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Remembering Local Heroes: Louise Rogers Johnson represented a new Generation of Educators

Merab-Michal Favorite • Sunday, Feb 20, 2011

Part 4 of a series honoring Black History Month

Louise Rogers Johnson attended Bethune-Cookman College, then an all girl school for African Americans.

BRADENTON – Louise Rogers Johnson (1910-1992) was one of Manatee County's most famous educators and distinguished citizens. She was a teacher for 42 years and became the first African-American to serve on the Manatee County School Board. The year after her death, the county named a school in her honor – answering a petition with over 1,000 requests from residents to do just that. She was the next generation of educators that turned the tables of opportunity for black children in the area.

When Johnson (born Louis Elizabeth Rogers) was growing up, African-American neighborhoods had little or no options for education. School was only offered for three-months out of the year, when children weren't required to tend crops. Johnson was born in 1910. She remembers going back and forth between churches, her parents paying 25 cents a week for her to get school lessons from ministers and teachers.

"Then people like me . . . they were brilliant people in those days and some more brilliant. I know that some of them had as much ability as I had, but they didn't have the money so a lot of people lost out," said Johnson in her 1987 interview with the Manatee County Historical Society.

Johnson was the eldest of nine children. Her father, G.D. Rogers bought the old Manatee County Courthouse and established Lincoln Academy Grammar School, the first school for black children in the county. He served as a type of "principal", finding teachers and giving speeches while her mother prepared lunches in the cafeteria. Through books and supplies donated from white schools, the children managed to achieve a decent education.

"I learned composition back there, I knew how to make a verb, subject and verb back there. There are high-school students now who can't do it," said Johnson

Bethune Cookman College

Lunch was not the only concoction boiling on the stove of the school kitchen, according to Johnson; her mother was canning foods for needy families between mealtimes. Minnie Thompson Rogers organized the West Bradenton Women's Club in June of 1911. Johnson said it started off as the Ladies' Aid Society. The club would take baskets out to anyone who was in need of provisions for survival.

"My mother had this big kitchen at the school that my daddy moved over there, and they would can goods for people," said Johnson. "My mother could can anything."

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At that time, schools only went up to eighth grade. When students graduated from Lincoln Academy, those families that could afford to send them to secondary schools often did. Johnson attended Bethune Cookman College in Daytona, Fla. when she was 14 years old.

“At that time, all the black colleges in the state had high school departments for students from places like Manatee County. Because there were very few high schools across the state,” said Johnson.

Bethune Cookman College was founded by Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), an African American teacher, who is regarded as one of the great educators of the United States.

Bethune Cookman College was founded by Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), an African American teacher, who is regarded as one of the great educators of the United States.

After a prestigious college education, she decided to start her own school and rented a two-story frame building in Daytona Beach, Fla. She began the difficult task of establishing a school for African American girls which opened in October 1904, with six pupils, five girls and her own son. There was no equipment; crates were used for desks and charcoal took the place of pencils. Ink came from crushed elderberries. Thus began the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls, in an era when most African American children received little or no education.

“Miss Bethune started this school with some soap boxes, five little girls . . . on a vacant lot,” said Johnson.

By the time Johnson enrolled in 1926, the school had grown to 400 or 500 students. Johnson worked in Bethune’s office, and according to some texts even lived with her while attending the college. She began to look up to Bethune and regarded her as a mentor. She graduated in 1932.

Johnson was accepted to law school at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. but after contracting pneumonia, she moved back to Florida. She finally graduated from Florida A&M University to pursue teaching. In 1977, she became the first African-American to serve on the Manatee County School Board. In 1987 she was awarded Manatee County’s distinguished citizen award.

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