The Black Middle Class:

Owensboro's black community had its own chautauqua at turn of the century

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When the 20th century was still young, segregation and racism held the American South, including Owensboro, in an iron grip.

Many African Americans struggled to earn a living as domestics, porters, tobacco stemmers, servants and sharecroppers. But Owensboro had an energetic and vibrant black middle class, although historians and newspapers have largely ignored this important group and their accomplishments. There were shop owners, teachers and professional men who wanted to provide the best education and entertainment for their race. Education was critical to the dreams of blacks, including many of the 5,554 who lived in 1 Daviess County at the turn of the century.

In 1907, there were two black schools, Eastern School on Jackson Street and Western School on West Third Street. The principals and teachers provided much of the leadership – men such as A.O. Guthrie and Professor Samuel Barker. Also conspicuous and active were five churches – Center Street, Fourth Street and Sweeney Street Baptist churches and Asbury and St. Paul AME congregations.

Although most blacks were employed in low-paying labor, there were seven black barbers, a brick manufacturing firm (McCullough's in Mechanicsville); a shoemaker, a shoemaker, Givens Crump; druggist R.F. White; at least four grocers and three physicians – Dr. R. Moreland, Dr. J.M. Peters and Dr. P.G. Walker. Three men ran saloons, and John Abner Agnew had an undertaking parlor and livery stable at Fourth and Elm streets.

Agnew was educated as a dentist and was the first African American to practice dentistry in Kentucky. He gave up dentistry when he moved to Owensboro and took up embalming.

There was a black newspaper, the Kentucky Reporter, on West Second Street, which provided news and community support. The educated, community-minded middle class black men formed the Owensboro Negro Chautauqua in 1907. It was modeled after the Mother Chautauqua in New York and imitators throughout the country. It provided religious education and well-known speakers, as well as entertainment and enlightenment to the city's black population.

The site for the annual sessions was the fairgrounds on East 18th Street. Activities included dances, concerts, cake-baking contests and oratorical contests, as well as baseball games and other athletic events.

According to the memoirs of Marvalene Jackson, affluent blacks would rent rooms and live at the fairgrounds for the entire week of the chautauqua. Gustava Hayden remembers attending chautauquas as a girl with her mother. She often wished they could stay in the lodgings at the fairgrounds, with their holiday atmosphere. It was exciting to a child to greet friends dressed in their Sunday best, to listen to inspiring speakers and rousing bands and to savor the mingling fragrances of food from the many vendors.

The inaugural season began July 26, 1907, with a band concert and a welcome by Owensboro Mayor William O'Bryan. One day was devoted to labor, with discussions led by representative farmers, miners, barbers, waiters, blacksmiths and mechanics. The principal speaker was the superintendent of the black schools in Covington, Frank L. Williams, who spoke on "Making Men" and "Making a Home."

Women's Day featured a floral parade with nearly 400 children and adults wearing and carrying wreaths and bouquets as they marched behind the brass band from Louisville. This was touted as a "red letter" day with nearly 300 present to hear Vera Lee Moore, a teacher at Walden University in Nashville, Tenn. Her subject was "The Inherent Power of Influence," and it was aimed at mothers on how to raise children. The Inquirer's reporter reflected: "Would that we had many such women to go forth throughout the length and breadth of our land to help us solve the so-called race problem."

Organizers of the chautauqua were praised for their enterprise and its reflection on the city. Officers were William Allen, president; the Rev. Green Price, general manager; Dr. P.G. Walker, assistant manager; and Professor William C. Orton, recording secretary. The Rev. B.F. Stone, the Rev. F.P. Fielding, Professor Samuel L. Barker, attorney E.A. Watts, J.E. Weaver and Dr. J.M. Peters served as directors.

The second year the summer events ran for 10 days and boasted a 20-page program. The Rev. A.D. Hurt was added to the list of officers. More than 500 season tickets were sold, which, according to the Inquirer, was perhaps "the only colored chautauqua in the United States." Richmond began a negro chautauqua in 1916, and there was a national colored chautauqua organization formed by that time.

Each year seemed better than the one prior, with larger crowds and more exciting programs. Noted educators from Wilberforce University and other black institutions spoke on black progress and advancement and encouraged industrial and vocational training based on the philosophy of Booker T. Washington. Much emphasis was placed on moral and mental improvement but within the accepted parameters of the segregation system.

Most of the speakers urged advancement in character, education, property ownership and church life. Amanda Cabell urged: "Don't meditate over things that hinder us but rather the things that help us. A good character, a practical education and a love for honest work, as Dr. Booker T. Washington says, will win for us."

She described Owensboro's black community when she praised the strong role models found in "church, schools, drugstore, doctor, lawyer, teacher and preacher…."

Speaker H.M. Mickens pointed out that although blacks had not accomplished all they might, "history does not give an account of a people under similar conditions who have done so much in so short a time."

Noted journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells spoke to an audience of 1,200, which listened "with great interest and patience." Her topic was "The Second Emancipation," which she said was from "ignorance, sin, and moral weakness." She was referred to as the "most eminent negro woman in the country."

By 1910, the newspaper had nothing but praise for the Owensboro Negro Chautauqua, calling it a great success. Local black physician A.B. Bell gave an illustrated lecture on "The Tendency to Consumption," which was so well received that it was reprinted in its entirety in the Inquirer. Bell stressed the danger of overcrowded and poorly ventilated houses, poor nutrition, and the danger of the common housefly. Like wellness authorities today, he urged more pure air and pure water.

Without explanation, a passing reference in the newspapers in 1913 noted that the chautauqua was prospering as never before, "in spite of some feeble opposition." A fake telegram was sent to a speaker from Louisville that prevented his arrival on schedule. Although no real indicator of problems seemed apparent, there was obviously a change in management.

The Owensboro Negro Chautauqua and Amusement Co. filed articles of incorporation with a capital stock of $500 at $2 per share in 1914. Stock owners were P.G. Walker, John Abner Agnew, Samuel L. Barker, E. Clements, Marietta J. Wheatley, J.P. Martin and T.E. Barrett. But new directors did not stop problems when the lights at the fairgrounds were cut off for nonpayment of $55.75 for the previous year's electrical work. The wires were disconnected just before dark, disrupting the evening's activities. Agnew maintained that he and the other directors were not liable for debts of the former management. Meanwhile, a group of women paid the bill, and the programs went on as scheduled.

By the 1920s, champion baseball teams played exhibition games at the event, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds. Another favorite was the cake-baking contest sponsored by Owensboro Milling Co. The winners in 1922 were Lummie Glenn, Emma Edwards, Janie Slaughter and Elizabeth George.

Groups came from as far away as Louisville to hear Roscoe Simmons, a frequent favorite, and to enjoy concerts, dramatic recitals, athletic events and a drama, "Beyond Pardon," presented in 1925. Although the lights went out again in 1925, this time from an electrical storm, causing the evening program to be canceled, it was heralded as one of the most successful seasons ever. Much of the credit was given to the untiring efforts of Agnew and Barker.

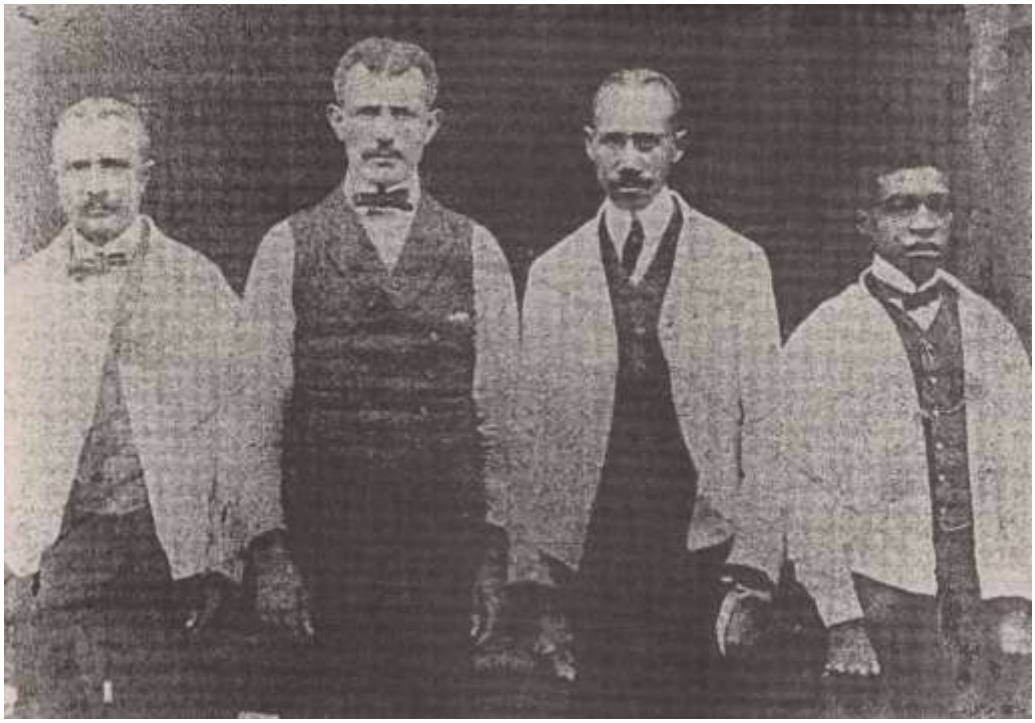
A day was dedicated to Dr. P.G. Walker in 1925, one of the founding members and greatest supporters of the chautauqua. He died of a heart attack in May 1924. Other days were designated as Health Day, Business and Child's Day, Cake Contest and Education Day, Farmers and Fair Day. Sunday was Banner Day, which marked the close of the event. The 1925 season was called one of the most successful ever, but this seems to be the last year for the Owensboro Negro Chautauqua. No further mention has been found in the newspapers.

What happened? We know that a vital and active black middle class continued for many years. By 1928, there were four physicians, and benevolent lodges continued in strength and popularity. Perhaps it was the loss of Walker and the aging of many of the early supporters. Perhaps renewed Ku Klux Klan activity across the nation was a factor. In the post-World War I era, many blacks were leaving towns such as Owensboro for better jobs in northern cities; and new forms of entertainment were becoming more common.

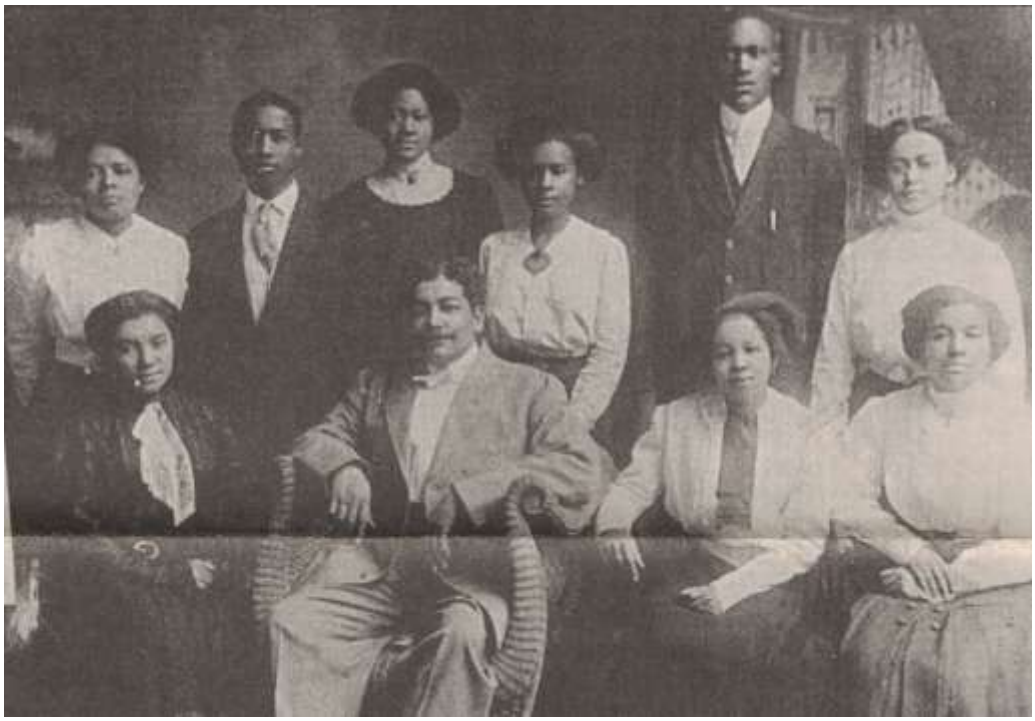
Unfortunately, too much of Owensboro's black history is one-dimensional, without the rich details to fill in what must have been a strong, well-led society within the strict rules and limitations of segregated America. Where are the Agnews, Barkers, Walkers, Willinghams and Guthries today?

It was a strong sense of community and a desire to achieve status and education that made the Owensboro Negro Chautauqua possible in the early 20th century. Perhaps the solidarity of Owensboro's black community went the way of the front porch swing and the corner grocery, but

the history of this great cultural experiment tantalizes and entices the reader and the researcher to know more; to really know what life was like in Owensboro a century ago. Perhaps when we know, we will have a better grasp of the future of our community.



John R. Willingham, barber, on far right [he was also an attorney & minister]



A.O. Guthrie, seated at center, was a leader in the black effort to better educate themselves [he was principal of the Western Colored School]