

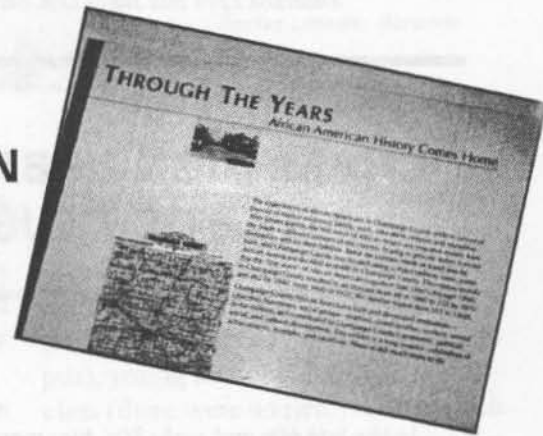
THROUGH THE YEARS

AFRICAN - AMERICAN HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

SUMMER 1997

THROUGH THE YEARS: AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY COMES HOME

By Val Littlefield



During the month of June through October, 1996, the staff of the UIUC Afro-American Studies and Research Program and the Krannert Art Museum worked with members of the Champaign County African American History Committee to coordinate, organize and develop an exhibit on Champaign County African Americans.

The exhibit "Through the Years: African American History Comes Home," held its opening night on October 24, 1996 and included a panel discussion by Champaign County African American History Committee members: Mrs. Carrie Banks, Mr. Nathaniel Dixon, Mrs. Doris Hoskins, Mrs. Cheryl Kennedy, Mrs. Estelle Merrifield, and Mrs. CharLotte Nesbitt. Reverend Roland Brown served as moderator, and Dianne M. Pinderhughes, Director of Afro-American Studies, gave the welcoming remarks. The exhibit was on display at the Afro-American Studies and Research Program from October 24 through December 20, 1996. During that time we had an attendance of approximately 500 people which included students from area

schools such as Rantoul and University High School and numerous interviews and inquiries. There was also a radio interview by David Inge of WILL with members of the Champaign County African American History Committee. WCIA television aired a series of segments on the exhibit in February, and a feature article by Greg Kline on the exhibit was printed in the *News Gazette* on Sunday, November 3, 1996.

"Through the Years" consisted of poster-sized panels, composed of newspaper articles, photos, quotes from oral histories, and other historical documents such as receipts, letters, graduation programs, and census records. Themes covered with the panels included early African American families, community activism, military service, education, arts and entertainment, businesses, churches and fraternal and social organizations. In addition, local residents supplemented the panels with memorabilia such as barber and hair stylist equipment and personal items such as tea pots, hair

combs, lace, and china.

The exhibit was also made available to area schools and public institutions upon their request. During the month of January the exhibit was displayed at the Champaign Public Library at 505 S. Randolph, Champaign; February at Parkland College, Champaign; and March through May at Yankee Ridge School, Urbana. It will be displayed at the new Douglass Branch Library, Urbana during the months of June through August; and at Urbana High School in September. Urbana Middle School has requested it for February 1998.

The "Through the Years: African Americans Come Home" exhibit received high praise and following are some excerpts from comments by viewers.

• The exhibit let me glimpse a part of our community and our history I know very little about. I was moved and fascinated by the stories told there. -Donna Pittman, Staff, Champaign Public Library.

• It gave a lot of pride to our local community. It showed that locally there are African Americans who have done things of importance beyond our community and they also did things here. - Daniel Kingery, Senior, University High School.

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Anderson Epps and Judge G.R. Skillman



Anderson Epps



Khair Azaad Ali
a.k.a. Fred Davis

THE CHAMPAIGN-URBANA ATHLETIC CLUB

By Barbara McGee

In the late 60s and early 70s two men in Champaign-Urbana thought they would try to do something for our youth. Mr. Khair Azaad Ali (a.k.a.) Freddie Davis, with the help of Anderson Epps, started a Boxing Club.

The first facility, leased from the Champaign Park District, was an old garage behind Washington School the Park District used as storage. They charged \$1.00 per year for the men to lease the garage. There was also a grant given to the men from the Volunteer Illini Project at the University of Illinois, an organization that is still active today. The grant was used to purchase equipment. Francis Nelson Health Center offered free physical examinations to each youth who had permission from their parents to participate in the club.

Anderson Epps, a former boxing champion, wanted to do something to help some of the kids who had gotten into trouble at the Douglass Center with the law. After there had been a "brawl" (as Epps called it) at the Douglass Center, Epps took time off his job to go to court to talk to Judge G.R. Skillman. He spoke about offering a boxing program to these young men to show them there were other things to do besides get into trouble. Judge Skillman agreed something needed to be done, and believed Epps deserved a chance to try to do something with these youths.

The first two matches were held at the Douglass Center, and one was held at the Champaign Armory on Park Street. Milton Norwood and Oscar Gipson were referees and timekeepers. Epps was a Golden Gloves fighter who fought in Chicago. In 1958, as an airman at Chanute Air Force Base, he won a Chanute Boxing Championship and a championship in the Great Lakes Tournament. He also won one match in the national tournament in California.

Khair Azaad Ali (a.k.a.) Freddie Davis was a Golden Gloves fighter. He ended his boxing career with ninety-nine wins, seven losses, and one draw. One of the former boxers who helped Ali was Fred Newbill, a professional boxer fighting out of Cincinnati who was in line to fight Sugar Ray Robinson until he lost a fight earlier to disqualify him.

A few local men who fought with the Golden Gloves were Edward Johnson, John Watson, Wardell Briggs, Charlie Williams, Linford (Duke) Russell, Leroy Knox, Jim McClain, Jasper Osler, and the very first national champion from Champaign, Anthony Jones. Snapper Johnson and Rudy Evans would referee and assist with boxing matches.

History

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• I believe that the aptly named exhibit successfully raised the public consciousness on the black community's diverse and significant history in Champaign County. I found that "Through the Years" was a rich visual tapestry exploring the contributions of African Americans to Champaign County's business, religion, and the arts. - **George Scheetz, Director, Champaign Public Library**

• I had a wonderful time at the museum last Friday. I especially liked the exhibit about the people singing and about WWI and WWII. - **Cory Hinners, student, Eater Jr. High, Rantoul**

• Thanks for taking the time to take us through the exhibit last Friday. The kids and I found it very interesting and enjoyable. **Linda Peete, Teacher, Eater Junior High, Rantoul**

• I am writing to tell you thanks for showing us your wonderful exhibit. I really liked the photos of the black men going to war, and the barber things. - **Dusten Allen, student, Eater Jr. High, Rantoul**

• I enjoyed the field trip to the Afro-American Studies. I'm glad you allowed me and my colleagues to learn a lot about the local black history. I hope you will find more information about black history. Had a great time thank you. - **Nickolus Lillard, student, Eater Jr. High, Rantoul**

• This exhibit has helped to reveal and develop the strong ties that should exist among people in both the University and local communities. It also shows the vision of certain Africa-American leaders who see the vital connection between our past and our future in this society. I thoroughly enjoyed it personally. - **John Jordan, Director, University YMCA**

Financial and in-kind support of the Champaign County African American History Committee and the Afro-American Studies and Research Program project was instrumental in making "Through the Years" a success.

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Julia Valentine

THE LEGATO MUSIC CLUB



Concert Participants at C.M.E. Church



Charles Latham, Baritone

By Hester Suggs

Through the years many Black organizations have played vital roles in the history and preservation of culture in the local African American community. Some have been long term and are still currently in operation with well documented historical information as to their role, mission and vision in responding to societal development, i.e. NAACP, Urban League, local churches, Masonic groups, and affiliates. Others have been short term and their scope and longevity limited, but they too have served vital functions of historical significance to the Black community.

A look into the artifacts from these groups reveals all the rich historical chronology of those segments of the community. Examination of meeting minutes, news articles and announcements, programs, posters and flyers of events, scrapbook photos and notes, and individual memorabilia gave excellent historical information and leads to resource persons.

The Legato Music Club was one of these "shorter term" organizations that provided positive experiences in the Black community during the 1940s. The Legato Music Club was formally organized in 1945. Prior to that time there were many evidences of interest in the arts. Nationally renowned Black artists, baritone Paul Robeson, contralto Naomi Watson, dramatic soprano Omega King, and the great Marian Anderson, world renowned "colored" contralto, gave performances in

Champaign-Urbana. Classical choirs and ensembles from Black colleges performed locally while on tour to raise funds. Local Black church choirs utilized hymns, anthems and spirituals in weekly worship services.

On Sunday, July 23, 1944, the Twin City Committee presented a Negro Folk Song Festival under the direction of Julia Walden Valentine at 4:30 in Crystal Lake Park Pavilion. This program featured a community chorus, a female chorus, violinist Bruce Hayden, and vocal soloists Thelma Holloway, Hattie Winfield and Lucy Gray. From this group the Legato Music Club was initiated.

Julia Valentine, musical director of Salem Baptist Church, classical pianist, and a graduate of the School of Music, Milliken University in Decatur, Illinois opened a music studio in her home where both vocal and instrumental lessons were given. Members interviewed credit Mrs. Valentine with forming the club in 1945.

Its objective as given in a program, "The Legato Chorale Ensemble in Musique Soiree an Afternoon of Music" were: 1) To give individuals a better understanding of good music 2) To give individuals a wider knowledge of Negro composers and their compositions 3) To bring to the public a few of our accomplishments through public concerts, entertainments and festivals, and 4) To bring to the city outstanding artists periodically. The club motto was "make the best better."

Members were drawn from the di-

verse Black population in the community and included professionals and nonprofessionals - doctors, barbers, domestics, cooks, university students (there were no faculty members on campus), young and old, poor and middle-class (there were no rich.) All were rich in their interest and involvement in the musical experiences provided. The club met on the third Monday of each month at the home of a member to discuss music and to study the various artists and their works and to present a musical program. Both local newspapers gave monthly coverage of not only special events, but also the monthly meetings.

Other recitals, performances, programs and events such as the annual Mother Daughter Banquet were held for "the establishment of a scholarship fund for worthy music students." Benefit programs were presented to "aid the various churches in their drives." The club also sponsored a youth group, the Sharps and Flats, and the Junior Music Club, where the youth of the community were mentored in both classical and contemporary music and were exposed to Black history through music. They also learned the finer art and protocol needed to present professional programs to the community with dignity and elegance.

Many local musicians received their first training and inspiration in the musical field due to the efforts of the Legato Music Club.



Rozell R. Nesbitt



Russell Nesbitt



George Nesbitt



Dr. Lendor Nesbitt



Dr. Robert Nesbitt

REMEMBERING THE LEGACY: THE NESBITT BROTHERS

By Reverend Roland Brown

There is a familiar African proverb which reads "We are standing on the shoulder of others." This proverb rings true in the story of five brothers which, myself as well as this generation, are proverbially standing on. Recently a person died who went to St. Luke CME Church when he was a child. His name was Rozell R. Nesbitt. The interesting legacy he left was that he was one of five Champaign born brothers who graduated from the University of Illinois during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The other brothers' names are Russell Nesbitt, George Nesbitt, Dr. Lendor Nesbitt, and Dr. Robert Nesbitt. This was a period when few African Americans went to the U of I, much less known to have graduated. These broth-

ers went on to become a civil servant, a teacher, two doctors, and a lawyer.

In the Sunday, October 3, 1977 edition of the *News-Gazette* (pg. 46-C), the brothers were all featured. At that time the oldest brother was 68 and the youngest 57. They shared stories of their proud parents, the late Lucian and Christine Nesbitt; their difficulties of prejudice and bigotry which plagued our nation during that time; their medical disadvantages, ranging from pneumonia to osteomyelitis, which could have hampered their chances of achievement; and their everyday struggles that can shift ones dreams to the point of despair. None of these obstacles stopped the brothers from their goal of graduating from the University.

It is now a little over five decades since the Nesbitt brothers accomplished this feat. One of the five brothers is no longer living. But such a legacy must be shared with the younger generation who still face unwanted obstacles and challenges that can snuff out their dream to achieve not only academic excellence which results in accomplishing college degrees, but any other positive successes the world has yet to achieve.

Let the African proverb live in their hearts that "We are standing on the shoulders of others." May the lives of many African Americans in Champaign who through the years have taken what life and society has given them to leave a legacy many can be proud of and emulate, live on in the hearts and mind of all humanity today.

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, *Through the Years* editor, at 217/367-4585.



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