

## ***Della Mae Lewis Jones***

**Della Mae Lewis Jones was born in Williamstown, Grant County, Kentucky, on July 7, 1903, the only daughter of Richard and Sarah Elizabeth Jackson Lewis. Her father was a very religious and gentle person who never whipped or scolded her. He had a quiet way and would just throw his hat at her and she would immediately stop whatever she was doing.**

**She attended the Williamstown Colored School which was located on Short Street, off Cynthiana Street down the road from the slaughter house. Emma Blanton was Della's grade school teacher. When Della completed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, all students had to take an exam in order to attend high school. So Della went to the Williamstown Court House and took her exam. She was the only black person to take the test. The examiners for the exam were Ben Harrison, Mrs. Price and Mrs. Gray. She passed her exam and began high school in Cincinnati, Ohio where she lived with her Aunt Grace Drew for 3 years until her aunt moved away. At first Della didn't know how she would finish high school, however, an educator named Dean Smith, who was starting Lincoln Institute in Shelby County, Kentucky, had come through Williamstown recruiting students and stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, Della's parents. He left a pamphlet on the school. Della wrote to Dean Smith and told him she wanted to attend his school. She was accepted and graduated from Lincoln Institute, Shelby County, Kentucky in 1923.**

**She began her teaching career in 1924 in a segregated one room rural school in Monticello, Wayne County, Kentucky which is located in the south central part of Kentucky. She cried herself to sleep at night because she was away from her home for the first time. After one year she went to Boone County, Kentucky and taught in a one room segregated school for four years. While teaching in Boone County, she lived with a family named Oots.**

**A young man by the name of Bradley Jones had started seeing Della when they both were 16 years of age. They dated for 7 years and then had a falling out and didn't see each other for 3 years. He came to a program she was having in Boone County and asked if he could come to see her again. She said he could and he started coming every night for 3 weeks. Then he cut down to only 3 times a week, Wednesday, Saturday, & Sunday, and after 1 1/2 years they married in 1929. Della says she was really in no hurry to marry, but she had reached the age of 26, close to becoming an "old maid" and she didn't want that.**

**She and Bradley raised a daughter, Paulyne who was the daughter of Bradley's sister, Emma. She was going to be sent to an orphan's home and Della just could not stand the thought of Paulyne having to live there. So even though Bradley wasn't 100% in favor of adopting, they did raise her. Paulyne finished the 8th grade at Dry Ridge Colored School**

and then went to Lincoln Institute for high school. She married before finishing high school which broke Della's heart. Pauline moved to Richmond County, Indiana. Della tried to get her to attend Butler College in Indiana, but she didn't think she ever did. The worst tragedy of Della's life occurred when Pauline died in 1972 of pancreatitis.

Della did work around Williamstown to help supplement the family income since married women were not allowed to teach school. During the 1930's and the depression, times were hard for her and Bradley. He lost his regular job but was able to get a job through the WPA in order to keep their family going. Della's mother became ill and Della cared for her until her death. Although neither her mother nor father could read or write, her mother knew the value of an education and made Della promise that she would go back to school and get her degree.

Three months after her mother died, Della enrolled at Kentucky State College in Frankfort, Franklin County, Kentucky. Bradley was not fully supportive of Della's decision to return to school, however Della felt strongly about her teaching career and the importance of a degree. She packed her "grip" and hid it under the "settee" in the living room and after Bradley went to work, she and Pauline left for College. She had few clothes, just "2 skirts, 3 waists and 1 pair of rayon stockings" that she washed out every night. She attended school and cleaned dorms for 17 straight summers to pay her way through Kentucky State University. One of her first classes at Kentucky State was a history course taught by Mr. Smith. She sat in the front of the class so she wouldn't miss anything. One day she was very nervous and was scared that she wouldn't be able to do the work since she had been out of school for 13 years. She started crying and was trying to cover it up so that no one would notice. At the end of the class, Mr. Smith called her into the hall. She was scared to death that she had done something wrong. However, he asked her what was wrong and she told him that she was afraid that she would not be able to do the work. He assured her that once she got started that she would be fine. And she was!

One Saturday, as Della was trying to get home to Williamstown, she was sitting about half way back in the bus. The bus driver got up and asked her to move to the back but she refused. The bus stopped in Georgetown, Kentucky for a brief time and she got off the bus with everyone else. When it came time to board again for the rest of the trip, the driver returned her ticket and refused to let her reboard the bus! She had to wait one hour for the next bus in order to get home.

By taking summer courses and extension classes she finally received her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Kentucky State University on June 2, 1957. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the commencement speaker.



She taught in a one room segregated black school in Owen County, Kentucky from 1943 until 1958 when the school was integrated into the white school. While Della taught in the "colored school" she would walk to school because coloreds were not allowed to ride the school bus. The buses would drive right by her and the colored children. The schools were technically desegregated in 1954, however the students did not have to attend the white school until 1958, at which time, Della was moved to the white school. She was not allowed to teach in the integrated school so instead became school librarian, first in Owen County Elementary School and then Owen County High School working from 1958 to 1974. She retired from the Owen County, Kentucky School District in June, 1974.

Religion was always been a large part of Della's life. Her mother sent her to the District CME Conference when she was 14. Her Dad was a member and a trustee in the old church that was built in the 1800's. In the 1940's membership fell off and there were only 3 women left. The old church was in such disrepair that Della feared the city would condemn the building and take the land. She knew that her father would be very upset if that happened. So she wrote to Bishop Dr. Porter and asked what he could do. He sent men to tear down the building so a new church could be built. Rev. Davis was the presiding elder and with help from the men of Williamstown they tore down the old building. The 3 remaining female members of the church were Idell Mitchell, Cornelia Coleman and Mrs. Della. They decided to build a new church. Since the church had little money, Ms. Della wrote to the Grant County News asking for donations and they started coming in until they had the money to start building the new church which was completed in 1950 and still stands today. They had a big celebration and Dedication. Bishop Porter was there and dedicated the building. Ralph and Hattie May Lewis were new members. The women fixed dinner for everyone and served it in Ms. Della's back yard. For awhile a minister from Lexington would come in the afternoon after his services and hold services in Williamstown. Then all the members either died or moved away and she became the only living member of the church. Rev. Reed & Rev. Naylor came every 3 months and give her sacraments, but toward the end of her life people from Williamstown Christian Church would come every Sunday morning and give her sacraments. She watched different church services on the television and Kay Collins, a friend, came and read the devotional from the Upper Room to her. Her favorite hymns were How Great Thou Art and Amazing Grace.

After Della's mother died, she and Bradley continued to live in the same house her parents had lived in. One day they were informed that the house was going to be sold at the court house steps. Since there was an ordinance on the books that blacks could not purchase property on Cynthia Street, she and her husband were not legally able to bid on it. Bradley got someone to bid on the property for them. The day of the sale, Bradley went on to work and Ms. Della was on her knees praying that they would get their house. During her prayers, the strong feeling came over her that she should go to the court house



herself. So she went but was afraid to say anything. She worked her way to the center of the crowd, remaining quiet lest someone realize she wanted the house and out bid her. Ben Menefee, the auctioneer, must have realized that she wanted to bid, because she nodded her head and batted her eyes and he pronounced the house sold to her. She was told by Bertha Blackburn that the house would have to be resold; however, Bertha's son, Bob, who was the County Clerk, made it possible for them to register the sale and own the home.

After integration, Della and her sister in law were shopping in Covington, Kentucky and went into a 10 Cents store to sit at the counter and rest (something they previously could not do). As they left the store, her sister in law laughed and said, "Well, no black rubbed off." Della would also work at the voting polls in Grant County, a job she loved doing. Most people would be respectful of her although there were always some who would look at her in a very hateful manner and say, "What are you doing here?" as if she had no right to have anything to do with the voting process.

In her last few years, Della opened her door to a stray cat that became the love of her life. She named her Hobo and was constantly entertained by her numerous antics. Due to her declining health, Della was admitted to Grant Manor Nursing Home, Williamstown, Kentucky. One of the things she missed most was Hobo who was being cared for by Justine Taylor, a friend. She kept Hobo's picture on a table in her room and talked of her often.

On May 14, 2009 Ms. Della was granted an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Kentucky State University, the school where she graduated in 1957. Since she was unable to attend the ceremony on campus, the next week, the President and Registrar came to Grant Manor Nursing Home, where Ms. Della resided and presented her the degree. She also received a Citation from the Kentucky House of Representatives and was informed that the day had been designated "Della Jones Day" in Owenton, Owen County, Kentucky for recognition for all she had done to promote education in the area.

Ms. Della, as she was affectionately called by her friends, lived in Grant County, Kentucky during the days of segregation. She remembered separate Black and White bathrooms in the court house, not being able to eat up stairs in the main dining room of the Half Way House, and not being allowed in the library because of her color. Despite the hardships of living as a Black person in a majority white county, Ms. Della had a remarkable loving attitude towards all people. She credited her strong faith in God for keeping her strong and enabling her to accomplish all she had in her life. She said that she "had a good life doing things my way." At the end of her life, although her body was failing her, her mind was quick and her memory remarkable. She still had a twinkle in her eye and loved to laugh at a joke or even at herself. She was truly a blessing to all who knew her.

**Ms. Della went to meet her Lord at 4:53 PM, July 14, 2009 with some of those she loved by her side. Her passing has left a void in many lives.**