

# life regretted

PHOTOS BY ALBERT DICKSON

bought more. Making a living has been difficult. Grudgingly, she ventured to the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., in 1992, where, along with Lucy Harris, became the first two women players inducted. But White believed the Hall's recognition came too late to help ease what she describes as a "subsistence" existence.

She does not kindly suffer strangers or writers. The media's chronic indifference became mutual. Arranging an interview required negotiating through a friend. Her decision to be interviewed surprised friends; they suspect pride and sense of history won out over privacy. When I locate White's house with some difficulty on a chilly January afternoon, her friend ushers me in. For half a minute, White hangs back, a gray silhouette in a dim kitchen.

"I usually get lost in the country," I say.

"You think this is country?" comes a drawl.

"I reckon," I hear myself drawl.

She steps into the light. Tall and angular, she moves with stiff economy. We shake hands; hers are rough and chapped. Her face is weathered, eyes pale blue and unblinking and, I think, shy. Her expression is Tennessee Gothic. There is a stillness about her, centered and observant.

"You're only two miles off the highway," she says. "Real country is five or six miles back. That's where I'd like to be."

**N**era White's basketball career gave her two sore knees and a bruised psyche. Her desire to remove farther into the Macon County outback reflects a hurt that infuses but does not dominate her personality. It emerges unpredictably, like a boil on a nose, and quickly subsides. Talking with White I garner an impression that she nurses her grievance with care bordering on solicitude. Bitterness adds a fine piquancy to her attentive, informed and wryly observant conversation.

At least that's how her friends at Pedigo's Grocery know her. Despite White's description of herself as "antisocial," she enjoys the fellowship of farmers. Most mornings she drives her pickup truck two miles to a small market on Highway 10. Glenn and Lori Pedigo's store sells a bit of everything, including shaved barbecue ham sandwiches on white bread for \$1.40. Farmers and assorted laborers sit at the back, under a television, sipping soft drinks and coffee, smoking to beat the devil. White sits among them, bolt upright, chatting of crops, land and a political topic *du jour*, usually the federal government run amok.

One of her friends, Bennie Jones, asks me, "What do you think of Rush Limbaugh?"

I change the subject. "How many women you know Nera's age who farm alone?" I ask.

"None," Jones says. "Not any age. Just isn't done. Nera's an unusual woman."

She calls the group her "social circle." It is apt to include Tim Jones, a farmer who rolls her hay; Billy King, a farmer who repairs her tractor; Jackie McClard, a gentleman farmer who acquired wealth distributing soft drinks; and Radar, a happy yokel with a Gomer Pyle laugh. Some of the older farmers saw White play basketball, but the younger ones know little about her career. Recently King, 30, ogled her trophies for the first time.

"Nera, I didn't know you was so famous," he said. His admiring comment must have embarrassed him, because he quickly appended it. "Woman, a five-gallon bucket won't fit over your head now."

White counts King among her friends. I ask how she knows a friend. Easy, she says. "If you need them and they're busy, they drop it and come. I got a number around here."

She chews on an idea.

"The main thing is I'm not dependent on anybody now," White continues. "There's nothing they depend on me for. Or me them. There are no illusions here. In Nashville, I did depend on somebody."

The catalytic event in White's adult life was losing her printing job in 1982. Balls had died and left his businesses to two nephews. She be-



Forever immortalized: A replica of a plaque dedicating a gymnasium in her honor hangs in White's living room.