CHAPTER 12: In Their Own Words

Against All Odds - Struggles of the Negro Educator After the Civil War

"To make a contented slave you must make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his morale and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate his power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery. The man who takes his earnings must be able to convince him that he has a perfect right to do so. He must not depend upon mere force: the slave must know no higher law than his master's will."–Fredrick Douglas, Abolitionist

Faced with the challenges resulting from this traditional mentality of former Negro slave owners and some plantation owners, blacks still emerged and struggled against all odds to meet the desire for education and the independence that came with it. The recollections of pioneer Leon County Negro educators such as Iola Douglas, Emma Jane Douglas, Augustus Robinson, Lettie Jackson Braxton, and Freeman Lawrence, to name a few, tell of the atrocities and hardships encountered by Negroes in pursuit of an education.

Iola Douglas taught in several schools in Leon County. As supervising teacher at Concord, one of the larger Negro Rural Schools, she remembered having to cook meals, fetch water, shop for groceries and read the electric meter. Over the years, teachers such as Douglas had to search for firewood, shovel coal, and inhale the fumes of gas heaters in buildings in which there was little inside ventilation to protect the students or the teacher. These were indeed rough times. "Separate but Equal" was the doctrine and practice of the land.

Upon accepting a position at Concord in 1941, Iola Douglas received from school officials, chalk, erasers, a broom, bucket, dipper, and $50 a month in salary. During this time, the Negro lead teacher at a school was considered equal to principal. In many references to education during Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction by those who are best qualified to tell the story, the participants, the words "principal" and "lead teacher," were, in fact, used interchangeably. The experiences of all persons who held this position, however, were the same as Iola Douglas, who said, "during my entire career with Leon County, from 1924 to 1962, I never attended a school board meeting."

ORAL HISTORIES

Interview with Mrs. Iola Douglas
by Althemese Barnes
at the home of Mrs. Douglas
February 1, 1996

I was born in Leon County. My father, Rev. William Henry Witherspoon, owned 100 and some acres of land there. And that was below Bradfordville. I attended Horseshoe School, which was located on my father's place/land. It was wooden and one big room. I was later a teacher at the school. I

went to the sixth grade. The school was first through sixth grade. I started teaching after I finished the sixth grade. Before I started to teach, I moved to Tampa. When I left Tampa, I moved back to finish my schooling. I finished my schooling at Griffin High School some time in the 40s. Griffin was a 12th grade school. It began as a boarding school.

I became a principal at Concord School. I started teaching at Concord School in Miccosukee, and then became the principal. After I left, I think Elton Andrews came as principal. Before me was Alice Macon. I went there after she left. One of my students was Odell Anderson, a lady who lived down on Macomb Street. She was a music teacher, but she moved. There were about 125 students at the school when I was principal. I was the principal for four years. After that, I came back to Griffin as a teacher of first grade. When they built the new school, I was transferred to third grade and also taught Social Studies. I taught there for 17 years. I retired in 1972, June. During some of this period, I worked in other schools in other counties too.

When I went to school, we went about three or four months. We had no year round schools then. Schools were not integrated either when I became a teacher. There were only black students at the school. There were whites living out there, but they went to the city schools, in town. They rode. They could always ride. The whites could. When I worked at Concord, the whites had rides. They had buses. But, the blacks didn't. Up in Miccosukee, that was the little town, the white children would pass by on the bus and hold their heads out and spit at the black children walking to school.

That was Concord at Miccosukee. There was a lunch room at our school. The government gave food and we had to cook it. We had to pick the food up from in town. The white folks gave it out. I had to pick up the supplies from the warehouse. It was a storehouse where they had all the food. You got milk, cheese, and staples like that. The teachers cooked the food so the children could have lunch. Mrs. Dorothy Holmes was the supervisor. Sometimes she and Bessie Weems would come about the time we were going to have lunch, and eat. I would take a week cooking and the teachers would take a week. There were about six teachers. Marie McCelvy was the basketball coach. Mrs. Dorothy Holmes was the Jeanes teacher. Our school didn't get any money from the county, except salary. My salary as principal was $50 a month. Teachers were paid less. We got a lot of help from the community around the school. Parents furnished some things like fish and meat. See the government didn't give those kinds of things. The children went for eight months of school then. When I was at Horseshoe, we had those shorter months.

The name Horseshoe came because Horseshoe School was near the Horseshoe Plantation. It was on my father's place-Witherspoon's land. But it started in the church, down there below us— a Methodist church. Going to Thomasville, it's on the left. It's a white wooden church, with green trimming. The church was not as far down as Dawkin Pond Church is now. It was Horseshoe Church, near Bradfordville.

That building is still out there now. They moved it down the road further toward-Thomasville. You see my father's land joined the Baker's Plantation land. Some of Mr. Baker's offsprings own the land now. Peter Hunter worked for them [the Bakers] a long time. I believe, all of his life. They had his funeral out there in Bradfordville, not too long ago. His wife still lives in that house out there. He bought some land out there. The school is still standing. It's a white [congregation] church,

this side of Bradfordville. It's still a church. They have improved it so much. They know that it use to be a school building for blacks. Bradfordville-that use to be our town. They'd come to Bradfordville for us. And we had to go to Bradfordville to get our mail.

We never worked on the Baker Plantation because we had our own land. My father had 147 acres on the other side of Dawkin Pond, below Bradfordville, on the right. There are some mailboxes beside the road. But you have to go through Van's property to get to it. Over time, we divided it up among the heirs. I have three acres out there now. I still go out there sometime. My property is on the back. All on the front is taken. My father bought his property. When we were small he started buying it. There was a man named Bill (Will) Johnson who decided he didn't want to live there anymore. He sold it for $50 an acre along then. There was an old house on it. Another part my father inherited from his father. We farmed the land. Yes, we had cows and hogs and chickens. We didn't sell anything. Well, we sold some cows. People would come out there and buy the cows. They would do them right there on the place. They would leave what they didn't want-head, lites, etc.

My grandparents on my mother's side were Frank Duhart and Kittie Duhart. They had Indian blood in them. That was way back then, they called it slavery time. My mother, Celia Witherspoon lived to be 105 and 1/2 years old. My grandparents on my father's side were Ben Witherspoon and Ella Witherspoon. She was a mid-wife. I had six sisters and four brothers. All of them are dead but me. I'm the oldest girl. Isn't that something? One older than me, one younger than me, and I'm right between. And I'm still living. I was born April 15, 1902. How old am I? Ninety four years old, and I still drive and go fishing.