

IN KEEPING WITH THE DREAM: VICTORIA TAYLOR WALKER, BLACK AMERICAN EDUCATOR

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The passing Model T's sent the dust flying, mingling it with the white fluff of the fields, producing a white onerous cloud, seemingly bending the backs of the pickers, as if part of their natural stance. One small child remained erect, as if defying the fate which had placed her there. That child, Victoria Taylor, although anonymous among names of such black leaders as W. E. B. Dubois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thurgood Marshall, began to share those same characteristics which had made men such as these true leaders of their time.¹ Each had used his tenacity, ambition, and dreams as a ladder to climb above oppression and become more, not only for himself, but for his people – black Americans. Victoria Taylor Walker's experience as an educator illustrates the struggle of an American black to achieve the promise of America.

Victoria Taylor's childhood experiences in the cotton fields of the rural southern community where she was raised can not be classified as unique; a thousand – a hundred thousand – young blacks have stood in her place in cotton fields across the South. What is exceptional is her determination to become educated during a period of America's history when education was something most blacks only dreamed of. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century many rural Texas communities such as Goose Creek turned their cotton fields into oil fields and enjoyed a period of boom town "whoopie" associated with any new oil discovery in America; however, just a short distance away by skiff across Cedar Bayou stream, a traveler would swear he had slipped back in time when the southern landscape was nothing but vast fields of hardy cotton.² This rural farming community known as Cedar Bayou was the birthplace and lifetime home of Victoria Taylor Walker. Victoria's birth, September 12, 1905, to Adlene Drawborn, marked the beginning of a relationship between a community and a special individual which would last a lifetime.³

For many rural black families of the early 1900s, life consisted of little more than struggles for sustenance. In order to survive, many households encompassed not only parents and their siblings, but grandparents, as well as boarders; Victoria's home was no exception. While these conditions may seem unfavorable, when compared with today's lifestyles, Victoria contributed much of her own inner strength and determination to succeed to her early childhood under the guidance and support of her maternal grandparents and a family boarder, Leah Cooper. From her grandmother Rose Winfree, born in nearby Lynchburg, and her grandfather Maurice Winfree, a possible descendant of slaves belonging to the Winfree family, a prominent family in the Cedar Bayou area, Victoria inherited a will to succeed, which had enabled her grandparents to survive, despite the rigorous hardships of early pioneer life in Texas. Her grandfather, unable to read or write, and her grandmother, with only a third grade education, were determined to see their only grandchild educated regardless of the sacrifice. While many children were kept from the classroom in order to work in the fields or help with other chores to provide what they could to

the family's finances, Victoria, with the help of Leah Cooper, who was also the community's only teacher, began her education at the unusually early age of four. Although Victoria claims she was really too young to learn much, she could carry her "'big ol' lunch bucket just the same." Victoria's response to the teacher's question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" best demonstrates her strong purposefulness even as a young child. Unlike her fellow classmates, who expected nothing more from life than to wash, iron, and farm just as their parents had done, Victoria replied that she wanted to become a teacher. This imaginative answer so delighted her teacher that Cooper felt Victoria warranted careful nurturing and immediately discussed with Victoria's family the need to further the child's education.⁴

Along with the support Victoria received from her family, her church also contributed to her education.⁵ Like many black communities, the church in Cedar Bayou offered those with "little money and scant education," opportunities for "recognition and fulfillment denied them in the white-run world."⁶ Their church provided a "haven which served, by natural extension, as a social club, recreation center, meeting house, political headquarters, and schoolroom."⁷ Victoria not only attended school in Mt. Olive Baptist Church but found spiritual strength there as well. Due to her outstanding academic achievement, she was admired by fellow church members and was even, at a very early age, placed in the responsible position as church secretary. When the time neared to find the necessary funds to further Victoria's education, the church community passed the hat more than once, in the hope that one of their own would finally succeed.⁸

Victoria had succeeded with the help of her community in gathering the financial support needed to further her education.⁹ But one obstacle still remained. Although the Texas forefathers had placed great importance on education and wrote in "The Texas Declaration of Independence" that "unless a people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuance of civil liberty or the capacity of self-government," they little realized the hold "King Cotton" had placed on democracy in the South. "King Cotton" had made economic slaves of whites as well as blacks.¹⁰ Whites, realizing their dependence on the pickers, could not allow blacks to become educated beyond the most "rudimentary training," for to do so might make them "restless with his lot" and take them away from the cotton fields where they were so desperately needed.¹¹ Blacks, on the other hand, could not afford an education, because of their constant ties with the fields which enabled them to survive. Although the majority of blacks allowed this arrangement, a few like Victoria challenged a system that perpetuated illiteracy and undermined the development of a whole race. Although the whites in communities near Victoria's had established high schools to promote higher education for the white students, socially-segregated blacks who wished to further their education in the Cedar Bayou area beyond the seventh and eighth grade were required to travel to other communities in order to receive a high school diploma. The distances involved and the cost of tuition served as deterrents to black aspirations to higher education.¹²

In Victoria's case the nearest institutions available to blacks were in Houston and Waller County. Victoria's family, concerned with the dangers a young lady might confront in a growing metropolis such as Houston, decided to send her to the Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College in nearby Waller County.¹³ Organized under an act "to provide for the organization and support of a normal school, for the preparation and training of colored teachers," the law (or act) establishing the school was approved by Governor Oran M. Roberts, April 19, 1879.¹⁴

Having selected her school, Victoria, at fourteen set off to accomplish her first goal – the completion of high school; she knew that her family's meager earnings required that she make more than sufficient grades; she had to work to supplement what her family sent for room and board. Victoria spent all her extra time between classes laboring in a laundry to provide the additional needed funds. Victoria laughs and says, "that many a night after studying I would kneel to pray, as I had been taught as a child, and wake up the next morning still on my knees." But after two trying years, at the age of sixteen, Victoria's first dream became a reality – she was certified to teach, which at the time only required a teaching certificate and not a college degree. Victoria came back to teach her first year in Anahuac at the Bayshore Elementary School close to her own community. After one year at Anahuac, she returned to teach in the community to which she owed so much. In retrospect, Victoria laughs and comments that her young age, close to that of her own students, and her lack of experience made the task difficult, and she felt she was simply "spreading ignorance." So once again she returned to Prairie View A & M University to work on her first college degree, which she received in 1937.¹⁵

In May of 1917, the community of Cedar Bayou, on the Harris County side of Cedar Bayou stream, was granted its petition by the state to become an independent school district, and Victoria's little one-room school building became part of its jurisdiction.¹⁶ The minutes of the Cedar Bayou Board of Education covering the years from 1919 through the consolidation with Goose Creek in 1954 delineates the racial injustices which occurred. Victoria's salary is the most obvious of the inequities she was required to endure. Throughout the minutes in which the names and salaries of teachers are indicated, Victoria's salary is from \$30.00 to \$45.00 less than her white counterparts, which in her earliest years of teaching forced her to return to the cotton fields during the picking season to supplement her income.¹⁷ But even then, Victoria met the challenge, and she proudly claims that she could pick up to 250 pounds of cotton in one day.¹⁸ Along with the injustices directed at Victoria, those which directly affected her children were her first concern.

Victoria's first goal, after the new school district was organized, was to request a lengthening of the school term for her school. Although the white schools had already incorporated a nine month school system, Victoria's black school continued to remain on a six month schedule in order for the children to help in the fields during the cotton picking season. Victoria, in order to validate her request for a longer school term, had the parents sign a petition requesting the lengthening of the school term to provide a more equivalent education for her black students. Despite the school board's inquiries throughout the community – in the hope that the parents would be unfavorable to the idea – the board consented to grant a nine month term for Victoria's school.¹⁹ However, despite this step, in many areas equal schooling was denied. Throughout the Cedar Bayou minutes, references are made to improvements of older buildings and the construction of new ones, but no mention is made of improvements to Victoria's school.²⁰ As the years progressed, the little one-room school building where she taught, a building which had been discarded by whites years before, began to show signs of considerable deterioration. Not only did it lack standard plumbing and sufficient heating already installed in the white schools, but the floors had rotted in several places leaving holes, about which Victoria recounted, "one day a child fell through hurting his leg, prompting a great deal of dissatisfaction throughout the community." Feeling it her responsibility to rectify this situation, Victoria went before the board of trustees and asked for the immediate consideration of a new school. One trustee, as Victoria recounts, was so mad that

he told her "that the only reason the community had wanted her back there to teach was because they knew she would be up at the trustee's office every day begging in their face." He continued "that if she was dissatisfied with the way things were, she could use her own money to get what the community wanted." Unfortunately that was already the case; Victoria had used her own money to provide nearly all the materials necessary to give her children an education anywhere comparable to what the white children received.²¹ Money allotted for band instruments, field trips, and other extra curricular supplies for the white school was not used to provide any assistance for Victoria's school.²² Victoria, realizing the need for additional enrichment to continue the children's interest in school, formed a PTA in the black community in order to raise funds for band instruments, curtains for the stage, and uniforms. Victoria felt inadequate to provide the training the children deserved, even after being awarded a Master of Arts Degree in education in 1945 from Atlanta University, and once again returned to school at Texas Southern University and received a Master of Education Degree in 1952. During her own schooling at Texas Southern University in Houston, she was able to receive additional help for her band students, not provided by the Cedar Bayou district, and would bring the children each Saturday for guidance from the college's music department.²³

Although Victoria attempted to give her students an education comparable to that of the white students, she also realized that education was not enough for children who knew nothing more than the surrounding area in which they lived. In many cases, these children had not even seen the inside of a department store. Victoria aware of their limited experiences, encouraged them to leave their community in order to achieve a higher education by offering them a ten dollar scholarship to attend a boarding school such as the Kendleton School in Kendleton, Texas, which was established through the Rosenwald Foundation in the early twenties. Victoria also realized the need to establish pride in her children. She began to preach this need so strongly that she finally was called to the superintendent's office. Realizing that many times blacks were stereotyped for eating watermelon(s) and drinking red soda, Victoria began to tell the children not to eat or drink these items in public. One mother, a maid for one of the white teachers, not understanding Victoria's intentions, told the teacher about Victoria's recommendations to her child, and the white teacher immediately informed the superintendent. Victoria, strong in her convictions, recounts that she informed the superintendent "that he had pride in his people and she had the same for her own."²⁴

Totally disillusioned with her progress in meeting the needs of her school, Victoria, after many years, decided to find a job in another community and applied in the town of Settegast, where she talked with the principal, a Mr. Holland. When asked why she wanted to leave her community, Victoria explained her unsuccessful attempts to get cooperation from the school board. When Mr. Holland realized Victoria's superintendent was none other than an old college classmate, he insisted on talking with him to see what could be done. In less than two weeks after Victoria's interview, Mr. Ackeridge, President of the Cedar Bayou School Board, found the funds necessary to build Victoria's new school. In 1951, after some thirty years, a new building was erected and named after Victoria Walker, a tribute suggested by her community. Over the years many changes occurred, eventually resulting in the closing of the school. The increase of the scholastic population throughout Texas, and the cost of education resulted in the consolidation of many small districts such as Cedar Bayou with nearby Goose Creek in 1954. But the Supreme Court's decision in the *Brown vs Board of Education* case of 1954, which ostensibly ended the

segregation of blacks forever in America's schools, had the most profound effect. By 1964 the Victoria Taylor school was required by Goose Creek to shut its doors in order to comply with the new desegregation laws.²⁵

In 1964 as the Victoria Taylor school shut its doors for the last time, so did a nation of blacks also close the door on a part of America's history in which blacks such as Victoria had only dreamed of equality. Although the closing of the segregated facilities opened new doors for blacks across America, the Victoria Taylor Walker story suggests that opportunity alone does not decide success, but that determination and a desire to accomplish a dream are also determining factors.

NOTES

¹Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

²Alga Bernice Miller Haezel, "A Social History of Baytown, Texas, 1912-1956," The University of Texas, 1958, p. 6.

³Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

⁴Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

⁵Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

⁶Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 11.

⁷Kluger, p. 12.

⁸Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

⁹Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

¹⁰H. Y. Benedict and John A. Lomax, *The Book of Texas*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916), p. 129.

¹¹Kluger, p. 13.

¹²Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

¹³Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

¹⁴*Forty-Sixth Annual Catalogue of the Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College* (Texas: Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College, 1924), p. 13.

¹⁵Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

¹⁶H. B. 48, Chapter 19, *Local and Special Laws of Texas*, 35th Leg. 1917, p. 333.

¹⁷Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

¹⁸Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

¹⁹Cedar Bayou I.S.D. Minutes. In office of Administration Building, Goose Creek Independent School District, Baytown, Texas. 30 March 1939.

²⁰Cedar Bayou I.S.D. Minutes. In office of Administration Building, Goose Creek I.S.D., Baytown, Texas. 16 August 1923, 3 December 1925, 20 March 1939, 31 January 1949, 13 June 1949, 7 May 1951.

²¹Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

²²Cedar Bayou I.S.D. Minutes (Baytown, Texas: Administration Building, Goose Creek I.S.D., 3 September 1951, 15 March 1951, 16 August 1951, 28 May 1951, 4 October 1951, 10 September 1951, 28 January 1952).

²³Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

²⁴Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.

²⁵Personal interview with Victoria Taylor Walker, 16 September 1986.