

## **Matilda Heaston Calcote (1910-1990)**

Matilda Bell Heaston was born on November 30, 1910. She was one of at least 15 children born to Jake and Doshie (Robinson) Heaston in Randolph, Tennessee. While living in Tennessee, Matilda's parents were sharecroppers. Sharecropping is a form of farming where the landowner allows someone else to farm their land and in return gets a share of the crops. In 1920 at the age of 10, Matilda and her family moved to Luxora, Arkansas, just across the Mississippi River. There, Matilda's parents were able to farm on their own.

The family later moved into a house that they had purchased. Matilda grew up there and would eventually live in that same house with her first husband and daughter. Her mother took in laundry and did not have a job outside of the home. Her father worked as a blacksmith and shod horses. Matilda attended an all-African American school in Arkansas. In fact, she never attended an integrated school throughout her education.

In 1926 Matilda married Lucious Walton. On December 2 of that year, she gave birth to a daughter, Ruthie Mae Walton. Two years later, Matilda and Ruthie moved to Bloomington, Illinois where they joined Lillian Augusta (Heaston) and Robert Lee Boykin, Matilda's older sister and brother-in-law. Matilda's marriage had hit a rocky patch, and she and Lucious had separated. Eighteen-year-old Matilda and her toddler briefly moved in with the Boykins before beginning work for Helen Stevenson. For at least two years, Matilda served as Helen's personal maid and even lived at the Stevenson home at 1316 E. Washington Street. Matilda later worked as a maid for other local families.

Domestic service was typical among African American women in Bloomington-Normal. In fact, 90 percent of African American workers in the nation in 1930 performed agricultural or domestic service jobs. Half of these domestic servants worked in private homes. The other half served as laundresses, waitresses, untrained nurses, and elevator operators, among other roles. According to Matilda, jobs and housing were easy for her to find even during the economic challenges of the Great Depression.

In 1934, she returned home to Arkansas, where she stayed for one year. She distributed agricultural "commodities" in Blytheville as part of a government relief program. Matilda recalled that the Great Depression did not affect her much. She stated that she "always had work to do.... I never had anything in my life given to me free." Over the course of her career, Matilda also served as a "commercial worker" and spent time working in restaurants, which she did not like very much.

By 1940, Matilda was married to William C. Miller. They lived in northwestern Bloomington where they rented a home. William worked as a garage janitor and Matilda was a housemaid for a private home.

In 1944, Matilda sought employment in the defense industry when she left Bloomington to work in Seattle, Washington for eight years. She built destroyers for the war effort during World War II. Matilda recalled that there was a strong need for these types of ships because 50 or more of them protected larger ships at sea. They were in such high demand that she helped produce a ship every 60 days. She worked several jobs at the shipyard including spot painter, welder, and tank cleaner. Women at the shipyards received jobs based on their existing skill set. According to Matilda, the employers "didn't teach you to do it. You had to take a sweeping job if you didn't already have a skill. But if you already knew how to do those things, they'd give you a trial and see if you could do it. And then they'd let you have it." Fortunately, Matilda had welding skills and got the job.

It is unclear when Matilda and William Miller divorced, but on November 8, 1947 she married L.C. Riley in Seattle. By 1952 the new couple had moved to Bloomington and were living with Matilda's mother at 1322 N. Ewing Street. Between 1953 and 1957, L.C. worked at the whites-only Louis E. Davis American Legion Post No. 56 as a bus boy and later as a custodian. Two years later he earned a living as a laborer for Behrenz Asphalt in Bloomington. By 1957 Matilda and L.C. were residing at 1204 W. Mulberry Street. They divorced sometime before 1959, and Matilda returned to the west coast.

On May 13, 1960, Matilda married William Calcote in Seattle, Washington where they were both living. William was 23 years her junior. By the next year, they were back in Bloomington living at 1322 N. Ewing with Matilda's mother. From 1964 to 1971, the Calcotes lived at the North Ewing address. During that time—five days a week from 1961 to 1976—Matilda (or “Tillie” as she was known to some) worked as a maid at the Bloomington home of Betty Zimmer. In 1972, Matilda and William resided at 703 W. Monroe Street where they remained for the rest of their married lives.

The Calcotes were members of Union Baptist Church located at 514 W. Jackson Street. In fact, after arriving in Bloomington in 1928, Matilda joined this church and worshipped there whenever she lived in town. She also actively participated in the church's Willing Workers Club and Progressive Women's Club. These social clubs performed projects to better the lives of the members and the community as a whole. In 1953, she led the women of the church in directing three services for “Women's Day.” Sixteen years later, she was co-chair of that same event where local African American community leader Caribel Washington spoke. Around 1975, Matilda joined the Three C Club, which brought women together to discuss issues that regularly affected African Americans.

William Calcote was only 47 years old when he passed away on September 28, 1980. He and Matilda had been happily married for 20 years. He was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Ten years later, Matilda passed away at the age of 80 on December 27, 1990, having been ill for several months. Her funeral service was held at Union Baptist Church on New Year's Eve. She was laid to rest next to William at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.