

FORUM

February: Black Names and Ideas Come Out of History's Hole

Just when the groundhog pokes its head out, bidding six more weeks of cold weather or an early spring, school children are snowed under to hear and recite the names of "famous blacks." It's Black History Month. For the rest of the year, the rich legacy of pride, achievement, toil and strife and mastery over obstacles returns to the cold, dark caverns of little ones' craniums.

Ask today's school children about "famous" African Americans and the list will likely begin with someone in sports. Likely, it won't be Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, "Big House" Gaines, Earl "The Pearl" Monroe, Florence Griffith Joyner, or Joe Louis. Michael Jordan, "Shaq" and Dennis Rodman will jump out. For great musical talents one will not hear the names Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, or Marian Anderson. Rather, it might be Michael Jackson, Prince or one of any number of rap artists.

LIFT EVERY VOICE

By BILL TURNER



Go to the contributions of African Americans to literature, and, if the investigator is fortunate, the kid — college students included — will name Maya Angelou or Toni Morrison. Maybe Alex Haley. Names like James Baldwin, W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston and Ralph Ellison would draw blanks.

African American entrepreneurs? Umm. What do the names Wally "Famous" Amos, Reginald Lewis, James B. Llewellyn, Percy Sutton, and Booker T. Washington mean to our children? The contributors to the cause of human and civil rights would include Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and maybe Thurgood Marshall. Maybe. Ida B. Wells might never come to mind. Few school children have been taught to appreciate the work of Sojourner Truth and Fannie Lou Hamer. Most are all mixed-up about the role of Malcolm X, not to mention that of Louis Farrakhan.

Go to politics and to education; and when the science category is opened, one should not be surprised if George Washington Carver is the only name that stands out. In the field of religion, most students know but the bare minimum. The names of African Methodist Episcopal Church founder Richard Allen and the church's famous bishop Henry Highland Garnet would be lost. Father Divine is as much shrouded in mystery as he ever was, as is "Sweet Daddy" Grace, whose first church still stands in Charlotte, N.C.

What of "well-known men and women of color" who can be rightfully called intellectuals and scholars. How many school children are taught anything about the American Negro Academy, founded 100 years ago; a black elite that would shape and direct



Carter G. Woodson

American society insofar as blacks were concerned. The Rev. Alexander Crumwell comes to mind. E. Franklin Frazier, George Washington Williams, John Edward Bruce, Arthur Schomburg and Alain Locke.

They fought against the views of prominent European scholars at institutions like Oxford in London and Harvard. Said one laughingly at the "very thought" of black history: "Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness ... and darkness is not the subject of history."

Said Dr. L.S.B. Leakey, widely-known for his studies of the earliest evidence of human life — in Kenya, East Africa, "In every country that one visits and where one is drawn into conversation about Africa, the question is regularly asked by people who should know better: But what has Africa contributed to world progress?"

Where would we be then were it not for Dr. Carter G. Wood-

son, who, 71 years ago launched Negro History Week to promote the study of African-American history. What is more, Woodson was not as much interested in the study of black history as he was in the history influenced by African Americans.

So today only God can be thanked that African Americans have come as far as they have. The serious study of their history and contributions is relegated to one month of the year. African-American history should be infused into the general curriculum all year long. But, Dr. John Hope Franklin, the best-known black historian, warns us: "Blacks can never expect the public schools to teach us as much about our history as we want or need to know. We can urge them, we can press them to teach more, but I think that much of this lies with us."

Like the groundhog, one can crawl through the Internet and get some rich materials this month. The web site is just under our groundhog. It's February!

(Bill Turner is a regular freelance columnist for the Chronicle.)

We're All Called to be Leaders

Like many of us, Henry Louis Gates grew up poor and didn't know it. All he knew was that his father worked two jobs — loading trucks at a paper mill and as a night janitor at a phone company — and that the family always ate well, dressed nicely, and managed to put a little money away for college. He also knew that what his parents expected from him didn't sound like poor folks' expectations.

"Certainly my parents never allowed my brother or me to doubt that we could become whatever we chose," Henry says in his new book, "The Future of the Race," which he wrote with fellow Harvard scholar Cornel West. "Nor did they let us doubt that the world would yield its secrets if only we turned our attention to it. They believed in the possibility of upward mobility, of racial betterment, of collective progress. We were to get just as much education as we possibility could, to stay the enemies of racism, segregation, and discrimination. If we heard it once, we heard it a thousand times: Education is the one thing nobody can take away from you."

But as the great black scholar W.E.B. DuBois noted nearly a century ago, education, and any upward mobility that came as a result, meant a whole new set of responsibilities. DuBois wrote that the "Talented Tenth," the most fortunate, gifted, and successful minds in the black community, were obligated to help those less fortunate.

"Dr. King did not die so that half of us would 'make it' and half of us would perish, forever tarnishing two centuries of struggle and agitation for our equal rights," Henry and Cornel write. "We, the members of the Talented Tenth, must accept our historical responsibility and live King's credo that none of us is free until each of us is free ... and that all of us are brothers and sisters, in spirit."

When I was growing up, I was taught that the world had a lot of problems that I should struggle and work to change. My parents

taught me that extra intellectual and material gifts brought with them the privilege and responsibility of sharing with others.

They believed that service is the rent each of us pays for living, and that service is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time or after you have reached your personal goals.

Cornel and Henry say that the lessons of recent history and the many challenges we have yet to overcome as black people require us to take a fresh look at our ideas about what it will take to move us forward. They believe that we must all find opportunities for positive change — within ourselves and within our community. What about government's role? They make the case for getting people off welfare, training them for good-paying jobs, and putting them to

neglect our duty as leaders of our own community.

"Not to demand that each member of the black community accept individual responsibility for her or his behavior — whether that behavior assumes the form of black-on-black homicide, violations by gang members against the sanctity of the church, unprotected and too early sexual activity, gangster rap lyrics, and hate of any kind — is to function merely as ethnic cheerleaders selling wool tickets from the campus or the suburbs, rather than saying the difficult things that may be unpopular with our fellows. Being a leader does not necessarily mean being loved; loving one's community means daring to risk estrangement and alienation from that very community, in the short run, in order to break the cycle of poverty, despair, and hopelessness that we are in, over the long run."

I agree. What we desperately need now is the kind of leadership that will allow us to move forward as a community and as an entire nation. Given the multitude of problems we face today, we must recognize that we all have a responsibility to serve as leaders.

"The Future of the Race," written by Henry Louis Gates, chairman of Harvard University's Afro American Studies Department, and Cornel West, professor of Afro-American studies at Harvard, is published by Alfred A. Knopf and is available at most major book stores or by calling (212) 751-2600.

(Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund and a member of the Black Community Crusade for Children Working Committee, whose mission is to leave no child behind. For more information about the BCCC, call (202) 628-8787.)



CHILDWATCH

By MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

work. We must demand a wide range of economic incentives to generate new investments in inner cities, youth apprenticeships with businesses, and larger tax credits for money earned. And they urge us to stand boldly against anti-black racism, but warn us against continuing to repeat the same old, stale formulas: "To blame 'the man' for oppressing us all, in exactly the same ways; to scapegoat Koreans, Jews, women, or even black immigrants for failure of African Americans to seize local entrepreneurial opportunities," is

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