

THROUGH THE YEARS

AFRICAN - AMERICAN HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

SPRING 1996

PORTRAIT OF A FAMILY

By Carrie Pope Banks

There were very few Black families in Champaign-Urbana before 1900. Those who were here seemed to live a pretty good life.

One of the prominent Black families in Urbana was the family of General Cass Lee. Mr. Lee, born in Missouri in 1857, came to Urbana with his parents in 1865. He met Luetta Smith, the daughter of Jethro and Carolyn Smith, who was born in Urbana, Illinois in 1864. They were married on January 14, 1883. Mr Lee opened the first six-chair barber shop on Main Street in Urbana, and Mrs. Lee opened the first or second beauty shop. They moved from Main Street to Clark Street in Urbana and later moved to East White Street in Champaign. Both Mr. and Mrs. Lee were very active in the Bethel AME Church, the first Black church in Champaign-Urbana. He was one of the first trustees of the church. They were also both active in the Masonic family. In fact, Mrs. Lee was instrumental in organizing Deborah Chapter #27 O.E.S. in Champaign, Illinois. She was active in the local and the Grand Chapter.

Mr. and Mrs. Lee were the parents of Carrie Alice Lee who was born January 6, 1892 in Urbana, Illinois. She attended school in Urbana (Lincoln School.) The family later moved to Champaign where Carrie



General Cass Lee



Luetta Lee

graduated from Champaign High School in 1910.

Another family of note in the later 1880's was the family of George W. Pope. Mr. Pope was also born in Missouri in 1861. He came to Champaign County when he was just a small boy. He lived in Sidney for a while. It was there he met his wife, Sarah Allen, whose family lived in Sidney. They were married on March 19, 1885. They had two children, Cecil Pope and Mary Kathryn Pope-Means. They moved to Champaign when their children were school age. Mr. George Pope was also very active in the early church. He too was one of the first trustees.

The children attended grammar school at the old Avenue School located on University Avenue and Lynn Street. Champaign Central High School occupies that location today. They also attended Gregory School on Columbia Avenue and Randolph Street, which is now the Gregory Apartments. They graduated from Champaign High School, located on the corner of Randolph and Hill Streets in downtown Champaign.

Cecil Pope, son of George and Sarah Allen Pope, and Carrie Alice Lee, daughter of General Cass and



Cecil Pope



Carrie Alice Lee Pope



George W. Pope

Luetta Smith Lee were married September 16, 1917, thus uniting two of the oldest Black families in Champaign County. To this union was born: George Lee Pope, Cecil Allen Pope, Carrie Luetta Pope Banks, Sarah Elizabeth Pope Potter, Esther Genevieve Pope Scroggins and Paul Lawrence Pope.

A BRIEF LOOK AT CORNERSTONES OF BLACK CHURCHES

By Rev. Roland Brown

Cornerstones represent heritages and legacies. At least nine out of more than thirty African American churches in Champaign-Urbana have cornerstones that are living testimonies of our past. This article highlights four of these nine churches in words and pictures.

The dates on cornerstones help us place them in historical context. This helps us to recognize the sacrifices and accomplishments of African Americans as they established congregations and church buildings, and sought respectful positions in society. For example, it is important to know slavery reigned from 1619 to the end of the Civil War in 1865, that Reconstruction took place from 1867 to 1877, that Jim Crow laws and the rise of segregation lasted from 1877 to 1954, and the Civil Rights era was from 1954 to 1980. When we consider Salem Baptist's cornerstone, which reads 1866, we begin to see how eager and determined African Americans were as they built churches just after the abolition of slavery, but before Reconstruction. This is even more significant considering Illinois was not the most hospitable place for African Americans, even after the end of slavery.

However, sometimes cornerstones do not tell the whole story. Churches were burned, destroyed, torn down and rebuilt. Therefore dates on some cornerstones are not always accurate. For example, the Bethel Church cornerstone shows the date 1892. The inception of the church can actually be traced to 1863, two years before the Civil War ended -- and in a state that almost became a slave state! Another

example is St. Luke, which began in 1909, but its cornerstone reads 1914.

The photographs are of four churches from different denominations: African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Black Baptist, Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME, where the "C" used to stand for "Colored"), and Black Freewill Baptist. The denominations originated outside of Champaign-Urbana (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Silver Bluff, South Carolina; Jackson, Tennessee; Cairo, Illinois respectively), demonstrating their rapid growth in trying times. These churches were started by a small group of people who met to pray at someone's home.

Cornerstones begin to tell the story of our communities and churches. They show how far we have come and help us to renew our commitment to the legacy we share. Whether you visit or regularly attend a church, take some time to consider the significance of its cornerstone.



ANNUAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN EVENTS

By Charlotte Nesbitt

January

- Martin Luther King Celebration - Sunday on or before his birthday (1/15)

February

- Cotton Club
- African-American Read-In-Chain - first Sunday

April

- Gamma Upsilon Psi Society Annual Cotillion
- WBCP Black Expo
- U of I Black Mom's Day

Summer

- Champaign Public Library's Douglass Branch Summerfest

August

- C-U Days - second Saturday

September

- Douglass Senior Style Show - fourth Sunday
- Black Dollars - Labor Day weekend

October

- U of I Black Chorus Annual Concert

November

- Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Inc.: Kappa Omega Chapter's annual Senior Citizens Thanksgiving Dinner - the Saturday before Thanksgiving at the Douglass Annex

December

- Kwanzaa Celebration - December 26 to January 1

MARY ALEXANDER: REFLECTIONS ON LIFE: PART 2

By Mary Alexander and Kathleen
Johnson Winston

Because of past experience and present circumstances, I was moved to try to make a difference in a world where segregation kept my people chained.

In 1939, I joined the Council for Community Integration (CCI), an interracial organization. Their goal was to persuade the community to value individuals on a personal basis and make no distinctions because of race, creed, or nationality.

The CCI met with personal managers of every establishment in the Twin Cities. Through their dedicated efforts, housing in many areas was opened, schools were integrated with changes in the school system, and programs working with underprivileged children were organized. I placed these children in such programs myself.

In 1958, I attempted to enroll my daughter in the Illinois Commercial College. I was told by the president that no Negroes had ever been allowed to attend the day sessions, but that night sessions were open. The reason that they gave for this was a hard fact of those times. The college catered mostly to the small towns and Negroes would hurt their business.

Many would have graciously accepted this crumb thrown our way. Education was, after all, a luxury to many Blacks at this time. But, as a mother and a Black woman, I could not settle for anything less than the best for my daughter. She was worth it.

After many conferences and pressure on my part, the Illinois

Commercial College opened its doors to the Colored population, and my daughter was the first to enroll and graduate from it. In 1960, I co-founded what was then called the Champaign-Urbana Improvement Association. Headed by the Rev. J.E. Graves, the CUIA's basic purpose was to crumble the walls of segregation in employment, to seek a fair employment policy, and to open up new avenues for Blacks.

The first project of the council was to assemble pickets around a J.C. Penney's store that had not hired a single Black person. I organized a boycott, and after three weeks J.C. Penney opened its employment to Blacks. Several businesses followed.

These times were instrumental in a new birth for Champaign-Urbana. It gave our Negro boys and girls their first opportunities and the incentive to press for higher education. The cities have made progress, but there is a great distance to go.

We talk about the Negro not being ready for this and that and not having the opportunity to make choices. The blame can easily be traced. How can a man be a man when he's forced to take only what's left? The historical line is laced with an unjust struggle.

So, I am aware that all Negroes are not first class citizens. Neither are all whites. I have lived with the deeply rooted need to take on the burden of the equality struggle. Though the future sometimes seems bleak, I have learned that each glimmer of hope that all people can make shine, brings us closer to that better place.

** Mary Alexander's achievements are numerous. She has served on the Board of Directors of the Urban League for eight years; she was appointed to the Champaign City Human Relations Commission; she served on the District Advisory Committee of Unit 4 Schools; she*

was a member of the Interfaith Council for Fair Housing. Currently Ms. Alexander serves on the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging and is active in the Douglass Center Annex for Senior Citizens.

REMEMBER:

Today will be tomorrow's
history - it is never too
late or too early to start
preserving our heritage.

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 Barbara McGee at the Douglas Annex, 217-398-2572.

SPORTS

By Mary Grace Thomas

JAMES C. WILSON

July 23, 1920 - April 6, 1967

Mr. James C. Wilson was the first African American track coach at the University of Illinois. He served under Head Coach Bob Wright. He was also an instructor in the Physical Education Department. At the time of his death he was on leave of absence from West Virginia State College. He was at the U of I to complete requirements for his Ph.D. This article is about his contribution to the track team and other accomplishments, such as caring about, inspiring and guiding young students at the West Virginia State College.



James C. Wilson Student Union Building

The College Union Building on the West Virginia State College campus was named the James C. Wilson Student Union Building in honor of Wilson's efforts in stimulating interest in the building. The first part of the complex was completed in 1961 and an addition was finished in 1970. Wilson was a 1947 WVSC graduate. He died in 1964.

To the right are the actual newspaper articles detailing Wilson's illness and his subsequent obituary.

Meningitis Hits Track Aide Wilson

Jim Wilson, assistant Illinois track coach, is in Breckenridge Hospital in Austin, Tex., with viral meningitis.

Wilson's sister-in-law, Miss Esther Hamilton, reported that Wilson's wife (Winnie) called Tuesday night and said that he faced an indefinite stay in the hospital.

He boarded a plane last Wednesday with the Illini track team and complained of a split-



JIM WILSON

ting headache. Upon their arrival, Wilson was taken to the hospital.

A spinal tap confirmed the diagnosis of viral meningitis. Wilson went into a coma late Friday night. Sunday night he came out of the coma and began responding to treatment.

His wife flew down last weekend to be with her husband. She will return home when Wilson's condition is satisfactory.

Wilson is on the physical education staff at the UI as an instructor. He is working on his doctorate. His son Jimmy, is a sophomore high jumper on the Urbana track team.

James Wilson Funeral To Be Monday

Funeral services for James C. Wilson, 46, will be at 1 p. m. Monday at Wesley Methodist Church, Rev. Benjamin Garrison officiating. Burial will be in Mount Hope Cemetery.

Friends may call from 2 to 6 and 7 to 9 p.m. Sunday at McHaney Funeral Home, 302 Vine, C.

Mr. Wilson, assistant track coach at the University of Illinois, died Thursday (April 6, 1967) at Austin, Tex. He was stricken with viral meningitis while with the Illini track team, which was participating in the Texas Relays.

He was born July 23, 1920, in War, W. Va., son of Emmanuel and Agnes (Mayberry) Wilson.

He married the former Winnie Ruth Hamilton in 1949 in Charleston, W. Va. She survives, as do two children, a son, Jimmy, and a daughter, Karen, both at home.

One brother and four sisters also survive. They are: Moley C. Wilson, New York City; Maryanne Hodgins, Buffalo, N. Y.; Elizabeth Davis, Toledo, Ohio; and Bessie Barron, Germany.

Mr. Wilson attended West Virginia State College, where he received his BA degree in 1940.

He then went to Springfield, Mass., where he received his master's degree from Springfield College. He returned to West Virginia State as an instructor in physical education.

During his stay at the West Virginia school, he served as professor of physical education, track coach, swimming coach, assistant football coach, acting director of the physical education department, director of intramural athletics and director of the student union.

He served in the Italian campaign during World War II, and was a forward observer in field artillery.

Mr. Wilson began work on his Ph.D. degree at the University of Illinois during the summer of 1962. In 1963, he returned to complete requirements for the degree.

At the time of his death, he was assistant track coach and an instructor in the physical education department.

Mr. Wilson was a member of the American Assn. for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity and Alpha Phi Omega fraternity.