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SPOTLIGHT: ELIZA ATKINS GLEASON, RUTH HILL JONES, AND DELLA JONES

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Kentucky's libraries have been served by many dedicated librarians over the years. While records for longevity have not been kept, 2009 may mark the first year in which Kentucky had three librarians celebrating centennial birthdays.

Kentucky's three centennial librarians deserve recognition not only for the length of their lives, but also for their contributions to the profession and their communities. Each of these remarkable women made significant contributions, while overcoming huge barriers of race and gender. Their stories are inspiring for Kentucky librarians as we strive to serve in times that are exciting as well as challenging.

Eliza Atkins Gleason will celebrate her centennial birthday on December 15, 2009. After graduating from Fisk University with an A.B. in 1930, and the University of Illinois with a B.S. in library science in 1931, Gleason relocated to Kentucky where she accepted a position at the Louisville Municipal College for Negroes in 1931. She was promoted to head librarian a year later and began teaching library science classes in the new library science department she established.

In 1935, she left Kentucky to pursue a master's degree in library science at the University of California, Berkeley. After receiving her degree, she accepted the position of head of the reference department and assistant professor at Fisk University in 1936. A year later, she left to continue her studies at the University of Chicago and, in 1940, became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in the field. Subsequently, she served as director of libraries at Talledega College from 1940-1941. And, in 1941, she was invited to Atlanta University, the present Clark Atlanta University, where she was the founding dean



At Fisk University, circa 1936

and the first African American dean of a library school. From 1941-1946, Dr. Gleason oversaw the beginning of a library program that would graduate more African American librarians than any other program in the United States.

Dr. Gleason married Maurice F. Gleason, M.D. in 1937. In 1946, she left Atlanta to join her husband in Chicago. Dr.

Maurice Gleason had just been honorably discharged from the Army after serving in the medical division along the Burma Road during WWII.

Dr. Eliza Gleason served in many capacities at both academic and public libraries throughout her career. Among many firsts, she was the first African American ALA Councilor from 1942 to 1946. The American Library Association honored her with the Eliza Atkins Gleason Award, recognizing outstanding books written in English in the field of library history. The award is presented by the Library History Roundtable every three years.

Dr. Gleason was the progeny of prominent African American academicians. Her father, Simon Green Atkins, founded Slater Industrial and State Normal School in 1892, the first African American institution in the United States to grant degrees in elementary teacher education. In 1925, the school became Winston-Salem Teachers College and in 1969 it was renamed Winston-Salem State University.



Dr. Eliza Atkins Gleason, University of Chicago, 1940

Her mother, Oleona Atkins, was a teacher and assistant principal at the school. Dr. Gleason currently lives in Louisville where her daughter, Joy Gleason Carew, is associate professor of Pan African Studies at the University of Louisville.

For more information on Dr. Gleason see *Library Service to African Americans in Kentucky*, by R.F. Jones; *Biography Index: A cumulative index to biographical material in books and magazines*, vol 24 (Sept 1998-Aug 1999); *Who's Who in America*, 38th - 46th eds.; and *Eliza Atkins Gleason Book Award*.

Additional information for this entry was provided by Dr Joy .G Carew, Associate Professor, University of Louisville.

Ruth Hill Jones celebrated her centennial birthday on July 31, 2009. She was the daughter of a prominent Louisville minister, John J. Action Hill, who was an Army Chaplain in World War I. She graduated from Wilberforce University in 1931 with a degree in English. She earned her MLS from the University of Chicago in 1954 and a master's degree in Liberal Arts from Indiana University in 1957. She served as a librarian in the Louisville school system for many years before retiring and then working in the library of Simons Bible College. Ms. Jones was an active member of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association and wrote regularly for the association's journal. She currently resides in Treyton Oak Towers in Louisville.

Information provided by Major Susan R. Addams



The oldest Kentucky librarian of which a record is available is **Della Jones**, who died in July 2009 at the age of 106. A native of Williamstown, Kentucky, Ms. Jones was educated at Woodward High School in Cincinnati and Lincoln Institute in Shelby County. She began her teaching career at the age of 19 in rural Wayne County, Kentucky. The following year she accepted a position in Boone County, Kentucky. Later she taught in New Liberty and other schools around Kentucky.

By laws of the day, her marriage to Bradley Jones in 1929 ended her teaching career. Following legislative action allowing married women to teach, she resumed her career in a one-room school for black children in Owen

County. When the public schools were desegregated, Ms. Jones became Owen County High School librarian where she remained until she retired.

For 17 straight summers she cleaned dorms at Kentucky State University to pay for classes that allowed her to obtain a bachelor's degree in 1957. Her commencement speaker was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whom she was thrilled to meet. Ms. Jones recalled that hearing Dr. King and seeing Barack Obama sworn in as President were the highlights of her life.

As the oldest living alumna from KSU, she was awarded an honorary doctorate in May 2009. During the ceremony conferring her honorary degree, former students and colleagues universally declared she was an "inspiration to everyone who meets her." The soft-spoken librarian lived in the same white frame house in Grant County—excepting absences for work and education—for almost 85 years before moving to a Grant County nursing home.

Sources: Obituary of Della L Jones <http://stanleyfuneralhomes.com/pages/obituaries.php?obtid=171>

Grant County News September 6, 2009

Centenarian Remembers Dr. King's I Have a Dream Speech by John Rutherford; <http://allday.msnbc.msn.com/archives/2008/08/28/1299624.aspx>

The history of library service in Kentucky is overflowing with stories of dedication, resilience, and perseverance as seen in the lives of these outstanding women. Along with others of similar spirit, they built the foundation on which we provide library service. Today's Kentucky librarians owe a large debt of gratitude to them for their service along with a commitment to continue to provide services that meet the needs of our users.

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