

*Much of what we know today about Matilda comes from oral history which can sometimes contradict existing historical documents. In situations where there is confusion, we have included the information from both sources, as well as explanatory text.*

Matilda Bell Heaston entered the world on November 30, 1910.<sup>1</sup> Born to Jake and Doshie (Robinson) Heaston in Randolph, Tennessee,<sup>2</sup> Matilda was one of 15 children though it is unclear exactly how many brothers and sisters she had.<sup>3</sup> While living in Tennessee, Matilda's parents were sharecroppers. In 1920 at the age of 10, Matilda and her family moved to Luxora, Arkansas, just across the Mississippi River.<sup>4</sup> There, Matilda's parents were able to farm independently.<sup>5</sup>

Many African Americans and low-income whites experienced the oppressive sharecropping system of the South.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Mississippi County, Arkansas, where the Heastons farmed, had a very high percentage of tenant farms which was 90.3 percent in 1930.<sup>7</sup> This was the second highest rate among the Arkansas delta counties at that time.<sup>8</sup> Matilda recalled "that real hard way of living, we never had that because we always raised our food..."<sup>9</sup>

The family later moved into a house that they had purchased. Matilda grew up there and would eventually occupy the residence with her first husband and daughter. Her mother took in laundry and did not have a job outside of the home. Her father worked as a blacksmith and shod horses. Matilda attended an all-African American school in Arkansas. In fact, she never attended an integrated school throughout her education.<sup>10</sup>

In 1926 Matilda married Lucious Walton. On December 2 of that year, she gave birth to a daughter, Ruthie Mae Walton.<sup>11</sup> Two years later, Matilda and Ruthie moved to Bloomington, Illinois where they joined Lillian Augusta (Heaston) and Robert Lee Boykin, Matilda's older sister and brother-in-law.<sup>12</sup> Matilda's marriage had hit a rocky patch and she and Lucious had separated.<sup>13</sup> Eighteen-year-old Matilda and her toddler briefly moved in with the Boykins before

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<sup>1</sup> "Matilda Calcote," *The Pantagraph*, December 28, 1990, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Matilda Calcote's obituary states that she was born in Covington, TN. However, her oral history interview and 1960 marriage certificate state that she was born in Randolph, TN; *Ibid.*; Matilda Calcote, interview by Unknown, Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Historical Society, April 25, 1986, 1; King County, Washington. Marriage certificate no. 243149 (1960), Calcote-Riley.

<sup>3</sup> Jake Heaston's obituary states that he had 15 children. Doshie Heaston's obituary states that she had six children. In her oral history interview, Lillian Augusta Boykin stated that there were 13 children in all; "Matilda Calcote"; "Jake Heaston," *The Pantagraph*, October 7, 1951, 8; Robert and Lillian Boykin, interview by Mildred Pratt, Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Historical Society, January 13, 1986, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Vickers, "The Sharecropping System," 1999, accessed August 7, 2015, <http://www.clt.astate.edu/sarahwf/elainrt/sharcrv2.htm2>, 1; Matilda Calcote oral history, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Vickers, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 3.

<sup>10</sup> In her oral history interview, Matilda stated that she left school after the seventh grade. The 1940 federal census states that she attended school until the first year of high school; Matilda Calcote oral history, 2-3; "United States Census, 1940," *FamilySearch*, accessed June 15, 2015, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KWRD-1C6>.

<sup>11</sup> "Ruthie M. Walton," *The Pantagraph*, October 7, 2006, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

beginning work for Helen Stevenson.<sup>14</sup> For at least two years, Matilda served as Helen's personal maid and even lived at the Stevenson home at 1316 East Washington Street.<sup>15</sup> Matilda later worked as a maid for other local families.<sup>16</sup>

Domestic service was typical among African American women in Bloomington-Normal. In fact, 90 percent of African American workers in the nation in 1930 performed agricultural or domestic service jobs.<sup>17</sup> Half of these domestic servants worked in private homes.<sup>18</sup> The other half served as laundresses, waitresses, untrained nurses, and elevator operators among other roles.<sup>19</sup> According to Matilda, jobs and housing were easy for her to find even during the economic challenges of the Great Depression.<sup>20</sup>

Matilda left Illinois several times in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1930 she and her daughter moved to Holland, Missouri with to be with her parents and younger siblings.<sup>21</sup> In the 1930 United States federal census she was listed as "Matilda Young" though there is no record of another marriage at that time and the name does not appear again in any other sources.<sup>22</sup>

In 1934, she returned home to Arkansas, where she stayed for one year.<sup>23</sup> She distributed agricultural "commodities" in Blytheville as part of a government relief program.<sup>24</sup> In October 1933, just prior to her arrival in Arkansas, President Roosevelt ordered the formation of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC), an operation overseen jointly by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA).<sup>25</sup> The FSRC worked to reduce agricultural surplus by purchasing excess crops and animal products and distributing them to state relief agencies.<sup>26</sup> Those state agencies—and employees like Matilda—would then provide this food to people in need.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Matilda recalled that one of the women in charge "had more in her basement than the people had on the street."<sup>28</sup>

When asked whether the Great Depression affected her much, Matilda answered, "No, I always had work to do. . . . I never had anything in my life given to me free." Over the course of her career, Matilda also served as a "commercial worker" and spent time working in restaurants, which she did not like very much.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> United States Women's Bureau, "Women at Work: A Century of Industrial Change: Women's Bureau Bulletin, No. 161," *Bulletin of the Women's Bureau* (1939), accessed August 3, 2015, <https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/?id=243#!5836>, 60.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>20</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 2 & 7.

<sup>21</sup> "United States Census, 1930," *FamilySearch*, accessed July 17, 2015, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHND-9J2>.

<sup>22</sup> Matilda is listed as married on the 1930 federal census; Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>25</sup> Floyd W. Hicks and C. Roger Lambert, "Food for the Hungry: Federal Food Programs in Arkansas, 1933-1942," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring, 1978), 24.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

By 1940, Matilda was married to William C. Miller.<sup>30</sup> They lived in Bloomington's Ward 5 (northwestern Bloomington)<sup>31</sup> where they rented a home for \$10 per month which is the equivalent of \$169.86 in 2015 dollars.<sup>32</sup> William worked as a garage janitor and earned \$624 for 52 weeks of labor.<sup>33</sup> Matilda was a housemaid for a private home, collecting \$320 for 40 work weeks.<sup>34</sup> Together they brought in \$944 which is the equivalent of \$16,150.21 in 2015 dollars.<sup>35</sup> To put these amounts in perspective, the median annual income for a man in 1940 was \$956; for a woman, it was \$592.<sup>36</sup> Assuming Matilda worked at least 40-hour weeks, this meant that she earned 20 cents per hour—much less than the minimum wage at the time which was 30 cents per hour.<sup>37</sup>

Overall, this census data provides a valuable perspective on the African American economic situation. Federal measures to relieve the economic strain caused by the Great Depression failed to reach female African American workers. In particular, the Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, which introduced the minimum wage, excluded the two sectors in which many African Americans worked; agriculture and domestic service.<sup>38</sup>

Not all federal programs passed over African Americans workers. On June 25, 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 which attempted to curb the “discrimination of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin. . . .”<sup>39</sup> Although the United States had not yet declared war, American industry was ramping up production to help its ally Great Britain fight the Axis powers.<sup>40</sup> Despite this need, many factories refused to hire African Americans. These discriminatory practices angered Chicagoan Asa Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.<sup>41</sup> Backed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League, Randolph pushed for fair hiring practices.<sup>42</sup> He called for 100,000 African

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<sup>30</sup> “United States Census, 1940”

<sup>31</sup> In 1949, the boundaries of Bloomington's 5<sup>th</sup> Ward were Division St. to the north, Main St. to the east, Market St. to the south, and the city limits to the west. The Millers later lived at 303 W. Oakland Ave. in 1941 and 1101 W. Washington St. in 1943-1944; 1949 Ward and Precinct Map of Bloomington; *Bloomington City Directories*, 1941, 1943-1944.

<sup>32</sup> “United States Census, 1940”; “CPI Inflation Calculator,” *United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed 17 July 2015, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=10&year1=1940&year2=2015>.

<sup>33</sup> In 1941, William Miller worked as a gas station attendant. By 1943, he was an attendant at the McLean County Service Station; “United States Census, 1940”; *Bloomington City Directories*, 1941, 1943-1944.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; “CPI Inflation Calculator,” <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=944&year1=1939&year2=2015>.

<sup>36</sup> United States Census Bureau, “1940-2010: How Has America Changed?” accessed August 24, 2015, [http://www.census.gov/library/infographics/1940\\_census\\_change.html](http://www.census.gov/library/infographics/1940_census_change.html).

<sup>37</sup> “History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938 – 2009,” *United States Department of Labor*, accessed 17 July 2015, <http://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/chart.htm>; 40 weeks x 40 hours per week = 1,600 hours. 1,600 hours / \$320 = 20 cents per hour.

<sup>38</sup> United States Women's Bureau, 63.

<sup>39</sup> President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Reaffirming Policy Of Full Participation In The Defense Program By All Persons Regardless of Race, Creed, Color, Or National Origin, And Directing Certain Action In Furtherance Of Said Policy,” Executive Order 8802, June 25, 1941, 1.

<sup>40</sup> “Women Replace Men in the Workforce,” *Oakland Museum of California*, accessed 17 July 2015, <http://picturethis.museumca.org/timeline/world-war-ii-homefront-era-1940s/women-labor/info>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Americans to march on Washington to protest discrimination in defense industries.<sup>43</sup> Embarrassed, President Roosevelt issued his Order which also created a Committee on Fair Employment Practice.<sup>44</sup> The committee was charged with investigating employment discrimination cases.<sup>45</sup>

In her oral history interview, Matilda recalled the growth of black employment in Bloomington-Normal during the early 1940s when African Americans began to be employed at places like American Steel and Williams Oil-O-Matic.<sup>46</sup> In fact, her brother, probably her younger brother William Harrison Heaston, started working at the latter business in 1942.<sup>47</sup> Although it's unclear what job William specifically performed at the factory, the Williams Oil-O-Matic company fulfilled a variety of military contracts requiring precision machine work.<sup>48</sup> The company manufactured hydraulic control devices (or what were called "oil gears") for aiming anti-aircraft guns, as well as smoke screen generators for the U.S. Navy and parts for the Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber.<sup>49</sup>

Matilda soon sought employment in the defense industry herself when she left Bloomington in 1944 and worked in Seattle, Washington, for eight years. She built destroyers for the war effort. Matilda recalled that there was a strong need for these types of ships because 50 or more of them protected larger ships at sea. They were in such high demand that she helped produce a ship every 60 days. She worked several jobs at the shipyard including spot painter, welder, and tank cleaner. In her oral history, she recalled the "depressing" nature of tank cleaning: "So many times when them [sic] ships would limp in from abroad, from the sea, there would be a bunch of sailors when they'd open that bulk head, you know. They'd be in there. It was terrible." Women at the shipyards received jobs based on their existing skill set. According to Matilda, the employers "didn't teach you to do it. You had to take a sweeping job if you didn't already have a skill. But if you already knew how to do those things, they'd give you a trial and see if you could do it. And then they'd let you have it." Fortunately, Matilda had welding skills and got the job.<sup>50</sup>

The start of World War II dramatically changed the relationship between women in general and the American workforce. It also provided inroads for African American and other minorities into the workforce. Due to a labor shortage caused primarily by white men leaving the workforce for military service, these new workers took over various roles that had historically been unavailable to them.<sup>51</sup> These roles included skilled and semiskilled factory operations such as work in munitions, food, and textiles factories.<sup>52</sup> In total, the number of African Americans who worked in civilian jobs increased by approximately one million between 1940 and 1944.<sup>53</sup> Sixty percent of those workers were women.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the United States, African American

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Roosevelt, "Reaffirming Policy of Full Participation," 1.

<sup>46</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; "Former Resident Killed in Oregon," *The Pantagraph*, August 31, 1952, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Bill Kemp, "Williams Oil-O-Matic Plant Workers Served on Homefront During WWII," in *Pages from Our Past: Stories from the Sunday Pantagraph*, (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 2012), 134.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 4-5.

<sup>51</sup> United States Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, "Negro Women War Workers," Bulletin No. 405, 1945, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

women saw a 40 percent rise in employment during this time period.<sup>55</sup> For example, in 1942 the Brooklyn Navy Yard hired women mechanics for the first time in 141 years<sup>56</sup> and nearly ten percent of the first 125 women hired there were African American.<sup>57</sup> At the same time in Detroit, Michigan, fewer than 30 black women were employed in war plants; by November 1943, over 14,000 worked in that occupation.<sup>58</sup>

It is unclear when Matilda and William Miller divorced but on November 8, 1947 she married L.C. Riley in Seattle.<sup>59</sup> By 1952 the new couple had moved to Bloomington and were living with Matilda's mother at 1322 N. Ewing Street<sup>60</sup> (Her father had passed away in 1951.<sup>61</sup>) Between 1953 and 1957, L.C. worked at the whites-only Louis E. Davis American Legion Post No. 56 as a bus boy and later a custodian. Two years later he earned a living as a laborer for Behrenz Asphalt in Bloomington.<sup>62</sup> By 1957 Matilda and L.C. were residing at 1204 W. Street.<sup>63</sup> They divorced sometime before 1959 when he had married Mary Burnett.<sup>64</sup>

Matilda returned to the west coast. On May 13, 1960 she married William Calcote in Seattle, Washington where they were both living.<sup>65</sup> William was 23 years her junior.<sup>66</sup> By the next year, they were back in Bloomington living at 1322 N. Ewing with Matilda's mother, though the city directories show Matilda at 1204 W. Mulberry Street.<sup>67</sup> From 1964 to 1971 the Calcotes lived at the N. Ewing address.<sup>68</sup> During that time—five days a week from 1961 to 1976—Matilda (or “Tillie” as she was known to some) worked as a maid at the Bloomington home of Betty Zimmer.<sup>69</sup> In 1972, Matilda and William resided at 703 W. Monroe Street where they remained for the rest of their married lives.<sup>70</sup>

Through the years William had found better and more secure employment. He worked as a custodian at the Eureka Williams plant from 1963 until 1967 when he took over as a maintenance worker at the Holiday Inn.<sup>71</sup> In 1971 he returned Eureka and worked there for two more years.<sup>72</sup> In 1974 William began custodial and maintenance duties at Bloomington Junior High School until 1979. After that he served as a maintenance man for the local Board of Education.<sup>73</sup> William was a custodian at Raymond School at the time of his death in 1980.<sup>74</sup> Matilda was retired at that time and did not return to work.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> King County, Washington. Marriage certificate no. 143397 (1947), Riley-Miller; “Jake Heaston”

<sup>60</sup> “Former Resident Killed in Oregon.”

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Bloomington City Directories*, 1953, 1955-1956, 1957, 1959.

<sup>63</sup> Bloomington city directory, 1957.

<sup>64</sup> “L.C. Riley,” *The Pantagraph*, March 4, 1988, 19.

<sup>65</sup> William and Matilda's 1960 marriage certificate states that they lived in Seattle, WA, but the 1960 Bloomington City Directory states that she lived in Bloomington; “Matilda Calcote”; King County, Washington. Marriage certificate no. 243149 (1960), Calcote-Riley; Bloomington city directory, 1960.

<sup>66</sup> King County, Washington. Marriage certificate no. 243149 (1960), Calcote-Riley.

<sup>67</sup> “Mrs. Doshie Heaston,” *The Pantagraph*, November 9, 1961, 3; *Bloomington City Directories*, 1960 and 1962.

<sup>68</sup> *Bloomington City Directories*, 1964-1971

<sup>69</sup> Betty Zimmer, in discussion with Candace Summers, August 14, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> *Bloomington City Directories*, 1972-1990.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 1963-1973.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1964-1973.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1974-1980.

The Calcotes were members of Union Baptist Church located at 514 W. Jackson Street.<sup>76</sup> In fact, after arriving in Bloomington in 1928, Matilda joined this church and worshipped there whenever she lived in town.<sup>77</sup> She also actively participated in the church's Willing Workers Club and Progressive Women's Club.<sup>78</sup> These social clubs performed projects to better the members and the community as a whole. In 1953, she led the women of the church in directing three services for "Women's Day."<sup>79</sup> Sixteen years later, she was co-chair of that same event where local African American community leader Caribel Washington spoke.<sup>80</sup> Around 1975, Matilda joined the Three C Club<sup>81</sup> which brought women together to discuss issues that regularly affected African Americans.<sup>82</sup> The next year she took over as chaplain of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Redd-Williams Post No. 163 of the American Legion, an all-African American post.<sup>83</sup> Her brother was a World War II veteran which is how she qualified for membership.<sup>84</sup>

William Calcote was only 47 years old when he passed away on September 28, 1980.<sup>85</sup> He and Matilda had been happily married for 20 years.<sup>86</sup> Matilda thought that her previous marriages were inconsequential by comparison.<sup>87</sup> She said they were the result of being "young and not knowing what was going on and just married."<sup>88</sup> Family members laid William to rest at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery on October 2, 1980.<sup>89</sup>

Matilda's pride in her grandchildren could not be hidden. She spoke highly of her granddaughter who worked as a nurse, and her great-grandsons, who were medical students in neurosurgery and psychiatry.<sup>90</sup> She credits the lack of role models as to why her great-grandsons left Bloomington.<sup>91</sup> In her own words, "There was nobody doing anything. Nobody to look up to... There wasn't no men doing nothing, but, you know, 'shacking up' and stuff."<sup>92</sup> By all

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<sup>74</sup> "William Calcote," *The Pantagraph*, September 30, 1980, 16.

<sup>75</sup> *Bloomington City Directories*, 1980-1981.

<sup>76</sup> "Matilda Calcote"; "William Calcote"; Bloomington city directory, 1928.

<sup>77</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 2.

<sup>78</sup> "Matilda Calcote"

<sup>79</sup> "Women's Day Speaker," *The Pantagraph*, August 2, 1953, 5.

<sup>80</sup> "20<sup>th</sup> Women's Day Planned at Union Baptist Church," *The Pantagraph*, August 23, 1969, 20.

<sup>81</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 7.

<sup>82</sup> "Alverta Duff (1885-1968)," accessed August 3, 2015, <http://www.mchistory.org/perch/resources/alverta-duff-2005-1.pdf>, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Due to racial segregation, African American veterans were not allowed to join existing American Legion posts. As a result, several members of the 370 U.S. Infantry founded the American Legion post for African-American veterans in Bloomington around 1922. The African American Legion named its post the Redd-Williams Post No.163 in honor of Gus Williams and John Redd, soldiers from the 370<sup>th</sup> who died in France during World War I; "Auxiliary to Discuss Fund Raising Ideas," *The Pantagraph*, November 23, 1976, 13; "Private Gus Williams (1892-1918)," accessed August 3, 2015, <http://www.mchistory.org/perch/resources/private-gus-williams-1999.pdf>, 3.

<sup>84</sup> "Former Resident Killed in Oregon."

<sup>85</sup> "William Calcote"

<sup>86</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 9; "Matilda Calcote"

<sup>87</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 9.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> "William Calcote"; "Burial Details: Calcote, William," *Evergreen Memorial Cemetery*, accessed June 15, 2015, <http://www.evergreenmemorialcemetery.com>.

<sup>90</sup> Matilda's grandchildren's names are Shirley, Dr. William, and Dr. Wendell Becton; "Ruthie M. Walton"; Matilda Calcote oral history, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Matilda Calcote oral history, 8.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

accounts Matilda was a strong, hard-working, and adaptable human being. Through multiple jobs and marriages, she maintained her independence.

Matilda passed away at the age of 80 on December 27, 1990, having been ill for several months.<sup>93</sup> Her funeral service was held at Union Baptist Church on New Year's Eve.<sup>94</sup> She was laid to rest next to William at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> "Matilda Calcote"

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Matilda and William Calcote are buried in Section 8, Lot 59; Ibid.; "Burial Details: Calcote, Matilda Bell," *Evergreen Memorial Cemetery*, accessed 15 June 2015, <http://www.evergreenmemorialcemetery.com/UserPages/BurialEvent.aspx?ID=3362>.