

Annie Ethel Jones (1899 – 1991)

Annie Ethel Berry was born in Booneville, Mississippi on May 19, 1899, to Malaci Berry and Ida Eugenia (Bynum) Berry. For most of her life, she went by her middle name, Ethel. She was the oldest of 10 children that lived into adulthood. Two of her brothers died young—one at five years old and one in infancy. Eventually, the family moved to Riezi, Mississippi, although it is unclear when that move occurred.¹

In an oral history interview, Ethel stated that she believed her parents were “free-born,” meaning they were not born enslaved. However, Ethel did not know if her grandparents had been enslaved.² Her father Malaci (sometimes referred to as Mellen or Malcom) and her mother Ida were born in 1874 and 1881, respectively.³ As she was growing up, Ethel helped her family in the fields hoeing cotton and corn. Her father was a farmer and owned his land in Mississippi. He also worked as a carpenter, and found steady employment from white residents in town.⁴ Ethel thought her father was a self-taught carpenter. She recalled that “he started making little things at home and fixing on the house that he was buying. Of course, he built a room onto it.”⁵ The white individuals who employed her father seemed to be satisfied with his work and treated him and the rest of the family kindly. Ethel recalled that her father had “a little grippe” (influenza) one winter. The two white men he had been working for came to the house and stayed with her father all night while he was sick, helping care for him. They also brought the family food and other needed items while Malaci was sick. Ethel also remembered that those men told her father, “...your work will be there when you feel like you’re able to come work.” However, he was not compensated equally to white individuals who did the same kind of work.⁶ Malaci used his carpentry skills to build three houses for his family; two in Mississippi and one in Tennessee.⁷ Ethel’s mother did “washing” or domestic work for families in town, but her father preferred that the family to stay home if possible.⁸

Ethel attended a one-room schoolhouse while she was living in Mississippi. She recalled having three different teachers over the course of her schooling; two women, and one man she remembered was called Mr. Gibson.⁹ Even though Ethel and the rest of her siblings had work responsibilities on the farm, they took their education seriously. Growing up, Ethel had dreams of being a doctor.¹⁰ Her family was too poor to consider the possibility of going to medical school, but her drive and determination in her educational pursuits was evident.

When Ethel was in eighth grade, she passed a six-week course that allowed her to assist with teaching at other segregated Black schools in Mississippi. A Black school in Booneville, Mississippi didn’t have a teacher placed at the beginning of the school year, so the superintendent (who heard that Ethel passed the teaching course), called her parents asking if she was interested in teaching just until they could hire someone else. Her parents consented to the

¹ Annie Ethel Jones, interview by Dr. Mildred Pratt, September 26, 1985, oral history transcript, The Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Museum of History, Bloomington, IL, 1.

² Ibid.

³ 1910 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

⁴ Jones, oral history, 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

arrangement, and she taught for at least one semester. Ethel said some of the students were older and taller than she was. She stated that “teaching was not the job for me, but I stuck it out until spring.”¹¹ Regardless of her lack of passion for being a teacher, that fact that she was encouraged to take that responsibility at such a young age reflects the value her family placed on education. It also set the stage for Ethel’s quest to learn the skills to follow her dream.

Ethel’s parents moved to Humbolt, Tennessee after she was an adult. Her father established a farm where he grew and shipped English peas and built the family home.¹² By the time the family moved to Tennessee, Ethel was living in Illinois, so she didn’t spend much time there.

Ethel likely met her husband, Squire Jones, in Mississippi since he was living in Riezi at the same time she was.¹³ He was a widower and 35 years her senior. Squire had two grown daughters when they met; Mrs. Frances Conwill who stayed in Riezi and Mrs. Cora Johnson who resided in Bloomington, Illinois.¹⁴ Ethel and Squire married in 1922 in Danville, Illinois.¹⁵ According to Ethel, the couple married in Danville because an aunt on her father’s side lived there and helped them find work.¹⁶ They mostly did housework for people in Danville. Squire wanted to move to Bloomington to be closer to his daughter, Cora, so they did not stay in Danville long. They were settled in Bloomington at the time of the birth of their first child, Beulah, on June 5, 1923.¹⁷

Ethel and Squire had three more children (boys), although one, James Calvin Jones, died at the age of seven from pneumonia.¹⁸ According to Beulah, her brother caught pneumonia from playing in the snow with her.¹⁹ He passed away at St. Joseph’s Hospital on February 10, 1932 after only one week of illness.²⁰ Ethel and Squire’s other sons were Walter Louis Jones, born on November 30, 1928, and Charles F. “Charlie” Jones, born on January 3, 1931.²¹

When they came to Bloomington, they rented a house at 1210 West Oakland Avenue.²² Arshell and Margaret Barker and their daughter Ella Stokes were their neighbors at 1220 West Moulton.²³ Ella would sometimes babysit for the boys while Squire and Ethel worked. Squire did housework for white people in town including the Read family and two Carter families, all of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Squire is sometimes referred to as Esquire. On some census information, his name is spelled “Savite.” This is due to a misreading of handwriting as the “q” and “u” when handwritten can look like an “a” and a “v.”

¹⁴ “Squire Jones Dies in Hospital,” *The Pantagraph*, June 7, 1942, 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jones, oral history, 5. It should be noted that Annie’s obituary states that she and Squire were married in Tennessee. Annie says in her oral history that they were married in Danville.

¹⁷ *U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015. Beulah died on February 5, 2002.

¹⁸ Beulah Kennedy, interview by Beth Maltby, January 15, 1989, oral history transcript, The Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Museum of History, Bloomington, IL, 17.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Irving School Pupil, Ill Only Week, Dies,” *The Pantagraph*, February 11, 1932, 3.

²¹ *U.S., Social Security Death Index 1935-2014* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011 and *U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015. Walter died on May 21, 2002 and Charles died on February 4, 2010.

²² Jones, oral history, 5.

²³ Ibid.

whom lived on East Washington Street.²⁴ Ethel also did day work here and there for people in town. From their wages, they were able to buy the house they had been renting.

Their house on West Oakland Avenue was in a predominately Black neighborhood. Beulah, Ethel's daughter, remembered there was one white family in the neighborhood, but they did not want their white children to play with the other Black children in the neighborhood.²⁵ The children would occasionally walk to school together or be invited into their yard, but for the most part, the white family kept to themselves.

The Jones house consisted of three rooms and an outhouse.²⁶ Ethel and Beulah slept in the front room, while the boys and Squire slept in the back room. They did not have running water, so they had to carry water from a fountain on what is now MacArthur Avenue before the city laid water service pipes down Oakland Avenue.²⁷ They did have a large yard where Squire grew grapes and had a peach tree. Ethel and Beulah made jelly from the fruit Squire grew, and for a short time, the family raised chickens.²⁸

The Jones family could be considered a traditional household in terms of gender roles, and the father was the authority figure in many ways. Ethel cooked for the family and every morning she made Squire bacon, eggs, and biscuits.²⁹ However, Ethel insisted that the children had their chores divided evenly. Beulah and her brothers all did the dishes, even though Squire felt that was not a chore for boys.³⁰

Both Ethel and Squire were involved in the Wayman A.M.E. Church (originally located at 806 N. Center Street and now at 803 W. Olive Street in Bloomington). Church was vitally important to the Jones family, and they walked to church every Sunday, sometimes going to three different services in one day.³¹ The family did not own a car, so if they could not catch a bus, they would walk to and from the church multiple times in one day. Beulah remembered church being enjoyable and she was an active member of the junior choir. Squire taught Sunday School and Ethel was the president of the pastor's aid, an organization created to support the minister.³²

Ethel and Squire were active in the community in other ways, as well. They were both members of the NAACP. Ethel was also a member of the Bloomington Chapter, Order of the Eastern Star, a philanthropic fraternal organization devoted to making "a positive difference in the world with charitable works," that benefit local communities, states, and humanity in general.³³ Beulah also said her mother belonged to a social club. When there were events that members could bring guests, Squire rarely went with Ethel, so Beulah would tag along.³⁴

Ethel's family worked hard to make a living at a time when it was very difficult for Black folks to find steady and well-paying employment in Central Illinois. This situation became even worse as the Great Depression hit. Like many families across the United States, the Jones family struggled to make ends meet. Squire found it almost impossible to find work once the Depression

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ B. Kennedy, oral history, 18.

²⁶ Ibid., 19.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 20.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Ibid.

³³ "OES Mission and Values," Order of the Eastern Star, <https://easternstar.org/about-oes/oes-mission-and-values/>, Accessed September 1, 2023.

³⁴ B. Kennedy, oral history, 20.

hit. On top of the struggle to find employment, his health began to fail.³⁵ The family received some aid from the county, but other than that, the family was largely on their own.³⁶ Luckily, Ethel was still able to secure some day work and she had some savings from her jobs that she kept in a safety deposit box.³⁷ However, her desire to keep working and her ability to find paid work actually limited the family's access to social services. Ethel recalled that a representative of the local relief office came to their house to check on the family. He told Ethel that if she wanted relief she had to stay home and not work. Ethel replied that she was not a lazy person. "If you don't want me to have it, I'll get by. Just don't worry about it." She wanted to provide for her family and chose to work rather than stay home and collect relief from the county. Ethel recalled that she felt they did better with her working than if they had accepted the assistance the relief office was offering.³⁸

Ethel worked for several families throughout the Great Depression and was able to keep her family afloat during some of the most challenging economic times. She worked for Hal Stone, who lived at 704 E. Walnut Street, where Goldwater Care Bloomington (formerly known as Heritage Health) is located today.³⁹ Occasionally, the Stone family gave Ethel food to take home. She also worked for the Taylor family on Emerson Street, near the Stones, and for the Paul Hillard family, whose home was on East Front Street at the time.⁴⁰

As the Depression wore on, Squire's health continued to deteriorate, and he was sickly for several years before his death. Squire died on June 6, 1942, at the age of 78.⁴¹ Ethel was 43 at the time. Earlier in their marriage, Ethel promised Squire that she wouldn't remarry to anyone who would be cruel to their children.⁴² She told him she would not marry again until the children were able to take care of themselves independently. However, even after the children were grown, Ethel never married again. Since Squire had been ill for some time, there was no drastic change in terms of the workload for Ethel and the children, or the finances.⁴³ With Squire gone, the reality that Ethel would be the sole provider for her children fully set in and she began to think critically about what this new chapter of life could entail.

When she was growing up, Ethel wanted to become a doctor. Medical school seemed completely out of reach due to the enormous cost and her family's economic status.⁴⁴ However, throughout her early adulthood and into her marriage, she knew she wanted to work in a hospital. After Squire died, Ethel pursued a career in nursing at the encouragement of her own physician, Dr. Howard Sloan, a well-respected doctor in the community. Ethel started her studies through a correspondence course that allowed her to become a nurse's aide.⁴⁵ Eventually, she went to Chicago to take her state board examinations. Once she passed the exams, she was officially a licensed practical nurse (LPN).⁴⁶

³⁵ Ibid., 19.

³⁶ Jones, oral history, 14.

³⁷ B. Kennedy, oral history, 19.

³⁸ Jones, oral history, 14-15.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Squire Jones Dies in Hospital," *The Pantagraph*, June 7, 1942, 9.

⁴² Jones, oral history, 6.

⁴³ B. Kennedy, oral history, 21.

⁴⁴ Jones, oral history, 8.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Ethel began her nursing career at St. Joseph's Hospital in Bloomington in 1951.⁴⁷ Before St. Joseph's Hospital moved to its current location at Veteran's Parkway and East Washington Street (and its name was changed to OSF St. Joseph Medical Center), the hospital was a rambling collection of additions to an earlier mansion near the corner of West Jackson Street and Morris Avenue on the west side of Bloomington. Originally, the administration at St. Joseph's thought Ethel needed to take another exam in order to be hired. However, after deliberation with the head of nursing, she was allowed to start right away.⁴⁸

While Ethel insisted that her coworkers at St. Joseph's were kind to her and she did not report racial discrimination from the hospital, she did have to cope with quite a few racist patients. Ethel remembered that many white patients "didn't want Blacks to work over them."⁴⁹ While Ethel was not the first Black person on staff at the hospital, and there were several other Black individuals working at St. Joseph's, she was certainly a minority in her place of work and her field. Some white patients protested when Ethel was assigned to give them a bath. Her solution, which was supported by her supervisors, was to grant them their wish. Patients who had a problem getting a bath from a Black nurse simply wouldn't get a bath that day.⁵⁰

At the advice of a colleague, Ethel left St. Joseph's for better wages working at what had been the McLean County Poor Farm by 1955.⁵¹ Ethel reported that the administration (specifically Sister Christopher) was disappointed that she left for another opportunity.⁵² By the time Ethel started working there, the Poor Farm had become the county-operated Maple Grove Nursing Home.⁵³

The County Poor Farm, located on Route 51 about five miles south of downtown Bloomington, had a horrible reputation and was regarded as one of the last places a person would wish to live. It was mostly a place for people who could not take care of themselves and had nowhere else to go. These people were often destitute, suffering from severe mental illness, or had other medical conditions that prohibited them from living alone. Founded in 1860 by the Board of Supervisors (what is now the County Board), the McLean County Poor Farm included more than 350 acres of farmland, 20 acres for the superintendent's home, various outbuildings, and living quarters for the residents (typically referred to as inmates).⁵⁴ In an inventory of the Poor Farm in 1898, the farm was reported as having 300 acres of land, all brick buildings, water works, farm residence, barns and other outbuildings, and a new crib.⁵⁵ The total value of the property was \$78,167.13, which would be close to \$3 million today.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ *Bloomington Illinois City Directory*, 1951.

⁴⁸ Jones, oral history, 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹ *Bloomington Illinois City Directory*, 1955.

⁵² Jones, oral history, 11.

⁵³ McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives, *McLean County Poor Farm Collection*, Bloomington, IL, 2008. <https://mchistory.org/research/finding-aids/mclean-county-poor-farm>.

⁵⁴ Bill Kemp, "Poor Lost Souls Haunt County's Potter's Field," *The Pantagraph*, May 22, 2011.

⁵⁵ *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society*, Vol. I. (Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., Bloomington, IL, 1899), 277.

⁵⁶ Measuring Worth, <https://www.measuringworth.com/index.php>. While the Bureau of Labor Statistics only calculates official inflation records starting in 1913, rough estimates from various other inflation calculators put the figure close to \$3 million in 2022-23 U.S. dollars.

Although the Poor Farm was a massive undertaking by the county and a relatively productive farm, the residents were not treated well. A 1916 report in *The Pantagraph* argued that animals at Miller Park Zoo were treated better than the residents at the Poor Farm.

“One who looks about cannot fail to contrast, for example, the almost luxurious environment provided for the beasts, birds, and reptiles in Miller park with the shabby, lousy, bed-buggy, unattended, and wasteful surroundings amidst- which the unlucky and unfortunate aged poor exist in the McLean county poor farm.”⁵⁷

Countless reports in the local newspaper referred to the conditions at the Poor Farm as nothing short of nightmarish, with residents not having proper heating in the winter and a general lack of supervision and care. This was not a place where people who fell on hard times went to get better, rather it was a place where those deemed unwanted and unproductive went to disappear.

The county transformed the old farm into the county-run Maple Grove Nursing Home in 1954. However, when Ethel came to work there the next year, the institution was generally still thought of as “a poor farm,” and Ethel never referred to Maple Grove as anything other than the Poor Farm in her oral history. This illustrates the reputation that remained, even after the county converted it to a proper nursing home. Although different than hospital nursing, providing care at the nursing home still provided some challenges. A male patient kicked her in the breast so hard that it caused a knot. Ethel said the incident happened while she was trying to wash the man’s feet. She assumed it would heal, but the knot did not go away, and she eventually had to have surgery years later.⁵⁸ No cancer was found, and Ethel believed that the kick from the man in the nursing home had caused the knot.

Ethel worked at the Poor Farm/Maple Grove until 1959.⁵⁹ Maple Grove phased out their operations in 1970 when the county could not make the necessary changes to the property to meet a state deadline. The structure that housed the nursing home was originally built in 1879. As a result of periods of neglect over the years, the building was not up to the nursing home standards of the time and was overcrowded.⁶⁰ The old Fairview Tuberculosis Sanatorium eventually became the site of a new McLean County Nursing Home, which is still located at 901 North Main Street in Normal. The land occupied by the Poor Farm was auctioned off in 1974. The 320 acres sold for about \$830,000 (almost \$5.5 million today).⁶¹

Ethel intended to take a break from nursing, but that didn’t last long because someone soon called her to be a nurse at a new nursing home in Bloomington. The Nel-Dor Arms at 1116 East Lafayette Street was advertised as luxurious, especially compared to the conditions at Maple Grove.⁶² An advertisement in *The Pantagraph* described private bedrooms, maid service, laundry and dry cleaning, chef-prepared meals, and limousine service to downtown.⁶³ When Ethel began working at the Nel-Dor Arms, another nurse refused to work with Black people. Ethel’s boss did not tolerate that nurse’s racist attitude and told her that she had to work with Ethel because she had a reputation as an excellent nurse. The white nurse, unhappy with the response, ended up quitting.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ “Our County House Far Below Standard,” *The Pantagraph*, February 9, 1916.

⁵⁸ Jones, oral history, 11.

⁵⁹ *Bloomington, Illinois City Directory*, 1959.

⁶⁰ Roland White, “Board Committee Proposes New County Nursing Home,” *The Pantagraph*, June 27, 1966.

⁶¹ McLean County Museum of History, *McLean County Poor Farm Collection*; Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.

⁶² 1116 E. Lafayette Street is the home of the Bloomington Normal Barber College and WXRJ radio station in 2023.

⁶³ *The Pantagraph*, July 4, 1959, 5.

⁶⁴ Jones, oral history, 12.

Ethel typically worked the night shift at the Nel-Dor Arms.⁶⁵ She remembered working with good people and must have truly enjoyed her job because she remained there from 1960 to 1971.⁶⁶ After Ethel left the nursing home, she had a desire to slow down, but did not wish to completely quit caring for patients, so she got into private nursing. Once she fully retired, Ethel lived at Wood Hill Towers and at the Phoenix Towers apartments, both in Bloomington.⁶⁷

Ethel's hard work and the value she placed on education clearly influenced her children. All three of them attended Illinois State Normal University for varying periods of time. Her daughter, Beulah, also worked as a nurse's aide at St. Joseph's Hospital.⁶⁸ She served in leadership roles with the local chapter of the NAACP along with her husband, Merlin Kennedy, a well-known Civil Rights activist in the community. Beulah was part of a local organization called US, which played a vital role in the fight for fair housing and against employment discrimination in Bloomington and Normal.⁶⁹ US was instrumental in developing a training program at State Farm Insurance Company to help young Black men and women become competitive candidates for jobs there.⁷⁰ Beulah died at the age of 78 on February 5, 2002, in Bloomington.⁷¹

Ethel's son, Walter, went on to become a prominent journalist who worked for renowned Black newspapers such as *The Gary Crusader* and *The Gary Daily Defender*. By age 46, he was the editor of Milwaukee's *Courier*.⁷² He was also on the staff of the *Chicago Defender*. Walter died on May 21, 2002.⁷³ Her youngest son, Charlie, served in the U.S. Army and was an avid golfer. He died on February 4, 2010, in Bloomington.⁷⁴

Ethel's life is a testament to the power of lifelong learning. At a crossroads in her life, she decided to follow her dream in the best way she could by pursuing more education and becoming a nurse. Her decades of service were felt and remembered by the community. Annie Ethel Jones died on March 29, 1991, at the age of 91 at Bloomington Nursing and Rehabilitation. She was survived by 12 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren.⁷⁵ Her funeral service was at the Wayman A.M.E. Church, where she spent so much time during her life, and was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.⁷⁶

By: Maria Mears, 2023

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ *Bloomington, Illinois City Directories*, 1960-1971.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 1972-1990.

⁶⁸ B. Kennedy oral history, 3

⁶⁹ Merlin and Beulah Kennedy, interview by Dr. Mildred Pratt, February 2, 1986, oral history transcript, The Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Museum of History, Bloomington, IL, 7.

⁷⁰ "Beulah Kennedy," *The Pantagraph*, February 7, 2002, 8.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² "Education Reporter Wins Top Award," *The Pantagraph*, April 10, 1975, 6.

⁷³ "Walter Louis Jones, Sr.," *The Pantagraph*, May 29, 2002, 7.

⁷⁴ "Charles 'Charlie' F. Jones," *The Pantagraph*, February 7, 2010, 12.

⁷⁵ "Annie Ethel Jones," *The Pantagraph*, March 26, 1991.

⁷⁶ Ibid.