

# NATIONAL

## A Perspective of Fisk University

When Beth Howse goes to work on the campus of Fisk University, she literally walks in the footsteps of her mother, grandfather and great-grandmother. Beth is a special collections librarian at Fisk University in Nashville and the fourth generation of her family to graduate from one of the nation's oldest African-American schools.

Fisk began in October 1865 when General Clinton B. Fisk met with representatives of the American Missionary Association in New York and the Freedman's Aid Commission of Ohio to plan a school for the education of the children of former slaves. Fisk University accepted its first students in 1866, providing a quality, liberal arts education to facilitate in the liberation of America's newest citizens.

Fisk today is known for its alumni of influential American leaders, its commitment to scholastic achievement and its architectural and fine art treasures. But it was the Jubilee Singers, the school's choral group, that first brought international attention to the school.

Howse's great-grandmother, Ella Sheppard, was one of the original members of the world-renowned troupe.

"Ella was purchased from slavery by her father," said Howse. "He took her to Ohio, but she returned to Tennessee in 1868 to accept a teaching position in Gallatin. She enrolled in Fisk and eventually obtained a position as the school's music teacher and was the only black staff member at the school until 1875. Ella also joined the Jubilee Singers and served as the group's pianist and assistant coach."

When a financial crisis threatened to close the doors at Fisk in the early 1870s, the Jubilee Singers embarked on a fund raising tour to save the school. Under the guidance of the school's treasurer George L. White, Ella and eight others began a tour of the North and the South on Oct. 6, 1871.

"At first many people ridiculed them as nothing more than a minstrel show," Howse said. "They

were often denied food and lodging and were sometimes threatened with violence. One performance in Ohio raised less than \$50. Then the group heard news of the Great Chicago Fire. Though they were hungry and cold, they donated the money to aid the victims."

Their act of charity was rewarded in Brooklyn when clergyman Henry Ward Beecher endorsed the group, creating a climate of acceptance that opened the doors of white churches everywhere. A performance at the Boston Coliseum electrified the audience, among them Johann Strauss, who was said to have thrown his hat into the air with excitement. The group also performed before President U.S. Grant in the White House.

"People fell under the spell of the American Negro Spiritual," remarked Howse. "The music was an outgrowth of the suffering endured in the yoke of slavery. There was a universal appeal in the music that touched many people. By the end of the first tour, the Jubilee Singers earned \$125,000, a vast fortune in those days.

"It is also interesting to note that they sacrificed their own education so Fisk could flourish," added Howse. "Their second tour began in 1884 and lasted for six years! None of the original singers graduated, but Fisk's survival was assured."

The second tour took the group to Europe, where they sang before commoners and kings: In England Queen Victoria was so pleased with their performance, she commissioned a life-size portrait of the group. The painting, rendered by court artist Havel, hangs today in Jubilee Hall.

The Jubilee Singers took Fisk University from its humble beginnings at the close of the Civil War to international recognition as an institution of higher education: The Jubilee Singers, drawn from the student body, still tour at home and abroad.

The university today is a private, coeducational liberal arts college, welcoming students from 40

states and seven foreign countries. Its graduate list is impressive, including such notable as Hazel O'Leary, U.S. Secretary of Energy; U.S. Representatives John Lewis of Georgia and Alcee Hastings of Florida; David L. Lewis, author and professor at Rutgers University; John Hope Franklin, author of *The Militant South*; and Nikki Giovanni, poet and author of *Sacred Cows*.

Fisk was created in the changing social order of the Reconstruction, and the campus buildings reflect this in their variety and scale. Jubilee Hall, the university's first permanent structure and a National Historic Landmark, sits prominently on a hill to the west. To the south, one of the original, clapboard Civil War hospitals is preserved. Once used as a school house, it has been restored and now serves as The Little Theatre.

To the north the Fisk Memorial Chapel is a dramatic example of High Victorian Picturesque architecture. With Romanesque arches and a gigantic Gothic bell tower, it is radically different from other Fisk buildings. The chapel serves as a visual reminder that Fisk may be small but is full of unique treasures, many of which are open to the public.

Fisk University is located at the corner of Jefferson Street and D.B. Todd Boulevard. Information on gallery or library hours and group tours of the campus can be obtained by calling Fisk at 615-329-8720.

For more information on Tennessee's African-American historic sites, call 1-800-636-8100.



Lou Rawls (2nd from left) celebrates the success of the 1994 "Lou Rawls Parade of Stars" telethon with (from left) James Alston of UNCF, Wayman F. Smith III of Anheuser-Busch Co. and actor Gregory A. Williams.

## UNCF Telethon Raises \$11 Million

Preliminary totals from the Lou Rawls Parade of Stars telethon, which benefits the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), indicate that \$11 million in cash and pledges were raised during the nationwide telecast Jan. 8.

Proceeds from the 14th annual telecast are used to help maintain and expand educational opportunities at the 41 private historically black colleges and universities represented by the college fund.

More than 54,000 students are

enrolled at UNCF colleges, a 27 percent increase in the last five years.

Cumulative totals for the nation's only telethon to benefit an educational cause now stand at approximately \$120 million.

Among the stars who joined Rawls for the seven-hour special were co-hosts Marilyn McCoo, Ed McMahon, Patti Labelle, Alex Trebek and Gladys Knight. Others joining the "Parade of Stars" included Ray Charles, Anita Baker, Eddie

Murphy, Frank Sinatra, Oleta Adams, Michael Bolton, Quincy Jones and Boyz II Men. Rawls, who has led the Parade of Stars for the past 14 years, thanked the many callers who contributed to the program, which launched the 50th anniversary of the United Negro College Fund.

"The public's financial support of UNCF colleges and universities is outstanding," Rawls said. "I want to thank everyone for their generous support."

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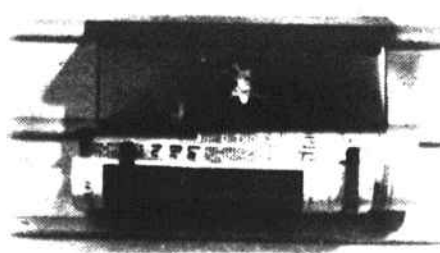
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