table with a black woman and ate! That made me an ineffective health officer . . . because it was so against their mores."⁴⁰ But the logic of southern customs left no option for the board of county commissioners. As one Florida writer noted, she had broken the cardinal rule which defended against the greatest fear of southern whites: racial-social equality.⁴¹

Dr. Coggins came to believe that she had developed a broader understanding of the underlying forces set in motion against her. In November 1956, she was invited to speak of her experience at a meeting of the Wisconsin Welfare Forum in Milwaukee. Her talk, entitled "The Tragic Sickness," offered the view that many southern towns responded to the threat of integration as they did because of poverty and ignorance. The cure, she argued, was industry and a greater exposure to the larger world outside.⁴²

The editor of the *Miami Herald*, in a letter to the Madison County commissioners, predicted that Dr. Coggins would "not be appreciated for at least two or three decades."⁴³ Now, twenty-five years after the events in which she unwittingly participated, that analysis appears to have been confirmed.

40. Ibid.

41. *Miami Herald*, February 17, 1957.

42. *Milwaukee Sun Final*, November 29, 1956.

43. Loyce Furman Cargile to Madison County commissioners, September 30, 1956, D. Coggins file, Madison County Courthouse.