

## **THE ACHIEVING BLACK WOMAN IN OKLAHOMA, PAST AND PRESENT**

*Etta Perkins, Christine Pappas and R. Darcy*

**T**he Oklahoma Spirit is the Spirit of Freedom. It is the Spirit of Opportunity. That is what Ralph Ellison wrote in his essay “*Going to the Territory.*” That is what African-Americans sought when they came to the Oklahoma Territory. Freedom and Opportunity would not be easily granted these African-Americans, however. Too many Oklahomans agreed when Bill Murray the President of Oklahoma’s Constitutional Convention, addressed that body with these words.

The more the colored race makes an effort in the line of industry, mechanics and agriculture, and the less they attempt to become lawyers and professional men, the less will be the vagabondage that infests our cities, the less the number of crap-shooters and ‘dope fiends’ will characterize this race. We do not desire that race to be extinguished, but we desire that they will be serviceable to society.<sup>1</sup>

Alfalfa Bill Murray and his colleagues created segregated schools and Jim Crow laws. They took away the right to vote. They added a half-century of Overcoming Oppression to the Spirit of Oklahoma.

Black women have been a part of Oklahoma long before statehood, long before Alfalfa Bill Murray, long before even the Territory. They came to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears, they came after the Civil War and they came when the Territory was opened to settlement. Being one of the United States’ final frontiers, Oklahoma’s unique culture offered Black women freedom and opportunities they could find no place else. Some Black women lived in racially mixed towns, some lived on the frontier where they shouldered farming duties plus household responsibilities and some lived in all-Black towns.

For a brief time in Oklahoma history all-black communities provided an incubator for female advancement. Pioneer women seized this opportunity to assert their abilities and to weld a network of relationships that commanded respect, improved their circumstances, and increased their opportunities. In the end they saw their own array of alternatives diminished, but the [black town] experiment armed them with survival strategies to meet the demands of life in the racially mixed urban environment of Oklahoma.<sup>2</sup>

Linda Williams Reese writes of Oklahoma's early Black women. She finds in 1910 over 37 percent of Black women ten years of age or older were gainfully employed.

While she was single Ollie Robinson Bacon occasionally worked for Jones and Peters law firm, and after her marriage she managed the Bacon and Bacon General Store. Hallie Q. Jones and Eliza Dolphin Paxton were both postmistresses of Boley, and Annie Peters worked in the telephone office, Mrs. C.M. Brock advertised her services as a notary public, operating from an office located in Turner's Drug Store. Clerking in the grocery stores also seemed acceptable employment, and the *Clearview Patriarch* singled out Miss Rebecca Grayson for special praise. A *Langston Herald* advice columnist voiced the community reinforcement of this work ethic when she counseled young women that teaching was not the only career available: 'It is now almost impossible to find any business in which a woman is not engaged.' She wrote, 'if not as principal as assistant. Although she is not always paid as good a salary as the opposite sex.'<sup>3</sup>

From the beginning, women undertook the most important tasks of public school teaching for a group who yearned for knowledge. The wives of leading citizens worked alongside their husbands to build towns where Blacks could lead dignified and productive lives. The founding of Langston University in 1898, a historically Black college, afforded many Black women valuable educational opportunities, as well as talented role models, such as Zelia Page Breaux.

The air of freedom created by Langston University and the Black towns could not withstand the institutionalized prejudice brought on during the Territorial period and, in 1907, statehood. Oklahoma's 1907 constitution required separate school systems for Blacks and whites. Jim Crow laws created

walls that Blacks and the whites who opposed segregation would have to batter. The achieving Black woman was and is one who fought against the barriers or who accomplished her goals in spite of them.

Women who struggled within the confines of what was possible include Judith Carter Horton. A graduate of Oberlin College, she resented that Guthrie's new Carnegie Library was closed to Blacks. Earlier she had founded the Excelsior Club. She asked this Black women's cultural club to establish a Black public library. They secured community support, raised funds and on September 1, 1908 the Black Guthrie Library opened.<sup>4</sup>

Black women in the new state organized civic and cultural clubs that served the needs of the membership as well as their community.<sup>5</sup> In 1910, Harriet Price Jacobson, a transplanted Sooner from Kansas, called a meeting to organize the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Delegates met at Oklahoma City's Avery Chapel A.M.E. Church to form the Oklahoma Federation. Under Harriet Price Jacobson's leadership they campaigned for a state training school for boys and girls so that juveniles would not be incarcerated with adult criminals. The Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs has worked for Black welfare. Its members included civic leaders such as Lamonía Outlaw McFarland, a public school teacher, whose work for the YWCA led to the naming of the branch YWCA in northeast Oklahoma City for her.<sup>6</sup> The local clubs sponsored cultural programs, community beautification efforts, the establishment of Black libraries, summer camps for girls and provided scholarships for college bound students.<sup>7</sup>

Many other women demonstrated that they too were willing to assume the risks of challenging Jim Crow practices. Teachers, such as Emma Freeman and Octavia Douglass, undertook the successful court cases that led to the equalization of salaries for Black and white public school teachers.<sup>8</sup>

In 1980, Vivian Pegues became the first woman to head a government department in Tulsa when the mayor appointed her Executive Director of the Department of Human Rights with the responsibility for administering and supervising the city of Tulsa's human and civil rights programs. The efforts of the past have produced significant changes. Today, Black women serve on state and local human rights commissions established to ensure that civil rights programs are enforced.

### **Women of Achievement**

**Hannah Diggs Atkins**, the first Black woman elected to the Oklahoma House of Representatives, was born in Winston Salem, North Carolina. She has had a long distinguished career in government service since her election to the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 1968. She served six terms in the House where she was a 'flaming moderate.' As Chair of the Public and

Mental Health Committee, she was the first woman to chair a committee in the House. She was also a member of the Appropriations and Budget Committee. In 1976 to 1982 she was a commissioner to UNESCO and in 1980 President Carter appointed her a delegate to the 35th Assembly of the United Nations.

Governor Henry Bellmon appointed Atkins Cabinet Secretary for Social Services in 1987. The following September Atkins added Secretary of State to her duties and served in dual roles in the Cabinet. In addition to the traditional duties of a Secretary of State, she had oversight of the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Corrections, the Pardon and Parole Board and their related boards, councils and committees.

Atkins holds a BS degree from Saint Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina, and a BLS degree from the University of Chicago. Oklahoma State University and the University of Oklahoma both awarded her honorary degrees.<sup>9</sup>

**Zelia Page Breaux** taught music at Langston University and in Oklahoma City's schools. She had so much impact on Ralph Ellison, the author of *Invisible Man*, that he wrote about her in his essay "*Going to the Territory*." Let Ellison speak.

Mrs. Breaux was a musician and a teacher of music. By the time I entered the primary grades she was supervisor of music for Oklahoma City's Negro schools, and the connection between Mrs. Breaux and my presence here began in a second-grade classroom. At the time we were dancing and singing to a little nursery tune which went, 'Oh, busy squirrel with bushy tail and shiny eyes so round/Why do you gather all the nuts that fall upon the ground.' There were quite a number of us hopping about, but she must have been struck by the way this particular little nut was doing his squirrel act, because she gathered me up for special attention. So began one of the most important relationships in my life. For more than ten years Mrs. Breaux was a sort of second mother. . . . Better, still, she was an agent of music, which soon became the main focus of my attempts to achieve my own identity.

This was during the 1920s, the period in which what was known as the Public School Music Program was sweeping the nation. Mrs. Breaux was a leader in this movement which did so much to broaden and enrich the nation's musical culture. She did so by teaching musical theory and by training what became famous marching bands. She organized school orchestras, and she was responsible for the high quality of our music-appreciation program. Thanks to her, ours became a

music-oriented culture which involved as many of the other arts as was possible in a system that was limited in budget and facilities. On May Day children from all of the Negro schools were assembled on the playing field of the old Western League baseball stadium, the girls in their white dresses and the boys in blue serge knickers, and white shirts, and there, to the music of the Douglass High School Band, we competed in wrapping dozens of maypoles and engaged in mass dancing of a variety of European folk dances. . . . Thanks to Mrs. Breaux, we were being introduced to one of the most precious of American freedoms, which is our freedom to broaden our personal culture by absorbing the cultures of others. Even more important was the fact that we were being taught to discover and exercise those elements of freedom which existed unobserved (at least by outsiders), within our state of social and political unfreedom. This gift, this important bit of equipment for living, came through the efforts of a woman educator who by acting as agent of the broader American culture was able to widen our sense of possibility and raise our aspirations.

Nor was that all for while I was to become a writer instead of a musician, it was Mrs. Breaux who introduced me to the basic discipline required of the artist. It was impossible for me to grasp the basic compatibility of the mixture of the classical and vernacular styles which were part of our musical culture. She was one of the owners of what for many years was the only Negro theater in Oklahoma city, and it was here that she made valuable contributions to The popular arts. While she discouraged her students from playing jazz, she also saw to it that our community was provided the best of Negro entertainers. In her Aldridge Theater one could see and hear the great blues singers, dancers and comedians, the famous jazz orchestras and such repertory drama groups as the Lafayette Players. In other words, just as she taught Negro spirituals along with Bach and Handel, she provided a cultural nexus in which the vernacular art forms could be encountered along with the classical. . . . Interestingly enough, it wasn't until years later that I learned how unusual this was, or the extent to which it cleared away the insidious confusion between race and culture which haunts this society.<sup>10</sup>

**Mattie Butler**, a graduate in English and journalism of Central State University, now the University of Central Oklahoma, won the actress of the

year award for her role in “Raisin in the Sun” at the university in 1968. Her lengthy list of performances include Mama in “Raisin in the Sun,” the Lady in Red for “Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide,” Nedra in “Three Hundred Sixty Degrees,” Sister Moore in “The Amen Corner” and Estelle in “No Exit.” With Black Liberated Arts, Inc. she performed in “And You Thought All We Could Do Is Dance” in performances in Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Louisiana and Iowa.<sup>11</sup>

**Anita W. Christopher**, O.D. was born in Tulsa, and educated in the city through secondary school. Because of Oklahoma’s segregated higher education, the only available college in Oklahoma was Langston University. She chose to go to Virginia and attended Hampton Institute which she was able to afford with part-time work and scholarships. Eventually, Christopher received her doctoral degree from the Northern Illinois College of Optometry. In 1951 she became the first Black woman to receive a license to practice optometry in Oklahoma and only the third Black woman recipient of a license in the United States.

**Bessie Coleman**, first Black woman airplane pilot. She was born in Texas. Her father was three-quarter Oklahoma Choctaw. The family of thirteen children worked as cotton-pickers. Bessie managed to graduate from eighth grade and came to Oklahoma to study at Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University (Langston). She soon left, however, for Chicago. Her desire was to be a pilot but American flight schools would not accept a Black woman. She learned French and was accepted to a French flight school in 1920. She returned to the United States as a pilot and began to participate in air shows and lecture. In 1926 she was killed in an airplane crash.

**Shirley A. (Bruce) Darrell**, in 1982, became the first woman elected to the Oklahoma County Board of Commissioners<sup>12</sup> and first Oklahoma Black woman county commissioner.<sup>13</sup> She was born in Oklahoma City. Her father was one of the first Black attorneys to practice law in Oklahoma. She holds a BS in business administration from Hampton Institute and a Master’s degree in business administration from Oklahoma City University. Her government and community service include service on the Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools. Her work history includes the positions of management analyst for the Federal Aviation Administration in Oklahoma City, Civil Rights Investigator for the United States Department of Transportation, Executive Director of the Metropolitan YWCA of Oklahoma City, and Branch Director of the McFarland Branch YWCA of Oklahoma. Afterwards, Darrell said she ran on a pledge “to break down the good old boy system. . . . I think that’s a tribute to America that race and sex is no longer an issue.”<sup>14</sup>

**Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher** has been designated by the Smithsonian Institution as “one of the 150 Black women who has impacted the course and direction of American History.” Her quest for entry into the University of

Oklahoma College of Law, after she had graduated from Langston University, inspired others to pursue the same goal. When University of Oklahoma President George Cross denied her admission to the law school, she appealed first to Oklahoma courts, and then to the Supreme Court of the United States. The Supreme Court ruled she had a right to obtain a legal education within the state. Fisher was jubilant, but the state soon placed a new obstacle before her. It decided to establish a Langston University Law School with facilities in the state capitol. Three local attorneys were employed as the faculty. Fisher ignored the state's substitute and continued her efforts to enter the University of Oklahoma law school. Her efforts were finally successful when the McLauren case led to the admission of Black graduate students to the University of Oklahoma in 1949. After Fisher completed her law degree in 1952 she practiced law and raised her family in her hometown of Chickasha. Later she became chair of the Social Sciences Department at Langston University. In 1992, more than 45 years after she was denied admission to the law school, Governor David Walters appointed Fisher to the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents.<sup>15</sup> Fisher died in 1995.

**Diane Ross Franklin** is a native of Oklahoma City who received a BA from Central State University, now the University of Central Oklahoma. She became a branch director for the McFarland Branch YWCA in 1977. Under her administration, the building has been expanded and a health club facility added. The membership increased by sixty percent. Community projects under her leadership have included a Black Women's Forum, first introduced in 1979, and an Oklahoma City Arts Festival for the Northeast Quadrant in 1983.<sup>16</sup>

**Eddie Faye Gates** is a writer and educator. She has written three books about Oklahoma Black history and the Tulsa race riots: *Miz Lucy's Cookies: And Other Links in My Black Family Support System* (1996), *They Came Searching: How Blacks Sought the Promised Land in Tulsa* (1997) and *Riot on Greenwood: The Total Destruction of Black Wall Street* (2003). After graduating from Douglas Elementary School in Preston and Dunbar High School in Okmulgee, Gates attended Tuskegee Institute until 1954 when she married. After traveling with her husband throughout Europe and giving birth to five children, she went on to graduate magna cum laude from the University of North Dakota. Her master of arts degree is from the University of Tulsa. Gates was a high school history teacher for 22 years in Tulsa, a public school administrator, and a curriculum writer. In addition to being North Tulsa Historical Society President, she served as a Member of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, Chair of the Commission's Survivor's Committee, and has participated in the campaign to gain reparations for other survivors.<sup>17</sup>

**Rubye M. Hibler Hall** was born 1912 in Eufala. She taught English, Mathematics, Speech Pathology, and Psychometry. Hall has been active in community organizations and was president of the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and Chair of the Executive Council of the National association of Colored Women's Clubs. She was also the 1983 chair of the VIP Panel of the United Negro College Fund. Serving from 1974 to 1980, she was the first Black appointed to the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education and was chair in 1978-1979. She received a BA from Langston University and MA from the University of Oklahoma. In 1986 she was inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame and in 1998 into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame.<sup>18</sup>

**Carole Hall Hardeman**, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies, and Professor of Education at Langston University-Oklahoma City. Between 1975 and 1984, she was the Executive Director of the Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies, and was then the only Black woman to hold the rank of Administrative Officer at the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus. Hardeman is a former teacher of music at Northeast High. Among her contributions to minority education are two curriculum packets on math and science. Her Institute for Educational Equity in Math and Science Classrooms contributed to innovations in both areas. She contributed to urban education by guiding graduate students through the process of developing research. She established the Graduate Student Research Roundtable for National Alliance of Black School Educators. She received a BA in music from Fisk University, and an MA and PhD from the University of Oklahoma.<sup>19</sup>

**Anita Hill** was born 1956 in Lone Tree. She received her undergraduate degree from Oklahoma State University in 1977. She earned her law degree from Yale University in 1980. In 1981, Hill began working for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, under future Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. When Thomas was nominated to the Supreme Court ten years later, Hill, who was teaching at the University of Oklahoma Law School, came forward to confront him for sexual harassment. Of her testimony Hill said, "If you think about the way the hearings were structured, the hearings were really about Thomas' race and my gender." She has taught at Brandeis University since 1998.<sup>20</sup> She is the author or editor of *Race, Gender and Power in America: The Legacy of the Hill-Thomas Hearings* (1995), *Speaking Truth to Power* (1997) and *Sexual Harassment* (1998).

**Maxine Horner** served in the Oklahoma Legislature as North Tulsa senator for eighteen years, 1987 through 2005, when term-limits forced her to retire. With Vicki Miles-LaGrange, she was the first African-American woman to serve in the Oklahoma State Senate. She is credited with legislation founding the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame in north Tulsa (with Penny Williams) in



1988 and with helping secure the \$1.5 million in bonds to improve it. She successfully sponsored legislation against police use of racial profiling. In 1992 she passed OLAP, the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program which funds scholarships to Oklahoma colleges and universities for students from low income families who take a high school core curriculum with good grades and stay out of trouble. Horner, born 1933 in Tulsa, graduated from Booker T. Washington High School and Langston University

**Harriet Price Jacobson** was born in Lexington, Kentucky. She grew up in a prosperous family in Kinsley, Kansas, coming in the 1880s to Oklahoma at age 16. She received her bachelor's degree from Kansas State Teachers College at Emporia. She taught in rural schools in Oklahoma and Cleveland counties. In 1900 she entered the Oklahoma City public school system. Honored for her forty years of teaching by the Oklahoma Association of Negro Teachers, she led an active career outside education. Founder and the first president of the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, she was also active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Young Women's Christian Association.<sup>21</sup>

**Minifred Kibler**, the wife of a minister, writes that "her religious duties take precedence." Her duties include the presidency of the Women's Missionary Council of Oklahoma-Muskogee Conference of the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; CME State Representative to Church Women United; and Pianist for the CME Missionary and CME Evangelism Council. She holds three degrees: BA from Philander Smith College, an MA from Northwestern University, and a master's of library science from the University of Oklahoma. A former elementary and secondary school teacher and librarian, Kibler has served as the President of the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and of the Tulsa Federation of Colored Woman's Clubs.<sup>22</sup> She died in 1996.

**Judy Eason McIntyre** was elected from House District 73 (Tulsa) to the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 2002 and to the State Senate in 2004. She was born 1945 in Tulsa and graduated in 1963 from Booker T. Washington High School. She was educated at the University of Oklahoma, earning a BS and MS in social work. She worked for the Child Welfare division of the Department of Human Services for 31 years. McIntyre served on the Tulsa School Board for 16 years, two years as president.<sup>23</sup>

**Mazola McKerson**, a former mayor of Ardmore, was born in Bluff, Oklahoma. She operated her own business for 21 years. She owned Mazola's Gourmet Restaurant and Catering Service. She is active in politics and community service. She was Governor Nigh's Chair for the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, served on the Ardmore City Council for six years, and was Mayor of Ardmore 1979 to 1980.<sup>24</sup>

**Leona Pearl Mitchell** is an operatic soprano from Enid. She received her BA in music from Oklahoma City University in 1971. She has performed in London, Paris, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, and Buenos Aires. In Sydney, Australia, she appeared in her twentieth season in a lavish new production of *Ariadne* in 1997. Her Metropolitan Opera debut was in *Carmen* in 1975 and she sang there for eighteen consecutive seasons.<sup>25</sup>

**Angela Monson**, as President of the National Conference of State Legislators, was the most vocal advocate for more money being given to states during the budget crisis of 2003. As she testified to the US Senate Finance Committee, "State budgets are under siege."<sup>26</sup> She has served in both the Oklahoma House of Representatives, from 1990 to 1993, and the Oklahoma Senate from 1993 to 2005. She was born in Oklahoma City. She holds a bachelors degree in corrections from Oklahoma City University, and a Master's of Public Administration from the University of Oklahoma.<sup>27</sup>

**Zella Justina Black Patterson** earned degrees from Langston University and Colorado State University before teaching elementary school in Logan, Payne, and Lincoln Counties. She taught at Langston University from 1937 to 1974. After retirement she wrote *Langston University: A History* (1979) and *Churches of Langston* (1982).<sup>28</sup> Patterson died in 1986.

**Wennette West Pegues** served as Oklahoma State University's Assistant Dean for Students/Registrar and Financial Aid. She has also served as Director of the University Center at Tulsa. A former nurse, she was an instructor in pediatrics at the Hillcrest Medical Center School of Nursing. Her career outside nursing has included teaching and administrative positions at University of Tulsa and Langston University Urban Center. She holds an EdD from University of Tulsa.

**Evelyn LaRue Pittman** is a former music teacher and well-known composer. She was born in McAlester and grew up in Oklahoma City. She received degrees from Spelman College and the University of Oklahoma. Other institutions were also important to her career. At Langston University, she completed work that led to her life teaching certificate in music and social studies. A course in Black history at Atlanta University "changed her whole way of thinking." A summer's study of composition with Robert Ward also proved beneficial. She is the composer of three musical dramas: *Cousin Esther*, *Freedom Child*, and *Oklahoma's Jim Noble*. These works have been produced and performed in the United States, Europe, and Africa.

**Gloria R. Smith** was born in Chicago. In 1975, Smith became the first Black dean at the University of Oklahoma when she was appointed to head the College of Nursing. She served until 1983 when she left Oklahoma to become the Director of the Michigan Department of Public Health. Smith had a long and impressive career in nursing and nursing education in Oklahoma, Georgia, Alabama, and Michigan. In 1991, Smith became vice president for

programs at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and in 1996, she won Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine's Phillips Medal of Public Service. She received a BS in nursing from Wayne State, an MA in anthropology from the University of Oklahoma, and a PhD in anthropology from the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities.<sup>29</sup>

**Dorscine Spigner-Littles** is Associate Professor in the Department of Human Relations at the University of Oklahoma. She is the co-author of *Practitioner's Guide to Understanding Indigenous and Foreign Cultures: An Analysis of Relationships between Ethnicity, Social Class and Therapeutic Intervention Strategies* and author of articles on cultural diversity and the pedagogy of multicultural education. She is writer and producer of the documentary film *Collective Visions: A Historical Overview of Black Women in Oklahoma, Early 1800s - 1921*. In 1993, as assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, she sponsored a National Research Conference on African-American Studies. She earned her PhD in Higher Education Administration at the University of Oklahoma in 1985.<sup>30</sup>

**Alice (LaDell) Strong-Anderson** is a native and resident of Oklahoma City. She holds the BS degree from Langston University and a Masters of Public Administration from the University of Oklahoma. Strong-Anderson was employed as a personnel specialist for four years at Fort Sill and a personnel specialist and supervisor at Tinker Air Force Base for eleven years. She has served as Director of Personnel Services for the Oklahoma City Public Schools, and later for Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. In 1988, she was named Distinguished Alumna at the National Conference on Blacks in Higher Education. On her contributions as a Black woman, she writes, "I think one of the most important contributions I've made is establishing a revolving student loan fund at Langston University while I was Regional President of the Langston University Alumni Association and raising thousands of dollars through various fund raisers." On her greatest personal or career achievement, she observes that "I am a great believer in public education. I come from a family of educators. I feel I can and am making an important contribution to our current and future society through the actions we take on a day-to-day basis in Personnel that directly and indirectly impact on our future leaders and citizens."<sup>31</sup>

**Juanita Kidd Stout** was born 1919 in Wewoka. She was elected to the Philadelphia Municipal Court in 1959, the first Black woman in America elected to the bench. In 1988 Stout became the first Black woman to serve on a state supreme court. She was appointed by Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey. She received her BA degree in music from the University of Iowa in 1939 and taught in Seminole and Sands Springs. She went on to earn a law degree from Indiana University. She was admitted to the District of Columbia bar in 1950

and to the Pennsylvania bar in 1954. In 1965 she attracted national attention for supporting education and combating juvenile delinquency.

Within twenty-four hours of their arrest, she sentenced seven black youths accused of trying to rape a woman on the subway tracks to six years in prison. In the next two weeks, she sentenced 11 other youths charged with attempted rape or gang related crimes. When one gang retaliated with threats on her life, she ordered them rounded up. Two days later, she sentenced them to indeterminate terms in detention centers. Other gangs responded with bomb threats. 'She was an inspiration to all of us,' said Brenda Frasier Clemons, president of the Barrister's Association of Philadelphia. . . . 'As a native of Oklahoma, she represented the best of Oklahomans, with her pioneer spirit and the spirit of can-do and energy and optimism,' said Beverly McQueary Smith, president of the National Bar Association.<sup>32</sup>

Stout died in 1998.

**Joyce Carol Thomas** is a native of Ponca City, which is the setting for many of her award-winning books for children, teens, and adults. Poem collections include *Bittersweet* (1973), *Blessing* (1975), *Inside the Rainbow* (1982), *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea* (1993), *Gingerbread Days* (1995), *Blacker the Berry* (1997), *A Mother's Heart, A Daughter's Love* (2001) and *Crowning Glory* (2002). Other books are *Black Child* (1981), *Bright Shadow* (1983), *Golden Pasture* (1986), *A Gathering of Flowers: Stories about Being Young in America* (1990), *When the Nightingale Sings* (1992), *I have Heard of a Land* (1998), *Journey* (1998), *Cherish Me* (1998), *Marked by Fire* (1999), *You are my Perfect Baby* (1999), *Hush, Songs* (2000), *Bowlegged Rooster* (2000), *Gospel Cinderella* (2000), *Joy* (2001), *Angel's Lullaby* (2001), *House of Light* (2001), *What's the Hurry Fox?* (2004) and *Skull* (2004).

She was educated at Stanford University and taught for many years in the English Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She lives and writes in Berkeley, California.<sup>33</sup> She is the recipient of a 1982 American Book Award and the 2001 Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award by the Oklahoma Center for the Book.

**Freddye Harper Williams**, elected to the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 1980 and served until 1990, was born 1917 in Arkansas. Her family moved from Pine Bluff to Oklahoma City in 1931. A long-time employee of Tinker Field Air Force Base, she retired in 1975. Williams was the first Black woman elected to the Greater Oklahoma City Board of Education,

and the first Black woman president of a major Board of Education. She graduated from Douglass High School in Oklahoma City as Valedictorian and studied at the University of Oklahoma Extension School in Oklahoma City and the Air Force Institute of Technology, Gunther Air Force Base, in Alabama.<sup>34</sup> Williams died in 2001.

## TWO PORTRAITS

**Clara Luper** was born in Okfuskee County and educated in the segregated schools of Hoffman and Grayson in Okmulgee county. Her early memories include the sign in nearby Henryetta that said

Negro, read and  
run,  
If you can't read,  
Run anyway.<sup>35</sup>

She recalls using discarded white-school textbooks with missing pages, sitting at the back of trains, not being allowed to try on clothing in stores, exclusion from restaurants, libraries, bathrooms and phone booths.

Holding a BA from Langston University, she and another were the first Black students to enroll in the Social Studies Department at the University of Oklahoma where she received an MA. One professor told her he “had never taught a nigger and had never wanted to.”<sup>36</sup> She taught social studies in Taft, Pawnee, and Oklahoma City. Eventually she came to segregated Dunjee High School in Oklahoma City. In 1957 she wrote a play, “Brother President” which 26 Dungee students performed in various area venues before being invited to New York City.<sup>37</sup>

Luper decided to take the students to New York by the ‘northern route’ and return by the ‘southern route.’ In St Louis they experienced an integrated



Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Director Clara Luper leads a group of demonstrators in Lawton on June 11, 1966 to protest a segregation policy barring Blacks from the swimming pool at privately-owned Doe-Dee Park.

*Photo copyright, The Oklahoma Publishing Company, 1966.*

restaurant for the first time. Returning, they experienced segregated Tennessee, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Traveling by blacks was indeed a headache. If blacks traveled they'd have to carry their lunches, buy cold snacks at grocery stores, find all-black restaurants or eat at the back of a white restaurant if they could find one that would serve them.<sup>38</sup>

Back in Oklahoma City the students, with Clara Luper as their advisor, decided they would begin the integration of Oklahoma City eating establishments. On August 19, 1958 they headed to the downtown Katz Drug Store. Luper had trained the students, aged 7-15 years old, in non-violence. They would not respond to being spat on, cursed, or struck.<sup>39</sup> They would simply place a five dollar bill on the counter and ask for Cokes.

Blacks were to sweep around the seats, and keep them clean so whites could sit down. It didn't make any difference what kind of white person it was, thief, rapist, murderer, uneducated; the only requirement was that he or she be white ... Nor did it make any difference what kind of black you were, B.A. Black, M.A. Black, Ph.D. Black, rich Black, poor Black, young Black, old Black, pretty Black, ugly Black; you were not to sit down at any lunch counter to eat.<sup>40</sup>

After two days of sit-ins the Katz chain of 38 stores agreed to serve all



Clara Luper addresses those gathered for a Martin Luther King Day celebration.

*Photo copyright The Oklahoma Publishing Company, 2005*

persons. The children immediately went to the store across the street and began sit-ins there. The sit-ins continued until 1964 when Oklahoma City passed a public accommodation ordinance guaranteeing the end of segregated eating places. Along the way Clara Luper, her students and supporters, overcame the political establishment's insistence that the issue was private rights to serve whomever the owner wished to serve. It took about seven years but thanks

to Clara Luper, Oklahoma came to realize civil rights are more important than property rights. When she started there was tremendous opposition, even from African American integration pioneers.<sup>41</sup> By 1961 whites had joined the demonstrations. Actor Charlton Heston carried a sign in one of her demonstrations saying "Racial Discrimination is Un-American."<sup>42</sup>

Luper's next targets were the white churches, many of which did not allow Blacks to worship. Again, the sit-in tactic succeeded. Fair Housing was another target of demonstrations. Oklahoma City passed its housing ordinance in 1969. In 1972 Clara Luper ran for the Democratic nomination for Robert S. Kerr's old US Senate seat. She came in sixth in a field of eleven.

Luper is a hero in ending discrimination against Blacks in public accommodations. She has received over one hundred awards and citations and academic honors. She was the first Black Vice President of both the Oklahoma County Teacher Association and the Oklahoma City Social Science Teacher's Association.<sup>43</sup>

**Vicki Miles-LaGrange** was born 1953 in Oklahoma City. She graduated from Vassar College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1974 and from Howard University School of Law in 1977. She attended the University of Ghana. While in law school, she worked as a staff member in the Washington, D.C., office of Oklahoma Congressman Carl Albert. In 1986, she was elected to the Oklahoma State Senate. Upon her appointment in 1994, she became the first Black Federal judge in Oklahoma and in the six states that comprise the US Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. David Boren took that occasion to talk about Vicki Miles-LaGrange.

*Going to the Territory . . .* [Ralph Ellison's] remarkable series of essays talks about the essence of what it means to be an American . . . America is a place where each of us has the ability to create himself or herself anew without any limitation on the possibilities of achievement or personhood. The talent is found in the most unexpected places and courage is found in the most unexpected places and they are matched together to form great human beings . . . I would say if Ralph Ellison were still alive to hear our voices, I would say to him, Mr. Ellison, today, in some ways, the promise of the territories, that unbounded promise of possibility, has been redeemed and has been fulfilled and the circle has been drawn and completed in a very special way. . . She's a person who cares. She's an incorruptible person when it comes to commitment, to principles and fairness.<sup>44</sup>



Seventeen year old Girls' State Governor, Vicki Miles, seated in Governor Dewey F. Bartlett's chair while Bartlett and Mrs. Glenn Laughlin, Girls' State Director, stand by.

Minority Set Aside legislation, and was active on the Literacy Task Force, successfully sponsored AIDS education legislation and requirements for AIDS insurance coverage. She managed to pass legislation creating the Oklahoma Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Life Skills initiative — all in 1987. In 1988 she led the fight to keep the Confederate flag off the capitol grounds. She lost that one in the legislature but Governor Bellmon, at her urging, ordered it not be raised. She passed her Hate Crimes Bill. She passed legislation allowing AIDS notification for health care professionals while preserving patient confidentiality and legislation authorizing AIDS education in the schools.

Vicki Miles-LaGrange was born into segregation. Her parents taught in Oklahoma's segregated schools. She was a student leader at Bishop McGuinness High School and the first African-American elected Girl's State Governor. She was the state's first African-American female State Senator, an honor she shares with Maxine Horner.

As Senator from District 48, sixty-two percent African-American, with a median household income of \$28,682, she represented the concerns of her constituency tirelessly. Vicki Miles-LaGrange quickly rose to leadership in the Oklahoma State Senate. That meant she represented the entire state, not just her district, from her key positions as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and chair of the Legislative Black Caucus. She took the lead in



Senator Miles-LaGrange speaking on the floor of the Oklahoma Senate

Photo courtesy Vicki Miles-LaGrange



Vicki Miles-LaGrange led the charge for women's issues. Her legislation requiring insurance coverage of yearly mammograms for women 45 and older passed in 1988. Governor Bellmon signed her legislation making the state more aggressive in the hiring of women, African-Americans and other minorities. In 1989 she passed legislation expanding mammogram insurance coverage to women 35 and older. She led a task force advocating child care programs include an education component and sponsored legislation to provide funding. She sponsored legislation providing rural pre-natal care funding only to have it stalled by anti-abortion advocates. This was despite the fact her bill had nothing to do with abortion.

She sponsored Oklahoma's Family Leave Law in 1992 and also legislation making stalking a crime. No one passes legislation by themselves. But some people make a huge difference. Vicki Miles-LaGrange used her five years in the Oklahoma State Senate to create, support and further many of the benefits, protections, and rights women today take for granted.

President Clinton appointed her United States Attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma in 1993. She was the first African-American woman to hold that position. In 1994 the President and Senate made her the first African-American woman Federal judge in Oklahoma.

As a Federal judge, Chief Justice Rehnquist appointed her to the Judicial Conference Committee on International Judicial Relations. That brought her to Rwanda to help set up a justice system to deal with the aftermath of genocide.

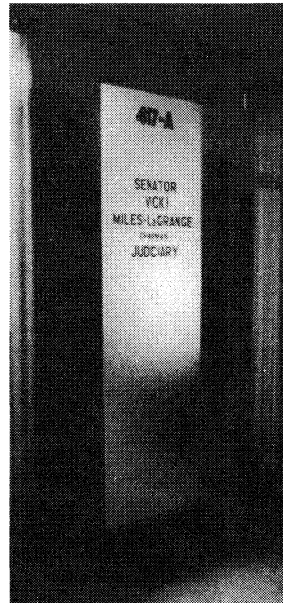


Photo courtesy V. Miles-LaGrange

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the Proposed State of Oklahoma Held at Guthrie, Oklahoma.* Muskogee Printing Company, Muskogee, Oklahoma, 1907, page 45.

<sup>2</sup>Linda Williams Reese. *Women of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997) 183.

<sup>3</sup>Reese. *Women of Oklahoma*:153; "What shall I do for a Livelihood," *Langston City Herald*, 7 September, 1895.

<sup>4</sup>Etta Perkins. 1984. *The Achieving Black Woman in Oklahoma, Past and Present.* Oklahoma City: Black Liberated Arts Center (no page numbers).

<sup>5</sup>Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *The Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980) 42-44.

<sup>6</sup>A community activist, Lamonia Outlaw McFarland was born in Mississippi. In Oklahoma, she graduated from Langston University. She taught for forty years and was the first Black elementary school principal in the Oklahoma City Public Schools. "Dedication McFarland Branch YWCA," June 2, 1968, 4-5.

<sup>7</sup>Franklin, *Blacks in Oklahoma*, 43; *Sooner Woman*, 5-6, 12, 26, 39, 44, 46-47.

<sup>8</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*; Franklin, *Blacks in Oklahoma*, 18-19.

<sup>9</sup><http://www.library.okstate.edu/scua/women/atkinsbi.htm>, accessed April 11, 2004

<sup>10</sup>Ralph Ellison. 1995. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison.* Edited by John F. Callahan. (New York: Random House):604 -606. See also Hannah D. Atkins. "Jazzmen," *Black History in Oklahoma*, Ed. By Kaye M. Teall (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Public Schools) 201.

<sup>11</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman.*

<sup>12</sup>Ray Robinson, "Win Claimed by Darrell." *Daily Oklahoman* September 22, 1982

<sup>13</sup>James Johnson. "Victory Makes Darrell Proud." *Daily Oklahoman* November 3, 1982.

<sup>14</sup>Robinson. "Win Claimed by Darrell."

<sup>15</sup>George Lynn Cross, *Blacks in White Colleges, Oklahoma's Landmark Cases* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 65. See also Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher. 1996. *A Matter of Black and White: The Autobiography of Ada Lois Fisher* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).

<sup>16</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*.

<sup>17</sup>"Author to sign copies of book on race riot", *Tulsa World*, Feb. 1, 2004, H10; "Race Riot work grabs `60 Minutes' attention", *Tulsa World*, May 23, 1999, Book Section, 5; Julie Bryant, Pioneers Settlers Looked to Tulsa as 'Promised Land', *Tulsa World*, Feb 18, 1998, 1; <http://www.tulsa-riot.com/TR/>, accessed April 10, 2004.

<sup>18</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*; "Longtime state educator dies at 91." *Daily Oklahoman* November 11, 2003:5A; "Giving all you had: Rubye Hall: A life well spent." *Daily Oklahoman* November 14, 2003:18A.

<sup>19</sup><http://region7.ou.edu/files/hardeman.pdf>, accessed April 10, 2004.

<sup>20</sup>Judy Gibbs Robinson. "Anita Hill finds success in New England: The former OU law professor has thrived since leaving the state." *Daily Oklahoman*, February 29, 2004, 6A.

<sup>21</sup>"Last Rites Today for Founder of Oklahoma Federated Clubs." *The Black Dispatch*, July 7, 1961. "A Great Woman Passes Away." *The Black Dispatch* July 7, 1961, 3. Will Strong, "The Origin, Development, and Current Status of the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women's Clubs" (EdD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1957) 55: *Sooner Woman*, 1980-1982, 9.

<sup>22</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*.

<sup>23</sup><http://www.lsb.state.ok.us/house/Members/hd73.htm>, accessed April 10, 2004.

<sup>24</sup><http://www.ardmoreite.com/stories/021598/news/news04.html>, accessed April 10, 2004.

<sup>25</sup>*Who's Who in America, 1982-1983*: "First Black Oklahoman to Sing at Met." *Black Dispatch*, December 18, 1975, 1; <http://www.leonamitchell.com/biography.htm>, accessed April 9, 2004.

<sup>26</sup><http://www.ncsl.org/standcomm/scbudg/testimony.pdf>, accessed April 9, 2004

<sup>27</sup><http://www.oksenate.gov/Senators/contact/monson.htm>, accessed April 9, 2004.

<sup>28</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*.

<sup>29</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*; <http://www.oucom.ohiou.edu/Phillips/phillips96.htm>, accessed April 10, 2004.

<sup>30</sup><http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Dorscine.S.Littles-1/>, accessed April 10, 2004.

<sup>31</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*.

<sup>32</sup>“Leukemia Takes Wewoka-Born Historic Judge.” *Daily Oklahoman* August 22, 1998 page 24; See also Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*.

<sup>33</sup><http://www.joycecarolthomas.com/biography.html>, accessed April 10, 2004

<sup>34</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*.

<sup>35</sup>Clara Luper. *Behold the Walls*. 1979 Jim Wyre, Oklahoma City, 43.

<sup>36</sup>Luper. *Behold the Walls*, 45.

<sup>37</sup>Luper. *Behold the Walls*. 2.

<sup>38</sup>Luper. *Behold the Walls*, viii.

<sup>39</sup>Luper. *Behold the Walls*, 8-9.

<sup>40</sup>Luper. *Behold the Walls*, 9.

<sup>41</sup>Luper. *Behold the Wall*, 26.

<sup>42</sup>Luper. *Behold the Walls*, 134-5.

<sup>43</sup>Perkins. *The Achieving Black Woman*.

<sup>44</sup>Transcript of Swearing In Ceremony, 25, 27



#### DID YOU KNOW?

Hannah Diggs Atkins became the first African-American woman elected to the Oklahoma legislature in 1968? (page 81 )

Zelia Page Breaux’s Oklahoma City Aldridge Theater offered the best Negro entertainers, great blues singers, dancers and comedians in the 1920s and 1930s? (page 83)

Clara Luper organized sit-ins to desegregate Oklahoma City eating establishments and churches in the 1950s? (page 92)

The great operatic soprano Leona Mitchell is from Enid? (page 88)

Vicki Miles-LaGrange was the first African-American woman in the State Senate (with Maxine Horner), the first African-American woman U.S. Attorney in Oklahoma and the first African-American woman Federal judge in Oklahoma? (pages 93-95)