

Annie Ethel Jones (1899 – 1991)

Annie Ethel Berry was born in Booneville, Mississippi on May 19, 1899, to Malaci and Ida Eugenia (Bynum) Berry. For most of her life, she went by her middle name, Ethel.

In an oral history interview, Ethel stated that she believed her parents were “free-born” meaning they were not born **enslaved** to her knowledge. However, Ethel did not know if her grandparents had been enslaved. Her father Malaci (sometimes referred to as Mellen or Malcom) and her mother Ida were born in 1874 and 1881, respectively. Growing up, Ethel helped her family in the fields **hoeing** cotton and corn. Her father was a farmer and owned his land in Mississippi. He also worked as a carpenter where he found steady employment from white residents in town. Ethel believed that her father taught himself **carpentry**. However, he was not **compensated** equally to white individuals that did the same kind of work.

Ethel’s education consisted of attending a **one-room schoolhouse** while she was living in Mississippi. Even though Ethel and the rest of her siblings had work responsibilities on the farm, they took their education seriously. Growing up, Ethel had dreams of being a doctor. Even though her family was too poor to think about the possibility of going to medical school, her drive and determination in her educational **pursuits** was **evident**.

When Ethel was in eighth grade, she passed a six-week course that allowed her to assist with teaching at other **segregated** Black schools in Mississippi. A Black school in Booneville, Mississippi didn’t have a teacher placed at the beginning of the school year, so the superintendent (who heard that Ethel passed the teaching course), called her parents asking if she was interested in teaching just until they could hire someone else. Her parents **consented** to the **arrangement**, and she taught for at least one semester.

Ethel likely met her husband, Squire Jones, in Mississippi since he was living in Riezi at the same time she was. He was a widower and 35 years her senior. Squire had two grown daughters. Ethel and Squire married in Danville, Illinois in 1922. They mostly did housework for people while living in Danville. Squire wanted to move to Bloomington to be closer to his daughter, Cora. They did not stay in Danville long and were in Bloomington at the time of the birth of their first daughter, Beulah, on June 5, 1923. The couple went on to have three more children, all sons: James, Walter, and Charles.

When they came to Bloomington, they rented a house at 1210 West Oakland Avenue. Arshell and Margret Barker with their daughter Ella Stokes were their neighbors. Ella would sometimes babysit for Squire and Ethel while they worked. Squire did housework for white people in town. Ethel also did **day work** here and there for people in town. From their wages, they were able to buy the home they were living in.

Their house on West Oakland Avenue was in a predominately Black neighborhood. Buelah, Ethel’s daughter, remembered one white family that lived in the neighborhood, but they did not want their white children to play with the other Black children in the neighborhood. The children would occasionally walk to school together or be invited into their yard, but for the most part, the white family kept to themselves.

The Jones house was made up of three rooms and an **outhouse**. Ethel and Buelah slept in the front room, while the boys and Squire slept in the back room. They did not have running water and had to walk over to a fountain that was located on what is presently MacArthur Avenue before the city laid pipes down Oakland Avenue. They had a large yard where Squire grew grapes and had a peach tree. For a short time, the family even raised chickens. Ethel would work with Buelah to make jelly from the fruit Squire grew.

The Jones house could be considered a traditional home in terms of gender roles, where the father was the **authority** in many ways. Ethel would cook for the family and every morning she made Squire bacon, eggs, and biscuits. However, Ethel insisted that the children had their chores divided evenly. Both the boys and girls did the dishes even though Squire felt that was not a chore for boys.

Both Ethel and Squire were involved in their church, the Wayman A.M.E. Church, in Bloomington. Church was **vital** important to the Jones family, and they walked to church every Sunday, sometimes going to three different services in one day. The family did not own a car, so if they could not catch a bus, they would walk to and from the church multiple times in one day. Squire taught Sunday School and Ethel was the president of the **pastor's** aid, an organization created to support the minister.

Ethel and Squire were active in the community outside of church as well. They were both members of the NAACP. Ethel was also a member of the Bloomington Chapter **Order of the Eastern Star**, a **fraternal** organization devoted to “make a positive difference in the world with **charitable** works,” that benefit their local communities, states, and humanity in general.

The Jones family worked hard to make a living at a time when it was very difficult for Black people to find steady and well-paying employment in Central Illinois. This became even more **apparent** as the **Great Depression** hit. Like many families across the United States, the Jones family struggled to make ends meet. Squire found it almost impossible to find work once the Depression hit. On top of the struggle to find employment, his health began to fail. The family received some aid from the county, but other than that, the family was largely on their own. Luckily, Ethel was still able to secure some day work and she had some savings from her jobs that she kept in a safety deposit box. However, her desire to keep working and ability to find paid work actually limited the family's access to social services. Ethel recalled that a representative of the local **relief office** came to their house to check on the family. He told Ethel that if she wanted relief she had to stay home and not work. To which Ethel replied that she was not a lazy person. “If you don't want me to have it, I'll get by. Just don't worry about it.” She wanted to provide for her family and chose to work rather than stay home and collect relief from the county. Ethel recalled that she felt they got by better with her working than if they had accepted what the relief office was offering.

As the Depression wore on, Squire's health continued to decline, and he was sickly for several years before his death. Squire died on June 6, 1942, at the age of 78. Ethel was 43 at the time. She never married again. Since Squire had been ill for some time, there was not a **drastic** change in terms of the workload for Ethel and the children or the finances. With Squire gone, the reality that Ethel would have to be the **sole provider** for her children fully set in, and she began to think **critically** about what this new chapter of life could **entail**.

Growing up, Ethel dreamed of becoming a doctor. Medical school seemed completely out of reach for Ethel due to the **enormous** cost and her family's economic status. However, even throughout her early adulthood and into her marriage, she knew she wanted to work in a hospital. After Squire died, Ethel decided to pursue nursing at the encouragement of her own doctor, Dr. Howard Sloan, a well-respected doctor in the community. Ethel started her studies through **correspondence course** which allowed her to become a nurse's aide. Eventually, she went up to Chicago to take her state board examinations and passed, becoming a **licensed practical nurse (LPN)**.

Ethel started her nursing career at St. Joseph's Hospital in Bloomington in 1951. Before St. Joseph's Hospital moved to its current location at Veteran's Parkway and East Washington

Street (and its name was changed to OSF St. Joseph Medical Center), the hospital was a **rambling** collection of additions to an earlier mansion near the corner of West Jackson Street and Morris Avenue on the west side of Bloomington. Originally, the administration at St. Joseph's thought Ethel needed to take another exam in order to be hired. However, after **deliberation** with the head of nursing, she was allowed to start right away.

While Ethel insisted that her coworkers at St. Joseph's were kind to her and she did not report **racial discrimination** from the hospital, she did have to cope with quite a few racist patients. Ethel remembered that many white patients "didn't want Blacks to work over them." While Ethel was not the first Black person on staff at the hospital and there were several other Black individuals working at St. Joseph's, she was certainly a minority in her place of work and her field. Some white patients protested when Ethel was assigned to give them a bath. Her solution, which was supported by her supervisors, was to grant them their wish. Patients who had a problem getting a bath from a Black nurse simply wouldn't get a bath that day. Ethel, at the advice of a **colleague**, left St. Joseph's for more money working at what used to be the **McLean County Poor Farm** by 1955. By the time Ethel started working there, the Poor Farm was the county-operated Maple Grove Nursing Home. For most of its history, the Poor Farm, located on Route 51 about five miles south of downtown Bloomington, was mostly a place for people who could not take care of themselves and had nowhere else to go.

When Ethel took the job at the Poor Farm, the county recently transformed the old farm into the county-run Maple Grove Nursing Center the year prior, in 1954. Although different than hospital nursing, providing care at the nursing home still provided some challenges. Ethel recalled being kicked in the chest by a male patient so hard that it caused a knot. Ethel stated that it happened while she was trying to wash the man's feet. She assumed it would heal, but the knot did not go down and she eventually had to have surgery years later. With no cancer to be found, Ethel believed that it was the kick from a man in the nursing home that caused the knot.

Ethel intended to take a break from nursing, but that didn't last long as someone called her to be a nurse at a new nursing home in Bloomington. Located at 1116 E. Lafayette Street, the Nel-Dor Arms was advertised as **luxurious**, especially compared to the conditions at Maple Grove. An advertisement in *The Pantagraph* described private bedrooms, maid service, laundry and dry cleaning, chef-prepared meals, and limousine service to downtown. When Ethel began working at the Nel-Dor Arms, there was a fellow nurse who refused to work with Black people. Ethel's boss did not **entertain** the **racism** from this nurse and told her that she had to work with Ethel because she had a reputation as an excellent nurse. The white nurse, unhappy with the response, ended up quitting.

Ethel typically worked the night shift at the Nel-Dor Arms. She remembered working with good people and must have truly enjoyed her job as she worked there from 1960 to 1971. Ethel quit working at the nursing home and, desiring to slow down but not completely quit, got into private nursing.

Ethel's life is a **testament** to the power of lifelong learning. At a **crossroads** in her life, she decided to follow her dream in the best way she could by pursuing more education and becoming a nurse. Her decades of service were felt and remembered by the community. Annie Ethel Jones died on March 29, 1991, at the age of 91 at Bloomington Nursing and Rehabilitation. She was survived by 12 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren. Her funeral service was at the Wayman A.M.E. Church, where she spent so much time during her life. And she was laid to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.