

The Inspiring Story of Chester Shell, African-American from Hawthorne, Florida

Brief Presentation by Robert Moore, ACHC member, before the Alachua BoCC on 2/11/2020.

Even as a young man, Chester Shell was keenly aware of the need for a school to serve the Negro community in Hawthorne. His foresight, persistence, and hard work ultimately resulted in bringing better opportunities for education to hundreds of both black and white students.

When Chester Shell was born on February 16, 1892 in Orange Springs, Marion County, FL, near Hawthorne, there was no school for Negro children in the Hawthorne area. Some teaching was done in churches, private homes, and an old Masonic hall owned by the black community. [1] From 1915 to the mid-1920s Negro children were taught in a one-room community hall, partitioned with bed sheets to form two rooms: the “Big Room” for older children and the “Little Room” for younger kids. The school year was two months long, later stretched to three. Parents were charged twenty-five cents for each child to help pay the teacher for the extra month. [2]

Chester had limited education himself and never graduated from high school. [3] As a child, he learned how to hunt, fish, sleep in the Florida woods, prepare game for eating, cook over a camp fire, and train hunting dogs. With these skills, he became a seasonal hunting guide at the Moore Hotel, where wealthy white northerners would stay during hunting season. As an adult, Mr. Shell became a full-time porter for the Seaboard Railroad and traveled extensively. [1,4,5,6]

After many failed attempts by the black community from 1922-1925 to enlist help from the Alachua County School Board, Shell learned of the Julius Rosenwald Education Fund. Mr. Shell investigated how this fund might help. The Rosenwald Fund was offered for the Hawthorne black school project with the understanding that an equal amount would be raised locally. [1,2,5]

In 1926, Mr. Shell again approached the School Board for help. This time, due to the addition of Rosenwald funds, he was told that if he raised half of the necessary money, the School Board would match the funds, and a school would be built. [1]

Chester rode the train north on his railroad pass and visited the men he had guided during their hunting trips. The charismatic Shell raised much of the needed funds (\$10,000) through these contacts. The rest came from the Hawthorne black community by selling dinners, soliciting funds, and making personal donations. When the goal was reached, the school was built.

Mr. Shell encouraged the use of materials from the former wooden white Hawthorne Grade and High School, which was torn down in 1926.

The reconstructed building was named Hawthorne Negro High School. The name was later changed to Shell Middle School, which provided only kindergarten through eighth grade, so high school students had to be bussed to Gainesville’s Lincoln High School. [1,2,4]

Another renovation of the school, completed in 1955, created the high school for black students. Eventually converted into an elementary school, named Shell Elementary, it was integrated in 1970. [1]

In 1950, a portrait of Chester Shell was presented to him at the Shell School in his honor, and he expressed appreciation for those who had worked so diligently. In 1976, a dedication was held after a remodeling project that increased the size of the school by two-thirds. Shell’s daughter,

Margery Shell Johnson, a fifth-grade teacher at the school said, “If my daddy were here, he would be crying tears of joy.” [2,6]

Chester Shell died on May 9, 1967 and is buried in Hawthorne Cemetery. He is remembered by his philosophy, “Give the best you have and the best will come to you.” Today, Shell Elementary is busy dedicating an entire room at the school to honor Chester Shell. His legacy lives on.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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