



RUBY A. EDWARDS (1906-1977)

Some would say she did it all, all the things many women want to do. She was a working woman. She was a wife, a mother and grandmother, even a great grandmother. She was a joiner and an organizer. At a time when opportunities for women, particularly African American women, were limited, Ruby Edwards worked hard. She worked hard to care for her family, and to make her community better. She cared about people, especially women and children, and because of her and people like her, Bloomington/Normal is a better place.

Ruby A. Jackson was born on January 29, 1906 in Bloomington, Illinois. She grew up first in Bloomington and later in Chicago where she attended public schools and Woodrow Wilson Junior College. She married Frank E. Hogan on September 3, 1922. They had one son, Frank Hogan, Jr. Sometime in the early 1940s the Hogan family moved to Bloomington. By this time the family included Frank Jr.'s wife, Lorraine, and his daughter Alaine. Shortly after the move here, Ruby's marriage to Frank Sr. ended.

On December 14, 1942 Ruby married Booker T. Meaderds. He was a dry cleaner and worked for several dry cleaning companies in Bloomington. Sadly, after nine years of marriage, Booker died after a short illness. They had no children. On June 15, 1954 Ruby married Herman Edwards.

For most of her adult life, Ruby worked outside the home. She was a waitress at the Tilden Hall Hotel which was located at Madison and Washington Streets. Then she went to work as a janitress for the W.H. Roland Department Store in downtown Bloomington until about 1957. At this time, Ruby went to work with her husband Herman at Ewing Manor. Ruby worked as cook and Herman as a chauffeur and houseman for Mrs. Hazle Buck Ewing.

Ruby enjoyed and took pride in the work she did for the Ewing family. She loved living and working at Ewing Manor. Ruby and Herman had an apartment above the garage at the estate. As a cook, Ruby and Mrs. Ewing planned the meals, which Ruby would prepare and serve. Cindy Ewing, a granddaughter of Hazle Ewing, recalled that the food Ruby prepared was "not fancy, but well prepared," typical Midwestern fare of meat, potatoes and "overcooked vegetables." Cindy also remembered that Ruby was easy going and "feisty in a way, you could

kid around with her.” Cindy said Ruby was great to talk to, but “you would not want to be on her wrong side because she could probably dress you down pretty well if needed.” Cindy also remembered that Ruby and Herman “were a great pair.” They complemented each other well,” she said. Unfortunately, Herman died on October, 26 1967.

Ruby continued living and working at Ewing Manor until after Mrs. Ewing’s death in 1969 when the estate became part of the Illinois State University Foundation as Mrs. Ewing had planned. Today, it is known as the Ewing Cultural Center and is home to the Illinois Shakespeare Festival.

Ruby went on to work at the State School at Lincoln, IL, and then as a housemother at the Morgan Washington Home in Bloomington. Finally, she worked at Bloomington High School in food service until her retirement in 1972.

Throughout her working life, Ruby was heavily involved in service clubs and community organizations. She was very concerned with what was going on in the world around her. She belonged to at least 20 different clubs and organizations. Most of these groups worked to improve social conditions for African Americans, particularly women and children. She was often the founder, president, or an officer in these organizations. These clubs allowed Ruby the opportunity to have leadership roles in the community at a time when African Americans and women were typically denied them. She worked hard and long to improve the lives of black women and children living not only in Bloomington and McLean County, but everywhere.

One organization in which Ruby was deeply involved with was the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. She belonged to the Civic Women’s Club, the local branch of this group. Its purpose was to bring “Negro Women of the community together to stimulate a greater interest in Civic and Social Contact.” Ruby served as president of the club several times. At the state level, she was elected to the board of directors of the organization, and served as its president from 1964-1966. She also organized the education and leadership training departments of the state association. In these positions, she held training sessions throughout the state for a number of years. She was also a member of the national Board of Directors and held various offices on a national level.

Ruby also served on the Board of Directors for the McLean County YWCA for six years. She served two terms as president of the board while the “Y” was being built at its current location on Hershey Road and Empire Street. She was a member of the PTA at Raymond School while her son attended there. At one time she was president of United Church Women of Bloomington-Normal, president of the Bloomington-Normal branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and president of the National Council of Negro Women. She was a precinct committee woman for the Democratic Woman’s Organization of McLean County, president of the Woodhill Tenant’s Council, a member of the Senior Citizen’s Advisory Council for McLean County, and held many more memberships and offices.

In an effort to improve the lives of others in the community, particularly her fellow residents on the West Side, Ruby twice ran for public office. Neither time was she successful. But she brought attention to the issues of the schools and neighborhood. For all her efforts and work, Ruby was recognized by receiving a number of awards. In 1965, she received a National Champion of Open Occupancy Award from the Foundation for Freedom and Democracy in Community Life. In 1976, she was named Senior Citizen of the Month by the Kiwanis Club. Her living room walls were covered with distinguished service awards from many of her grateful organizations.

Ruby Edwards died at Brokaw Hospital on December 30, 1977. Her funeral was held at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church where she had long been an active member. She asked that gifts to her memory be given to a scholarship fund for Bloomington High School students to attend Illinois State University. It was said that “Bloomington-Normal lost a great civic leader and every organization in which she participated, local, state and national, would miss her.” She is buried next to her husband Herman, and her son Frank Hogan Jr. in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: What do you think motivated Ruby to work in so many groups and organizations?