



Bradenton had thriving black business district

Posted Feb 2, 2004 at 2:31 AM

The Family Heritage House Museum and gallery is a resource center for the study of African-American achievements. The museum, on the campus of Manatee Community College in Bradenton, contains national and local history.

One of the museum's displays highlights some of the former businesses along Bradenton's old Central Avenue. The street is now known as Martin Luther King Avenue or Ninth Avenue West. It is between First and Ninth streets west.

The street was the center of Bradenton and Manatee's black business district, with many black-owned and operated businesses.

You could get your haircut at Maudie Goodrum's, buy groceries at Henry Burton's store, see a movie at the Lincoln Theater or have your car repaired at Daniel's Filling Station. You could also schedule dental work or consult with your physician.

Christopher's Dining Room was owned by Janie Christopher. Several blocks away, Royal's Restaurant was owned by Janie's sister, Viola Royal.

Royal's restaurant was built by Viola's husband, Frank Royal, who also built a major part of his church across town, Saint Mary Missionary Baptist Church.

Christopher's Dining Room and Royal's Restaurant were favorite places for dining in a time when blacks could not frequent restaurants set aside for white patrons.

The 1926 City Directory shows 11 restaurants or lunchrooms between 1st Street and 8th Street West, including Lemon's Cafe', the Velvet Ice Cream Parlor and Sawyer's Lunch Room.

Using the 1926 through 1962 City Directories housed at the Manatee County Historical Records Library, it is interesting to see the number of businesses that operated on Central Avenue over that 36-year period.

When the 1926 and 1958 city directories are compared, three businesses stand out that remained on Central Avenue for three decades.

These were the Fraternity Funeral Home, later called the Rogers Funeral Home; Williams Furniture Store; and Afro-American Life Insurance Co.

In the 1930s, Minnie and Garfield Devoe Rogers Sr. established the Fraternity Funeral Home. Until their retirement in 1967, the Rogers provided mortuary service for the community.

Minnie Rogers held state license number 65, indicating that she was the 65th person in the State of Florida to receive a mortician's license.

The Rogers family was closely tied to one of the churches on Central Avenue. On Sundays, black families returned to Central Avenue to attend services at one of the three churches there: Mount Pilgrim Primitive Baptist Church, Gethsemane Baptist Church and Mount Pleasant Methodist Episcopal Church, which later became known as Rogers Memorial United Methodist Church.

A history written for the Rogers Project Hope VI reunion compiled by the Historical Committee tells the story of its founding.

With her two sons, Isaiah and J.S. Lee, along with Charles Wesley Caldwell, Mother Amanda Lee organized the Mount Pleasant Methodist Episcopal Church in 1903.

The small group met in a frame house with long, rough, handmade benches and a small wooden table, which served as a pulpit. Shortly after the establishment of the congregation, Mother Lee became ill and moved to Tampa, where she died.

A year later, her sons, along with G.D. Rogers, reorganized the church. After some disappointments in the establishment of a church building, the group raised money for a new sanctuary, which was built in 1923 on the corner of 3rd Street and Central Avenue.

In an era when affordable housing for blacks was not a priority, many people lived in the several rooming houses on Central Avenue.

One was owned by the Webb family, which included Henry Webb, inventor of the Webb plow and member of the Manatee County Agricultural Hall of Fame. His son, Taft Webb, worked as a plumber in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the early 1970s, Ninth Avenue was widened and many historic buildings and homes were torn down.

Other changes in the community such as the construction of housing projects and fast food restaurants changed the neighborhood.

Today, when you drive along Martin Luther King Avenue or 9th Avenue West, you see little to remind you of this once thriving business district that served as the center of the black community for many decades.

The only remaining original building is Royal's Restaurant, still at 710 9th Ave. W.

The historic restaurant has been renovated to preserve an important part of Bradenton's history.

-- Cathy Slusser, supervisor, Manatee County Historical Resources Department, Manatee County Clerk of Circuit Court.