

THROUGH THE YEARS

AFRICAN - AMERICAN HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

WINTER 1995

ENTREPRENEURS

by Estelle Merrifield

An entrepreneur, according to the dictionary, is a person who organizes and manages a business undertaking, assuming the risk for the sake of profit. The African-American community of Champaign-Urbana had many such persons throughout the development of the cities.

In this article, let's zero in on the good old days when Mrs. Carr made the best "hot tamales" and distributed them in converted baby buggies for five cents each or three for a dime; when Mrs. Taylor had a restaurant at Dublin and Wright Streets specializing in "fish sandwiches"; when Mrs. Herbert Clark sold pastries, pies and cakes (especially lemon pies) at Dublin and Mathews in Urbana; when *Three Sisters* sold "the best fish and chicken this side of Heaven"; when *The Chicken Shack*, operated by Mrs. Minnie McDuff and located near Grove and Fifth Streets in Champaign, specialized in full service and provided delivery; when Mrs. Ollie Macklin's *Tea Room*, located on East Hill Street in Champaign, had a soda fountain and catered to teenagers; when Mom and Pop Gardener operated their restaurant on North Poplar Street; when Hattie and Mel Winfield's tavern (the



Po Boy's Bar-B-Que

original *Blue Island Tavern*) was located in the 800 block of North Poplar Street in Champaign and which later moved to the old Colom-

bia Hotel; when Mrs. Romeo Green was operating an eating and dancing establishment for junior and senior high school students; when "Cry Baby" Mac Brewer and Mrs. Mac had a full service restaurant specializing in "sweet potato" pies on North Poplar Street and a place for dancing on the corner of Fourth and Vine Streets, *Tuxedo Junction After Hours* (the sweetest music in town.)

Now, next door to *Tuxedo Junction* on Fourth Street was a place called *Larry's*. *Larry's* was operated by Mr. Percy and Mrs. Lucille Larry.

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THE CREATION OF THE DOUGLASS CENTER: 1940-1945

by Nate Dixon and Steven Nafziger

Plans for the Douglass Community Center began in 1940 because the black community's needs were not being met with the inadequate, segregated facilities which existed. A house adjacent to Douglass Park, in which the community had carried on its recreation programs, was donated. An organization known as "The Douglass Community Service Committee" was formed, and fundraising began to build a recreation center.



Douglass Community Center

The fundraising continued through 1941 when a grant proposal was made to the federal government. This proposal was turned down and the fundraising was resumed with renewed commitment.

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THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC

by Doris Hoskins

Music, Music, Music...the universal language—vocal and instrumental, has been alive and well in Champaign-Urbana since the 1860's and probably earlier.

An article in the August 4, 1860 *Clarion* describing the "Colored residents of Champaign-Urbana, celebrating the Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies with song while picnicking on the Sangamon River," is evidence of this.

Some years later, on January 7, 1874, an article appeared in the *Champaign County Gazette*, announcing an exhibition and festival held by Colored citizens of Champaign-Urbana celebrating the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln. The article read, "Miss Jennie Mehan presided at the piano in an accomplished manner and accompanied soloists, J.W. Smith, Leopold Green, Kate Waldron, Bertie Sanders and N. Washington. The program was varied and attractive, and all who attended were united in saying the affair was a decided success and reflects much credit upon the taste and abilities of the Colored citizens of Champaign-Urbana."

As churches began to appear in the 1860's, music was also involved. Choirs, choir directors, accompanists and instrumentalists, etc. were all a part of the church services.

Small bands started making an appearance in Champaign-Urbana. One of the first, the "Brewer's Juvenile Band," was established in 1907. Continuing on throughout the 1920's and 30's, several area orchestras were formed. To the right are pictures of three musical groups, circa 1907-1928.

During the 1930's, 40's and 50's a number of other musical groups were formed. In our next issue, we will continue this column on music and entertainment.



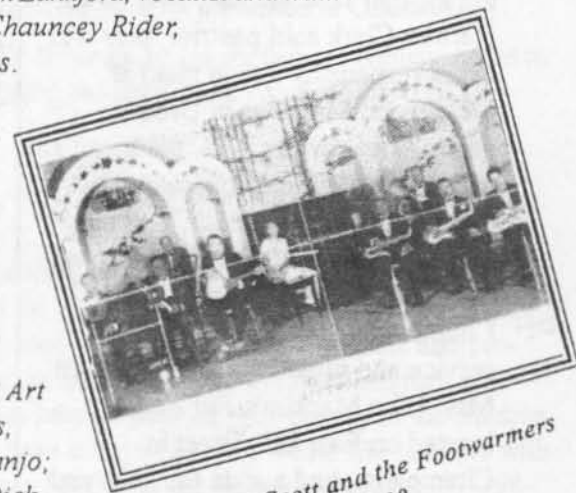
Brewer's Juvenile Band, 1907

Raymond Scott, Abraham Music, Cecil Pope, Mr. Brewer, other band members are unidentified.



*Ray Scott Band
1922-1926*

Raymond Scott, saxophone; Faye Hines, piano; Ray Hines, drums; Doctor Harry Ellis, banjo; unidentified violonist. Later, 1922-1926: Ray Scott, soprano sax; Alyne McRoberts, piano; Art Penny, tenor sax; Theophilous Mann, banjo; Dick Lankford, vocalist and trumpet; Porter Lewis, alto sax; Chauncey Rider, E-flat bass; Ernie Hite, drums.



*Mac Scott and the Footwarmers
1926-28*

(Yours truly) Doris Baker, piano; Ray Scott, soprano sax; Art Penny, tenor sax; Porter Lewis, alto sax; Theophilous Mann, banjo; Elwood Buchanan, trumpet; Dick Lankford, trumpet and vocalist; Chauncey Ride, E-flat bass; Ernie Hite, drums.

MARY ALEXANDER: REFLECTION ON LIFE

by Mary Alexander and Kathleen Johnson Winston

Looking at the past, I am filled with a sense of pride. Pride, I have discovered, is knowing that you have given your all to a worthwhile cause.

In the small Tennessee town where I came from, where I worked my way through high school and my first years of college, numerous obstacles were thrust in my path. It was in 1938 when I came to Champaign, Illinois.

I came to Champaign with the idea that the opportunities would be prime and plentiful. But I discovered the same deep-rooted problems that I had left behind; that the plight of the American Negro was not restricted to my town or to the South.

Negroes had a certain place in the community. They were the domestic workers, working harder and being paid less than their skills were worth.

Negroes had a certain place to sit in the theaters. At the time, there were only two public places where a Negro could sit down to eat—the ten-cent store and the Illinois Central Train Station.

And of course, the most powerful of positions that could be had was ever allusive to Champaign's 'Colored' population. This power was education.

In schools, Negro boys and girls were kept out of education's main stream. The opportunity to be recognized in school activities was not there; the honor to stand in front of their class as president was not their own; to see their faces in the newspaper in recognition for a worthwhile

deed was an unreachable star. Why, there wasn't a single Negro teacher in the area school system. The result of all this: a generation that had nothing in the way of encouragement or motivation to pursue higher education—the most precious gift in the world.

To the depths of my soul, I was sickened by the state of the world. It was all too hypocritical, you see. That those basic human rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness had exceptions when it came to something so terribly insignificant as the color of one's skin....

Yes, I was sickened, but I was moved into action as well.

The conclusion of Mary Alexander: Reflections on Life will be in the next issue.



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Their specialty was "chittlin's" and southern cooking. Joe Sommers operated *Dagwoods* (Jukebox Saturday Night for the high school students.) Judge Sommers was the first black elected Justice of the Peace and later magistrate in Champaign County.

Mr. Arnold Yarber, following in his grandmother's footsteps, established *Po Boy's Bar-B-Que* at the same location that Mrs. Carr had her eating establishment. It is still in operation.

There will be more written in future issues on black businesses: more about eateries, tailors, storekeepers, auto mechanics, plasterers, doctors, podiatrists, artists, news and publications, antique dealers, seamstresses, barbers, beauticians, and so on. We do seek your help filling in the spaces on businesses of the past and present. What is happening today will be history tomorrow.

Annual African-American Events

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 26-30

By 1943, land adjacent to Douglass Park was acquired through increased efforts by the black community. In September of 1943 another proposal was submitted to the federal government, and it was accepted.

The government offered a \$18,500 grant, provided the community could raise an additional \$14,500. Commitments were made from various groups including \$3,000 from the black community, \$2,500 from the Home and War Chest Organization, \$3,500 from the City of Champaign Recreation Department, and \$2,000 from the City of Urbana. The rest of the local contribution was filled out with individual donations.

The contract for the center was let on February 12, 1944 at a cost of \$35,000. The ground breaking occurred on February 18.

Dedication for the center was held on September 23, 1945. After years of fundraising and proposing, the goal had finally been reached. It was truly a day of rejoicing for the black community.



The Champaign-Urbana Convention & Visitors Bureau is proud to sponsor the *Through the Years* newsletter. We look forward to continued involvement with the Champaign County African-American History Committee. The Partnership is committed to this project, and we hope you will feel as strongly as we that this committee is providing an invaluable service for the community.

We would like to thank everyone who volunteered their time to make this issue a reality. A special thanks to Stephen Nafziger and Kathleen Johnson-Winston from University High for their assistance. Their excellent work was much appreciated.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS' FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE ATHLETES

- 1904 Football (Roy Young)
- 1904 Track & Field
(Hiram Hanibal Wheeler)
- 1929 Tennis (Douglas Turner)
- 1947 Swimming (Ralph Hines)
- 1950 Fencing (John Cameron)
- 1957 Basketball (Mannie Jackson and Govoner Vaughn)
- 1963 Wrestling (Al McCullum)
- 1965 Baseball (Trenton Jackson)
- 1982 Gymnastics (Charles Lakes)

As I attempted to gather information, I began to realize how it would affect these young men. These are the things I thought of: 1) it was their chance to get an education, display their talents and to aid in getting picked for the Pros, 2) it becomes a means of developing self confidence, public speaking, or finding their own niche or place in life, 3) to learn team work and build character, 4) it is not all about "Hoop Dreams," or tearing down nets, or winning races, or hitting home runs, etc.

There were barriers also which they had to face, as indicated in the following article from the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (date unknown):

Among the Fighting Illini, who crushed the UCLA football team 45-14, were four young Americans named Buddy Young, Paul Patterson, Ike Owens and Bert Piggott. The wing-footed Buddy roared over two touchdowns and Patterson plunged through one. Owens and Piggott by excellent playing also contributed to Illinois' dazzling conquest in the Rose Bowl. Yet not one of these four, even though his parents were tax-paying residents of Missouri, could play on the University of Missouri team. Indeed, not one of them could attend the state university and study there. For they happen to have been born with darker skins than those who set the rules for admission to Columbia.

My thanks to Shawn Wax, U of I Division of Intercollegiate Athletics, and to Mrs. James C. Wilson, wife of deceased assistant track coach of the U of I.



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 Douglass Annex, 217-398-2572.



1947 HOMECOMING BADGE as designed by Ike Owens, Illini football end. The badge was sold under the sponsorship of the Illini Union by campus organizations.

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