



HENRY L. BROWN (1913 - 1987)

Henry L. Brown was never afraid to learn new skills to overcome the challenges which life threw at him. After his parents divorced and the Great Depression came, he dropped out of school and became a “wild child” of the streets. Luckily, he had two experiences which changed his life; serving in the Civilian Conservation Corps at a bird refuge in Arkansas and meeting and marrying his wife Gertrude. After settling in Bloomington, Henry struggled against discrimination to make a home and support his family. He tried many different occupations: sheet metal worker, mechanic, carpenter, and bricklayer, but he couldn’t get hired in any of those trades. Finally, he became a licensed plumber, owned his own business, and had a long career of 26 years. Through hard work and determination, Henry always persevered.

Henry was born in Mississippi on April 1, 1913. He had one brother. Later, when his parents divorced, the boys would spend part of the year in either Memphis with their mother, or in Helena, Arkansas, with their father. During the Great Depression, Henry dropped out of school and, according to one of his sons, was living wildly on the streets. A caseworker talked him into joining the Civilian Conservation Corps, a Depression era work corps where he developed a great love of nature while working at a bird refuge in Arkansas. Henry credited the CCC with turning his life around.

Returning to Memphis, and the wild life, he saw a girl who caught his eye. He told his brother he was interested in getting to know this girl. His brother said, forget it. She is only interested in people who are “right with the Lord.” Sometime after this, Henry had what his children referred to as his “boxcar experience.” One night after presumably some of that “wild living,” Henry found himself alone in a rail yard in a boxcar. There he had a spiritual experience and turned his life over to God. He found that girl, Gertrude, they fell in love and were married. Henry became a skilled sheet metal worker and earned his living working at a trailer manufacture and later making fire doors. Then came World War II (WWII).

During the war, Henry served in the army where he became a fleet dispatcher with the rank of corporal. He did such a good job that his superior officer refused to let him transfer “up” to a better position.

After the war, Henry came to Bloomington to visit his mother. He liked it so well, he

decided to stay, and sent for Gertrude and their two children to join him here. But he was told that “black men could not be sheet metal workers in Bloomington.” He found a job, but not in sheet metal working. Jobs and housing...both were problems faced by African Americans in Bloomington in the 1950s. Henry found that no one wanted to rent housing to African American families. However, with the help of family and the GI Bill, he was able to buy “the small house” at 1207 Mac Arthur Ave. He would live on this street the rest of his life. Later, in the 1958, he built a bigger, better home for his family at 1116 MacArthur Ave. He built the new house using skills he learned in the building trades while he sought a new occupation.

Because the sheet metal trade was closed to Henry, he learned carpentry. Then he became a bricklayer. Still there were no jobs for him because he was African American. In the meantime, he worked as a janitor and clerk and kept learning new skills. There were already a few African American plumbers in Bloomington and he began to study this trade. Finally he became a plumber licensed by the state of Illinois, and eventually, a plumbing contractor.

The Browns had three more children after moving to Bloomington. Henry was dedicated to his family. His children remember him as an extremely hard worker. He was able to accomplish so many things because he was very organized. Everything in his office or truck had its place. He encouraged his children to save money, and opened a savings account at the First Federal Bank for each one of them. Henry set a very high value on education. He saved all his children’s report cards. After his own children were raised, he obtained his GED. He then began working on his college education, with a goal of becoming a lawyer. But other events including health problems interfered.

Henry Brown worked hard to make Bloomington-Normal a better place and was very active in the community. In the 1950s, African Americans could attend Illinois State Normal University but could not live in the dorms or eat in the cafeterias. African American students ate at the Chat and Chew on the edge of campus and lived with African American families in the community. Each year, the Dean of Women at ISNU, Anna Keaton, would call the Browns and other African American families in the community to find rooms for African-American students. They and others in their neighborhood would do their part to help the students and took student boarders.

Henry was a devout Christian and active member of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church. He was for many years a deacon at the church and at one time, chairman of the deacons’ board. He also taught adult Sunday school classes until shortly before his death. In the early 1960s, Henry served as building chairman, fund drive chairman, and church treasurer. This was during a major remodeling of the church building which was then located at 701 S. Lee Street.

He also worked hard to make his adopted community a better place. He was cofounder and president of the Bloomington-Normal Minority Voters Coalition, a member of the Bloomington Police and Fire Commission for six years, and director of the weatherization program for McLean County Economic Opportunity Corp. He also served on the McLean County Regional Planning Commission for 13 years and the advisory council for District 87 schools. In 1978 he received the Bloomington Illinois Mayors Commission on Human Relations award and in 1985 the Culture Fest Service to the Community Award. According to his children, he worked hard to represent the west side of the Bloomington. On April 12, 1987, the Mt. Pisgah congregation honored him with a special service and Mayor Jesse Smart declared it “Henry L. Brown Day.”

On June 20, 1987, Henry Brown died peacefully at his home on MacArthur Street. His funeral was held at Mt. Pisgah Church. Many people in the community mourned his passing. In

a letter to the editor of *The Pantagraph* written about a month after his death, the author stated that Bloomington's black community had lost one of its "stalwart and energetic citizens." The community as a whole had lost one of its leaders who fought hard for... "decency and respectability where all people white, black, religious, political, and all other racial groups can live side by side in peace and contentment." Henry Brown was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

Discussion Question: How is Bloomington-Normal different because of Henry L. Brown?