

## Ruby M. Turner's Reflections (Continued from page 12)



Ruby Turner and Melvin Kennedy as bride and groom in a Tom Thumb Wedding production along with another classmate at Davidson Elementary School.

little distance between "sir" and the same for females. By doing this, she noted, we would preserve our self-respect and dignity. It was a lesson well taught, given that as people of color we faced laws that governed every aspect of our lives. It took courage for Mrs. Davidson to defy this system.

Minnie Nickolson, the assistant Sunday school superintendent, and Alberta Weir, the pianist of the Everdale Baptist Church and also Ethel Curry left their mark as strong leaders in the church and community.

Mrs. Nickolson sponsored an annual Easter program that was a part of the Sunday school youth and children department. It required several weeks of preparation with rehearsals at the end of the school day. Children and youth attended these rehearsals to learn the songs from Mrs. Weir and the speeches with special dramatic readings assigned by Mrs. Nickolson. They worked out the logistics of the marches, which were executed with military-like precision.

Families looked forward to the Easter programs, which always brought an overflow crowd to the church. White guests sat in a special reserved section. The dedication of these two women instilled pride and confidence in the students.

Ethel Curry provided an essential part of the personal care for the neighborhood's girls. On the afternoon before Easter, she used her beautician skills to give the girls hair styles of their choice – free of charge. As one of the younger participants, I requested Shirley Temple curls!

On Easter afternoon, Miss Curry decorated the choir stand with colorful streamers of crepe papers and fresh bouquets of flowers to provide a beautiful background for the program.

Additionally, Miss Curry, as a science and biology teacher, extended her school day to arrange nature walks outside of town on late fall days. She pointed out how the trees were changing, becoming bare, and noted the different kinds of foliage. As a reward we were allowed to gather holly berries and

mistletoe for the Christmas holiday.

Miss Curry did not forget her students during the summer months. As a segregated town, Water Valley did not provide recreational facilities for the colored residents. Community leaders, including Miss Curry, sponsored safe, interesting activities, such as house parties or outdoor events. She organized late evening strolls on warm summer nights when the moon was full. A group of children of all ages would meet at her house, and the walk would lead to the farm of E.M.B. Church members Mr. and Mrs. L. Z. Hervey. They hosted a party after the walk in their expansive front yard so the children could play games without fear of the police – who were always suspicious of gatherings by colored people – showing up. At the end of the party, Miss Curry served refreshments that she had prepared. Her dedication along with others gave the colored children and youth beautiful lasting memories.

Three other women deserve recognition for their service to the community and their churches.

Annie Kelly was the "jeans" teacher and supervisor over the colored schools in Yalobusha County, though no one ever explained what "jeans" meant. She had an office on main street and visited all of the colored schools. Miss Kelly's parents were among the county's first free-born generation in the post-Civil War era. Black residents with a high school certificate could teach school but had to attend Rust College in the summer to pursue a college degree. Miss Kelly was also a leader in the Miles C.M.E. Methodist Church and later on the conference level of the C.M.E. Church, where she worked in the various auxiliaries to improve and grow the church nationwide.

I remember Miss Kelly's congenial personality, always putting the interest of children first. On one of her visits to the Water Valley Colored School, she assigned me the task of memorizing the Twenty-Third Psalm with 10 cents offered as a reward. I met this challenge, and a week later I



Ruby M. Turner now resides in Illinois.

proudly recited the psalm. Miss Kelly motivated many children, encouraging them with her words of wisdom to pursue higher goals.

After her marriage later in life, she continued to devote her time and energies to motivate and inspire those who sought higher education – the very model of a strong and intelligent woman not to be forgotten.

Annie Givens, featured in the December 13, 2018 article in this column, and her husband, Reverend S. J. Givens, lived next door to me when I was a child. When we played outdoors, Mrs. Givens kept a watchful eye over us. She later moved to her home on Wagner Street. Her niece, Faye Thornton, and I were best friends, and I often visited the Givens. Mrs. Givens continued to attend the E.M.B. Church and became the Sunday school superintendent after Mrs. Nickolson retired and moved to another state.

As Sunday school superintendent Mrs. Givens kept abreast of the current materials published by the National Baptist Publishing House. She attended the annual convention each year as a delegate of the E.M.B. Church. World War II drastically changed the makeup of the communities as so many young men were drafted to serve in the armed forces. Camp McCain, an army camp, was located in nearby Grenada. When some of the young soldiers visited Water Valley on weekend passes, they helped fill the void left by the men who had been drafted. The community welcomed these soldiers, and when they came to the E.M.B. Church Sunday school and worship service, Mrs. Givens assigned them to the adult class that my mother taught. They eagerly participated and were a positive addition to the church.

Over the years, Mrs. Givens faithfully worked with the children and young adults in various programs, and the Sunday school grew under her leadership. She was a beautician, and she showed the same interest in her clients as she did with fellow congregants. Her door was always open.

Lou Avant was a strong, influential leader of the church. She was the presi-

but we felt the need to do more and approached Mrs. Avant with the idea to form the Young Matrons Gospel Chorus. She readily agreed, and we put the plan in motion. I served as the pianist for the junior choir for several years, and I became the pianist for the Young Matrons Gospel Chorus. As a choir, we were successful, but we did not have choir robes. We raised the money, including donations from the white business community, and became the first choir to be robed.

As young married and single women we wanted to have a social outlet that was not church affiliated. Again, we approached Mrs. Avant with our idea to form a social club. Always progressive, she supported us in this new endeavor. We organized the Sweetheart Social Club and soon held our first afternoon tea at the Miles C.M.E. Church. The good attendance reflected the community's support. We soon became recognized as young leaders and decided to include benevolent duties to help the elderly, especially on holidays, with food donations.

In May of 1956, my oldest sister, who lived in Chicago, was in the final stage

of her illness, so I left Water Valley to be with her. After she passed, my husband and I, with our two daughters, moved to Chicago and later to Phoenix, Illinois, a suburb of the city. Most of the women involved in the aforementioned activities moved to various states in the mid-1950s, ending a special Yalobusha county era.

On March 10, 1974, the committee for "A Tribute to Theresa Davidson" met in Chicago at the home of Lorine Turner to plan a dinner the next month at the Pilgrim Baptist Church Community Center. On the evening of April 20, 1974, former students who lived in the Chicago suburbs and in other states gathered at the southside building to reminisce about their experiences under Mrs. Davidson's leadership. The highlight of this memorable evening was the surprise visits of her sons Drs. E.C. and Kerry Davidson.

The women featured in this article - each of them a leader - dedicated their lives to enriching and inspiring the children and youth of the colored communities that are now a part of the African-American experience. This is their well-earned legacy.

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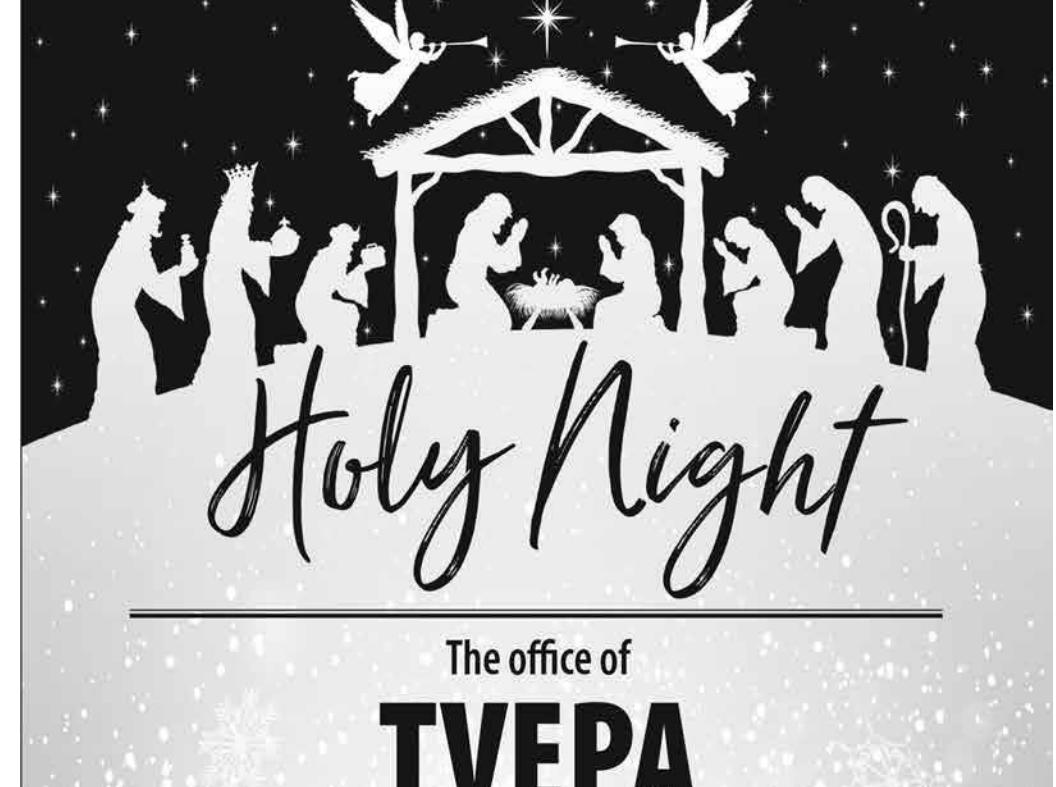
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