

THROUGH THE YEARS

AFRICAN - AMERICAN HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

Spring/Summer 2000

THE SHELTON LAUNDRY 1934 - 1986

By Doris Hoskins as told by
Frances Shelton Moreland

From a humble beginning in 1934, the Shelton Laundry grew to a state of the art "business," spanning more than five decades.

Frances Shelton Moreland, 76, tells us her story:

"I was six months old when my parents, Arah Mae and Merritt Shelton moved to Champaign in 1923 from Covington, Tennessee. In Tennessee, they were farmers. In Champaign, Pop Shelton worked for the Illinois Central Railroad. Our first home in Champaign was in an area called 'Happy Hollow,' near the railroad tracks. From there we moved to Poplar Street (now called Phillips Drive) and from there we moved to 1206 West Eads Street in Urbana where the laundry actually started in the backyard and later in the basement. I had three sisters: Ethel Mae Shelton-Jones, Mary Shelton-Jones (both deceased), Martha Freeman and two brothers, Merritt, Jr. and Albert (deceased).

When the 'crash' of 1929 occurred, many families found themselves in dire financial crisis, and through the government subsidies offered, we would stand in line at a local site (a church at 5th and Vine) to receive our share of milk and other commodities. Because of disputes as to who was first in line, my mother felt that there must be a better way than this to help support our family, so she decided



Clockwise from top: Arah Mae Shelton, the mother who started the business; Shelton Laundry, circa 1965; Albert Shelton who bought the business from his mother; the original start-up equipment in the home, circa 1934.



to start taking in washings, in addition to doing laundry in the homes of families. Since there was no form of public transportation at that time, she had to walk great distances to and from those homes, so in 1934, she started bringing washings to our home. It was our (the children's) job to pick up and deliver the laundry, using an old-fashioned laundry basket with two handles. Our first family to do laundry for was Mrs. Morgan who lived on South State Street in Champaign. We graduated from a two-handled basket to a wagon to put the basket on to pick up and deliver. In the summer, Mother would do the washings on the back porch using the scrub board. The water was heated in a large black iron pot which her father

sent to her from Tennessee. She would heat the water by placing the large black pot on bricks and building a fire under it. In the winter, the water was heated on top of the coal stove and the washings were done in the kitchen as we had no basement to the house at that time. We used the old-fashioned flat irons that were heated on top of the stove to do the ironing, then we graduated to an iron that used kerosene and a pump to heat. Later on when we had electricity in the house, we were able to have electric irons and could do better work with the American Beauty Irons that weighed about 5 pounds. As income increased, Mother was able to have a basement dug and finished so we moved our laundry operations to the basement. We hung lines to dry clothes and did the ironing there.

Mother had a dear friend named Carrie Burks who joined us, so we left 1206

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West Eads and went to a vacant house on the corner of 6th and Vine Streets where they would do the laundry. This arrangement did not prove satisfactory to Mother so we went back to the basement at 1206 West Eads. Needing more space, we moved to 1408 West Eads where there was an old garage building which she converted into a laundry. She and my youngest brother Albert would go to Chicago to negotiate with dealers and purchase machinery. We had a wooden washer that was motor driven and mangles to sit down to use and hand irons. At that time, we were doing work for fraternities and sororities, plus McKinley Hospital and the Illini Union. In 1950, we had a terrible fire which destroyed the garage, but with the help of the insurance settlement, we were able to put up a cement block building. We had two more fires in 1953 & 54, but by it being built of block, the damage was confined to the ceiling and Mother rebuilt and we continued our business there until around 1965.

Because of the increase in clients, and the need for more space, Mother went to the Small Business Association in Chicago and was able to negotiate a loan of 1/4 million dollars. With that we purchased the building at 1104 North Goodwin Avenue in Urbana. We started expanding the business doing not only laundry for fraternities and sororities, but continued doing the sheets and linens for the Illini Union and McKinley Hospital. It was still a family business encompassing the help of all of us. In 1972, Albert, who was Acting President, purchased the business from Mother and was instrumental in getting large contracts from Chanute Air Force Base, Scott Air Force Base near Belleville, the U.S. Army's Fort Benjamin Harrison near Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Danville. Mother continued to work with us until her death in 1973. Having secured all of the large contracts, newer and more sophisticated equipment was bought — no longer was it necessary to measure soap and bleach — the computerized equipment took care of that. A new fleet of trucks with semis were added to



haul laundry to and from outside the Chicago area. At that time, Shelton's Laundry was labeled the largest Illinois Commercial Laundry outside of Chicago, Illinois. We were very proud of that distinction but never forgot that it came about because my mother was a very hard working individual who always wanted the best for her children. Albert always said, "You can't get anything without hard work." I've always said, "no pain, no gain." Pain entertains a lot of doing without in order to get. Mother didn't mind that because she knew how to sew, and made our clothes. That saved a lot. She was very frugal. Mother left us a legacy. It's your integrity, your honesty and how to put whatever it takes to put it together to make the most of it. She took an old black pot, a washboard and an old iron and turned it into a multimillion dollar business, so all the credit goes to my mother and father, Arah and Merritt Shelton. Father did his part even though he worked for the railroad. He died in 1972.

Our employees were a 'melting pot', made up of Africans, Hispanics, a young man from India (who later married into the family), African Americans and Caucasians. We were the first business to hire the "Boat People" from North and South Vietnam. Full wages and benefits were provided for all. There was a break room with the latest amenities, including a microwave. There were pop vending machines and a Canteen. Due to the fact that we had government contracts, unan-

nounced inspections occurred often, one inspector noted that our place of business was always "spic and span", and that the floor was clean enough to eat off of. Albert always insisted on it being that way.

In 1981, Albert was selected the 1981 Illinois Small Business Person by Phil Ramos, manager of the SBA's Springfield Office who said, "Shelton's accomplishments are a veritable Horatio Alger's story." Albert in return credited our mother's hard work beginning with a scrub board and big black kettle which sat in his office — a reminder of the firm's humble beginning. Albert's marriage to Verma McNair in 1955 formed the basis of a strong management team along with other family members. The business grew and began to penetrate the larger commercial markets. By that time our employees had grown to 75, the bulk of them Vietnamese and other minority individuals.

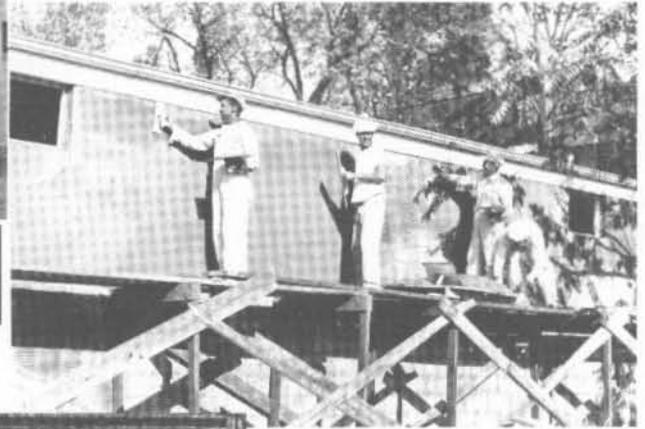
We did all bid work which included all the local hospitals. We lost one or two bids, but sometimes they came back.

In 1986, Albert found himself in a "bid war" in Indianapolis, Indiana. Out of that experience he was underbid and we lost many contracts, so the business began a downswing and we were forced to close the operation, and to declare bankruptcy. We chose Chapter 7 — instead of Chapter 13 — and by gathering

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Left and below: One of the most prominent black businesses in the county during the late 40's and fifties was Picken's Plastering. John Pickens, a skilled plasterer, was denied membership in the local union even though he held a valid union card from California. He decided to start his own nonunion business training members locally and recruiting black plasterers from Kentucky and Tennessee



Jordan's SANITARY BARBER SHOP
 BEST and most up-to-date in the Twin Cities—HAIRCUTS—MASSAGES
 PHONE MAIN 1459 36 MAIN STREET CHAMPAIGN



Many restaurants were operated as extensions to residences as shown in this photo of "The Leopard Room" which was located in the 400 block of Vine Street.

LUCILE CLARK'S
 HOME-MADE PIES
 DELIVERED
 1302 W. Dubl'n Street
 Urbana, Illinois

Shown are four advertisements for locally owned black businesses, circa 1920-1940's.

WE CUT AND SHAVE
 Specialize in All Grades of
 Hair—Women and Men
William M. Varnado
 411 East Tremont St.

FOOT TROUBLE? Dr. F. J. JORDAN Up-to-Date
 PHONE MAIN 1459 OVER 36 MAIN ST. CHAMPAIGN Private Office

Black Owned Businesses

By Erma Bridgewater

Just east of the Illinois Central Railroad tracks in the early 1900s was a triangle shaped area bounded by First Street on the east and Water Street on the west that contained businesses owned by members of the black community. They included restaurants and a pool hall. The Harris and Dixon Taxi Cab Company was located in this area as well and catered primarily to women who were cooks on the campus of the University of Illinois. These women had to be on the job at very early hours in the morning; however street cars were usually available to them in the evenings when they returned home from work.

Many hairdressers worked in their homes with other businesses located in homes as well. At this time there were no parking requirements for businesses. One such business was located at 503 E. Grove Street in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Will McDuff. It was known as the "Chicken Shack." It was open until late at night and was an ideal place to go after a party or dance. In the 600 block of Grove Street was a miniature golf course created in the back yard of a home across the street from what is now the Washington Grade School. It became a good place for young people to go on Sunday afternoon.

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all of our assets, we managed to pay off all of our bills. The building, which still stands at 1104 North Goodwin, was worth \$750,000, added to that our equipment helped us to clear all indebtedness. Our mother always taught us the value of honesty and integrity. To our family, the legacy ended here but we will always remember our status as the family who owned and operated "The Shelton Laundry" from 1934 to 1986 — more than five decades."



Early Occupations

From a transcript found at the Urbana Archives, the committee discovered the following occupations listed for African Americans in 1870: farm laborer, day laborer, barber, and teamster. Added to this list in 1878-79 were: pastor, cook, porter, mason, washwoman, gardener or yardman, janitor, farmer, waiter, and plasterer. By 1900: domestic, hair dresser, park and/or merchant police, coachman, drayman, wallpaper cleaner, bricklayer, carpet layer, white washer, and carpenter. By 1912 there were a significant number of listings with the Illinois Central Railroad. Several were listed as

proprietors of shoe shining shops, barber shops, and hairdressing salons.

Some common employers included: Doane House, Beardsley Hotel, St. Nicholas Hotel, St. James Hotel, Inman Hotel, Griggs House, Sigma Chi House, White Star Laundry, King Restaurant, Crescent Cafe, McCormick's Cafe, Big 4 Dining Car, Swanell and Son, Champaign Creamery Company, Champaign National Bank, and J.P. Grubb.

This is just a beginning, please send us your recollections of early Champaign County history.

Committee Seeking Photographs for Millenium Issue

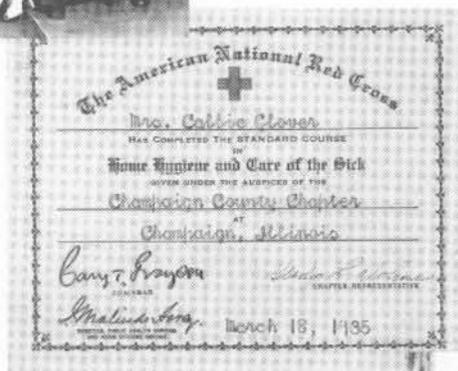
The Champaign-Urbana Convention & Visitors Bureau and the African American History Committee propose to publish a third newsletter this year and the success of this special printing will be totally dependant upon your support! This issue would offer a look at the African American experience in Champaign County through photographs that have been shared by members of the community like you. With your permission, this information will be added to a growing archive of Champaign County African American history and may well be featured in future newsletters!

Again, we need your help! We are looking for pictures that depict business and church happening and milestones, school activities, sports events, military and/or legion activities, social and fraternal club activities, or family and individual civic contributions. We encourage you to bring your pictures and any background information you might be willing to share with us to the Douglass Branch Library on Tuesday, May 16th from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. or to the NAACP Local Office at 310 E. Bradley in Champaign on Saturday, May 20th from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. If you no longer live in this area but have pictures and information you are willing to share, please contact any member of the committee or Cheryl Kennedy at the Early American Museum, 217/586-2612, to let us know you are interested. Thank You!!



Above: In 1935 black health females were trained and certified for Home Hygiene and Care of the Sick by the Champaign County Chapter of the Red Cross. This allowed them to go into homes and provide for the sick. Most of these women provided home services for wealthy white homebound or bedridden patients. Only in the major urban areas were Negro nurses given full nursing degrees. Minorities were not admitted to local nursing programs until the 1950's. This group was sponsored by the local black chapter of the Elks. They are seen here with Edgar Harris, an officer in the Elks, who was the editor and publisher of "The Illinois Times", the popular Black news weekly.

Below: This certificate of completion was discovered in papers of the late Callie Glover.



Right: The local black community played an active role in support of campus events. Students in the earlier years relied upon the "townies" as a support system. This group of women from all walks of life - domestics, maids, cooks, local mothers, and a few professionals - recognized the value of education and organized to supply this greatly needed service. ...circa 1941



A LOOK BACK...

*Through
the
Years*



**African-American History:
Today and Tomorrow**

The lifeline of any newsletter is the reaction of its readers. Please help us spread the word! Xerox and share this newsletter with others. Send your comments c/o Early American Museum, P.O. Box 1040, Mahomet, IL 61853 or phone 217-586-2612. If you live in Champaign County and would like to be included on our mailing list, please call 217-586-2612. More importantly, share in our mission by writing and sharing your reflections of our local history. We need YOU!

Visit our website at:
<http://www.prairienet.org/years>
and
<http://www.advancenet.net/~early>

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Champaign-Urbana Convention & Visitors Bureau

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BUSEY BANK
201 W. Main Urbana, IL 61801

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*Photos courtesy of Hester Suggs,
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