

Annie K. Montgomery - By the Works of Her Hands

Thanks to the work of the Women's Missionary Council and Leadership of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church we can celebrate the legacy of a woman whose parents were among Yalobusha County's first free-born generation in the post-Civil War era. Annie Kelly Montgomery was born on February 20, 1890 to George and Mattie Kelly in Water Valley. She was a life-long member of Miles Memorial CME Church on Simmons Street, near the courthouse. And as I have so proudly said about many others, she was an outstanding black woman of Yalobusha.

Annie Kelly was educated in the black public schools in Water Valley, completing high school and then a teacher training course at Mississippi Industrial College, located at that time in Holly Springs. Next, she earned a bachelor of arts degree in home economics from the college in May of 1930, after being admitted in 1926. Aside from teaching eight years in Water Valley public schools, substitute teaching throughout the county, especially in Oakland, the smallest and most disadvantaged of the three towns in the county, she taught at Mississippi Industrial for 14 years and served as a trustee at the college.

All this was in addition to working as the Jeanes Supervisor in Yalobusha County for 20 years. These supervisors worked for the Jeanes Foundation, which had established a fund to support education programs for black children in southern rural communities. It was named for Anna T. Jeanes, a white philanthropist and a Quaker from Pennsylvania, who worked with Booker T. Washington. From her office on Main Street in Water Valley Mrs. Montgomery, then known as Miss Kelly, oversaw the growth and development of the black schools and personnel in the county.

According to 90-year-old Ruby Turner, now living in Illinois, who grew up in Water Valley, most of the black teachers during this time could teach with a high school diploma but were required to pursue continuing education and a college diploma. Thus, most of them attended college in the summers or as often as they were able to keep their jobs and still advance their careers. It could take years to obtain that first degree, and their options were limited to black colleges. Many of them were far away, which required travel and possibly relocation and tuition costs. Mrs. Montgomery took her advanced studies at Tennessee State College in Nashville, Hampton University in Virginia, and Tuskegee College in Alabama.

To encourage black high school girls to aim for college, she helped organize and served as president of the Social Elite Club, a group of black women in Yalobusha County who mentored and provided scholarships.

Annie Montgomery's tombstone at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Water Valley shows only her year of birth, 1890, and year of death, 1974, the year I graduated from college. I cannot remember where I was when her funeral and burial were held on April 29, 1974. I wish I had attended the service.

I knew Mrs. Annie Kelly Montgomery because she was the superintendent of the Sunday School at Miles Memorial CME, where my family were members. And she was another one of those like Mrs. Lucy Kelly that I must always address as Mrs. out of respect. I was afraid of her! Every Sunday all the youngest children had to kiss her on her cheek. I hated that and would ask my mom and siblings why I had to do it. Of course, she was a kind lady, but I did not come to appreciate it until I picked up a book in the mid 2000s about the history of the CME church written by Retired Bishop Othal Lakey.

He noted her involvement and leadership in the CME church, and I was astounded. At the recent annual meeting of the Women's Missionary Council, Bishop Lakey said, "She was the secretary to the episcopacy and the general board of the CME church, which was a very important role." I only knew she substitute taught when I was in elementary school, and I hated when she subbed in my classes. She was a strict disciplinarian, and while her fellow missionaries considered her a master teacher, I felt intimidated because she had such high expectations of me.

Annie was married to the late Rev. D. M. Montgomery, a CME church pastor, who died before she did. He was known as Doc or Dock and had at least four children with his first wife, Beulah. He was listed as a college teacher in Holly Springs in the 1930 US Census.

Beginning in 1953, Annie lived with Pearline Butler Cody for 21 years. Annie considered her as a daughter. Pearline was a beloved and respected first-grade teacher and my first Sunday School teacher. We studied from a book called the Catechism. It sounds like it might have been a publication based on Catholicism. All I know is I remember the word. I loved Sunday school and still do! My mom usually gave me a nickel to put in the offering, I was so proud to be able to contribute and of course thought that was a lot of money. As time passed, Mrs. Montgomery and I became sort of friends. But I was not aware of her prominence and significant contributions to

Water Valley, Yalobusha County and the entire state of Mississippi.

Annie Kelly Montgomery is best known for having developed and designed what she called the Missionary Hand. Each finger has its own designated action label: Give, Work, Talk, Study and Pray. And each has a specific biblical reference. The hand's purpose was to remind the missionary women of the organization's focus. The Hand

was presented to missionary council members and is still used today.

Annie Montgomery began her years of service to the CME church in 1922, when she was 32. Her positions included local missionary president, local church trustee, and district missionary president. Mrs. Montgomery was a member of the committee that wrote the first Council Handbook, serving with Mrs. L. A. Story and Mrs. Rossie Thompson Hollis. In 1923 Mrs. Montgomery completed an unexpired term of the Council's first treasurer, and in 1926, she was elected as the second treasurer in Council history. She was elected Mississippi State president in 1928 and organized women's missionary societies throughout the state. Other positions she held included, statistician, registrar, finance committee member and secretary

of town and country. Her involvement, dedication and work at the state, district and national level strengthened connections among CME member churches.

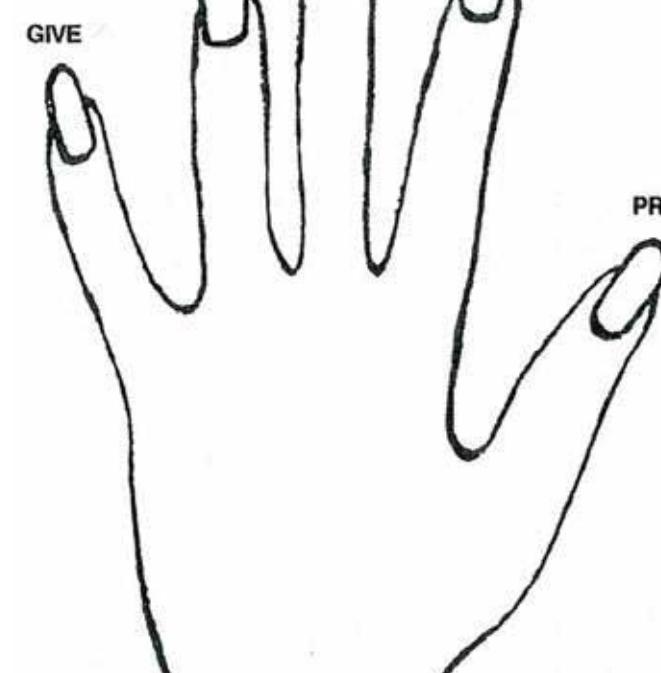
Reflecting on her Council work in 1971, Mrs. Montgomery looked to the future, writing, "It is our prayer that our mantle of service will fall on younger and more succinct shoulders, who will carry on in whatever is the design of the congregation."

The second line on the front of her tombstone reads: *Co-organizer Women's Missionary Society of CME Church - Organizer of Missionary Work in CME Churches in Mississippi.*

The engraving on the back of her tombstone reads: *Donated by the Four Mississippi Conferences of the Fourth Episcopal District, Bishop Joseph A. Johnson, Jr., Presiding Bishop.*

What a suitable epitaph!

Remember the saying that goes something like this? "It matters not the years that you live but what you accomplish between the dash." Mrs. Annie Kelly Montgomery accomplished a lot and influenced many lives



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Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. This article is part of a project to compile and share info about women in the county who have made an impact on the African American community. Her column appears bi-monthly, with occasional exceptions. She can be reached at (662) 825-2356 or reed2318@bellsouth.net

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between 1890 and 1974 - 84 years. Her legacy shall live on! She was 62 years old when I was born, probably 65 or so when I remembered her demanding those cheek kisses from me and my Sunday school mates, and then going on to teach us life lessons and about Jesus. She was much older when she mentored Dr. Louise Brown, Beth Brown Whiting and the other girls in the Social Elite Club. Maybe that was the magic that sustained these faithful outstanding women. They never stopped giving, they never stopped serving and never stopped caring. They were achievers who demonstrated the strength and fortitude to rise above the limitations and confines of Yalobusha County. They made a way. A friend up north often prods me to think about the contributions these outstanding black women of Yalobusha could have made had they been allowed to participate as full citizens of society, of Water Valley, of Yalobusha County, of Mississippi and of the United States in the prime of their lives. Can you imagine the difference their skills, talents and contributions could have made for a greater society if they were not plagued with racism and discrimination?

Now as a grandmother of four grandsons, a mother of three sons, one currently on active military duty overseas - another a veteran - a widow, retired, living in a red state and very concerned about our country and the future. I am afraid we might have to start marching again or that our numbers may be too low and too late to make a difference. I understand that "woke" is a word young folks use meaning informed, aware and cool, I think. Consider the other meaning of the word, and if I am asleep, please don't wake me up until all this chaos is over. Another friend who was born at McClelland - a black hospital in Atlanta - earned a bachelors in history from Morris Brown - a black college - earned a master's degree in public administration from the University of Denver, Colorado and was raised in the black African Methodist Church as a PK (preacher's kid) says, "World history is repeating itself, as we saw with the Roman Empire, which deteriorated from within; now America has become more amoral as a country and is headed down the same path."

We have just said goodbye to another Black History Month and a February like we have never seen before, God help us all! I believe Mrs. Annie Kelly Montgomery would be disappointed in where we are today, but she would want us to keep the faith. Her obituary states that her greatest joy came from her untiring work in the church. Asked how she wanted to be remembered, she said, "When God calls me home, rather than long speeches about me, let my work speak for the deeds I have done." I wish our hometown could have given her accolades while she was alive. While she had no children of her own, many, many children and families in this county, state and country were influenced and enriched by the unforgettable Annie Kelly Montgomery. In this month where we are celebrating the history of women nationally and internationally, how proud I am of the black women of Yalobusha County.

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