

REFLECTIONS

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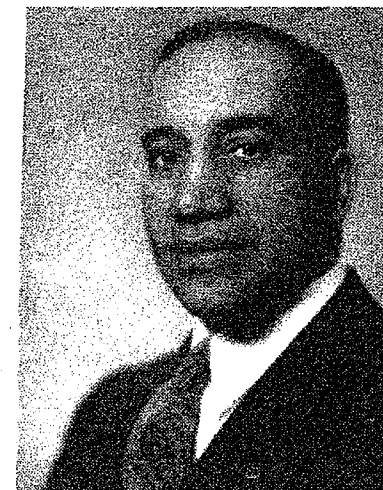
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Dedicated In Loving Memory



This memoir is dedicated to my parents. They have guided me through this adventure of life with a heavy but even hand on my shoulder and with love in their hearts. I am a product of their dreams, hopes, and love. Thus, the recording of my experiences is, in part, an embodiment of their hopes and dreams. This is a story of my life and times, as seen through my eyes.

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COLLEGE DAYS

Not many black youth have the opportunity to extend their education into college, though their families want them to go as far as possible. The cost of a college education is the greatest deterrent for most blacks, even though more scholarships are available for blacks now than ever before.

My parents were determined that my sister Eileen and I would attend college. We would be the first generation in our immediate family to do so, other than my Aunt Susie. My sister was one year ahead of me and went to the University of Illinois. In my latter years in high school, I started to give some thought to what college I would like to attend. I had developed an interest in the University of Michigan, and as I gave more thought to college and read more about it, I decided it was where I wanted to attend. However, as time passed, I recognized that I needed to reevaluate my choice. I realized that my parents were having a difficult time financially because of their support for my sister. Eventually, I decided against the University of Michigan because of the drain that the extra out-of-state tuition would put on my parents. However, my parents insisted that I continue to plan to go there, even if at the University of Illinois I would be paying about one tenth the tuition.

I talked to my friend, Bob Kelly, who had not made up his mind as to which of the many scholarships offered him he would accept. As we talked about school and the costs, I told him I had finally decided on

the University of Illinois. When I decided on the University of Illinois, Bob decided he would go there also. My friend Warren St. James, a year ahead of me in school, had gone to the University of Illinois his first year, but transferred to Southern Illinois University in his second year. My friends, Harrison and Robert, had already committed to go to Bradley University in Peoria.. Herschel also decided on the University of Illinois. Because so many of my friends would be at the University of Illinois or nearby, my decision was made for me, I would go to the University of Illinois.

After learning of my sister's first-year experiences in college, I felt I was ready for college, though I was somewhat apprehensive about it. During the summer before beginning college, I worked to earn some money toward my costs. I knew that my parents would be struggling to put my sister and me through school at the same time, and I was determined not to be dependent on them, if possible. I thought that I could find a job while at the university to help pay my expenses.

My parents were as elated as we were about our preparation for college. It was a road that they did not have the opportunity to travel. When it came time to report to the university, my mom, my sister, and I got on the interurban train for Champaign. The interurban was an electric-powered train, like the commuter trains of today, that served many of the smaller towns in Illinois not served by the major railroads. The interurban, an important segment of the transportation industry all over America, was often referred to by the youngsters as the "Tooterville Trolley," after the popular comic strip of the time. It connected Springfield to Peoria, Decatur, Champaign, and other cities as far south as St. Louis. It was a pleasant hour's ride to Champaign. The trains were usually packed with passengers traveling to and from the many cities of Central Illinois. It is sad that passenger trains as well as these commuter trains have disappeared from the American scene. They provided an important service to a lot of people.

On my sister's recommendations, my mom and my dad had made arrangements for me to room at the Wells House, a boarding house for boys next door to the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority house (AKA House), where my sister stayed. Ms. Wells and my mom knew each other from their activity in the Colored Women Clubs of Illinois. We arrived on campus and went to the Wells House. I deposited my bags and went over to the AKA house to help my sister get situated, and to meet some of the girls who also were first years students. While at the AKA House, I met George and Arnold Cisco of Greenville (a small town near Alton, Illinois). My mom also knew the parents of the Cisco brothers through the Colored Women's Club. George was in graduate school and Arnold was a senior at the university. After chatting for a while, the Cisco boys decided that I needed to be at the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity house (the Kappa House). They immediately went over to the Wells House and picked up my bags and carried them over to the Kappa House. Though Mrs Wells was disappointed that I was not staying at her house, she understood how fraternities and sororities recruited new students so she approved. She always had more applicants than rooms, I never had a chance to sleep one night at the Wells House. I met the fellows at the Kappa House who already had arrived and was made welcome by all the brothers. George Cisco had a car and graciously took my mom to the interurban station to make the train for Springfield. Once she was on the train, I realized that I was on my own for an extended period for the first time in my life, but the friendships that had been developed that first day eased the pain somewhat. This was the first of some of the greatest days of my life. The future was before me.

My friend, Bob Kelley, who had accepted a track scholarship at the University had arrived on campus about one week before me and had also committed to stay at the Kappa house. When I arrived at the Kappa house, I was assigned as a roommate of Bob during our first year, because of our previous relationship. Bob continued to excel in track in his first

year. He later became captain of the University of Illinois track team and was elected to the University's prestigious "I-Men" organization.

During our first year, Bob married his high school sweetheart, but she remained in Springfield when he was at the university. Unfortunately, the marriage lasted only two or three years. After college and after serving in the Navy in World War II, Bob took a job with Pabst Brewing Company as a salesman in Chicago. When I went to Chicago to work after the war, we renewed our friendship. Bob and his second wife, Christine, and I have remained close over the years and frequently see each other, or at least talk on the telephone, and we have a lot of mutual friends. We have taken several vacation trips together as well as trips with a group of our university friends.

As I settled into the Kappa House, I learned that nearly all of the fellows had an opportunity to work at various sorority or fraternity houses as waiters to earn their meals. I had not known this when I had decided on the U of I, but I did want a job to help my parents with expenses so I decided to become a waiter. Thus, the only major expense was tuition, rent at the Kappa House, and for my incidentals. At the time I enrolled, tuition for state students was less than fifty dollars per semester. At this time, nearly all of the white fraternity and sorority houses had dining halls. Since there were very few dormitories available, most students stayed in fraternity or sorority houses, or in private homes or apartments. Students in private homes ate at local restaurants or had to do their own cooking. Being able to earn my board was a great savings.

After the students in the upper classes arrived for the beginning of school, the waiters' assignments were discussed. The returning students who had worked as waiters the previous year had a choice of assignments. The number of waiters at each house was dependent on the needs of the fraternity or sorority house. However, since the Kappa House graduates had left vacancies for new students, I was given a position as a waiter at a fraternity house in the next block. This was my first job as a waiter so I

had to learn the technique. The veterans always helped us so that within a few days we could handle the job with the best of them.

Because we all had classes to get to on time, there was no formality in waiting tables, other than getting the food out as fast as possible. We served three meals a day and were paid for our services with three meals of our own. Some Kappa members also served as dishwashers. No one in the Kappa House went without a meal if he wanted to work. Sometimes, members would bring a plate home for someone who did not work or was unable to work that day. Many of the students in the fraternities and sororities where we worked were also in our classes. Frequently, we would exchange notes or discuss examinations or assignments. The result of this relationship between ourselves and the members of the fraternities and sororities was always quite cordial.

Often, during the year, the head waiter at the Champaign Country Club would ask for some waiters to help on special events at the country club, nearly always on the weekends. Because we got paid for our services, the extra money was welcomed. These jobs occurred often enough to provide the money I needed for incidentals or the movies. We always took several empty milk jugs with us to the country club. As diners requested drinks, we would order from the bar several more drinks than needed and poured the extras into the milk jugs. The milk jugs contained a mixture of everything but beer or wine. We took these jugs home and enjoyed the rest of evening getting soused with the rest of the house members.

At this time and in the past, the university had a large contingent of black students from St. Louis and the surrounding area. Missouri, like most of the southern states, did not permit blacks to attend public colleges and universities but did pay for their tuition to go out of state. Since the University of Illinois was close, many blacks from St. Louis attended the university. Many were residents of the Kappa House. Also, there were a few black students from other Southern states, primarily in graduate school. This policy of discrimination by the state of Missouri

and other southern states changed only in recent years, after Civil Rights legislation was enforced.

The Kappa House was located ideally on campus. At 707 South Third Street between Green and John Streets, it was a part of what was known as "Fraternity Row." I am unaware of how the Chicago alumni chapter bought this house, but it was good decision. For a black fraternity house to be so located was a real "steal." The house was located about four blocks from the quadrangle that served as the heart of the campus. Green Street was the main "drag" of the campus, which was centered around Green and Wright streets. The stadium and gym were about three blocks away and the library about five, as was the College of Engineering buildings. Not far from the library and gym was the ice-skating rink, where I spent many hours. Many years after I graduated, and as the university built dormitories, the number of members who stayed at the Kappa House declined, and the fraternity eventually closed the house and sold it. The Kappas later bought a fraternity house even closer to campus, across the street from the Armory and a block from the library. However, after a shooting incident during a house party, the university closed that house and it was later sold.

As a resident of the Kappa House, I was obligated to pledge Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity. Of course, when I went to college, I knew very little about fraternities, and any information I had came primarily from my sister, who had pledged the AKA sorority. The fraternity pledges met each Sunday and new house assignments were made for the following week. Each pledge had a specific duty in the house, such as cleaning the common rooms, the house library, and washing windows or doing anything else assigned to us. It was a three-story house with about 11 rooms and a dormitory area which had to be cleaned.

At the time I pledged, the fraternity and the university permitted the use of paddles. The Big Brothers liked to use them for any violation of assignments. To avoid the Big Brothers and the paddles, the pledges spent most of their time at the library. In the evening, during study

hours, all pledges had to go to their rooms to study. None of the Big Brothers interfered with the study time of the pledges, and they were always helpful to the pledges if they had taken the same course. Usually about 11 o'clock, a Big Brother would send a pledge to the corner to the Steak 'N Shake for late-night snacks. This was a break from the constant studying and gave us a chance to get out of the house. Each pledge was assigned to run this errand for a week. There were about 12 pledges in the house at the time, so this duty was well distributed. For a black student at this time in American history, the black fraternity was a needed support, and golden parachute.

All houses on campus had to have a house supervisor, male or female, who was responsible for ensuring that the house was run in accordance with the rules of the university. Even owners of rooming houses had to comply with the rules and standards of the university. Dr. Harry Ellis, the Kappa House supervisor, was a local physician who was single and had the time to provide the supervision necessary. At the time, he was the only black physician in the Champaign-Urbana area. A member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, "Doc," as he was called by all the members of the house, was an interesting fellow. He was a member of Jehovah's Witness and had a good grasp of world events which we all enjoyed discussing and arguing with him. He was respected by all who came in contact with him. Doc provided encouragement and motivation to those who stayed at the Kappa house. He always checked on everyone's academic progress.

I will never forget the time of his death during the final exam week of my senior year. Doc was in his mid-sixties at the time. Someone called an ambulance for him and I recall the look on his face as the rescue squad loaded him into the ambulance. He looked as though he was saying this was his last ride, which it was. Doc Ellis died the next day from his short bout with cancer. He touched many lives and will always be remembered as a beacon for those who lived in the Kappa House.

I had met several of the local families and students before enrolling at the university. These were wonderful families who welcomed the students with open arms. Among them were the Pope, the Hines, and the Nelson families. They have remained lifelong friends and I frequently stop by to see them today whenever I visited in the area, even though some of their children and my classmates have moved away.

The black students on campus frequently shared with each other. If a fellow did not have money for the movies, the date would willingly pay, or we would go "dutch." This behavior was part of our golden parachute of college life. As expected, several relationships that developed at the university did end up in marriage. Another remarkable feature of my stay at the university was the large number of brother and sister combinations that were there. I knew of at least six or eight brother-sister combinations among the black students there at the same time, which made the campus more like a family situation for the black students.

Academically, my freshman year was a success. Prior to being assigned classes, all freshman had to take a battery of placement tests. As a result of these tests, I was excused from the first course in English (or Rhetoric, as it was called), and I was enrolled in Writing. In Mathematics, I was excused from the beginning courses and was enrolled in Analytic Geometry, a course prior to Calculus. These results attested to the quality of my high school education and made me proud. My grades during the first year were good, and I was pleased in that I performed on par with my sister. This was reassuring to me and my parents, since I did have some reservations about the burden of college studies. One of the surprises I encountered was the large number of students that were enrolled in the introductory lecture courses, some of which contained as many as 500 students. Initially, these large classes overwhelmed me.

The one course I thoroughly disliked was the ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corp) course that was required of all male students. My dislike of the Army had been instilled in me by my dad. We had to

put on a uniform, which I disliked because of its association with the Army. We spent more time in drills, marching, and military history than anything else. We did learn to clean and take care of our rifles, and were introduced to military strategy and first aid. This class was at one o'clock and I would come home at lunch, put on the uniform, rush to class, and go home immediately after class to take the uniform off. The officer in charge of my battalion was none other than Welton Taylor, who lived in the Kappa House. He did not give me any slack in the class, and it seemed that he always critiqued my appearance more than others. I thought that because I would shine and polish his army boots that he would give me some consideration, but to no avail. Nonetheless, Welton was a wonderful guy, and though he was hard on me, I greatly respected him as a ROTC officer and admired him as a Big Brother in the Kappa House. He was a senior and stayed another year to pursue his Master's degree in bacteriology. He frequently talked with me about taking four years of military science but I was determined to finish the two required years and be through with it.

After the start of World War II, the university required all male students to enroll in a course entitled Military Athletics. This course, meeting three times a week, consisted of physical training for possible future duty in the military. We had to run an obstacle course about once a week, perform many physical military activities, do a fixed number of push-ups and pull-ups each day, and run a mile under a fixed time. One had to continue training to run the mile and complete the obstacle course in a given time until one met the time standards. This was a good course but it was rough.

My sophomore year was my disastrous year. As a sophomore, I thought I had everything under control. I missed classes for the first time in my life and, on many days, spent hours at the Student Union playing bridge. My academic performance slipped, and I was ashamed of my performance. This was my wake-up call. I vowed that this would not happen again.

One of the highlights of my academic career at the university was the Lyceum. This was an organization of black students and local young people who met at the Bethel AME Church on Park Street at 4th street. We discussed many current items of interest to black youths. It was always a well-attended meeting, even by the town's young people. The Lyceum met once a month on a Friday evening. Although many issues were on the agenda, most focused on the discrimination of blacks and the role of the student and the community. Most of the discussions pertained to national concerns and only infrequently to some local theme. The agenda was always well planned. The leader of the Lyceum during my freshman year was Walter Black, a truly wonderful person who was a senior Law School student and a member of the Kappa House. After he left the university, the Lyceum fell apart without his leadership and was discontinued. Later, Walt became affiliated with one of the most prestigious law firms in Chicago.

A highlight of the school year among the black students was the annual Kappa Ball in May. The house was always well-decorated with fresh flowers which the pledges had cut from people's yards at night. We knew we should not do this but most residences around our house were for student housing and our fellow students were too busy to note what we were doing. As I think back on this activity, I realize that we would have been in serious trouble if we had been caught. The decoration of the house was a responsibility of pledges and new initiates, and every spring we tried to outdo the previous year's decorations. Everyone on campus wanted to attend, so the place was always packed. We all had a great time. Other notable social events on campus were the Sadie Hawkins Dance hosted by the AKAs, the Homecoming Dance sponsored by the university, and other Homecoming dances sponsored by the sororities or fraternities. Although I never attended the University Homecoming Dance because it was too expensive, many black students did attend, particularly in their senior year. However, whenever the university had some outstanding band such as Duke Ellington or Count Basie, students

could buy cheaper tickets to sit in the upper level stands and listen, but these tickets did not allow them go down to the dance floor.

Another mischievous activity that many of us engaged in (but should not have) was at the U of I drugstore. A small restaurant counter was located at one end of the store. Students would often go in the store and buy a Coca-Cola and then sneak out without paying the check. We would then return at lunch or in the evening and have a meal that was much more expensive and pay with the Coke check. For the black students who were short on money, this scam worked quite well for many years. Luckily, no one ever got caught. The drugstore finally rearranged the restaurant area and the cashier counter so that it was impossible to skip out on a check.

Throughout our Junior year, students worried a lot about the war in Europe, and whether the United States would get involved. As time moved on, it was obvious that the country would become involved and the question became when, not if, we would join the fray.

The day of December 7, 1941 is quite vivid in my mind. It was a Sunday afternoon (about 2:00 p.m.) when we came home from the dinner meal we served at the fraternity or sorority houses to learn about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was a beautiful sunny day but when we heard the news, gloom settled over the house because we all knew what it meant for us. Many of us would be drafted and there was the possibility that some of us would not return. (As it turned out, several fellows who were there that Sunday were drafted and did not return). Although we had kept track of the war in Europe, the fact that the United States was in it presented a different implication. I don't think anyone did any studying that day. Instead, the Brothers and Pledges spent the afternoon and evening discussing the prospect for each of us and listening to the news reports as they came on the radio. President Roosevelt's words, "A day of infamy," were broadcast several times during the rest of the day. Those words and the day will always

remain in my memory. The gloom on campus was equally prevalent in other fraternities and sororities and in classes the next day.

The rest of the school year was made sober by the reaction to the war and how it would affect the male students. Before the school year was over, it was obvious that many men were no longer around. There was a veil of solemnity on campus.

The following year, a large Navy ROTC unit came to the campus for training and education. The university had built a large dormitory for students for the first time, but the Navy ROTC unit was the first to occupy this dormitory. The presence of the large Navy ROTC unit had an impact on the campus, for it brought the war to us.

When I returned to school in September, my senior year, the conversations focused on those who had been drafted. Although we maintained contact with many former students, we were all very glum as we read or heard about the war. Even many other fraternity houses had closed for lack of members. One bright spot of the war was that as students were drafted before the semester ended, they were refunded their full tuition. With some of the funds of the draftee, we celebrated by buying liquor and partying. Although we were saddened by the departure of a student, we enjoyed the excuse to enjoy our last fun time together. Like others, I had a difficult time focusing on my studies, feeling that I would be drafted soon after school. I was uncertain of what I would do now that the war had changed my thoughts about so many things. I decided to take my II-A classification, find a job, and wait for what was destined for me.

Since the war in Europe and Southeast Asia occupied everyone's mind and actions, the impact of graduation was greatly curtailed. The once-solemn ceremony was transformed into a limited program, emphasizing the 100 or more Naval ROTC graduates. As expected, very few male students were in this university graduating class. For my parents, my degree was an important achievement, but for me it was about my concern for the future. Most families and students were

disappointed with the abbreviated ceremony but recognized that these were war years.

I was let down with the event because of the emphasis was on the war. There were about a thousand graduates and we did not march across the stage to receive our diploma or have our names called. We simply were recognized as a group by the various colleges. I was glad when it was over. For me, graduation was the culmination of a long effort and I needed what we call today, "closure."

The university, established in 1868, had grown to be the largest employer in the Champaign-Urbana area. There were only a few industries, primarily related to farming or servicing the university. The university had been located in the heart of the agricultural belt of Illinois to serve the farming industry primarily, but it has since grown to serve many other needs and has become a large well-known research and academic institution. The Agricultural School, in particular, has grown to become one of the more prestigious in the country.

The black community of Champaign was referred to as the "North End." As its name implied, the area was located in the north part of Champaign and was no different from any other black community. As usual, the black community was separated physically from the rest of the town by railroad tracks. Many of the blacks worked for the University or as custodial workers or cooks at the fraternity or sorority houses, and there were a few black administrative personnel. Many of the young townspeople were jealous of the college students and strained relationships often existed between us. "Townies" felt that the college students considered themselves better than them. This rift was never overcome. However, the older people in town accepted the college students and welcomed us to their churches and events, and even invited us for meals on weekends. Because of my relationships with some of the young people formed when I was a member of the youth group at our church, I welcomed the opportunity to venture into the North End. A few members of the Kappa House occasionally went to the North End

on weekends to a dance hall on North Third street to dance and mingle with the townspeople, but for the most part the two groups of young people remained separated.

It should be noted that among the black businesses in town was the Royal Cleaners, located in the heart of the campus on Green Street near Wright Street. The Royal Cleaners was owned and operated by a black family, the Chavous family, who also rented apartments above the cleaners to students. The major part of their business was from the university. During her first year on campus, my sister stayed in an apartment owned by the Chavouses, and as a result, I got to know the family quite well. They were well respected in the university community, and extremely helpful to the black students.

The stores and businesses surrounding the campus did not discriminate and this probably was due in a large measure to the policy and pressure of the university. It should be noted that some of these businesses that had companion stores in the downtown area did discriminate at those stores.

The black college students sometimes frequented the First Street Tavern, which was also black-owned, and located in the downtown area. However, on campus there were two other taverns we frequented, Prehn's which had a place in Champaign just a block from campus and another place in Urbana that was situated in an area of many sorority houses and was about a block from the eastern side of the quadrangle. There was a movie theater on Green Street near the campus, which students most often frequented, primarily because it was cheaper than the downtown theaters, but had first rate films..

It was while at the university that I was introduced to blatant discrimination at the Steak 'N Shake restaurant that was located on the corner down from the frat house at Third and Green streets. We often went in to buy fast food to take out and never experienced any problems. However, when we went in to sit down to eat, the manager would tell us the place was closed. He would then turn out the lights as though the

place was closed. Later we staged a sit-in, which caused a mild ruckus. The store manager tried to oust us by turning out the lights. After several instances of this sort, we finally went to Fred Turner, the Dean of Students, and complained. He investigated the situation and in a few days we were told that we would be served. While we weren't told what had transpired, we believed the Dean of Students had negotiated the change. For this action, I have always had a great deal of respect for Dean Turner and the black Assistant to the Dean, Albert Lee.

This incident was the motivating force for many of the black students to join the Westminster Youth Group and to ferret out racism and discrimination on and near the campus. This group was a small but an active interracial student group sponsored by the large Westminster Presbyterian Church, located near to the campus. I do not know when the group was formed but it was active when I arrived on campus. This group was instrumental in resolving many issues of discrimination on campus and readily approached university officials or departments to address unacceptable practices. Many black students became university student officers as a result of the activity of this group

There were a large number of friends that I met at the University of Illinois with whom I have remained close and whose friendships I treasure. These are Bert Piggott, Leo Williams, Arnold and George Cisco, Walter Black, Welton Taylor, Phil Harris, Cecil Pope, Larry Carroll, Ralph Gardner, Leslie Bond, Ted Cruzat, Don Johnson, Zedric Braden, Tom, Anthony, and Marion Mayo, Ike Owens, William and Wilbur Tuggle, Bill Pope, Don Ryder, Lloyd Lewis, Leslie Henriques, Phil Turner, Claude "Buddy" Young, Lyman Young, and George Younge. These friends were residents of the Kappa House during my stay. We get together from time to time, though we live miles apart. I could write a whole chapter recalling some of the pleasant moments and amusing incidents that I had with some of these college friends and others. Of course, as the years have passed, several of these friends

have died. I miss seeing them and talking about the good times we had together in college. They have been wonderful, long time friends.