

## Bessie Moore - History of Kappa State Kappa State Workshop 7/30/2010

### Bessie Moore Early Years

Good evening, sisters. I would like to share with a few of the things that have happened in my life and some of our sisters whom I have known.

I was born Bessie Grace Boehm August 2, 1902, in Owensboro, Ky. That's 108 years this coming Monday. My 17 year old mother, Bessie Calloway Boehm, died a few hours later. I only weighed two-and-a-half pounds so my Papa, Edgar, age 37, wrapped me up and took me 40 miles by horse and buggy to my Aunt Lillie who got me to nurse by giving me bacon rinds to suck.

When I was 12, Papa and I moved to a farm near Mountain View which became his after three years under the Homestead Act. By the time I was 14 I had finished the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and took my first job as a teacher at a one-room school at St. James, between Mountain View and Batesville. I later earned a teaching degree at Arkansas State Teachers College and became a rural schoolteacher in Pulaski County before becoming supervisor of Jefferson County's rural schools.

In 1928, I married Merlin Moore, a traveling salesman and member of a prominent Pine Bluff family.. We went to the court house to get married. I was supposed to be at two different meetings that day. I told each one of them that I had to be at the other meeting.

While I was working out of the state Department of Education, I was selected as vice-president of the Arkansas Parents and Teachers Association and attended the national meeting in Washington, D.C. (We had the largest delegation there.) While there I met Dr. Gary Cleveland Meyers, a nationally known parental education expert. He found that I was using his materials in local meetings and he wrote about me in one of his columns in the fall of 1934.

The National Society of Delta Kappa Gamma had held a convention in Hot Springs in June, 1934. At that meeting three Arkansas women were initiated. They were Dr. Flora Gillentine of Henderson State Teachers College, and Opal Albright and Annie Griffey, both of Little Rock. When Dr. Gillentine noticed the column by Dr. Meyers she wrote to the national president of Delta Kappa Gamma recommending me as a founding member for Arkansas.

Twelve founders of Kappa Chapter of the Delta Kappa Gamma, honorary organization for outstanding women educators met with Miss Norma Smith of Montgomery, Alabama, the national president, who conducted the initiation at the Albert Pike hotel March 8, 1935. They were: Miss Edna Rudolf of Hot Springs; Miss Rosa Walker of Fort Smith; Miss Frances Bailey of the state Department of Education; Miss Annie G. Griffey of Little Rock, Mrs. Lelia M. Conte of Hot Springs; Dr. Flora M. Gillentine, Henderson State Teachers College, Arkadelphia; Miss Alma Keys, state Department of Education; Miss Beryl Henry, superintendent of schools, Hope; Miss Willie Lawson of Little Rock, executive secretary of the Arkansas Education Association; Miss Pearl Williamson, superintendent of schools in DeQueen; Miss Constance Mitchell, Arkansas State Teachers College, Conway; and myself Miss Opal Allbright of Little Rock was studying that year in Columbia University, New York City.

### **First Founding members**

#### **Dr. Flora Myers Gillentine**

Dr. Flora Myers Gillentine was born November 21, 1875 in Pikeville, Tennessee. In 1902 she married Logan Seitz Gillentine of Van Buren, Tennessee, a professor who had lived in England for a while. She received a degree from George Peabody College for Teachers in 1919 and they both taught at the State Normal College in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. She was a widow by the time she came to Henderson State Teachers College in Arkadelphia where she served as head of the department of education. She was extremely active in the Daughters of the American Revolution and served as historian at the national level

Dr. Gillentine was familiar enough with key women teachers in Arkansas to be able to help decide who the founders of Kappa State would be. She served as national vice president of Delta Kappa Gamma in 1940-42.

She died on October 11, 1946 in Arkadelphia and was buried in her hometown of Pikeville, Tennessee..

#### **Miss Annie Griffey**

Annie Griffey was born in Clarksville, Tennessee on November 21, 1868. As a twelve year old she moved to Little Rock to live with a sister. After graduating from Little Rock Senior High School she studied at Harvard and the University of Chicago. She taught in Little Rock schools and was elevated to a supervisory capacity. In 1929 she became assistant superintendent, which position she held until her death.

In 1910 when the Woman Teachers Association was organized in Little Rock she was its first president. When she became president of the Arkansas Education Association in 1924 she was only the second women to hold that position. She was elected one of the vice-presidents of the National Education Association in San Francisco in 1923. She was the first woman to serve on a county board of education when she was elected to the Pulaski County Board of Education in 1921.

She campaigned for and secured the appointment of many women as principals. She fought for equal pay for equal work with men and did much to thus equalize the pay status. She went to her eternal rest on March 28, 1944. She was active until the end, being ill only a few days.

#### **Opal Allbright Herrington**

Opal Allbright was born May 29, 1897 in Cushman, Arkansas. She received her training at the University of Arkansas and Peabody College at Nashville, Tennessee. For many years she was the head of the English department at Little Rock High School. She married Pat Herrington a Little Rock businessman. Her final years were spent in Denver with her step-daughter. She died there August 10, 1980.

#### **Other founders**

##### **Miss Frances Bailey**

Frances Bailey received degrees from the University of Arkansas and the University of Chicago. She and Miss Alma Keys worked together in the Home Economics Department of the state Department of Education. She served as state advisor

to the Future Homemakers of America.

### **Mrs. Lelia Conte**

Leila Morehead Conte was born in Memphis May 12, 1890 and graduated from Hot Springs High School in 1907. She continued her education at the University of Arkansas. She started teaching at Hot Springs High School in 1910 at a salary of \$15 a month. She married John Conti around 1915. In 1918 she became principal of Jones School in Hot Springs and held that position for 38 years until her retirement in May 1956. (In all these years she only missed three days because of personal illness.) Mrs. Conte passed away July 26<sup>th</sup> of that year and was laid to rest in Tranquil Cemetery off of Higdon Ferry Road.

When Henderson State Teachers offered extension classes in Hot Springs she took them no matter what the topic. She was a member of several professional organizations and traveled to several National Education Association conventions. She was the first president of the Hot Springs chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma.

In the 1920s and 1930s she taught Opportunity classes for soldiers stationed at the local Army and Navy Hospital as well other adults who had quit school before graduation. During the Great Depression she supervised canning groups who canned vegetables and beef to help feed needy children

### **Miss Beryl Henry**

Beryl Henry was born October 8, 1888 at Salem, Arkansas. After receiving her education at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia she came to Hope in 1918 and served as a classroom teacher and principal. In 1929 she became superintendent of Hope School System, a position she held until her retirement in 1942. She and Miss Pearl Williamson of DeQueen were the first women to serve in this position in Arkansas.

In 1942 she served as educational director of a Japanese relocation center at Jerome. She returned to Hope at the end of World War II and lived there until she moved to Benton in 1953.

She was secretary of the Retired Teachers Association. She worked to promote the building of Parkview Towers apartment house for retired teachers and served as a member of its board of management.

Miss Beryl Henry died October 21, 1974 in Little Rock and was buried at Roselawn Memorial Park, Little Rock,

### **Miss Alma Keys**

A native of Gurdon, Miss Alma Keys received her home economics education at Oklahoma State and the University of Tennessee. During her tenure as state supervisor of home economics the number of girls and women in homemaking classes rose from 1,000 to over 41,000. In 1956 she was named Woman of the Year by the Progressive Farmer magazine for her outstanding work in the rural communities.

### **Miss Willie Lawson**

Miss Willie Lawson received her degrees from Flora McDonald College in North

Carolina and College. Her early career was spent in Crossett and Jonesboro. She came to Little Rock as deputy state superintendent in the Education Department in charge of Opportunity Schools which were organized for those citizens who had no opportunity to receive the fundamentals of education..

She was the first woman to have served any state as executive secretary of its Education Association, and her elevation a few years later to the presidency of the Executive Secretaries' Section of the NEA made her the first woman to hold that post. She played an important part in the successful bid for teacher retirement in Arkansas, led by the AEA

She was selected in 1952 to serve a four-year term on the Arkansas Highway Commission. She was the first woman in the country to serve in such a capacity.

### **Miss Constance Mitchell**

Born August 10, 1888 in Radford, Virginia, Constance Mitchell moved to Illinois as a child. She was educated at Illinois Wesleyan College, George Peabody College, and the University of Illinois. After teaching a few years in Illinois, she came to Arkansas Normal (now UCA) in 1919 as an English teacher and remained with the institution until her retirement in 1954. She served as head librarian of the college's Torreyson Library from 1941 to her retirement in 1954. She also sponsored the girls' basketball team and led them to two state championships.

Miss Mitchell was chairman of the education committee of the Library Association, which worked with the state Department of Education to build up undergraduate library science courses in Arkansas colleges. The library science minor she built up at ASTC sent many graduates to other schools to finish their library degree. She served for a time as executive secretary of the Arkansas Library Commission.

She died in 1978.

### **Miss Edna Rudolph**

Miss Edna Rudolf was born November 8, 1879 in Arkadelphia. A graduate of Henderson-Brown College and Peabody College, she taught English in several schools in Texas as well as Arkansas. Her teaching experience also included Arkansas College and College of the Ozarks. In her later years she lived in Little Rock. She died February 1, 1964 and is buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Arkadelphia.

### **Miss Rosa Walker**

Rosa Walker received degrees from Florida State College for Women and the University of Tennessee. She came to Arkansas as head of the home economics department at Fort Smith High School. In the 1930s she became state supervisor in clothing, a job which involved traveling to all parts of the state conducting classes. From this position she went to Arkansas State Teachers College where for nine years she was in charge of student teachers. Later she became field supervisor for student teachers throughout the state, and was associated with the state Department of Education as clothing specialist.

### **Miss Pearl Williamson**

Pearl Williamson was an A.B. graduate of Henderson and had her Master's Degree from Columbia University. For over 30 years she served as superintendent of schools in DeQueen, her home town. She also served on the state Library Commission.

### **Bessie Moore Later Years**

After WWII Merlin and I operated two cafeterias in Little Rock, one on the lower level of the Capitol Building (contacts there were useful for years to come) and the other on Main Street. Merlin died unexpectedly in 1958. We never had children

My biographical resume takes up three single-spaced typed pages but I won't bore you with all of that.. You have to remember that I was just following Papa's advice to pay rent for living on this earth. and he taught me to finish what I started. "This was ingrained in me. It's almost physically impossible for me to leave a project unfinished."

Nine governors appointed me to the state Library Commission for a total of 39 years. Three presidents (Nixon, Carter and Reagan) named me as a member of the National Library Advisory Commission.

After Merlin's death, I joined the state Education Department as supervisor of elementary education. At the encouragement of Arch Ford, head of the state Education Department, I earned a master's degree in economic education at the University of Connecticut. In 1962, Arch Ford and I formed the Arkansas Council on Economic Education to promote economic literacy and the economic-way of thinking to students in Arkansas by empowering educators to teach the fourth 'r,' real life economics.

In 1950 Eleanor Roosevelt appointed me to the board of the American Association for the United Nations and was Arkansas U.N. chairman, helping initiate the UNICEF program, and I served on the United States Committee for UNICEF for 12 years;

I was given honorary doctorates by the University of Arkansas, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the University of Arizona at Tuscon. I was the first living person to be honored with a building named for them at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. The Bessie B. Moore Center for Economic Education was dedicated in 1979.

I was a member of the committee that brought about the expansion of Little Rock Junior College into a four-year institution (now UALR), and chairman of the Mountain View Folk Cultural Center Commission. The Bessie B. Moore Library in Mountain View, where I helped found the Ozark Folk Center, was named for me.

The last one of the Kappa State founders, I left this earth October 24, 1995 at the age of 93. I now rest next to my beloved Merlin in Graceland Cemetery in Pine Bluff.

"There is no end to the good you can do if you're a good advocate. That's what I've tried to do. If I do have a talent, it is the ability to create a sense of urgency in others to support the projects I see as necessary. Arkansans are good workers. They will work as a team to bring a program to fruition."