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A Brief Historical Sketch of the Early Days of the Piney Woods School (Cover)

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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 one finds that, if in any way it helps him, you will be favorably related to others to know more about the story. So I am relating here something that has not been told before, and, if the writer brings himself into the picture somewhat, it is only for the purpose of showing the environment in which the founder of Piney Woods School, Laurence C. Jones, had to work. This was in the deep South, and the psychology of the people was the result of tradition and the impressions of slavery. The inferiority of the slave and the superiority of the Master wouldn’t give away to common justice. So the Negro had no standing in society, schools, or courts of law.

You can’t talk about the Piney Woods School without talking about Laurence C. Jones, for they are part and parcel of each other. And when I look at the pictures of this vast establishment, it seems more human to me than physical, because there has been so much humanity, or human effort, put into it.

The very beginning of this school was one morning when this young Negro walked into my saw mill office and introduced himself as Laurence C. Jones. Myself and the other office force were surprised that a colored man would introduce himself at all. Miss Nannie Simmons, the typist, and Albert Howell, the bookkeeper, perked up their ears to hear what our caller had to say. He went right into his subject. He spoke fast, compared with us Southern folks, and with well chosen words. He outlined his plan for starting a school for colored people, and said he wanted the consent of the white people of the community and wanted my view of the matter. I told him I could not advise him favorably, for we white people were not able to educate ourselves, let alone the Negro.

“My talk seemed to discourage him, but I could see that he wasn’t completely knocked out. He bowed very politely as he told me good-by, thanked me, and asked if he might call back sometime and talk to me again. I told him he might call 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 of the community 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 attention, and this time he seemed to be on a better encouragement and I told him I was more in-terested in saw-milling than education.

But 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: Mr. Hemphil, Anderson Pruitt, William Pattie, Gabe Jones, Eddie Ammons, Roy Pathe—J. P. Cox; the Barwick brothers; and Mrs. Caline Beal. Mr. Jones was capitalizing on our human weakness to want to satisfy our ego, and further there was to be a school as his life’s work the lifting of humanity into a higher sphere of life.

N ow, 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 way money out of the saw mill. Naturally, I would have some influence in the community. Besides, I wasn’t one of them furriners, some of whom were drifting in. I was a native product, and employed Negro 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 I 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 larnin’ school, but he wants to lam’em—do you suppose he got his bows and lectures in the farm.”

“Now, Mr. Webster, may I have your permission to call on you again?” I told him yes, but I was more 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, and we agreed that it was absurd. Albert remarked, “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 in where Angels fear to tread’”.

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and better work, so when we want good work we don't get it. That's why I want to buy something. And, as long as it is better, I want to continue to do it.

Jackson, Vicksburg or Meridian would have been better places to go. But all these places are too far away. I would have liked to go to Baltimore, but I couldn't afford it."

He was right in dispute with me. He said, "Mr. Webster, I want to buy something. But I don't have the money to do it."

"It's not what you can afford, but what you need," I replied. "You need to justify your purchase."

He was a bit frustrated, but he understood. "I know," he said. "But it's hard to find something that I need and can afford."
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 an 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 com-
ment, 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 censuring 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
gossip going 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" I said. "I have no time to leave the country.
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 fin-
ished, 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
marvel 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 merch-
ant 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
教学 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, "teach 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 life-
time of effort to rear up this immense institution. I some-
times marvel and ask myself the question, "How was it done?" First, I will say, it was built like all other institu-
tions upon the personality of the founder. Jones had the dis-
position 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."