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A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH
Of the Early Days of the Piney Woods School

By JOHN R. WEBSTER

CARL BEAL, an earnest young man who has chosen as his life's work the lifting of humanity into a higher sphere of life, who is now a student in a theological college, has sent me copies of the
Reader's Digest and the Rotarian in both of which
he has been occupying, and what white people could or
would help would be of no benefit to you, for we are sadly
behind in education for ourselves, and as I told you before we
are not paying out much of anything to educate the Negro.

Here I broke in to do a little talking myself. I said,
"Young fellow, I think you are taking too much for granted.
Even if Uncle Ed gave you that land, you would not have
a school. You couldn't use a shed that the sheep and goats
have been occupying, and what white people could or
would help would be of no benefit to you, for we are sadly
behind in education for ourselves, and as I told you before we
are not paying out much of anything to educate the Negro.

"But I shall not throw anything in your way. So far as
I am concerned, you may proceed with your plans; but if, you
wanted to open new gates and turn new leaves, you would
have to get it from them'."

When I had finished, he seemed to be a little downcast,
he had lost some of his cock-sureness; but immediately
he took out a little book and pencil, and asked for the names
of white gentlemen that he ought to see. These are the
names that I can recall I gave him: Bob Hemphill, Anderson
Prutt, William Pattie, Gabe Jones, Eddie Ammons, Roy Pathe
— I added, "Be sure to go down to Braxton and talk to R.
Everett, and Wiley F. Mangum, the banker, J. P. Cox;
the Barwick brothers; and Mrs. Caline Jones was
in a hurry to get out, but turned to me with many thanks
and asked, "Now, Mr. Webster, may I have your permission
to call on you again?" I told him yes, but I was more in
interested in saw-milling than education.

This sounded like a wisecrack to Nannie and Albert. At
least, it served for a laugh to relieve them of the high tension
of just having to sit and listen to a young colored man talk.
Then we had some conversation about the possibility of
Jones building up a school like Booker T. Washington did
in Alabama, but we agreed that it was absurd. Albert re
marked, "But suppose that fool did do a thing like that.",
I said, "Listen, Albert, don't ever think that fellow is a fool,
and besides, the poet says, Fools go where Angels fear
to tread'."

NOW, remembering those days, I can see how Jones and
Uncle Ed Taylor used my paws to rake their chestsnuts
with. At that time, nearly every man in the country, including
merchants and farmers, was getting in some
money out of the saw mill. Naturally, I would have some
influence in the community. Besides, I wasn't one of
them furiners", some of whom were drifting in. I was a native
prince, and the employment of Negroes averaged labor on
the same terms; most of them, boys I had been raised with.
When Jones went out to interview these farmers round about,
he would always say, "I have been talking to Mr. Webster
and he said so far as he was concerned it was all right, so
I have come to get your consent also". He would go on
to relate his project. He would stress the point that this was
not to be a book
school but a Negro
school and on
the same
terms; the Negroes would be able to pay anything
they had in mind and the Negroes would be entitled to
his better
work in the楠
s
r. Jones
came back in a few days. And, as Miss Nannie
put it, he was more profuse in his bows and scrapes.
He came in apologizing, saying that he would be brief in his
visit — that Uncle Ed Taylor had sent him over this time
to know if the people there would be favorable to the school in their midst. He
related that Uncle Ed said that if he could get the school going
he would deed him the Old Montague Harris place as a
location for the school. We were all giving him strict atten
tion, and this young man immediately
and he was really as Albert put it, stepping on it with firm
tread. I didn't care to interrupt him. Fact was we were
being highly entertained. Miss Nannie wore her whimsical
smile and Albert's eyes just got bigger and bigger. Jones
went on to say that, if he could ever get the school started,
he had rich acquaintances in Iowa that he thought would
more and better work out of a Negro.

Now it was the chief conversation in the community. As
these fellows would come into the store to get their mail,
you would hear them say, "Well, what do you think of that
nigger school?" Well, I don't know. Did that nigger come
to see you too? Yes. What do you think about it? Well, I
think it's a good thing. He says he ain't gwine to teach 'em
so much book learnin', but he wants to larn 'em to do more
and better work, so when we want good work we can get it. That is why we are successful. I have not heard of any instance where they have had to make a mark (X).

In a few days Albert came back and found me out on the lumber yard. He said, "I have been talking to the Superintendent of the New York Central. He wants to give you some work. I know you are good for it."

In a few days Albert came back and found me out on the lumber yard. He said, "I have been talking to the Superintendent of the New York Central. He wants to give you some work. I know you are good for it."

The report got around that Jones and the children were putting the building with a little help from some of the doctors. I know that they were carpenters. I was the most able to do a job, but I could do it. They were putting the building with a little help from some of the doctors. I know that they were carpenters. I was the most able to do a job, but I could do it. I was sent out to do the work. I was sent out to do the work.

Jones had to curtail his great dietary control, because he couldn't call it "Webster Hall". Some of the white population, especially those who lived on the outskirts of the town, tended to look down on the Negroes. But the Negroes made a name for themselves. They were known as the "Jugum Negro" and "Negro" was considered a derogatory term. Jones had to curtail his great dietary control, because he couldn't call it "Webster Hall". Some of the white population, especially those who lived on the outskirts of the town, tended to look down on the Negroes. But the Negroes made a name for themselves. They were known as the "Jugum Negro" and "Negro" was considered a derogatory term.
stairs in a building we called the Hotel. My wife and I had rooms up there and we fixed up our visitors in a nice room, and we sat up that night until 1 o'clock talking.

Well, the next afternoon Jones came back for them and he had to wait a while for them to get ready, and Jones stood around and talked to us all for perhaps one half hour. A drummer or two and a lumber inspector from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and a mill employee or two had paused to listen to Jones talk, and then Jones carried the baggage down and got in the buggy by the side of the Turners and drove them over to the school. His being upstairs, and riding in the same seat with the Turners, caused some unfavorable comment, and it was the kind of gossip that some Southern people like. The more was said, the more was added to. Some of them were censoring me and my wife, for having "them thar Northern Yankees" in our home, said they had been living with the "niggers". Uncle Fleet Howell (my Mother's uncle) who was employed at the mill came to me and said, "John, you have made a mistake; they are saying some mighty hard things about you". I told him to let it drop and say no more about it; but the talk didn't stop, and in a few days Manuel Bridges, who worked in the store and was a boy playmate of mine, came to me and said, "John, there is something going on around here but you mustn't use my name." I said, "all right, Manuel, what is it?" Then he told me that there was talk of raising a crowd and taking Jones out and giving him a whipping, and ordering him back up North where he came from. Let me say here that there was only two or three of the mill crew that had joined this bunch, but it mostly came from those on the outside. I thought I would make my position clear to the whole outfit, hoping that it would avert trouble. So I called in Uncle Fleet and Mr. Bill Phelps who had known me long before I wore my first pants buttoned up in front, and who had good jobs at the mill and both of them had three sons, each employed at the mill. These two gentlemen usually had access to all the grapevine gossip round about. So I talked the matter over with them, and said, "Now this thing has got to stop; I am going to hold you responsible. If anything is done to Jones or that school, I will shut this mill down until every guilty party has been arrested". So I left the country, but I know what happened to that bunch that thought they would set up a whiskey business here; don't you? And you may say to these fellows that I know who they are, and I know how to reach the Federal Authorities", I really got on a high horse. I sometimes had to get on a high horse to get results.

At Commencement time a new school building was finished, so Jones invited all the people both white and colored to come to the school Commencement. The Auditorium was full of people and we never saw anything like this before. He had the work of the school carried on, on the stage. They were making dresses, doing laundry, welding iron, filling wagon wheels, making plow harness, vaccinating pigs, cooking biscuits and ginger cakes and passing them around through the audience, making brooms and straw hats, etc. It was a marvelous to see and as some of them commented, "there wasn't much book learning to be seen". They would say, "It's just like Jones said; he was going to learn them how to work". Jones was riding high in public favor.

As the Piney Woods School grew, there was a marked change taking place among the Negroes. Every merchant in the little towns of Braxton and Star would tell you that the Negroes were spending more money for their children to keep them in school. They were buying new furniture on the installment plan. Their wives and children were cleaning up, as Jones told them. "Look at these white people. Keep your clothes washed. Keep your own kitchens like these white ladies' kitchens. Pattern after these white folks and you will get some where. Keep your premises clean and be more sanitary". He had built a laundry and was teaching both young and old how to wash, starch and iron; and all the colored women and the students were being taught how to can fruit and vegetables. I asked a local White man fellow how he liked the school, and he said "just fine". He said, "you know he's teaching them colored people how to work, and not much book-larnin';", and that's what I've always said, 'larn people how to work as well as reading and figuring,' I agreed with him and went further and said that I thought our white schools ought to teach more work and less book larnin'. He said, "That's right, that's right you are right". So we agreed on everything apparently and parted good friends.

Now, after thirty years absence from Mississippi, I am recalling some of the events connected with my life and Jones' school. Much has taken place down there in forty years. It has required an immense sum of money and a lifetime of effort to rear up this immense institution. I sometimes marvel and ask myself the question, "How was it done?" First, I will say, it was built like all other institutions upon the personality of the founder. Jones had the disposition to fit into that particular nook at that time. It was his earnest desire to help his race and he wanted to help the white man too, if he could. He would and did absolutely surrender himself to the will of his white friends, getting their advice and sanction in all matters, and especially did he stay away from Politics. He told me that it was ignorance that was hurting his race. He said that the South depended upon the colored people as their laborers and that they were a great undeveloped resource. He quoted old Socrates "Not only is he idle who does nothing, but he is also idle who might be better employed."