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Remembering Local Heroes: Manatee County Locals Were Fighting for Education and Teacher Equality Long Before the Civil Rights Movement

Merab-Michal Favorite • Sunday, Feb 13, 2011

Part 3 of a series honoring Black History Month

BRADENTON -- Before the 1930s, education for African-Americans in Manatee County was a luxury. There was one teacher, Reverend John Wesley, who taught at the rate of 25 cents per child. If parents didn't have the money, their children went uneducated. Classes were scheduled around harvest seasons so that children could pick crops and almost no school, white or black, went past 8th grade. One man completely changed the progression.

Garfield DeVoe Rogers was a "chipper and a dipper" from Georgia. He chipped and dipped turpentine and worked his way down to Florida selling sandwiches on the train. Tales of successful Florida African-American communities that had given blacks an opportunity to become successful, had piqued an interests and been the driving force for many migrants. G.D. Rogers was no exception. He simultaneously started a family and several businesses along Ninth Street in Bradenton, the heart of a bustling black community. But Rogers wanted more than success, he wanted to instill in the lives of his children and the children of others a chance to become something great. So he purchased a plot of land and moved the old Manatee County Courthouse (est. 1890) to the lot; thus Lincoln Acadamey was created.

Originally opened in 1930, Lincoln was the first school for African-Americans in he county. It was located in Bradenton on Second Street and Tenth Avenue West. When it first opened, it only went to eighth grade. African Americans seeking more would travel to one of five private academies located at all corners of the state in order to receive a higher education. But by 1931, the school expanded to twelfth grade.

"I remember a fairly peaceful, fairly serene existence during all of that period," said Ken Rogers in an interview with the [Manatee Historical Society](#). "There was segregation, to be sure, but it never crossed my mind that there was ever anything else in the world. So I do remember with a great deal of fondness my teachers and that sort of thing."

Unlike white schools that received government funding, Lincoln functioned through an exchange program. Bradenton High School would donate old books and football uniforms to the students. Children and parents would have to hold fundraisers in order to buy equipment.

"I remember we had to sell ice cream, or our parents did, in order to buy – I remember the very first microscope we got. So we had to go out and raise everything for whatever we had," said Ken.

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The children would also entertain people. [The Kiwanis Club of Bradenton](#) would allow them to use their auditorium to sing for the tourists. Then the children would take up a collection for the school after the performance.

“Looking back on it, you know, it sounds really bad, but I don’t know, it was great. It was just really great. It’s just like Eisenhower says you know, I didn’t know I was poor until I got real old,” said Ken.

Though the school was poor, G.D. Rogers was a successful man. He ran a tailoring shop, opened a funeral home (a very profitable business back then), sold real estate and organized the Central Life Insurance Company. According to Ken, he also ran some illegitimate businesses as well.

“That is what we called the numbers, Bolita, Cuba and moonshining,” he said.

But Garfield stood up for what he believed in. During the 1940s, teachers all over the nation began to sue school boards for equalization of salaries. Black teachers’ wages were far less than those of whites. When Miss Frances H. Stephens locally sued the Manatee County School Board, Garfield was instrumental in getting Thurgood Marshall, then chief counsel for the [NAACP](#), involved in the dispute.

When School Boards around the state lashed out, firing any black teachers who showed any hint of support of the cause, Garfield accepted them with open arms. As president of the Central Life Insurance Company, he notified departments throughout the state that he would hire any teacher who was fired for supporting the suit.

Frances Stephens was represented by an African-American attorney, S.D. McGill, from Jacksonville, while an all-white team of attorneys including W.J. Daniels and Velma Keen of Bradenton, along with R.W. Shackelford of Tampa represented the Manatee County School Board.

A federal court ruled in favor of Frances in March of 1945. The school teacher who had funded her own lawsuit, not only won but completely reformed the rating system that had been in use for years. Judge William J. Barker submitted a new non-discriminatory salary scale for teachers. Under the new system a teacher’s ability, educational attainments, cultural background, and effectiveness in teaching would be considered for salary compensation and be determined by a rating committee made up of the superintendent and other board members according to the [Afro-American newspaper](#).

Lincoln in downtown Bradenton eventually closed, and no other school replaced it. It merged with Memorial High School in 1948 and became Lincoln Memorial High School, located in Palmetto. G.D. Rogers’ progression was just the start of a 30-year-battle for civil rights. Today we remember him and Frances Stephens as two of the most inspiring African-Americans in Manatee County history.

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