



BELLE BLUE CLAXTON (1872-1926)

Bloomington/Normal is proud of its diversity. Have you heard of Not In Our Town? It's a national group dedicated to promoting better relationships between all people. Perhaps you have seen their signs or walked in one of their parades. The local group was founded in 1995 and each year since 1996, they have sponsored a walk to promote **civil rights** in McLean County. But it wasn't always this way. One of the earliest people to work for equal rights and an open society in Bloomington was Belle Blue Claxton.

Belle Blue was born in Bloomington, Illinois on April 30, 1872. Her father Richard Blue worked as a farm laborer for Judge James Raybern. During the Civil War, he had served as a musician with the 29th United States Colored Regiment.

Belle married James Claxton who had moved to Bloomington in 1918. Belle and James had no children. She was remembered as "a tall, stately light-**complexioned** woman, always in a 'shirtwaist' and full skirt, her hair piled high on top her head."

Belle was an unusual woman for the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. At a time when few women worked outside the home, she had an extensive career. When most African-American women were limited to work as housekeepers, cooks, or seamstresses, Belle held a number of positions in businesses and offices. For five years she was a secretary in Chicago for former Bloomington resident and lawyer, General John McNulta. She was the head bookkeeper for the Percheron (a type of horse) Society of America for ten years. She also worked for many years as a **stenographer** and bookkeeper for S. P. Robinson, a Bloomington lawyer.

But it was in civic life that Belle contributed most significantly to Bloomington-Normal and McLean County. She and James were very active in the growing movement across the United States to obtain civil rights for African-Americans. These rights had been guaranteed to all citizens after the Civil War with the passage of the **14th and 15th Amendments** to the Constitution of the United States.

Belle and James were members of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In an effort to deny African-Americans their rights, a number of laws and **ordinances**, which were referred to as "**Jim Crow Laws**" were passed in many communities and states. "Jim Crow Laws" called for "separate but equal" facilities which included schools, restrooms, drinking fountains, or in the case of Bloomington's Miller Park, beaches.

Miller Park was Bloomington's finest park. But in 1919 two separate beaches for swimmers existed there: "one for whites and one for blacks." The separate beach had been established in 1908 when park **commissioners** decided to build separate facilities for African-Americans. They did this after some white members of the community harassed African-American citizens trying to use the single beach. Park officials stated that African-Americans were "entitled to some rights...as they too were tax paying citizens and Miller Park was a taxpayer supported lake." But rather than **integrate** the beach, the officials built a separate beach. The beach designated for "whites" was larger and included a **bathhouse** and changing rooms. The beach set aside for "blacks" was near the stone bridge and much smaller. It was in an area of **backwater** which was, according to *The Daily Pantagraph* of 1919, usually dirty and **unsanitary**.

As a member of the NAACP, Belle was part of the committee that worked for **desegregation** of the beaches. They met with John Welch, the Commissioner of the Department of Public Property, saying that as taxpaying citizens, they had equal rights to the beaches and bathhouses. The Commissioner's response was that "plans were being made to improve the beach designated for African-Americans."

In response to the **numerous** articles in *The Daily Pantagraph* about the "beach" **controversy**, Belle wrote a letter to the editor. She wrote to clarify the NAACP's position. She said, "We are not asking a favor of Mr. Welch (the Commissioner), we are simply demanding our rights. We have an organization, national in scope, that stands for something and that is justice." She went on to explain that her group demanded the exercise of citizenship rights which the law guaranteed to every citizen.

At that time, some members of the African-American community preferred **segregation**, but they wanted the equal part of the "separate but equal." They went to the commissioner and demanded that their facilities be improved and an African-American supervisor be put in charge of the African-American section of the beach. And in 1919, that is exactly what happened. By the end of that July, the beaches were extended, cleaned, and refreshed by new sand. Charles Thomas, a former **sergeant** of the 370th United States Infantry (known as the famous "Black Devils" during World War I), was given charge of the African-American beach.

It was not until the early 1960s that Miller Park Beaches became fully **integrated**. But these early steps were major victories on Bloomington's road to true civil rights for all. Belle Blue Claxton helped firmly establish the rights of African-American taxpayers, in fact the rights of all taxpayers, to all services provided by the city.

Belle continued to be active in the local NAACP working for civil rights in the years after the Miller Park Beach **controversy**. She was also an active member of Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church in Bloomington. Sadly, when she was only 54 years old, Belle suffered a stroke and died. Her funeral was held at the Coleman Chapel. She is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Her husband, James Claxton, died just four years later in 1932 and is buried next to her.