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IDA LOUISE JACKSON, CLASS OF '22

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ON MARCH 13, 1996 THERE APPEARED in the *Oakland Tribune* a three-column, half-page article entitled "State, Oakland's First Black High School Teacher, 93, Dies." Three months later, the *California Monthly's* obituary of Ida Jackson opened with the following words: "The first African American public school teacher in the East Bay, Ida Louise Jackson '22, M.A. '23, had a memorable impact on Oakland and the University."¹ Written by Gabrielle Morris, who had conducted Jackson's oral history as part of the University of California Black Alumni Project, the short tribute was accompanied by a photograph of a striking middle-aged lady whose countenance reveals the dignity and resolve that had made it possible for her to rise above repeated disappointments and achieve much at a time when African Americans (and other groups) were confronted by severe discrimination.

Her autobiographical statements, which appeared in Irving Stone's *There Was Light, Autobiography of a University, Berkeley: 1868-1968*, and in "Overcoming Barriers in Education," a product of the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library of the University of California, discuss the career of a resolute young woman who never forgot the lessons she had derived from a loving and supportive family and her parents' unswerving commitment to the importance of sound moral character and the benefits of education. Speaking of herself and her seven brothers, Ms. Jackson said: "We were taught that no man was superior unless he was more honest, had a better education and character. Those were the guidelines by which we were brought up. We were taught to protect ourselves, and rather die than be humiliated by being a coward and not standing up for our rights."²

Her father, a farmer, carpenter, and minister, had relocated to Vicksburg, Mississippi from Monroe, Louisiana in the late 1880s with his wife and three sons. Ida, the youngest child—and only girl—in the family of Pompey and Nellie Jackson was born on October 12, 1902. Both parents repeatedly impressed upon their children the need for higher education.

Having finished high school, Ida left Vicksburg at age fourteen to attend Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. After two years she moved on to New Orleans University (now Dillard University) and graduated in 1917 with a teaching diploma and a certificate in home economics from the Peck School of Domestic Science and Art.³ At the urging of two of her brothers, Ida and her mother soon relocated to Oakland in the hope of finding there greater opportunities for people of their race. Although the Bay Area did not prove to be anywhere near as liberal toward blacks (the term that Ida Jackson preferred)⁴ as she had hoped, she sought and gained entrance to the University of California. Her first semester included a philosophy class from George Adams, an anthropology class from Alfred L. Kroeber, and one in the history of education from Herbert Bolton.⁵ Early experiences at Berkeley are described



Ida Jackson, 1956.
Regional Oral History Office.

in *There Was Light*:

One of the most difficult problems I faced was entering classes day after day, sitting beside students who acted as if my seat were unoccupied, showing no sign of recognition, never giving a smile or a nod. This I thought of as the 'cold spot' on the Cal campus. In contrast, one day I had the privilege and great honor of being spoken to by and chatting with President Benjamin Ide Wheeler. I left inspired and figuratively walking on air.⁶

Ida Jackson recalled that in 1920 "there were eight Negro women and nine Negro men enrolled on the Berkeley campus."⁷ The need for companionship and a social life drew them together and resulted in the formation of the Braithwaite Club. Shortly thereafter, five of the young women decided to form a local chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the nation's oldest black sorority. (A local chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority was organized at about the same time by a few of the other black women at Berkeley.) As spokesperson for the projected AKA chapter, Jackson sought approval from Dean of Women Lucy Ward Stebbins. Her initial meeting with Dean Stebbins and assistant Mary Davidson, she recalled, "proved very valuable to me later." Jackson was elected the first president (basileus) of the Rho chapter and became its representative on the Women's Council. How welcome she was in this university student group is not clear from extant documents; but an incident occurred shortly thereafter that demonstrated how unfriendly the campus could be to "minority" students. Having had their picture taken and paid the forty-five dollar fee to have a page in the *Blue and Gold*, Rho chapter members were desolate to discover that they had been excluded.⁸ Moreover, no such picture is to be found in subsequent student yearbooks, although individual photographs of graduating seniors do begin to appear in the 1930s. Attending her first boule (national council meeting) in Columbus, Ohio in 1926, Ms. Jackson was named to head the newly defined Far Western Region of Alpha Kappa Alpha—a position she held until 1953.⁹ As was the case for black women until quite recently, Ida Jackson and her friends would find personal satisfaction, pride, and accomplishment in the rich club and social life of the African American community.¹⁰ At the same time, and against great odds, Jackson also developed a noteworthy career in an educational community dominated by whites.

When Ida Jackson received the A.B. degree in 1922, she had walked "unnoticed by [her] fellow classmates in the Senior Pilgrimage."¹¹ The following year she completed a master's thesis on the topic "The Development of Negro Children in Relation to Education" under the direction of J. V. Breitweiser; and in 1924 she received the teacher's certificate from Berkeley's School of Education. Her first position was in El Centro, California at Eastside High School (which Mexican and black students attended), where she taught home economics and English. Upon receiving a letter from the superintendent of the Oakland public schools offering her a position as a long-term substitute, Jackson sought the counsel of Dean Stebbins and Ms. Davidson about the problems she might encounter should she accept. In a pointed, but not unkind, manner Stebbins asked:

Do you think you will be happy in a situation where you may find yourself isolated? . . . Do you think you can stand calmly by and see those less well qualified than you advanced in the system ahead of you. Can you endure being left out of things when you, as a teacher, should be included?¹²

How prophetic these words were! Reflecting upon her years in the Oakland school district, Jackson stated:

I have never ceased to marvel at the wisdom, the insight, and the

thought-provoking questions that Dean Stebbins raised. How could she so clearly foresee the type of things that I, as Oakland's first black teacher, would have to endure on an all-white staff, in what was at that time a predominantly white neighborhood?¹³

Indeed, there were several indignities that Ida Jackson would have to endure. Initially assigned to teach a class for "non-readers," she subsequently was appointed for part of her duties as one of the counselors at Prescott Junior High School. In that capacity she discovered that other counselors were not arranging schedules of classes that would provide black children with the solid academic foundation that they needed to advance in their education.

In the 1930s, she conceived of an idea that became known as Alpha Kappa Alpha's Summer School for Rural Teachers. Convinced that blacks in the South needed improved health as well as improved education, in 1935 a health clinic (which was carried on for eight years) was added to these efforts. That same year she accepted the position of dean of women at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, where she had the opportunity to meet with Dr. George Washington Carver. She also enrolled at Teachers College, Columbia University to pursue doctoral studies in guidance and personnel—studies that were interrupted by the continuing Depression. Upon her return to the Bay Area, Ida Jackson was sent to teach at McClymonds High School in West Oakland, where she continued to teach until her retirement in 1953—the year that the Oakland teachers selected her as a delegate to the National Education Association convention. However, the administrative position that she long had desired was never offered.¹⁴ In 1945, she and her brother had purchased a large sheep ranch in Mendocino County; upon Emmett's death she moved north and assumed many of those responsibilities. She returned to the Bay Area in 1976 and the ranch was subsequently made a gift to the University of California.

Looking back upon her life and career, Ida Jackson spoke candidly about aspirations that had been crushed and opportunities that had been denied to her and others because of race. In spite of all this she achieved a great deal. In the 1970s, long overdue acknowledgments from the wider community were forthcoming. Among these, in 1971 she was elected to Berkeley Fellows; in 1974, she became a member of the San Francisco Branch of the American Association of University Women. How much more, we might ask, could Ida Jackson have achieved if it had not been for the barriers that existed in her day? One senses a tone, a quality, to her life that was aptly expressed in the obituary that accompanied the Order of Service held at Beebee Memorial C.M.E. Church, March 8, 1996, which concluded—her "philosophy of life may be summed up in the words of T.S. Eliot: 'What do we live for if not to make life more pleasant for others?'"

ENDNOTES

- 1 *California Monthly*, June 1996, 49.
- 2 Ida Louise Jackson, "Overcoming Barriers in Education," an oral history conducted in 1984 and 1985 by Gabrielle Morris, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1990, 8.
- 3 "Obituary" in memorial service for Dr. Ida Louise Jackson, Beebee Memorial C.M.E. Church, March 8, 1996. (Copy in Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library.) "Ida L. Jackson" in *There Was Light, Autobiography of a University, Berkeley: 1868-1968*, ed. Irving Stone (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 252.

- 4 "Overcoming Barriers," 7.
- 5 Ibid., 15–16.
- 6 *There Was Light*, 253–254.
- 7 Ibid., 249.
- 8 Ibid., 254–255. Page 29 of "Overcoming Barriers" contains a slightly augmented discussion.
- 9 "Obituary."
- 10 See for example, Gwendolyn Captain, "Social, Religious, and Leisure Pursuits of Northern California's African American Population: The Discovery of Gold Through World War II." M.A. thesis, University of California, 1995, especially chapter 6. In her oral history "Overcoming Barriers in Education" Jackson stated: "I had all the social life I could handle with black people," 72.
- 11 *There Was Light*, 255; "Overcoming Barriers," 76–78.
- 12 *There Was Light*, 257–258.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 *There Was Light*, 260–264. The date of retirement that Ms. Jackson gave in "Overcoming Barriers" was 1955/1956 (p. 59).



Commencement of the Class of 1922.1924 *Blue and Gold*.