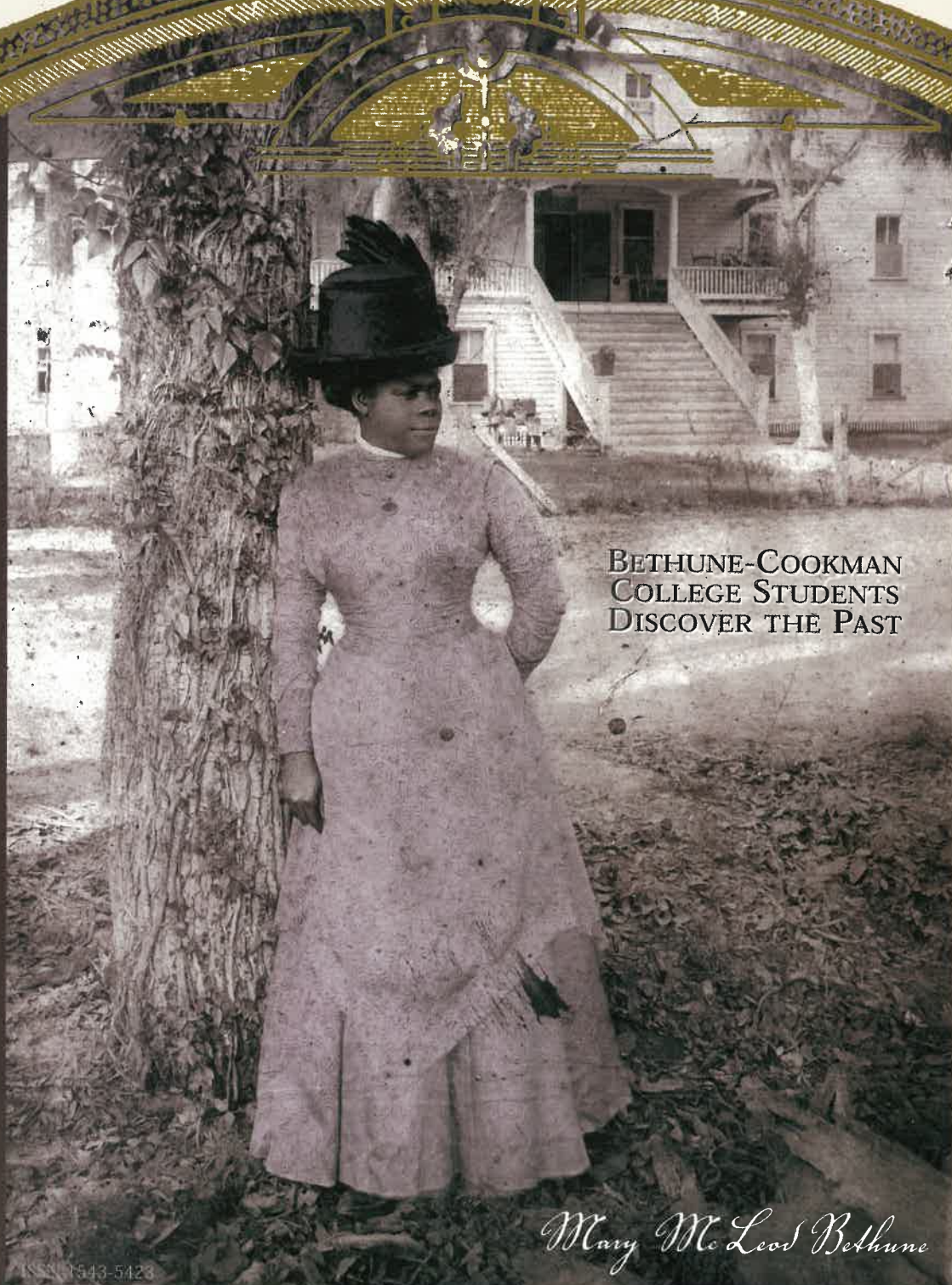


REFLECTIONS

FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA



BETHUNE-COOKMAN
COLLEGE STUDENTS
DISCOVER THE PAST

Mary McLeod Bethune

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Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), human rights champion, founded Bethune-Cookman College, or B-CC, when segregation ruled. Bethune's influence among alumni, professors emerita, former administrators, and community individuals is revealed in the school's *Centennial Oral History Project*. As one student observed, "Life stories are like footprints . . . taking interest in someone's life means more than the interviewer will ever know. We learn to appreciate the interviewees—their likes and dislikes, successes and failures. Listen to people. You never know how valuable the information can be."¹

One interviewee, James Huger, who studied at B-CC, became a marine sergeant major, served twenty-five years as B-CC business manager, and was elected Daytona Beach city councilman. Huger remembered, "At the end of the first semester of my freshman year, I thought I had what I *needed*, but didn't have all the things I *wanted*, so I decided to get a job." On the evening of the first day at work at the beachside Coquina Hotel, Bethune unexpectedly arrived demanding, "Huger, what are you doing here?" Ignoring his explanations, she lectured about the importance of an education and predicted that if he started working he might discontinue his schooling. A small crowd that gathered heard Bethune "order me to put my things in my bag and get . . . back to campus. I explained that there was no one to take my shift the next morning."²

"Mrs. Bethune did not leave anything to chance." She simply handed Huger's supervisor a paper with the replacement worker's name and phone number, "whatever time you need him." Huger admitted, "At that I had to tuck my tail between my legs and walk out behind Mrs. Bethune. Later, I realized that this was one of the turning points in my life."³

Clifford "Pop" Jenkins, who at ninety-seven was the oldest person interviewed, sometimes worked for Bethune. Jenkins, a Daytona Beach native affectionately known as "Pepper," remembered that Bethune walked with a distinctive strut and was "smart, very unique, and polished." Jenkins saw B-CC as farmland when

the school first started. Where the Harrison Rhodes building stands today "was nothing but a big garden; girls would farm over there and raise green beans, peas, and all that. Any labor Mrs. Bethune wanted done she would call on me and my 'corner boys.'" In the 1920s and 1930s black-owned businesses like Jenkins's own Pepper's Country Kitchen lined Second Avenue, now Mary McLeod Bethune Boulevard. Jenkins recalled, "Jack Butler and his son George had a café and pool room, there was Faircloth's newsstand, T. L. Smith's ice cream parlor, and, at the corner of Cedar and Campbell streets, there was a movie theater called the Majestic. The Ritz Theater came later."⁴

BETHUNE-COOKMAN COLLEGE STUDENTS DISCOVER THE PAST THE CENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

By Jeannette Ford

"Mrs. Bethune started a voter registration program for blacks despite the Ku Klux Klan 'suggestion' to curtail her activities. As KKK members gathered on campus, Bethune assembled the choir and student body to sing 'Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.' By the time they finished the hymn, the intruders had disappeared."⁵

Pop Jenkins explained that segregated society could be deadly in Daytona Beach. In 1939, a black taxi driver named Lee Snells was arrested for vehicular manslaughter after his cab collided with a twelve-year-old's bike at the corner of Keech Street and Volusia Avenue. The boy was from a prominent white family and died in view of his own home. While Snells was being transported in custody to DeLand, older brothers of the youth kidnapped and lynched him between Daytona Beach and DeLand on U.S. 92. Those

dangers caused one student to reflect, "I put myself in their shoes to imagine living in those racist days. Would I have made it alive? Would I have done this or said that? Now that I think about it, those actions might have cost my life."⁶

Most interviewees faithfully attended campus Community Meetings every Sunday. Pop Jenkins referred to them simply as "Temperance."⁷ James Huger remarked, "One Sunday afternoon, Bethune glanced up from the podium and saw a white man standing in the doorway looking around. She said, 'My dear sir, come right in and be seated.' The gentleman asked, 'Where do I sit?' Bethune replied, 'We do not discriminate here. Sit wherever you can find a seat.'"⁸

"Bethune-Cookman College was the only place in Florida where you could have an interracial meeting. Mrs. Bethune saw to it that the college was open to anyone."⁹ Alumna and librarian Judith Collier, said, "Church worship and meetings taught us to understand and work with one another. . . . We were taught first and foremost to respect God, our elders, and each other."¹⁰

Alumna and registrar Annie Thomas was "awestruck" in 1964 to find B-CC maintained firm rules and commanded high levels of community respect. Bethune's standards were so strict that B-CC credits were accepted anywhere.¹¹ Students "took in the richness of Bethune-Cookman College, walked tall and spoke softly," said alumna Juanita Roberts, continuing, "Mrs. Bethune made us feel good to be black." Thomas said, "College pride countered the hurt we felt at McCrory's on Beach Street, at Bel Aire Plaza, and other places where blacks were not served at lunch counters." She continued: "The most important achievement of black people at any point is education."¹² Quoting advice of former B-CC president Dr. Richard V. Moore: "Spend time improving yourself, and you will have no time to criticize others."¹³ Juanita Rivers advised students, "Remember your purpose and why you're in school."¹⁴

Alumnus, Vietnam veteran, and sociology professor Dr. Russell Mootry said being a student meant, "You did not have time to play around

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Mary McLeod Bethune
Courtesy of the Florida State Archives

REFLECTIONS



Bethune served as president of B-CC from 1904-1942 and 1946-47
Photo courtesy of Bethune-Cookman College



Bethune with Ambassador Joseph Charles of Haiti
Photo courtesy of Bethune-Cookman College



Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt 1936
Photo courtesy of Bethune-Cookman College



Bethune was born Mary Jane McLeod in this cabin in Mayesville, South Carolina. Rachel and Maria McLeod, her sisters, are standing in front of the "Homestead"
Photo courtesy of Bethune-Cookman College



Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt 1936
Photo courtesy of Bethune-Cookman College

unfocused, saying, 'I'll get better later, I'll do it next year.' No! You needed to do it now. You needed to make a habit of going to class, doing your work, reading and exposing yourself to as many opportunities as possible to learn about things you don't know. . . . Be focused on your studies. Be serious about your work. Making good grades is like putting money in the bank. You'll have an account when you get ready to leave."¹⁵

Dr. Theodore Nicholson, dean of the College of Mathematics, Science, and Engineering said, "The notion of students doing the right thing meant if an order was issued to you, that's what you followed! Everyone was so proud to be in college. If you did something wrong and the ruling said you had to go home, you better pack your trunk and go home. Nowadays it is almost like an opposite world. You are only in college for one thing; if you don't want to learn, then quit the class. My colleagues and I are not mean. We are trying to get good people to make a good living. You can't do that unless you know how to toe the line."¹⁶

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Accounts of early B-CC history remembered by lifelong members of the B-CC family were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by dozens of history students under the direction of assistant professor of history, Dr. Jeannette Ford. Interested in starting an oral history project of your own? At B-CC we follow the guidelines of the

Oral History Association and recommend thorough planning and research to prepare interview questions, ethics training, and attention to trends when preparing transcriptions. One student, Samantha Hield, summed up the experience. Intergenerational interviews, she said, "deeply motivate me to continue life in a more enthusiastic and serious manner. The interviewees have now become my role models. I want to be just as vibrant and happy as they are when I am older."

¹Petrina Coleman, COHP student assistant.

²James Huger interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 29, 2002. This and other cited interviews were conducted by students in Oral History classes taught by Dr. Jeannette F. Ford at Bethune-Cookman College. Slight and non-substantive changes have been made to some of these quotations by the author.

³Huger interview.

⁴Clifford "Pop" Jenkins, interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 21, 2004.

⁵Huger interview.

⁶Student Tanyattia Jones.

⁷Jenkins, interview.

⁸Huger interview.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Judith Collier interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, April 21, 2003.

¹¹Ann Thomas, interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, November 16, 2004.

¹²Juanita Rivers, "Reflections of our Days at Bethune-Cookman College" J.H. Dickerson Heritage Library, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, November 9, 2004.

¹³Thomas interview.

¹⁴Rivers, "Reflections of our Days."

¹⁵Dr. Russell Mootry interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach, FL, October 8, 2002.

¹⁶Theodore Nicholson, Ph.D., interview by HI 253 students, digital video, Daytona Beach FL, October 7, 2004.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeannette Ford directs oral history projects at Bethune-Cookman College. Her favorite Bethune quote is "Invest in the human soul. Who knows; it may be a diamond in the rough." Dr. Ford is presenting her work on Bethune at a diversity conference in Beijing, China this summer. Contact her at fordj@cookman.edu for more information.