

Ella Lee Luallen Scott Stokes (1912-1996)

Ella Lee Luallen is one of many important voices in McLean County Black history. She was born to Leslie (Lesley) J. Luallen and Margaret Clara (Jones) Luallen on June 30, 1912 in Corinth, Acorn County, Mississippi. Her father, Leslie, was a farm worker and her mother, Margaret, was a **domestic** worker and cook.

When Ella was about four years old, her parents separated (later divorced) and she and her mother Margaret moved to Humboldt, Tennessee. In Humboldt, they lived on a **plantation** that grew strawberries, and Margaret would drive a horse and buggy into town to do domestic work. By the time Ella was seven or eight, she and her mother left Tennessee for Bloomington, Illinois. They came to Bloomington on account of Margaret's uncle, retired teacher Tanzie (Nannie) Gibson who reported that there were better job opportunities for her there. When Margaret and Ella first moved to Bloomington, Margaret continued to work domestic jobs around town. Margaret was eventually able to rent a home on Cherry Street in Normal for a short period of time before settling in Bloomington on East Moulton Street.

Margaret married Arshell Barker on April 20, 1921. Margaret and Arshell stayed married until Margaret's death in 1969. Ella had a close relationship with Arshell, whom she referred to as "step-daddy."

Ella stayed in school throughout her childhood and her family's various moves. She attended a one-room schoolhouse in both Corinth, Mississippi and Humboldt, Tennessee. Her school in Humboldt was two miles from her home, forcing her to walk a long distance each day in order to attend. Going to school was important to Ella and although she could not attend at times due to the distance and occasional bad weather, she made school a **priority** from a young age. In Bloomington she attended Raymond School, Irving School, Emerson School, Bloomington High School. She **demonstrated** academic success as a student. At the age of 13, Ella was reported as having one of the highest writing exam scores in her class. She was proud of continuing her education for as long as she did, far surpassing the highest level of education her parents attained, which was fourth grade. Ella was able to continue formal schooling until she reached the ninth grade where she dropped out after one semester.

By the late 1920s, Ella married her first husband, James Thomas Scott. Ella had her one and only child with him, William DeLoss Scott. William was born March 13, 1929. In the **aftermath** of the stock market crash and the beginnings of the **Great Depression**, Ella, her husband and son moved to live with her husband's family in Missouri. They lived there just nine months before coming back to Bloomington, with the couple **ultimately** divorcing not long after.

On December 26, 1936, Ella Scott and Alfonso Stokes married in Peoria, Illinois. Alfonso was originally from Bloomington and born in the city on December 29, 1905 to Alfred and Margaret Stokes. Alfonso worked various laborer jobs throughout his life, including working for the **Works Progress Administration (WPA) New Deal** program during the Great Depression. He also worked as a maintenance man at Illinois State University.

It is clear that Ella deeply cared for her family members, and that is especially true of her son William, who was sometimes referred to as Bill. Ella lovingly remembered William as being "spoiled" as an only child and only grandchild. William attended Bloomington High School and later served in the Navy for four years beginning in 1947. After leaving the Navy, he eventually found work as a janitor and construction worker in Bloomington. William also became a self-taught golfer. His grandmother Margaret was gifted golf clubs by a family she worked for, and William practiced with the clubs in the back yard. Later, he began to **caddie** at Highland Park

Golf Course in Bloomington. William remained an **avid** golfer for the rest of his life, playing in tournaments throughout Illinois and the Midwest. Tragically, William died in a tragic work accident on November 25, 1980.

As previously mentioned, Ella worked a wide range of jobs throughout her life and was always able to maintain job security. She worked for wealthy families and at a hotel throughout the worst of the Depression years.

During **World War II**, Ella worked at the **defense plant**, Williams-Oil-O-Matic. The factory began as a heating plant to address the coal shortage during **World War I**. In 1940, prior to the United States joining World War II, the company was one of three in the nation charged with producing an automatic **anti-aircraft** firing **mechanism**. They continued to manufacture a variety of supplies for the war effort after the U.S. joined the conflict, and by May 1942 the factory was running 24/7 to meet demands for wartime manufacturing. Ella was one of the 300 women that worked there due to the fact that most of the men of working age were serving in the military. Black workers were also invited on staff in order to meet demand. There was only one other Black woman that worked the morning shift with Ella. At the factory, Ella cleaned parts for airplanes and was part of a larger **home front mobilization** where women across the country went to work in the factories in order to meet demand for wartime manufacturing.

Other than her brief time in factory work and her long history of domestic labor, Ella also worked in restaurants in Bloomington. She learned how to cook professionally from her stepfather, Arshell Barker. Arshell learned to cook after coming back from serving in World War I. In Bloomington, he worked as a private cook for prominent people in town including members of the Mecherle family that owned State Farm Insurance Company. Ella also did day work for the Mecherle family and worked for them for 25 years until she broke her leg and retired in 1981.

Despite Ella's packed work schedule, she found time to be an active member of the Bloomington community, especially the Black community. She was a member of the Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, the **Civic Women's Club**, the **NAACP**, the **Elks Lodge**, and the Auxiliary of the Redd-Williams American Legion Post 163. Ella recalled her mother Margaret joining the Auxiliary of the American Legion in the mid-1920s and Ella joined after that. For much of the 20th century, Bloomington's American Legion posts were **segregated**, and the Redd-Williams post was for Black Legion members. Both Ella and her mother Margaret held leadership roles in the Redd-Williams post.

In 1941, the Redd-Williams post, in coordination with the Regular Fellows Club, a local Black social club, threw a "Colored Ball" around President Franklin Roosevelt's birthday in order to raise money for the fight against **polio** (then known as infantile paralysis). The proceeds from the ball would go to the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, later known as the **March of Dimes**. The ball was, according to the local newspaper, "the first and so far is known the only such ball in Central Illinois." More than 350 tickets were sold, resulting in over \$100 (or approximately \$2,012 in 2022) raised for the foundation. Ella and her mother Margaret worked together to plan the 1942 ball.

On April 19, 1996, Ella Lee Stokes passed away at the age of 83 at the BroMenn Regional Medical Center in Normal. Ella was survived by her three grandchildren, as well as ten great-grandchildren and four great-great grandchildren. Her funeral took place on April 23, 1996 at Kibler-Smith Memorial Home in Bloomington. Following the funeral service, Ella was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery where she was laid to rest next to her husband, Alfonso Stokes.