

**Farm living:** Times have been trying for White. Last year cattle prices fell, feed costs rose and the tobacco crop was assaulted by pests, fungus and two droughts. 'When you farm, you've got a lot of worries,' says White's sister, June Fisher (below), helping with the tobacco crop.



lieved she had been guaranteed a job for life. Balls had told a couple of her teammates she would be included in his will; she wasn't. The new owners told her there was not enough work to keep her on after 23 years and gave her two months severance pay. At the time, she was making \$6.05 an hour, half that of men in the shop, and supporting her 13-year-old son. She never has forgiven the old grandee, Herman Balls, who sponsored women's basketball as a hobby.

"Basically, he lied," White says. "And he was supposed to be such a decent, religious man."

A job search through Nashville's printing companies proved futile; she returned to Macon County determined to make it as a farmer. White says her appearance may have kept her from landing a job.

"I was well qualified, but I probably didn't look like they expected me to," she says.

"How did they expect you to look?"

"Probably feminine. Not that I saw any beauty queens working."

A woman's appearance may be irrelevant to basketball, but never to life. White's self-deprecation reveals a sad pain long reconciled. In her time and culture, women were held to conventional standards of beauty and sexuality. Pictures show the adolescent White to be blonde and frail and feminine. As she matured, her appearance became masculine and athletic, accentuated by a deep voice. Cruelties have echoed in her wake.

"Most women aren't as matter-of-fact about their appearance," I say. She shrugs.

"I look at things the way they are," she says, "and not the way I'd like them to be. I might like things to be different, but I can't dwell on it."

Her secret is out. Nera White wanted to be a Catherine Deneuve. Well, I think, what woman didn't? Instead, she possesses a physical presence compelling in its strength and dignity. Two tall people, Eleanor Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln, come to mind.

"You were cute in your younger pictures," I say.

White chuckles. She recalls one of her son's girlfriends staring at a photo of the youthful Nera. Then the girl looked at White.

"What happened?" the girl asked.

"I got old," White replied.

At Pedigo's, Tim Jones' 6-year-old daughter, Molly, asks her mother, Cindy, why White dresses "like a man."

"Because she does the work of a man," Cindy Jones says.

The degree to which White's appearance shaped her life is a mystery she guards. It is not a stretch to suggest her reclusiveness stems from self-consciousness. Friends and family say she always has been private. If there was an affair of the heart, or a romance, she kept it to herself.

"Did you consider marriage?" I ask.

"I never thought about it, never looked," she says. "Probably couldn't find one anyway."

A hearty chuckle erupts.

"I'd hate to think what it would be like to be my husband," White says. "I'm my own person, always have been."

Loneliness was not a problem after her father persuaded her to adopt. His reasoning, White recalls, was she needed someone to look after her in old age. A former teammate, unwed and already the mother of an infant, could not support a second baby. White brought home her son, Jeff, on March 8, 1969. She kept him a secret from H.O. Balls until the national tournament concluded — triumphantly for Nashville — a month later. She retired as Balls, unwilling to change to a five-player game, disbanded the team.

Hardly a trace remains of the dynasty. Nashville Business College was closed after Balls' death. Team pictures, championship trophies and White's satin jersey No. 11 were discarded. Eventually the downtown YMCA where the club practiced was torn down.

**W**hite shows me a brief video of herself in action. It is a short clip of the 1962 AAU championship game, in St. Joseph, Mo., against Wayland Baptist of Plainview, Texas, Nashville's fiercest rival. Film footage of her era is rare and of poor quality, and the film gives just a taste of White's skill. She executes a quick switchover dribble, right to left, top of the circle, probes for an opening and explodes into the lane. Defenders converge. At the last second she flicks the ball to her right, into the hands of an open teammate. Next possession the defender drops off of White and she swishes a 30-foot set shot. Two more set shots from the same distance draw only net.

"I could have shot a jumper," White says. "Didn't have to. Guard dropped off. No point jumping if you don't have to."

She scored 28 points that night. Another game, she recalls, Wayland pressured her. She scored seven points but had 11 assists and 14 rebounds. Her recall is detailed and precise. In the '69 semifinals, Wayland overplayed her right hand on the theory she was less effective going left. White and Nashville Coach John Head worked out four options involving White's brushing by a pick at the top of the circle, right to left. She could keep the ball or throw three different passes. It