

Delta Democrat Times



Teacher's Life bookmarks the 20th century
King of the Blues among his pupils

By Cassandra Perry
Delta Democrat Times

B.B. King's homecoming just won't be the same this Friday following the death of his beloved teacher and mentor Luther Henson, who died in Greenville, March 9, at the age of 101.

Luther Heron Henson was born at the end of the 19th century, nipping at the heels of a century that would bring a vast amount of change to the world, as his parents knew it.

He lived in three centuries and was 101 years old at the time of his death. Henson saw things that people today just read about in books and see in movies.

Henson was one of 23 children born to Syrus Bogan Henson, who was a slave on a plantation in Wilmington, N.C.

Syrus' first wife and two children were sold away from him, leaving the family no record of them.

The elder Henson's second wife, Clovis Henson, died and his third wife Fannie Angeline Powell Henson was the mother of Luther as well as his 10 brothers and sisters.

After leaving the plantation in North Carolina, Syrus Henson came to the Elkhorn community, which is about seven miles southeast of Kilmichael.

According to Fannie Draine, Henson's eldest daughter, her grandfather Syrus knew that "owning land was crucial to establishing the black man's new status."

So Syrus Henson purchased 120 acres of land around Kilmichael and, after his death in 1909, he was able to leave all of his children with a little bit of land to call their own.

Draine recalls her father saying that as a small child he loved to follow his father and work on the farm. Henson also loved to play and listen to stories told by some of the older members of the family.

“The excitement of getting a stick of candy and firecrackers for Christmas, the joy he felt when he received his first pair of shoes, trips to town on the back of a mule and using that same mule as a mode of transportation to visit the girls on Sunday,” Draine wrote of these remembrances and more in a chronicle of her father’s life.

Henson started going to school at the age of 6 and was determined to get an education to better himself. This determination, according to Draine, was only strengthened by the death of two of his sisters from pellagra, a form of malnutrition.

Education was a privilege for Henson, who had little money. He settled for correspondence courses from Rust College in Holly Springs.

Afterwards, Henson became a teacher in Montgomery County. He taught in a one-room schoolhouse called Elkhorn school that was maintained by Elkhorn Primitive Baptist Church, which was founded by his father.

Henson received a salary of \$25 a month for teaching about 50 students in grades 1-8.

The building stood on a knoll behind a swamp and was maintained entirely by contributions from the families of the children.

“While teaching, Luther managed to give the young people a positive self-image, got them hooked on the idea of self-improvement and gave them an optimistic idea of their prospects in life,” Draine said.

Perhaps, Henson touched no other student so deeply as he did a little 6-year-old boy named B.B. King.

He’s the only man that has ever been able to penetrate this thick skull of mine,” said King in a phone interview. “When he talked, I listened.”

Professor Henson, as King calls him, had a way of talking to him and the other students that made them want to listen and learn. He didn’t talk down at them like other people did.

King, perhaps the most famous blues musician in the world, counts Henson as one of his great inspirations and said that Henson was a “father figure” to him in some ways.

Henson tried to build self-esteem and give his students the tools they needed to be self-sufficient and “a positive idea of being black.” Draine commented that teaching

these things to black children in 1930s Mississippi was not an easy task for her father.

King remembers Henson telling him that “one day after while we would be judged by what we will do, not the color of our skin.”

“After while is here,” King said. “I remember Henson telling me this and then years later I heard Martin Luther King say the same thing.”

Draine said that her father taught positive racial identity decades before words like “black pride” and “black power” became a part of the American vocabulary.

Henson would keep copies of “The Black Dispatch,” a weekly newspaper from Oklahoma for his students to read. At home, Draine remembers always having magazines like “Ebony” and “Jett.”

“When schools were segregated the white children rode buses. I had to walk five miles to school,” King commented.

Henson didn’t like this situation and, out of his own money, bought a school bus and drove the black children to school himself.

In later years, Draine recalls, the state finally gave money to fund buses for black students but Henson did not receive any of the money even though he had been doing it for years.

“I think that hurt him,” Draine said.

“For an African-American man living in Mississippi in the 1920s, Henson was a very successful man and like anyone else he didn’t like to be looked down upon or messed with.

Draine related one bone-chilling story of a time when her father was going to be lynched.

“Some people didn’t like his attitude,” she said. Henson had to leave town in the middle of the night and go to Oklahoma. He lived there for a year before returning home.

During the Great Depression when the banks had no money and Henson’s wages hadn’t been paid to him, people were going hungry and Henson regularly took children of his family and friends into his own home to care for them. He fed them the meat from his animals and vegetables from his garden.

William was one of those children. He came to live with Henson and work on the farm. Henson eventually adopted him and gave a brother to his five daughters, Fannie Lou, Martha Angeline, Margarete Clementine, Eleanor and Yolanda Faye.

Growing up, Draine recalls her father giving them history lectures and lessons in nutrition.

“We knew what part of the body that everything we ate affected.”

Most importantly, she said, “he made all of us kids feel like we were the most important people in the world.”

Luther Heron Henson, 101, passed away on March 9, 2001, here in Greenville where he was being cared for by his daughter, Fannie Lou Draine.

He was taken back to the place where he taught and lived for so many years and was buried in the Elkhorn Cemetery in Kilmichael.

Henson was a great man. King said he has only known three men as great as Henson: “Two were presidents and one was a pope.”

Draine said her father was the most important thing that ever happened to her family.

“The beginning has started over for our family,” Draine said. “Are we gonna walk the walk that he talked?”