‘Out of the gloomy past, ‘til now we stand at last’ — Negro National Anthem

Bryce Harper

A mural of Dr. James Lee Dickey hangs stately above many historic exhibits at the Williamson Museum. Dr. Dickey, Williamson County’s first black physician, was a crusader of change in Taylor by helping quell the 1933 typhoid epidemic, and establishing the black community’s first park.

deep roots

Filling in WilCo history

By JAMAAL E. O'NEAL

It's a legacy steeped in triumph and tragedy, yet for the black residents of the county, taking a peak into the past has laid the groundwork for a rich future.

February is Black History Month, and as the month nears its end, residents of all different colors, creeds and walks of life are learning more about a number of influential blacks who helped shape, grow and nurture what has become the Williamson County of today.

Black History Month

Americans have recognized black history annually since 1926, first as "Negro History Week" and later as "Black History Month," thanks to Carter G. Woodson.

Mr. Woodson, who was born to the parents of slaves in Tennessee,

Photos submitted by the Williamson Museum

The late Dr. James Lee Dickey with wife Magnolia and son James Jr.

was disturbed to find in his studies that history books largely ignored the black American population, and when blacks did figure into the picture, it was generally in ways that reflected the inferior social position they were assigned at the time, according to U.S. history texts.

However, because of the tumultuous period in American history when many blacks were discriminated against, shut out and even killed in their struggle for civil rights, many of the events and times blacks shared during that period have gone unrecorded.

Williamson County is no exception.

"Unfortunately we just don't have a lot of documents or artifacts that chronicle the events of black life in the county," said Chris Dyer, director of the Williamson Museum. "Some of it has to do with the fact that we are a young museum, but it also has to do with the fact that during that time, many blacks were afraid to comment, report or even record what happened to them because they just knew nothing would be done about it."

In the beginning

In a state and county where cotton was king, Mr. Dyer said many of the first black settlers in Williamson County were slaves of early white pioneers, many of whom settled in the eastern half of the county.

"Many settled near the Hutto and Taylor areas because that area was heavily agricultural with cotton growth," Mr. Dyer said. "As cotton growth continued, the slave population also grew."

Before the Emancipation Proclamation, Williamson County's slave population swelled from around 500 to 1,600 slaves, Mr. Dyer said. Once slaves were granted their freedom, some chose to migrate north to the U.S. cities of Chicago and Detroit in search of life that didn't involve picking cotton or handling cattle, but many decided to stay in the area.

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Georgetown's Carver High School football team taken in 1962 before the city's schools were integrated. Like many southern schools during integration, many of Carver's school traditions were lost upon integrating with students at nearby Georgetown High School.

HISTORY

Award to black doctor makes headlines

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"I think that is why you see a larger black population in the eastern half of the county," Mr. Dyer said. "It's also probably why a lot of the county's influential black leaders and events came from East Williamson County."

Taking a stand

One of the most prolific trailblazers in Williamson County's black history was the late James Lee Dickey, of Taylor.

"Dr. Dickey came to Taylor around the early 1920s and was the only black doctor in Williamson County," Mr. Dyer said. "He was originally from Waco and he later attended MeHarry Medical School, a black medical school In Nashville. Apparently he wanted to move north and east to practice medicine, but came back to Taylor to take care of his family."

Recognizing the many needs of the black community in Taylor, Mr. Dyer said, Dr. Dickey quickly worked his way into the hearts of Taylor residents — and wrote himself into the history books.

"He was a very caring and important person to the black residents of that community," Mr. Dyer said. "He really worked hard to help improve the living conditions of blacks, and place their needs on an elevated level."

During the typhoid epidemic of 1933, Mr. Dyer said, Dr. Dickey administered 3,000 injections — many free of charge — to black families that couldn't afford the inoculation. He also rallied to get Taylor's black community its first park, and highlighted many other challenges facing Taylor's black residents.

"Blacks weren't even allowed to go to the movies in Taylor," Mr. Dyer said. "Dr. Dickey basically told officials that the black residents needed more to do than work and go to church...that lead to some real changes."

Dr. Dickey's work was not without notable recognition.

In the 1950s, years before Jim Crow discrimination and the fight to end injustices behind the laws would become the top news story of every newspaper and television station from Austin to Alabama, Dr. Dickey was named Taylor's Citizen of the Year by the Anglo Chamber of Commerce.

It would become a headline spread across the nation.

"We're talking about an award given to a black doctor during a time when blacks were treated poorly and openly discriminated against," Mr. Dyer said. "That speaks a lot to his servitude to the black community and seeing them thrive and grow."

Dr. Dickey's work would not be in vain.

In Round Rock, Garfield McConico would become the city's first city black councilman in 1969, helping build some of the city's earliest subdivisions. He would also be elected for the next eight years, during which time he became an important part of Round Rock's future expansion.

A time for reflection, reaction

The Civil Rights era took on different meanings for Joel and Beverly Russeau, of Georgetown, a couple that grew-up on opposite sides of the Mason-Dixie Line.

Mr. Russeau, a Jacksonville, Florida, native, said discrimination and racism were alive and well in his community,

Photo submitted by the Williamson Museum

The Dickey Clinic, established in 1935 in Taylor, served many black families during the years of segregation.

The State of Texas
Williamson County Know all men
by these presents that I have this day
sold to Rollin Forbes a Sixteen Negro
Boy named Miles for Sixteen Hundred
Dollars the Receipt of which is hereby
acknowledged and I warrant the Title
against all lawful claims and I further
warrant him to be sound in body and
mind

Jan 2nd 1864

A. C. Pierce

Bryce Harper

A slave bill of sale on display at the Williamson Museum highlights the transaction of black slaves in the county. By 1864, Williamson County was home to more than 1,000 slaves, many of whom toiled in cotton fields and on ranches across the county.

especially when the Duval County School System were facing integration in 1970.

"It really wasn't the kids as much as it was the parents," Mr. Russeau said. "They just weren't having it, and in return that trickled into the schools…it was a very difficult time for many people of color."

But for his wife, it was the exact opposite.

"I grew up in Baltimore so I never really felt discriminated against," said Ms. Russeau, a former branch chief of economic analysis for the Air Logistics Center at Kelly Air Force Base. "When I entered high school, it was already integrated, so we didn't have any of the problems they had down south…but we heard about them."

The Russeaus, like many of the Baby Boomer generation, were witnesses to changes sweeping the nation and were aware of the outcome it could have for young blacks across the country.

"It was equalizing the playing field," said Mr. Russeau, a retired Hewlett Packard hardware development engineer. "There were no more excuses."

After graduating from high school, Mr. Russeau became the second black student to enroll in the University of Central Florida's engineering program, trailblazing the way for other students to follow in his footsteps.

"It was difficult because everyone was watching you, trying to see what you would do," Mr. Russeau said. "But I made it."

According to the latest 2008 U.S. Census Bureau data, more than 22,000 black residents call Williamson County home — and the numbers continue to grow.

Like many of the cultures that make the region its current melting pot, blacks have been interwoven into the history of Williamson County as doctors, lawyers, educators, business owners, religious leaders, local representatives and city officials.

Leaders like Ron Swain, senior adviser to the president at Southwestern University, and former nine-term Taylor mayor and current city councilman Donald R. Hill continue to light the way for future black leaders in the county.

The Russeaus said the next hurdle for blacks, as they reflect on Black History Month, is to take the steps necessary to empower themselves financially, and to take responsibility for their actions.

"I think Bill Cosby was right to jump on some of these black parents and teens about being responsible adults and young adults," Ms. Russeau said. "It starts at home, and as a people, we need to remember that. People are always going to judge us harder, so we have to have the whole package if we're going to be successful and be taken seriously as a people."

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