

MABEL EMERY BELL . . . “DEFINING GREATNESS”

By Sandra Lewis Miller

When defining the word “greatness” in relationship to women we have known, or read about in the history books, most of us are reminded of our nation’s early suffragettes who brought about women’s rights or those who revolutionized the world with life-changing inventions and theories. Some might consider the work of a young, black school teacher unworthy of the superior eminence to define greatness.

The achievements of Mabel Emery Bell, like so many others, symbolize the determination of all early black educators. Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “building a legacy, one student at a time.” Decades earlier, Mabel Bell’s vision for the future was very much the same. She believed that without education, the fate of the black people, would forever, remain trapped and suffocated in old traditions.

Ms. Bell’s successes as an educator have had no formal recognition outside of her family and the small community of Weston, Missouri, where she taught. However, her inspirations, handed down through the decades by former students to their descendants, still remains her “legacy of greatness” to hundreds of young black men and women today. While some of these people have gained high degrees of wealth, for the most part, they joined the majority of America’s population as hardworking, productive citizens ... those who make up the strong, sturdy fibers that hold our country together.

Mabel Mae Emery was born near Sedalia, Missouri, August 19, 1889. After completing the lower grades at a small country school, her parents were left with the problem of continuing her education. They were land owners and provided a comfortable living from their farmstead in southeast Missouri, however, extra funding to provide the child with a higher education was out of their reach. Her sister, Hillary Emery, willing to put her own education on hold, volunteered to hire herself out as a laundress’ to help with the expenses.

Mabel later enrolled at the Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri to study teaching. Worthy of her sister’s sacrifice, on June 11, 1909, Mabel graduated with honors and received a Bachelor of Science Degree. Unfortunately, in the early 1900’s, holding a degree did not mean employment was readily available for a young black woman. Schools for black children were few and far between. For the next five years Mabel applied for several positions but was able to secure only a few temporary assignments.

A position at the Mary Bethune School for Black Children in Weston, Missouri was an opportunity. The small town, located on the Missouri river, just north of Kansas City, at that time had a population of approximately one thousand people. Descended from slaves freed in Weston, nearly 45% of that number were black. The Bethune School had fallen into disrepair and had been without a teacher for some time. As the black children were not allowed to attend the white school they had been left with no means of education.

Mabel was a petite, plump woman, whose outgoing personality, bright amber eyes and infectious smile exuded a natural sparkle of intelligence that quickly drew attention. The Weston School Board, made up of an all-white panel, listened without interruption as she presented her academic background and explained her work ethics and theories on teaching. Impressed with her energy and promise of dedication, they unanimously agreed to hire her to teach grades one through eight at \$45.00 per month.

The one-room, school house at 806 Thomas Street was indeed in need of repair and presented more than a few challenges. Yet,

undaunted and determined to achieve her goals, she worked throughout the summer months restoring the old building to order.

Rewarded for her labor, on opening day, Ms. Bell was greeted in the school yard by a large crowd of smiling, young students and their parents. Mabel settled into the township and married Weston native, George Bell. Mabel and George never had any children of their own. However, Ms. Bell’s diary, kept from 1933 to 1938, reveals a constant flow of happy young people who frequented their home.

A former student reflects on those visits. “ Ms. Bell was more than a teacher. She was also a friend and mentor. She often invited the children to her home for various play time activities. At the same time, she was also teaching us personal dignity and social skills.” The diary also points to the extended care of her students. After graduating from the eight grades, any further education for black people in Weston was not available. Ms. Bell made arrangements for many of her students to continue their education in high schools in Kansas City and St. Joseph.

In 1935, some decline in enrollment and lack of funding prompted the Weston School Board to consider closing the Bethune School. On April 16, 1935, Ms. Bell received word that her contract would not be renewed. Devastated by this action, she called a meeting of the parents to discuss a solution. She knew that if the school was closed again, in all probability, it would never be reopened. In the early days, some funding for the small facility was received from the Bethune Society and the Freedmen’s Association. No records have been found to indicate how long that support continued.

Spearheaded by local resident, Dee Dydell, the parent’s group decided to petition the community. In just a few days, enough signatures were collected from both black and white residents to convince the board to dig a little deeper for operating funds. Donations were also contributed by local families.

For nearly four decades, most of Ms. Bell’s life revolved around the school children and caring for her neighbors. However, she also knew how to have fun and enjoyed a full social life. She traveled often, was a champion bridge player, active in church and belonged to several organizations. She was a fan of boxer, Joe Louis and always looked forward to the “knock out.”

In 1933, she and her sister, Hillary traveled to Illinois to attend the Chicago World’s Fair. She recorded in her diary August 10, 1933. “Arrived in Chicago for the first time at 8:35 A.M. “It is thrilling!” August 14, 1933. “We went to see “Sally Rand, the Fan Dancer” in person. She was superb! ” Sally Rand was an early Burlesque queen known for her clever dance with large plumes of feathered fans.

TESTAMENT TO THE LEGACY

Barbara Miller Pearl, an accomplished educator, and granddaughter of Mabel’s sister, Hillary, elaborated on her great-aunt repaid in numerous ways. As a young girl I spent the summers with my aunt in Weston. Her inspiration and guidance lead to my own career as an educator. I raised my children with the same ideals she passed on to me. I sent them to private schools, taught them love and tolerance and helped nurture their professional careers.” She said. “Former students, Mary Kelly Kendall and Josephine Kelly Jackson, now both in their late 70’s, recall fond memories of their first teacher. “Ms. Bell’s philosophy left a profound influence on our entire family.” said Mary Kendall. “She taught both of our parents, my brothers, sister and me. She encouraged us to love ourselves and take pride in our achievements, large or small. When I was very young, I

had an interest in music. She made arrangements with a white teacher in Weston to give me lessons. I was the only black student and the sessions were given in secret meetings.” Ms. Kendall, still an accomplished pianist, went on to explain the joy that music has brought to her life. She still plays for churches and various programs.

Josephine Kelly Jackson now has two grandsons who are successful school teachers. “Ms. Bell left us a legacy that is still being handed down through our family.” She said. “I taught my son love, honesty, integrity and the importance of education. He in turn shared these same values with his own children.”

In 2002, at a reunion for former black students in Weston, Anthony Wesley Payton, reflected on his early childhood. “My great-great-grandparents were slaves freed in Weston.” Said Payton, “As a young boy, running barefoot around this town, I never dreamed I would be where I am today.” Payton is now an aeronautical engineer and designed the wings for the NASA space shuttles. “Ms. Bell taught my parents and they taught me to believe that we were all capable of greatness. Remembering the wisdom in that statement made a definite difference in my life.”

Perhaps, one of Ms. Bell’s finest achievements came with a young man named Raymond Dydell. Dydell was born in Weston on June 26, 1939. Following the death of his mother, his father remarried and moved to Olathe, Kansas. Unhappy with his new surroundings, the young boy ran away and went to Ms. Bell for help. With the consent of his father, he continued to live with the Bells’ in Weston. After school, and on the weekends, he worked at the Rumble Hardware Store to help with his expenses.

Raymond graduated from the eight grades in Weston. Ms. Bell, then sent him to Lincoln High School in Kansas City, where he graduated at the top of his class. With additional help from the Rumble family, he later received a degree in business from a local college. As a community leader, Raymond Dydell founded the Weston Youth Sports Association, served as President of the Weston Jaycees and was once the head of the town’s volunteer fire department.

Dydell lived in Weston until his untimely death on February 20, 1971 at the age of 32. He died while fighting a fire in a local home. A plaque honoring his memory was erected in front of the Weston Fire Department. Each year the Jaycees continue to honor a Weston resident with the “Raymond Dydell Community Service Award.” Dydell was one of the last of Weston’s African American residents.

In this small, southern bred town, slavery and cruelty once prevailed on the black man as an accepted way of life. After the turn of the century, while some prejudice and segregation still remained, a bond between Weston’s black and white cultures began to form. Mabel Bell helped to strengthen those bonds by teaching her students, as well as her friends, to rise above old sentiments and join together as neighbors. She encouraged her students to take pride in their African past, but, at the same time, move forward to build productive lives as Americans.

Weston old-timers recall, “Ms. Bell extended her open, caring heart to those in need without color boundaries, everyone who knew her, black or white, was affected by her kindness and encouragement.”

Following the consolidation of schools in 1952, after 38 years of teaching, Ms. Bell retired. She remained in Weston until illness forced her to live with family members in Kansas City, Missouri. She lived in the Parade Park neighborhood until her death in 1974.

*Sandra Lewis Miller is a native of Weston and the author of
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