

## **Napoleon Calimese (1890-1972) and Louise Davis Calimese (1895-1985)**

Napoleon J. Calimese (pronounced CALIMEEZ) was born February 18, 1890 in Irvine, Kentucky. Napoleon and his family later moved to 505 E. Locust in Normal, Illinois.

Louise J. Davis was born February 12, 1895 in Louisiana, Missouri. Napoleon and Louise were married on August 4, 1920 in Normal. They had two children: one son (John) and one daughter (Betty).

Napoleon was **drafted** to serve in the United States Army during World War I. His service began on August 1, 1918. He served in Company A of the all-African American 809<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Infantry as a private, eventually being promoted to the rank of sergeant. On September 23, 1918, Napoleon and the rest of Company A of the 809<sup>th</sup> boarded the *U.S.S. Mongolia* in Hoboken, New Jersey with the final destination of France.

The 809<sup>th</sup> mostly functioned as a construction crew. All units designated as Pioneer Infantry were trained to build “temporary roads, railroads, bridges, trenches, and all kinds of shelter both in active operations and rest areas.” They also organized demolitions and destroyed enemy obstacles to prepare the area for advancing troops.

Napoleon was released from military service on August 19, 1919 and returned to work as a barber. By 1920, Napoleon, his brother, and their father all worked in their family owned barbershop, the Calimese Bros. (located at 101 E. Beaufort St. in Normal). In 1928 it moved to 102 E. Beaufort. According to an **apprentice** of Napoleon’s, the Town of Normal informed Napoleon that if he wanted to stay in business, “he could not cut any Black folks’ hair,” only white people’s hair.

**Discrimination and segregation** during this time period were **rampant** in Bloomington-Normal and all over the country. This led to the founding of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** on February 12, 1909. Napoleon was involved in the Bloomington-Normal chapter. He was elected to the executive committee in 1946, and in 1954 he supported the NAACP in their fight against segregation in new housing developments.

Napoleon’s involvement in the community did not end there. He was actively involved with the McLean County **Colored** Republican Club, **Masonic** Lodge Union No. 23, Prince Hall, Redd-Williams Post, No. 163 of the American Legion, and a member of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, where he was a **deacon** and superintendent of the Sunday school. Louise was also involved in several community groups such as the **League of Women Voters** and a member of the Christian Women’s Fellowship of Third Christian Church.

Napoleon and Louise spent a good portion of their lives working at the McLean County Home for Colored Children (renamed the Booker T. Washington Home in 1942). The Home was officially established in September 1920. In December of that year, the State of Illinois granted the Home a **charter**. For many years, this was the only home for African American children outside of Chicago to be licensed by the State of Illinois. The children who lived at the Home came from a variety of situations that left them with no place to live. Children ages six to sixteen could live at the Home. Before that age, the children went to the **Baby Fold** in Normal. After the age of sixteen, the children were allowed to stay at the Home until they found work or were placed in a private residence. The county no longer provided support once they turned sixteen. The home was run successfully by Alexander and Cedonia Barker for several years.

In 1927 the Home was in need of a new superintendent and matron. While Napoleon was still working as a barber, his doctor instructed him to “get more fresh air and sunshine.” Because there was an opening at the Home, the Calimeses applied. As superintendent and matron, they were responsible for the “spiritual, moral, and physical welfare of the girls and boys who are placed in the Home.” The couple approached their “duties with a keen desire to fulfill the wishes of the board of directors and [showed] an interest in the children of the Home.” When the Calimeses began working at the Home, they earned a combined salary of \$100 per month, plus room and board (which would be about \$1,428 in 2018).

When the Home was chartered by the State of Illinois, it housed nineteen children and two adults in a six-room house without running water or plumbing, located at 1203 W. Moulton Street (later renamed

MacArthur Avenue). By December 1920, an adjoining lot was purchased with a **cottage** on it. The boys then stayed in the cottage.

Finally, in 1935, enough funds had been gathered to construct a new building to **accommodate** the ever-increasing number of children at the Home. The building was two stories tall, fireproof (because it was made of red-brick with steel beams), and included a full basement for heating, laundry, and storage. It had a double entrance (one for girls and one for boys), with a common dining room and study. The Home could only accommodate twenty children, but this was considered an **amenity** that offered the children who lived there “a family atmosphere instead of an institutionalized life.” The Calimeses and the children at the Home moved into the new house in the fall of 1936.

In the hope of creating a true home environment, children at the Home were expected to contribute to the upkeep of the house by doing chores. In October 1940, the *Pantagraph* published an interview with Louise as part of an ongoing series of articles about agencies affiliated with the **Community Chest**. In the interview, Louise explained that the children would “rotate the household jobs so that each child gets a chance to do everything.” She also stated that Napoleon bought clothing for the boys, and the girls made their own. Louise, who liked to sew herself, started teaching the girls to sew when they reached the age of ten. Napoleon and the older boys worked the vegetable gardens located on the grounds of the Home. The abundance of fruits and vegetables that the garden produced sustained the Home throughout the summer months, and any excess was canned by Louise and the older girls in the Home’s kitchen for use during the winter.

But it was not all work and no play at the Home. Programs, such as concerts by the Amateur Musical Club, were frequent sources of entertainment for the children. The Calimeses also facilitated hobby-building programs for the children, including birdhouse building for the boys and piano lessons for all the children. The children attended Bloomington Public Schools and participated in many community activities. Children from the neighborhood were welcome to play at the Home’s playground, as long as they behaved.

Additionally, short trips were planned for the children. Louise stated in the same 1940 interview that “these children never go away anywhere for a summer vacation, so we try to plan an outing for them each year.” Those outings included New Salem, Brookfield Zoo, Navy Pier, the Art Institute, swimming, games, and a visit to the Mackinaw River. Local organizations also contributed to the children’s outings. In 1946, area businessmen bought tickets to the Mills Brothers Circus from the local VFW post, who sponsored the circus. Overall, the primary goal during trips like this one was to give the children who lived at the Home experiences other children may have had, and they clearly found much joy in these outings.

Louise strived to help the children discern the difference between actual racial **prejudice** and deserved discipline. In instances that the children would come home from school saying that the teacher did not like them because of their skin color, Louise stated that “nine times out of ten [...] the child [had] done something it shouldn’t and deserved any reprimand that it received.” However, this is not to suggest that the children did not experience prejudice in their lives. Louise would try “to instill in the child a desire and willingness to turn the other cheek and thus rise above the insult by sheer superiority in understanding and tolerance.” As an African American woman herself, she would have known the struggles that came with the **racism** that was so prevalent at this time.

The Calimeses remained at the Home for almost thirty years, retiring on July 15, 1957. The day before the couple’s last day, members of the board of the Home held a reception for Louise and Napoleon in honor of their many years of support and efforts towards the success of the Home. It was stated that “their cooperation with the board and their outstanding ability in handling children have endeared them to all with whom they work.” To their credit, many of the children “who left the home and gone out into the world never fail to express their appreciation for the splendid training” Louise and Napoleon gave them to “meet the problems of the world.”

After the Calimeses retired from working at the McLean County Home for Colored Children, they moved back to Normal and settled in a house at 1002 S. University Street. Napoleon worked as a serviceman at the House of Hoover (which sold and serviced vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, and

other small Hoover brand appliances), located at 801 W. Washington Street, for at least three years. In 1965, Napoleon returned to barbering, working at Gaston's Barbershop at 201 S. Center Street for another three years.

Napoleon J. Calimese passed away on Friday, March 24, 1972 at the age of 82. Thirteen years after Napoleon's death, Louise J. Calimese passed away on Tuesday, September 24, 1985 in Las Vegas, Nevada. Louise's body was brought back to Bloomington, and she was buried next to Napoleon at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

**Discussion Question:** What three words would you use to describe Napoleon and Louise Calimese and why? If you could talk with either Napoleon or Louise, what would you ask them? What do you think would surprise either Napoleon or Louise about life today?