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## Pillars Of Prairie View - O.J. Baker - 1931

Prairie View A&M College

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## PILLARS of Prairie View



O. J. BAKER

Bred and born in a small hamlet in Pike county, Alabama, among relatives who were all farmers, at the age of four his parents moved to a small town named Troy which was twelve miles away and where they resided for two years. From there they moved to a smaller town, 53 miles south of Troy, where he grew to manhood. This town is called Andalusia.

There was no publicly supported school for Negroes in either of the towns named above; however, believings ardently and fervently in the efficacy of formal education - as did most black people of that era - Mr. Baker's parents joined a compact with other black parents in Andalusia and in the surrounding communities which was designed to provide at least an introduction to formal education for their offspring. Each adult contributed ten, fifteen or twenty-five cents weekly - depending on his earnings - to they employed a teacher who taught their youngsters from two to four months a year. This instructional program was usually carried on in a church or a lodge hall. It was in this fashion that our subject achieved the sixth grade status.

Mr. Baker lost his father at the age of fourteen. He knew that his mother's meager capacity to earn would only support herself. He went to work to earn his own living, thus becoming a school drop out. Few Negro men of that era, with a limited education, could earn more than six dollars a week. Therefore, his financial future did not seem too bright.

He discovered that his church

was in those days.

Having secured the permission of the principal of Payne University to work his way through school there, he enrolled in September of 1916 and was placed in the seventh grade. His work consisted of janitorial services in a brick building with six classrooms, an office suite, and a chapel where all school programs were held. He also cared for two other buildings on the campus - one containing four rooms and the other consisting of one large room where ministers were prepared for pastoral opportunities.

Fires for the comfort of students and faculty had to be started each morning and maintained throughout each school day. These were his responsibilities, also, as well as the maintenance of a suitable supply of kindling and coke (or coal) for starting and keeping the fires going. Nevertheless, our subject managed these chores and succeeded in participating, successfully, in extracurricular activities. He participated in debating, dramatics, oratory, and baseball. He developed a singing voice and became a successful member of the choir and the glee club. During these years he also became a tenor soloist - accepted and respected by his peers. He brought these talents to Prairie View with him.

At the end of his student tour at Payne University he had earned the honor of valedictorian of his class and a place on the faculty.

Some four years later he enrolled at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Ga. There he played baseball and sang in the glee club under the direction of the famed Kemper Harreld. He worked four years as the night

superintendent of buildings and grounds and as night librarian at Spelman College in the same city.

Graduating from Morehouse College with highest honors in 1930, he enrolled at Hampton Institute, 1931, to study librarianship. The Julius Rosenwald Fund financed this undertaking. A year later our subject had earned his first professional degree\* and had been invited to serve as head librarian at Prairie View A&M College.

He arrived at Prairie View on June 6, 1931 and never left. His first major duty at this college was to move the library of about 6,000 good books from the east side, first floor, of the old Science Building to the top floor of the newly completed Education Bldg.

Our subject and his library staff (1 full-time assistant and six student assistants) served the college community in an impartial, nonpartisan, and unbiased manner in the Education Building for some fourteen years.

Taking time out in 1935-36 to earn his second professional degree in library science at Columbia University, he returned to Prairie View prepared to renew his services to the college and the state in ever-widening areas. His Columbia experience was sponsored by the General Education Board.

In 1944-1945 the old W. R. Banks library was erected and in July of 1945, our subject,\* moved the book stock and equipment into this new facility. The library staff at that time consisted of nine full-time people - the librarian and eight assistants. This event started a series of professional experiences which were rich and rewarding in their significance. It ended with his retirement in 1966.

During his tenure at Prairie View A&M College our subject had many profitable experiences many of which will not be mentioned in this column.

He presided over the college's official functions when the President was absent from the college, including two trips to Africa, 1946-1966. He served on the following permanent committee groups:

Commencement Committee, beginning in 1931-32 and continuing to this date -- serving as chairman from 1946 to date; Graduate Council, 1938-1960; Central Teacher Education Council, from origin to 1966 and presently; Research Council, from origin to 1969; Educational Conference from 1932 to its demise; State Executive Committee - Interscholastic League, 1946-Present; and Library Committee Chairman 1946-66, 1968-date.

Also, Educational Policies, Standards, and Curriculum from organization to 1966; Conference of Negro Librarians in Texas (Chairman), 1935-1947; Summer School Committee, 1946-1966; Executive Cabinet, 1935-1966 and presently; Educational Conference Committee, 1946 to its demise; President, Prairie State College Employees Federal Credit Union, 1939-1957; Summer School Committee, 1946-1966;

He served on the following Ad Hoc grouping:

University Librarian, American Library Association Committee on Discrimination, 1936-37; Texas State Committee to Study Senior College Library Facilities for Negroes in Texas, 1943-1944; and Chairman, Committee on Student Dormitory Life, Prairie View A&M College.

Other work experiences: General Administrative Consultant to Prairie View College Librarian, 1966- January 15, 1968; Active Librarian, Prairie View A&M College, 1968 (September) - present; Head, Department of Library Science, 1945-1966 and 1968-date.

Membership in Learned Societies - Texas Library Association; Southwestern Library Association; American Library Association; Texas State Teachers Association; Academy of Political and Social Science.

Authorship (significant) - "Library Service in Negro Colleges . . . Texas" News Notes, 19: 3-10 (April '43); "Senior College Libraries for Negroes in Texas" College and Research Libraries, 5: 75-83 (Dec. '43); "Improvement of the Negro College Library," Jol. of Negro Education, 16: (96-100) (Winter '47); "The Teacher's Part in Fostering the Student's Use of the Library," Journal of Higher Education, 19: 307-12 (June '48)

The Prairie View family has known no other more faithful than O. J. Baker. In an age of noisy pushers he has always been quiet and refined. When the vulgar treasured public image, he has known the satisfaction of real character. When the shallow have reduced learning to shop-worn cliches, he has been the temper and the outlook of the true scholar, loving and valuing knowledge for its own sake. When the place-man played the cheap politics of accommodation and appeasement, he has always known how to be on the side of the angels, standing for principle at the sacrifice of cheap popularity. When the educational hucksters have mouthed their low goals and empty preachments as salvations for youth, O. J. Baker knows how to stand with the eternal verities that a man cannot save his life if he does not save his soul -- that you can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear if you can get it out of its own mud-wallow. Truly we can say of him as Anthony said of Caesar "His life was gentle, and the elements so mixed in him that nature may rise up and say unto all the world, 'This is a man'".