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# **Piney Woods Country Life School: An Educational Experience of African Americans**

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**Abstract. This study is a historical analysis of the Piney Woods Country Life School during the Jim Crow era. The study focuses on the school's underlying mission to aid African Americans in gaining financial and political control over their lives through education for self-reliance, self-determination and economic independence by any means necessary.**

## **Introduction**

Historical research of the adult education activities of African Americans and African American educators is generally not labeled as "adult education" (Easter, 1995). Generally, the literature relative to the historical development of adult education has ignored this group's intellectual contributions to the knowledge base and its conceptual framework, and it has failed to acknowledge African Americans' participation as both consumers and producers of adult education programs (Colin, 1988)

Africentric and Afrocentric are terms that can be used interchangeably. This study is guided by an Africentric perspective, which posits that the African American experience and history are important and need to be acknowledged (Asante, 1987; Hayes and Colin, 1994). Adult education literature reflects little on the educational activities of African Americans, however adult education played a vital role in African Americans' struggle for freedom (Easter, 1995; Peterson, 1996). Colin (1996) concluded that, "perhaps adult education researchers have not considered the possibility, that in response to the laws and traditions...of Jim Crowism, African Americans ...developed and institutionalized a socioeducational philosophy and ideology that reflected a different world view." (Colin, 1996, p. 42)

This study offers a historical analysis using both primary and secondary sources. The data collection process also included audio and video taped interviews with nine former students or individuals that were involved with the school. Statistical and demographic data were taken from class records and census reports, and artifacts such as photographs and personal memoirs. Official records and documents and relics were used to analyze the ways in which the school reflected the educational experience of African Americans.

Life in Mississippi. Rankin County was organized in 1828 (Mississippi Planning Commission, 1930). According to Harrison (1982), "the Rankin County Piney Woods region, where the Piney Woods Country Life School was located,

was considered to have had the poorest land, cattle and people." (Harrison, 1982, p. 13) Harrison (1982) stated that, "the area had been settled by whites from the Carolinas and Georgia who could not afford acreage in the Delta, and by former slaves because of its cheapness, and its being...known as Free Town." (Harrison, 1982, p. 14-15) In 1830, 19 percent of the county's 2,083 population were African Americans of which 99.5 percent were slaves. The African American population rose to 40 percent in 1840; to 45 percent and 52 percent in 1850 and 1860 respectively; and with African Americans in slavery exceeding 99 percent for each period (Mississippi Planning Commission, 1930). In both the 1900 and 1910 census African Americans comprised more than 58 percent of the county's population, and of the 2,802 African American males of voting age, 51 percent were illiterate (Bureau of Census, 1910). Since the illiteracy rate for African American women in the county was not recorded, the illiteracy rate for African American adults may have been less than or greater than the 51 percent recorded. However, it was most likely the latter.

McMillen (1989) refers to the state of Mississippi as, "Jim Crow Mississippi", because education for African Americans "...was separate but never equal." (McMillen, 1989, p. 71) This is quite evident, since according to McMillen (1989), "the state invested most of its meager school dollars from 1890 onward in the education of its white minority, and only provided lip service to the support of a dual education system." (McMillen, 1989, p. 71) This belief was illustrated by A. A. Kincannon, the state's Superintendent of Education, who wrote in 1899: "It will be readily admitted by every white man in Mississippi that our public school system is designed primarily for the welfare of white children of the state, and incidentally for the negro children." (McMillen, 1989, p. 72) Holtzclaw (1984) stated that, "as late as 1962, Mississippi was considered the worst state in the union for sheer savagery", and treatment of African Americans. (Holtzclaw, 1984, p. 72) This belief is echoed by an alumna of the school who recalled, this incident from her childhood:

I can remember my mother was taking me on the campus for some program...and those Ku Klux Klansman was riding by and I remember she pushed me in the bushes, I was a little girl, to kind of hide out from those folks. But they were on horses and they had hoods over their heads.

Upon being asked about the affects of Jim Crow on the African American community of Rankin County, Mississippi she went on to say:

We weren't allowed to vote for a long time. You were not allowed and you, you were afraid to vote. It had a great affect on all of us. For the simple reason [pause] it's just [pause] certain things you just couldn't do. Or didn't do. Because you knew you would be in jeopardy if you did it.

According to Holtzclaw (1984), "between 1890 and 1964, the black population of Mississippi was stymied." (Holtzclaw, 1984, p. 71) They were repressed socially, politically and economically. During this period Mississippi had the lowest percentage of African American voters in the south; lynchings were a way of life in the state for them; and because African Americans were disfranchised due to the separate, but equal doctrine, local officials were

free to misappropriate state funds designated for the African American (Holtzclaw, 1984; McMillen, 1989). These misappropriated state funds allowed plantation county whites to benefit from African Americans, residing in Mississippi. Moreover, it provided these plantation owners with a labor force presumed to be ignorant, docile and dependent upon whites. Therefore, it is this belief which allowed whites in Mississippi to gain education and economic benefits at the expense of African Americans.

Establishing of the Piney Woods Country Life School. According to the school's archivist, the Rankin County African American community had been talking about organizing a school for twenty-five years before the Piney Woods Country Life School was founded. According to Cooper (1989), "no one had ever encouraged them [and] not any of them knew just what to do." (Cooper, 1989, p.53) The first substantial donation the school received was forty acres of land from Edward Nelson Taylor, a former slave (Harrison, 1982; Jones, undated; McMillen, 1989). McMillen (1989) cites an early graduate of the school as saying, "The beginning of Piney Woods was by black people." (McMillen, 1989, p. 97) Despite the social and political climate in Mississippi, the African American community of Rankin County recognized education as their source of empowerment.

Laurence C. Jones (1882-1975) founded piney Woods Country Life School in 1909 in Rankin County, Mississippi. It was founded for African Americans during the Jim Crow era of the separate, but equal doctrine (late 1890's until the enforcement of the United States Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education Topeka). According to Lusane (1992), the separate, but equal doctrine became embedded in the American culture after the United States Supreme Court ruled in the Plessy v. Ferguson court case that segregation could be legally practiced (Lusane, 1992). Lusane (1992) concluded that this, "opened an era of racism and American-style "apartheid" ...that permeated every facet of U. S. society for the next sixty-one years" and thereafter. (Lusane, 1992, p. 17) The enforcement of this practice imposed cultural and societal restrictions upon the African American population, which caused a significant portion of them to live in poverty, illiteracy and peonage.

Jones, an African American, who had just recently graduated from the University of Iowa went to Mississippi to provide education and the chance for a better life to African Americans in the Piney Woods region (Day, 1955). According to Harrison (1989), "he was an advocate of industrial education and believed that manual labor education could help society's bottom rail." (Harrison, 1982, p. 3) Critics of industrial education questioned whether such educational programs equipped African Americans to survive or whether they simply prepared them for continued subservience. These critics believed that if African Americans were to succeed they would need higher education. This belief fostered a tension between those who chose higher education and those who chose vocational education. This tension led to many believing that vocational education was inferior to higher education. Failure to reach a common ground on this issue had many consequences for African Americans (Potts, 1996).

When the school was founded, little if any differences were made between the ways in which children and adults learned. During the early years, the school had many students that were older than the traditional elementary and high school student. According to the schools' archivist:

...a lot of times the students' parents would also come to Piney Woods to learn to read and to write and

things such as that. Because they had had very little...educational opportunities before Piney Woods came.

A 1942 alumnus of the school recalled, that separate housing accommodations were made available on the first floor of the boys dormitory exclusively for grown men enrolled in the school. According to McMillen (1989), "unembarrassed illiterates of middle age registered as beginners, such as "Pa" Collins, an illiterate field hand, his wife, their seven children, and his mother and father who were among the 200 boarders at Piney Woods Country Life School in 1922." (McMillen, 1989, p. 96) Harrison (1982) further stated that Jones described some of the school's first students as "big gawky country boys and girls who came with their earthly possession in a sack and sometimes with no sack at all." (Harrison, 1982, p. 38) In addition to this, a two-year junior college was established at the school in 1931 and operated until the early 1960's (Cooper, 1989).

During Jones' administration, not only did the school serve its students, but it also served the African American communities of Rankin and Simpson Counties, as well as Mendenhall County, and often times beyond the school's surrounding communities. Jones and his wife, Grace Allen Jones, organized conferences and workshops to aid in the improvement of farming, housing, nutrition, and health care. The school's archivist stated:

Mrs. Jones, when she came to Piney Woods in 1912 immediately became active in the community. First establishing Mothers Clubs...she organized local women in the communities, and set up workshops and seminars...on child care, nutrition, housekeeping and all kinds of other issues...she went on to work with the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Beginning in 1920 as their state president. She served as state president from 1920 til 1924, and from 1924 until her death in 1928 she was chairperson of the legislative committee...African American offenders, no matter their age, were automatically sent to Parchman, no matter the offense...they felt that was wrong and that there was a need for a reform school, a training school, as they called it...they actually presented a resolution to the state legislature. The legislature approved the resolution, but didn't fund any money to build the school. So, the women by their own efforts...established...the first reform school in Clinton, Mississippi...

The African American community was an integral part of the school with each supporting the other. A 1946 alumnus, after telling how the African American

community lived and how his father and others supported the school said, "I was raised in a village and didn't realize it."

Jones efforts within the school and throughout the African American community stressed self-reliance. Students provided most of the school's labor. A 1942 alumnus recalled, "...these buildings here, we built these buildings. Made the bricks." During Jones' administration the school had its own hospital/infirmary, fire department, and post office and operated a farm and several industrial shops. In addition to Jones placing stress on self-reliance, the participants' accounts of their experiences at Piney Woods illuminates the school's unarticulated focus on using education to determine one's own plight, gaining economic independence and achieving these things by any means necessary. The next three sections summarize these factors as forces in their lives.

#### Education for Self-determination

The Piney Woods School experience had a significant impact on the surrounding African American communities, as well as it students. While it was not highly profiled as such, its underlying mission was to aid African Americans, both those who attended Piney Woods, as well as those in surrounding communities, in gaining financial and political control over their lives. Focus was placed on providing the students with an opportunity to become landowners instead of sharecroppers, to own businesses and to become professionals and educators. While this is not in keeping with the ideology of what opponents believed were the goals of industrial education, it was its unstated mission. This distinction was necessary if white people in Rankin County were to buy into the idea of a school for African Americans. This is quite evident as the comments from John Webster, a local white business person, recounts, "...this was not to be a book larnin' school...he wants to larn'em to do more and better work... This was the type of school that was pleasing to the people..." (Webster, undated, p. 3) One of the participant in this study further recalls:

...they were college preparatory courses...they had their own curriculum you didn't choose...I had Algebra, General Science, Biology, Geometry, Physics, Chemistry and of course English and Grammar... These courses prepared me for the science courses I had in Nursing School... We had people come in, role models...they always had people come in that made you realize, I want to move on, to go further...

Another participant recalled:

...I remember that Marian Anderson came here to Jackson and they got a [sic] bus load of us and brought us up that we could hear her...and back in the 40's and 50's that was unheard of...he always just

tried to instill in us that nobody could take what was up here [pointing to her head] from us, once we got that.

Jones (und) conducted Farmer's Conferences at the school for the community that he described as follows:

At these Farmer's Conferences...we always try to have a good speaker to inspire the farmers to better living as well as better farming. At each meeting we have those who have succeeded stand up and tell how they happened to buy their first acre of land, or how they raised more corn...or a farmer's wife tells how she is helping...In this way we get an exchange of ideas and everybody goes home determined to make a new start. (Jones, undated, p. 49)

#### Education for Economic Independence

While the Jim Crow era provided African Americans with little or no chance for economic independence, Piney Woods Country Life School offered students choices and alternatives. These choices and alternatives allowed them to establish and maintain economic independence over time. As one alumna states:

...around the middle of my tenure...it boiled down that they needed only one Home Ec teacher...I had (pause) learned so many things at Piney Woods I could do just about anything. I was asked if I would do pre-vocational art. And someone else got the Home Ec job, which I'll tell you, was a white person. And I feel that if I had not taken advantage of all that...was offered at Piney Woods I might not have been able to have filled this position of pre-vocational (pause) art.

While another participant said this about Jones:

...he still felt that black people had a lot of self improvement they could do...if Black people became economically self-sufficient then that would help a lot of other things to fall in line.

#### Education "By Any Means Necessary"

Though Piney Woods Country Life School, Jones advanced the social, political and economic status of African Americans in Rankin County. One participant in the study said, "...he was always a socially active person but never really a very political person..." While Jones was not known to have actively protested the treatment of African Americans, he did voice his discontent in his earlier writings. Jones (und) stated:

The pathway of a colored man who would help solve the problem of industrially educating the ten million colored Americans is by no means always pleasant. Walking the hard pavements day after day...is not an easy job...and especially when your skin is the wrong color, you have a double task of gaining the confidence of the people you meet. It means if you...become thirsty or hungry to keep from being told, "We don't serve colored people," which takes the ginger...so necessary for success out of one, you must stop work and go...where the colored people live...otherwise crucify your thirst or hunger...It means sleeping in the depot, sometimes all night, for hotels are generally "full" if a colored person wishes to sleep (Jones, undated, p. 57-58).

He provided the means by which his students could achieve self-determination and economic independence, so that they would eventually have a voice and become enlightened and active citizens in Mississippi, as well as anywhere in America.

The former students who participated in this study are each currently actively involved within their communities and the state of Mississippi. Jones may not have been viewed as a political person, but his role as an educator and his involvement in the community illustrates that he was extremely political during this era in America. While it may appear to some, that he took the road of least resistance, the curriculum he chose for the students at Piney Woods Country Life School focused on providing them with whatever was necessary to ensure their success, in whatever job or life goals they envisioned for themselves.

#### Conclusion

While the political climate in America for African Americans has been one of constant struggle in education, Jones viewed the educational process as a vehicle to gain self-determination, economic independence, and a voice. Moreover, industrial education could be used to aid African Americans in becoming self-reliant. In spite of the negative criticism about industrial education, Jones persisted in his belief that education was essential to students' ability to achieve social, political, economic and control over their lives. The participants in this study reflected these ideals in their

life choices and beliefs. They view their experiences at Piney Woods as having afforded them with a chance to move up economically from the "bottom rail". Piney Woods Country Life School is an example of how African Americans viewed and used education, at all levels, to achieve in the American society.

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