

Roscoe Reporting

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Mr. Hicks in Coming of Age in Mississippi

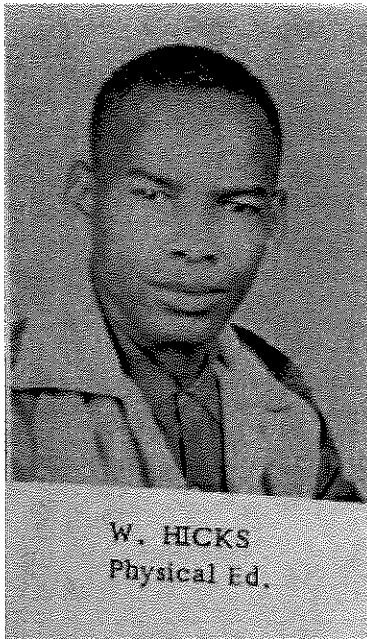
A Good Coach with a Dark Side

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#AnneMoody



Coach Wordy Hicks Jr.
(1930 - 1990)

Mr. Hicks, the young coach mentioned in Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, was actually Coach Wordy Hicks Jr., who worked for many years in the Wilkinson County School District, according to retired Superintendent Charles E. Johnson.

In Moody's view, the coach was tough, but also knowledgeable, helpful, and well-liked: "We all learned to like Mr. Hicks, in spite of his cruelty, because in the end he was always right."

Hicks was born on Sept. 18, 1930. A native of Bernice, La., he graduated from Grambling State University in 1956. Soon after his graduation, he became a coach at Finch High School in Centreville, where he met Moody, who was a teenager at the time.

Moody's book suggests the time of his arrival was the mid-1950s, a time frame supported by an article in the Feb. 22, 1976 issue of the *Biloxi Sun Herald*. The article notes that Hicks began his coaching at Finch in 1956 before "moving to Wilkinson County High in 1960." During the 1970s, he served as head principal of Wilkinson County Training School (later called Wilkinson County High School) in Woodville.

Hicks was so highly respected, the school district honored him by naming its sports complex the Wordy Hicks Memorial Athletic Stadium. The district, which is located in Woodville in southwest Mississippi, also features the Wordy Hicks Relay.

"He was a good coach and good teacher," said Johnson, who is researching and promoting Moody's life history. He suggested Hicks' contributions to the school district were not insignificant.

Good coach with a dark side

"I have many memories of Coach Hicks," Johnson said. "He was an excellent teacher, but he had a reputation as a womanizer. He also had a temper. He'd cuss you out in a minute."

According to one retired educator, who asked to remain nameless, Hicks had a dark side. He could be extremely rude and vulgar. As indicated by Moody, he was also fond of the female students, and he did not always hide his affections.

"If he lived today, he would be arrested for sexual harassment," said the retired educator. "He really liked the young girls and female teachers. He would openly talk about their appearance and their bodies without any sense of shame."

The anonymous retiree described Hicks as having brown skin. He wore his hair short and had an athletic build. Although students and teachers tried to avoid him on occasion, they simply loved his wife, Mrs. Pearl Jean Hicks, who taught Biology.

Johnson found a photo of Hicks a few months ago while thumbing through the 1963 school district yearbook. Hicks, he said, worked hard for the school district and for his community. In addition to working as coach and teacher of Physical Education, Hicks also was director of transportation and maintenance, Johnson recalled. "When needed, he drove the school bus," he said.

A glimpse of Hicks' popularity can be seen in the April 21, 2016 issue of *The Woodville Republican*. In a front-page story, Wilkinson County School Board Member Johnny Smallwood makes a comment about Hicks' legacy:

“Moving on to another topic Smallwood stated, ‘The annual Wordy Hicks Relays were started years ago to remember this great man. He was a school and community leader. The track meet was very popular and successful in the past, but it isn’t so much now. Wordy Hicks helped a lot of kids in his time.’”

Pushing them beyond their limits

In *Coming of Age*, Hicks is depicted as a stern coach who believed in winning. According to Moody, he did not suffer fools gladly and he had no time for slouches and girls who were out of shape. In Chapter 13 of her book, Moody introduces Hicks as the "new coach" at her school:

Mr. Hicks, our new coach, was a nut for physical fitness – especially for girls. He hated women who were dumb about sports and he used to practice us until we were panting like overplowed mules. Sometimes he’d even take us out to play touch football with the boys so that we could learn that game. All the girls who didn’t go along with his physical fitness program or who were fat and lazy he dismissed immediately. He was determined to have a winning team and was interested only in tall, slim girls who were light and fast on their feet. I think I worked harder than almost anyone else.

Hicks evidently was quite demanding. Like a drill sergeant, he aggressively pushed his team members to and beyond their limits.

His training for the students was rigorous. Moody described him as "the most merciless person" she knew. Hicks required his students to practice and work through their pain, even when they could barely walk. According to Moody, he would tell the students: "The only way to overcome that soreness and stiffness is to work it out."

His fondness for female students

Despite his ambition and laser-like focus on winning, Hicks apparently found time to flirt with the girls. Moody believed he took a personal interest in her that went beyond basketball. In Chapter 16 of *Coming of Age*, Moody made this startling statement about the coach:

It was easy for me to ignore the white men in town. But it wasn’t so easy for me to ignore Mr. Hicks, my basketball coach, and the only single male teacher at school. I knew before that Mr. Hicks like me a lot, but I thought he liked me because I was his best tumbler and basketball player. I never suspected he had any long-range plans for me or desired me physically. Now the only looks he ever gave me were looks of affection and whenever he spoke to me it was in the tone of a lover.

Hicks eventually got married and spent many years working in the school district. He and his wife, Pearlie Jean, had two daughters, according to Johnson.

Hicks died on Jan. 4, 1990, at the age of 59, after suffering from cancer, Johnson said.

Closing thoughts

In closing, it should be noted that the information presented in this article sheds light on two important factors in Moody's life story. First, it underscores the accuracy of her narrative, especially as it relates to dates and time periods. Moody apparently had an eye for details and she was meticulous in her story-telling. Numerous dates and/or time periods featured in *Coming of Age* are corroborated by multiple sources. Second, she was often a good judge of character, and she was usually on point in her description of people's attitudes, behavior and predispositions. Not surprisingly, her perception of Hicks is shared by a number of people who knew the man. She, like others who knew him, came to see him for what he was.

Acknowledgments:

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Questions about the Anne Moody History Project may be directed to Roscoe Barnes III via email at doctorbarnes3@gmail.com or roscoebarnes3@yahoo.com. For updates on Anne Moody history and the on-going work of this community service project, simply follow this blog or follow AMHP on Twitter (@AnneMoodyHP). #ComingOfAgeinMississippi