

THROUGH THE YEARS

BLACK HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

SPRING 1997

By Estelle Merifield

I have been asked why I am a member of the Afro-American Historical Society of Champaign-Urbana. After much thought I realize that history, any history, has been a favorite hobby all of my life. I like to relate to people. There is much to be gained in remembering the past, and more to be gained by projecting into the future that which has been learned as it relates to the improvement of people. Technology changes but human nature has been the same since the beginning of time.

Some of us arrived in this area around 1860 traveling by wagon, usually pulled by mules. One side of my family came from the eastern coast originating in and around Mt. Airey, North Carolina. The other side of my family came from the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee.

Other families came from Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky and Arkansas. Most came escaping oppression and for economic reasons after the Civil War. Religion and faith were the threads that held our families together. Even until this day, religion and faith and family ties keep us together.

Men were the head of the family, strong men. Women were the keepers of the home. The family Bible was, in most families, the recorder of family connections.

Most of the early Negroes were former slaves. As slaves they

PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE



African-American Exhibit at U of I Black Cultural Center

had many talents. They were the builders of plantations, the workers of the fields, the makers of furniture, the woodchoppers, dressmakers, tailors. But as freedmen, when they arrived in the North, they found that these jobs were closed to them. They often worked as maids, farm hands, barbers, laborers, cooks, housekeepers, railroad gandy dancers, and a few ministers of the Gospel. It was not the land of opportunity they had been led to believe it was. They were still colored.

Afro-American families settled in communities in and around Champaign County. Some settled near Broadlands, some near Newman, some in Tuscola, across the county line, some in Bellflower, some in or around Mansfield, Homer, Sidney, Ogden, Gibson City, Hoopston, Danville and Loda. Many of these families were related. When

one family became established they would send for others to come north.

Many of the relatives traveled on to Chicago and worked in steel mills, stock yards and as barbers, beauticians and laborers.

We, as a historical group, are trying to establish a permanent record...something the children of our community can point to with pride and realize the dignity and resourcefulness that was a part of their heritage.

When they look at the newly renamed streets of the Martin Luther King subdivision, when they see the Illinois Memorial Stadium,

when they see the names of Holt, Phillips, Pope, Nelson, Foxwell, Dr. Ellis Edition, Wesley Park, Bridgewater Park, Lee, Britt, Rivers, Alexander, Jordan, Edwards - there is a reason for Champaign-Urbana honoring these family names. These are just a few of those who have contributed to our community. There are so many more persons and families, too numerous to describe at this time, who have contributed to the well being of the county of Champaign, the cities of Champaign-Urbana, the surrounding communities, the State of Illinois, and the United States of America.

Why am I interested in Afro-American history? Any history?

1. We are here because of the effort, works, hardships and accomplishments of our parents and forefathers.

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By Doris Hoskins

MUSIC

Music, Music, Music, continues as the bands played on in the early 1900's. Four of the Hite Brothers played in the "Brewer's Juvenile Band, using the instruments purchased by Harvey Hite, upon his return from World War I.

This band was organized and conducted by a Mr. Schaede, a resident of German descent who lived on North Ash Street in Champaign. As a marching band, they played for parades and other local events, sponsored by the Knights of Pythias and Masonic Lodges.

A few years later, under the management of Mr. Clifford Jordan, who played violin and trombone, Ernie Hite organized his own jazz band using local musicians and by recruiting University of Illinois students who played with him until their graduation. They played for proms at many fraternities and sororities on Campus and at other places such as Prehn's on Campus, College Hall, Bradley Hall and other dance halls locally and in surrounding towns. Brother Les Hite left the area with his band and became quite famous in California, playing for, and making movies.

The Hite musical legend was carried on locally by Ernie's sons, Luster Jay and Ernie Hite, Jr., both talented musicians who led and played with their own jazz band - the Lus Hite Band.

To be continued.....



The Lus Hite Band



Ernie and Les Hite



The Les Hite Band, circa 1950

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2. We are progressing because they gave us a background of ethics, principles and religion, a reason for existing.

3. We do not want to repeat the wrongs of the past. We are remembering those who passed on to us the courage and determination to succeed.

4. To remember the past, to glean from the past the good things, "The good men do is oft interred with their bones." People are quick to remember the evil. It makes for a good story to remember the bad. That's why the tabloids, television, internet, movies and books of today are geared to the worst in us.

5. The sacrifices made in the movement of the "60's", the Civil Rights movement, to secure a better future for our children, has left a void for many of us who were not able to enter through the brief span of time the door has been open, and it is slowly closing.

6. If this group does nothing else but reach one person, one child....to make them realize the values and efforts that were put forth on their behalf by our ancestors; if it causes them to stop, to consider their own futures and the futures of their children, to fill that void that is rapidly being filled with hate, crime and deviousness, it will have accomplished what we have set out to do. We remember and honor our ancestors. We are a very important part of America and we want our children to know they are very special and are our reason for being.

Some of us may never make it into the 21st century, but we would like to be remembered as having prepared our children for the future by giving them a sense of security and stability.



Barbers and beauticians have been in demand since the beginning of time. In the early 1900's Mr. Frank Jordan, an African-American (Negro, Black, Colored...whatever term you prefer) owned and operated an emporium downtown Champaign. It was located on Main Street near the Illinois Central Terminal. Mr. Jordan had at one time more than ten barber chairs and featured haircuts, shaves, facials, and baths. Pictures of this elaborate emporium were destroyed by fire. The more prosperous Negro owned shops catered to "white only." It was a matter of "bread and butter" income. A black man could get his hair cut after hours when the shops were closed. This practice continued until 1940 when the first inductees of the 99th Pursuit Squadron arrived at Chanute. There were other black owned shops that catered to "black only."

Ace Barber Shop was owned and operated by Mr. Arthur C. Merrifield. It was first located on University Avenue and later moved to North First Street. He had three chairs. His nephew, Fred M. Merrifield, operated the same shop until 1972 many years after his death. Many barbers, including Speedy McDowell, Roy Suggs and others apprenticed themselves to Mr. Merrifield and Mr. Lincoln Wesley and later took barber exams, passed the State Boards and opened shops of their own. The older barbers passed the art of barbering to the next generation.

Beauticians were trained in much the same way as barbers. In the early years some were fortunate to attend the Madam Walker College for Beauticians in Indianapolis, Indiana. In the late 1930's and early 40's, a few were able to attend the Champaign Beauty College.

At the risk of forgetting an important beautician, suffice it to say the beauticians formed an organization

BUSINESS



Merrifield's Barber Shop Price List



Fred Merrifield's Barber Shop

and eventually united with national organizations. They learned the latest styles each year, operated financially successful shops and became prominent business women.

Prior to 1930 most of the "hair dressers," a term used in those days, had shops in their homes. They hot pressed the hair with iron combs. Curling irons, heated on little gas burners, were used to style the hair. Great skill was required to keep from burning the hair. Woe be unto the child that wiggled at the wrong time. We learned to sit quite still.

In the 1960's and 70's, at the time of the Civil Rights movement, the "Afro" natural style and the "Braid" became popular. Many of the older barbers were not able to cope, suffered financial decline and sold their shops to younger barbers and to beauticians.

Women and men incorporated each other's skills and both enterprises are now flourishing.

Scientific progress, knowledge of the composition of hair and skin, and a degree from an accredited school have enabled the beauticians to transform the hair by chemical process. Many have expanded their shops to include manicurists, skin care and the sale of beauty products.

The organized cosmetologist, as they are referred to today, contribute to scholarship funds and generally support the youth of the community. We can all be proud of the contributions the Afro-American barbers and beauticians have contributed to this community.



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St. Luke's Tabernacle Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, circa 1914-1920

REMEMBERING CHURCH HISTORY THROUGH OLD PICTURES

By Reverend Roland Brown

An old adage of "A picture paints a thousands words" is appropriate to pictures that tell a story of a time past that needs to be remembered and treasured. Every church has someone who has kept a picture of the church when it was first started. One is this picture. It is a portrait of the congregation of St. Lukes Tabernacle Colored Methodist Episcopal Church around the years 1914-1920. With the help of one of our oldest members, Mrs. Rosie Shelby and her cousin, Mrs. Myrtle Chatman, who had this picture, we can see some interesting gems of history of African Americans in Champaign County. According to Mrs. Shelby and Mrs. Chatman, the picture is dated around 1914 to 1919. Both ladies recognize the pastor who was Reverend W.T. Whitsitt. Notice the cornerstone on the right hand side and the church building in the background. This is different than what one sees in the building today.

The families represented in the picture are many: the Pickens, the Pettifords, the Nesbitts, the Tisdales, the Hopkins, the Miles, the Valentines, and the Abernathys are just some of the families shown. The fashions of the time are clearly noticed. For instance, during that time "Mortar Boards" on the women's heads were worn on members of the choir. Some of the women had bonnets which were worn by those who were on the Stewardess Board.

Between 1914 and 1919, Fifth and Tremont Streets, where the church is located, families of Italian, German, as well as African descent were living in the neighborhood. Though it was an integrated neighborhood, only Black children attended the Lawhead School which

can be seen in the picture as the tall building behind the church. Also during this time Tremont Street went from Poplar Street to Sixth Street. The park, as we see it today, was not developed at that time.

This picture is one of many pictures older members have that shows the rich history of African American churches in Champaign County. Mrs. Shelby and Mrs. Chatman are just two of many people at St. Luke who have pictures that they can tell a wonderful story of the history young people need to read in order to understand how far African Americans have come. It would be worth the time to sit down as I did with those who know pictures of church history that paints "a thousand words."



WHO WE ARE...

The Champaign County African-American History Committee is a volunteer committee under the sponsorship of the Early American Museum and the Champaign Park District. It is the committee's mission to gather, chronicle, and preserve the heritage that has been such an integral part of the establishment and growth of Champaign County. Please help us pass on your history to the children so it will never be forgotten. If you have information you would like to share with the committee, please contact Estelle Merrifield at 217/367-4585.