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WILL Press Room

Monday, February 21, 2011



Illinois Pioneers 7:30 pm Thursday, Feb. 24

WILL-TV's **Illinois Pioneers** looks at African-American history in Champaign through the eyes of Estella Merrifield and Hester Suggs, sisters and members of the Nelson family, one of the earliest African-American families in Champaign.

Through their memories and photos, the program chronicles a portion of history from the Civil War through the

Civil Rights protests of the late 1960s.

They talk about their grandfather, Joseph Nelson, who around 1900 was one of the first African Americans in the Champaign County Sheriff's Department, and describe the importance of organizations such as the American Legion in the lives of African-American residents. Churches, such as Salem Baptist and Bethel AME, were all-important as well, they said.

"The black churches were not only the social hub of the community, but the educational hub of the community, the same position they still hold," said Suggs, a former Champaign school principal.

They also talk to host Rick Atterberry about the importance to the community of Albert R. Lee, the university's first black employee, who worked for the University of Illinois for 52 years through seven administrations. From a messenger boy in a university of 800 students, he advanced through the ranks to become Chief Clerk in the office of the university president. Lee helped black students find places to live with families in the community during a time when black students were not allowed to live on campus and encouraged them to stay in school, they said.

Funding for **Illinois Pioneers** – Champaign @ 150 is made possible, in part, by the Noel Foundation, and by donors to the Champaign 150th Anniversary Celebration Fund. More information on the city's 150th Anniversary is at champaign150.com.

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