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The Southside Chronicle



James and Alice Toney Story

South Oroville African American Historical Society

By Virginia Walker

James and Alice Toney were born and raised in Monroe Louisiana. Alice was born on March 30, 1903. Her parents were George Ella Jackson and Floyd Jackson. Her mother died when she was a small child and she and her two brothers and two sisters were raised by their grandparents, George (Papa George) and Winnie (Mama Winnie) Brantley, on their farm. Her mother had several siblings who also lived on the farm and the youngest was Velma who was close to Alice's age. Alice and her Aunt, Velma, went to high school together and attended a small Christian college for a while.

James was born "in town" on January 2, 1903 to Georgia and Robert Toney. For most of his growing up his mother was single. James' mother was deaf and mute. So, James used sign language to communicate with her. He always felt a special obligation to look out for his mother. James' uncle, Henry Gregg was a farmer and had an enormous impact on James as a father figure and as a businessman. James loved being with him and spent a lot of time out on his farm. It was from Uncle Henry that he learned a strong work ethic, and how to think like a business man. It was on one visit to his uncle's farm that James saw Alice. He loved to tell the story of how he was walking down the road and looked up and saw Alice. The way he told it, it was love at first sight. He spoke to Papa George about "calling" on her, and so their romance began.

James and Alice were married on the farm and their first home was a small log cabin located on the farm land.



Mrs. Alice Toney and Mr. James Toney
SOAAHS 2014 Legacy Award Winners

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Several of the children and grand children also had houses on the farm. Their first child, Walter James was born in that little cabin on October 10, 1933. Walter's birth was followed 10 month's later by the arrival of Robert Lee on August 30, 1934.

During the early years of their marriage James and Alice were quite the entrepreneurs. James sold coffee and he also sold pies that Alice baked. They enjoyed a happy life with the extended family out on the farm for another couple of years. They moved into the town of Monroe "proper" when Alice was pregnant with their third child. Again, they stayed close to family, settling in a small home on Cedar Street where several cousins and aunts and uncles also lived. James took a job at a manufacturer of small boats for the Navy. During the next 6 years three more boys were added to the Toney family, Samuel in 1937, Glen in 1939 and Charles in 1942. Alice was a wonderful homemaker, known for her cooking, especially fried chicken and pound cake. She truly had her hands full with the 5 boys. Both James and Alice always emphasized education. There was serious consequences for not "getting their lessons".

During 1943, many of James and Alice's family and friends were migrating out of Louisiana to places like Chicago and Oakland, in part to escape the Jim Crow laws, but also, seeking more economic opportunities. An opportunity came up for James at the boat building company that he could not refuse. He was offered a transfer to Oakland California where the company had set up a Navy boat building facility. He jumped at the opportunity to get to California with a job and headed out there in 1943. Alice came out to join him in early 1944. She traveled on the train with their 5 boys and was accompanied by her cousin Vera who helped her commandeer the rambunctious boys. They settled in among family and friends in West Oakland where they lived in government housing on Kirkum Street. Their last child, Virginia, was born in this home in 1945.

Life in Oakland was good. Most of James' family had migrated to Chicago, but Alice's relatives had come to in Oakland. Her two sisters and two brothers and her Aunt Velma had all settled in Oakland. The community was close knit. Everyone found all the things they liked to cook at Swans or Housewives market where they would run into friends from home and catch up on the latest news. Church was an important part of the lives of the Toney family. James was a deacon at Beth Eden Baptist Church. Alice stayed true to her roots in the Christian Methodist Episcopal church and was a missionary in Bebe Memorial CME church. Every Sunday Alice had the boys in their white shirts, ties and pants and they would line up behind James and head to church with him.

The boys explored every aspect of Oakland and got into all kinds of mischief, including riding the back of streetcars and floating on the bay on rafts they crafted. They told many stories about "if Mom and Dad only knew"... Oakland was a bustling place, with lots of military personnel (army & navy) coming through. James built a shoe shine kit for the boys and they earned money shining shoes for the sailors & soldiers. The war ended and a lot of the work in the ship yards ended also, including James job with the boat building company.

For some time, James had developed a hankering to find a place where he and Alice could raise their family without the less desirable elements of urban living. He had a vision of a place with "potential", as he liked to say, to develop into a thriving community. Continued on page 3

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He wanted land to build a home for his family and raise his boys in particular, where he would not be as concerned about bad influences. He would go with some of his friends, who were hunters and fishermen, exploring areas where land could be purchased reasonable prices. One of those friends, took him to explore a place called Oroville. There was a lumber mill in the town, which meant jobs. Because James had worked in lumber mills in Arkansas and Louisiana before he met Alice, he was particularly interested in this. He thought the terrain in Oroville was beautiful too, there was a river that ran through the town. There was a four year college in the nearby town of Chico and a Junior College in Yuba City. He went home and told Alice he wanted to buy land in Oroville. Alice recognized it was a dream come true for him and supported that decision. James got work at the lumber mill and soon sent for Alice and the six children.

No one could tell the story, of her arrival on the train to Oroville, like Alice told it. She was fond of saying, "I looked around and I wondered where in heavens name I was." There was not much to the little town of Oroville and the place where James had bought the land had no running water, no sewer and only a dirt road to get there. James had found a place for the family on Fallbrook Street and he set about getting the house built.

When they moved into the house they got water from a stream in front of the house and of course there was an outhouse. Alice was a trooper and knew how to make something from nothing. The boys got settled into school and given their ages, some were at Burbank School and some were at Bird Street School. This was a long walk from where they lived and there were no school buses at that time. So Charles and Glen walked together to Burbank and the other boys walked to Bird Street. Soon Alice's Aunt Velma came to live with the family in Oroville to provide support for Alice. James had found a church home at Oro Vista Baptist Church and Alice, Aunt Bess and the boys became members at Taylor Memorial CME Church.

The family was happy and looking to a bright future. Two years after the house was built, during the Christmas holiday period, it caught fire and burned to the ground before the fire trucks arrived. All family members were safe but this was a sad day for the Toney family. Although they lost everything material, photos, etc., they did not loose the close knit connectedness of family. Both James and Alice told the family that "together we can make it, with God's help". The community rallied around the family as well, providing clothing as well as temporary housing. James' strong sense of his responsibility to care for his family drove him to figure out a way to complete the reconstruction of the house and the family was back into their home within 9 months.

Alice and James ran the Toney household on several strong beliefs based primarily on their Christian ethics. They believed in a strong work ethic, in being honest, having strong moral values and being the best you could be at whatever you undertook. They walked their talk. They were a great team, she soft spoken, often appearing to be in the background, but firm in her beliefs. He, a visionary, one who saw opportunities where others didn't, who was interested in making big things happen to improve conditions for black people to get a fair shake.

It was always clear that they wanted their children to know that "family" was a source of strength, a safe place where you are loved unconditionally, a refuge from a world that often treated blacks very unfairly.

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They both emphasized how important it was to keep the family strongly connected as a unit. James often spoke about how much fuller our lives were when we could experience a sense of accomplishment not only from our individual successes, but from sharing in the successes of each sibling and others in the community.

James played a key leadership role in developing the children to believe there was nothing they could not accomplish. He would sometimes get some healthy competition going, particularly among the boys, when one got all A's the others were asked, so "what's wrong with you...you let Sam beat you out?" He set the bar for achievement very high, but then gave all the children encouragement to succeed and challenged them to encourage each other to achieve great things.

James did not have a higher education but he had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He would read every night and what he read was wide and varied. He knew a lot about black history and was proud of the roots of African Americans. He made sure the children knew there was a history to be proud of about African Americans. He would quote black history and took time to describe the work of Benjamin Mayes, Booker T. Washington and others. He wanted his children to know that no matter that Blacks were left out of the history books at our schools, that black people were intelligent and had made a major contribution to building this country, as teachers, legislators and inventors. He wanted his children to know to never let anyone one make them feel anything less because they were black.

Alice never learned to drive a car. James was often working out of town and consequently Alice walked a lot everywhere...to the schools, to downtown. There was one time when she and Virginia walked downtown to shop. It was a very hot day and when they were nearly home, Alice realized she had a small item that she had neglected to pay for. They turned around and they walked all the way back to the store and paid for the item. This was no big deal to her, it was simply the right thing to do. She did not realize the example she was setting for her young daughter.

While they both emphasized the importance of education, Alice was the enforcer. The boys were involved in almost every sport, but she always insisted that they had to "get their lessons" too. She practically lived at the schools, holding teachers and administrators accountable to do their job to provide educational opportunities to ALL the children. She never, raised her voice and was never disrespectful, she would not be intimidated either. She simply did what she believed was the right thing to do. There was the time that Glen's fourth grade teacher led the class in singing "Old Black Joe", time and time again. Glen talked to Alice about it and she told him he did not have to sing that song. The next week when the teacher led the song, Glen told her that his mother said he did not have to sing that song. Glen was sent home. Alice walked back to Burbank School with Glen and in her quiet yet firm voice told the administrators that it was not a requirement for her son to sing "Old Black Joe" in order to attend school. She let them know that he would not be singing the song and that they should even reconsider having it a part of the music curriculum. She let them know in no uncertain terms that her son was to be allowed back into the classroom...and he was.

James went wherever he needed to go to find work to support his family. He worked locally in the saw mills and in construction.

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One year when things were really tough locally, he went to Ohio to live with a relative and worked in the steel industry. Robert went with him and attended Youngstown University for one year while there. No matter where James was, every Friday there was a check at the Western Union waiting for Alice. The boys always had jobs to help pay for the things they needed for school and they willingly contributed over half of their earnings for the family to have more. When one of them moved on from a job, it was passed on to the next brother.

The State Water Project (aka the Oroville Dam) brought a lot of attention and resources into Oroville and the surrounding area. It was a major force for a great deal of change in the early to mid-1960s – new people, new business and other positive developments for Oroville and Butte County. Not only was James at the forefront of efforts to have the south-side community included in these advancements, change was also taking place for him personally. Of course having a job to take care of his family had always been number one on his agenda, changes in the economy and his health (back injury) made it so the lumber industry and construction work were no longer viable options for employment. But, because local business was growing he was able to find employment at a Gibson's Pharmacy where he worked as a stock clerk and delivery person for many years until he retired.

Alice was active in church, in both official and lay capacities. She was a missionary, she served on the Stewardess Board and she sang in the choir. Plus, she was always called upon to bake one of her famous cakes for church events. James was a Deacon at Oro Vista Baptist Church. He taught Sunday School and was an active role model in the BYPU, the youth group.

James was an active participant in the NAACP and other local groups doing things to call attention to the injustices being committed against blacks in the South, as well as the lack of equal job opportunities for blacks in Oroville. He helped organize and participated in the march in Oroville for jobs. His vision was always to see Black people in Oroville feel good about themselves, be respected, participate in the economic benefits of the region, and to own businesses that could grow. He was proud of Johnson's store, Mrs. Alley's little restaurant, and the cleaners. One of his dreams was to see the Black Community have an African American Community Center where African American history could be on display to encourage the young and show others the significant accomplishments of black folks in this area. He participated with others to acquire the land to fulfill this dream but did not live to see it come to fruition.

The children did not let their parents down when it came to staying connected and getting a good education. The boys were excellent in sports, each one participating in the Block 'O' Society at Oroville High. Walter, the oldest son, was the first African American Student Body President at Oroville High. Both Sam and Glen earned the rank of Eagle Scout.

Walter, Robert, Sam and Glen all attended Chico State as undergraduates. They each helped the next financially to get through college. They were room mates, they had one checking account that they all used, no matter who was working or not, or who was making the most money. Walter went on to work as a civil engineer and helped design many of the parks in Berkeley. His children are Walter Jr., Jeana and Christopher. He passed away in 1990. Robert considered law school, but instead joined the military and spent 34 years in the US Navy

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achieving the rank of Admiral. He is retired and lives in Oakland. His children are Kimberly, Kelly and Robert Jr., who were born to him and his wife Flora. Bob's wife passed away in 2008. Samuel passed away in 1969 as he was completing his PhD at UC Berkeley. He was survived by one son, Laurence with his wife Lily. Glen received his PhD from University of Southern California and had a successful career in education and later corporate. He lives in Chico with his wife Virginia. They had four daughters, Nicole, Kali (who passed away in 2013), Kellance and Phoenix. Both Charles and Virginia graduated from San Jose State University. Charles spent a major part of his career at Toyota where he led their training programs based on Japanese techniques. He and his wife, Sophia, live in Chico. Charles has two boys, Marcus and Matthew who live in Oakland. Virginia spent her career primarily as a Chief Financial Officer in several high tech companies in Silicon Valley. Virginia lives in Chico with her husband Dell, directly across the road from Glen. Virginia has two children, Cecily and Robert who live in the Bay Area. Virginia left her corporate career in 2005 and started a consulting business called the Jamison Group. The six principals in the business include her brothers Glen and Charles. Jamison was the name the children came to use, with reverence, to refer to their father. Given what he stood for and his dreams about owning businesses, it seemed very appropriate to name the business the Jamison Group.

James passed away in 1975 and Alice passed in 1993. They were both two exceptional people in many ways. As African-American parents, in their time, who they were as people equipped them uniquely to deal with the challenges of successfully raising a family of 5 boys and a girl-- all of whom completed advanced educations and were highly accomplished in their various careers. What they did was not achieved alone. If asked, rest assured, they would be the first to tell you that what they achieved was done so by the grace of God and the support of a community of many good people in Oroville – the Toney's new home town.



Three of Mr. and Mrs. Toney's children were in attendance at the 6th Annual SOAAHS Legacy Award Ceremony. Pictured here from left to right are Admiral Robert Toney, Virginia Walker and Glen Toney.

President Message

By Dr. John Rivers

I hope you enjoy reading a part of the Alice and James Toney's Legacy. More of their legacy was revealed at our 6th annual Legacy Dinner last month. We were pleased to have members of the outstanding Toney family along with other families, Society members, and others in attendance. Our work to record and recognize the breath of contributions and accomplishments of Southside Elders continues. In this regard, we need your help in identifying individuals whose values, behavioral example, and support that enabled generations of African Americans to achieve success in life.

Let us know of others who deserve recognition by calling us at 530-533-7388, or writing a note to 936 18th St. Oroville Ca. 95965. We will assist you in composing a legacy story and submit it to the SOAAHS Board of Directors for their consideration and action. We know there are many other Elders who need to be included in the documented record of events and people who developed the Black Community in Southside.

I am pleased to announce that the Board has established a building fund to complete the work started by our elders in 1967. The fund is managed by the North Valley Community Foundation, in Chico Calif. I will explain and provide more information on this subject in the next newsletter.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I wish you and your family and friends a healthy and blessed Christmas and New Year.

Be well, and be blessed.

John

Membership Committee's Corner by Van Bilbo

Another year is coming to a close and SOAAHS has continued to do what we started 6 years ago, recording the history of African American people in South Oroville and the surrounding areas..

Membership in SOAAHS provides opportunities to connect and learn from others that have so much to offer from our past. Members working together gives us a stronger voice. By understanding our past we can do a much better job of preparing for our future. We are always seeking to add new member. Let your friends, family, and neighbors know about SOAAHS. If you are not a member please consider joining. Membership applications are available for downloading from our website (www.soaahs.org), or by calling 530 533-7388 to ask for an application to be mailed to you.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the membership and community for supporting SOAAHS, and ask that you continue your support so that we can create a complete and comprehensive account of African American history in South Oroville.

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