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Page: 1A

BLACK HISTORY OF MANATEE COUNTY - EYEWITNESS TO CHANGE AN AUTHOR INCLUDES MANATEE VIEW IN HIS HISTORY BOOK.

Bre Jones, Herald Staff Writer

Visitors must duck their heads to enter the white, wooden house --- two 1944 soldier barracks stuck together --- that doubled as a pseudo day care for black children in the 1950s.

The creak of the scuffed floor and hum of a La-Z-Boy moving into its stretched position filter from the screen door of the Bradenton home on 10th Avenue East.

Inside, 99-year-old Callie Elias stretches out to flip through faded pictures of her children. Although she is nearly deaf, the Bradenton native with a feisty drawl and gentle touch lifts her jeweled finger into the air to talk about a time when midwives delivered babies for \$3 in Manatee County, when the Manatee River glistened as an avenue of freedom for slaves.

Marvin Dunn, chairman of the psychology department at Florida International University, has a passion to share Elias' stories, as well as those of her fellow black Floridians. Lecturing 10 years ago to a group of puzzled high school seniors in Miami --- who could not name one influential black person in Florida history --- Dunn saw his mission in their empty expressions: write a book on the history of blacks in Florida and guide them to their roots. "They knew nothing about black history in Florida," Dunn said. "They knew nothing about how they came to the community. And these were seniors, bright students. They could tell me about Ponce de Leon, but they had no idea where blacks fit into Florida. They were shocked that Dr. (Martin Luther) King (Jr.) had even entered the state." Dunn is penning the final pages of his "long overdue" book, titled "The Storm is Passing Over: The History of Blacks in Florida (1525-2000), which includes a chapter on Manatee County. That portion he added after stumbling upon the rich history in Bradenton, a city where reconstruction after the Civil War was sluggish, Dunn said. The book is due for publication in November.

Wealth of history

To research a time when blacks in Bradenton couldn't sip a soda at the five-and-dime store, Dunn's assistant, James Valdez, trekked to town Thursday, collecting pictures from the Heritage House at Manatee Community College, the public library and The Herald. Dunn also is collecting pictures for a photographic history of blacks in Florida, a project organized by the Neighborhood Leadership Initiative.

"Until I started researching Manatee County, I didn't realize how much history it has, how separate the black population was," Dunn said. "During the Civil War, there were a considerable number of runaway slaves, escaping from the plantations to join the Union in Tampa."

With a notebook, Dunn crisscrossed the state, pausing in corner restaurants to flirt with the memories of strangers and sift through yellowed photographs tucked inside homes and historical societies.

"If I go to a park, I look for the oldest person there," said Dunn, who founded Ace Academy in Miami, an alternative high school for at-risk youths. "I'll sit with them and ask them to share. Talking to folks is where you find the history. Their stories are jewels, priceless."

Wrapping up his historical account without Manatee County, Dunn met **Cynthia Newell**, who spearheads the Neighborhood Leadership Initiative.

"I was so happy he was writing this book," **Newell** said. "We agreed that without connecting people to their roots, they will not move forward. Before Bradenton children can relate to the history in Africa, they must first know their own roots.

"I asked Marvin if he was including Manatee County, and he said, 'No,' " **Newell** said. "I said, 'Well, why not? Come to my village, come see our history.' "

Newell helped Valdez scan old photographs from the Heritage House on Thursday. They chose pictures of blacks flowing down to the river for baptisms and teachers standing in the sun near their schools. In one frame, a Sunday school teacher donning an orange dress pours juice for 12 children surrounding a table.

Difficult times

Memories, empowering and bruising, cherished and resented by blacks in Florida, were harbored in their families, rarely drifting far from their communities, Dunn said.

"I have found many who ask why we have to remember the lynchings, the discrimination, because it's difficult to talk about," Dunn said. "It brings back bad feelings, it makes them uncomfortable, and it's the longest part of our history."

Elias remembers the Ku Klux Klan roaring into houses to beat her relatives, friends and neighbors.

In his research, Dunn said Manatee County stayed the same long after the last gunshots of the Civil War.

"Many saw the Manatee River as their avenue for escape," Dunn said. "They went to Fort Brooks in Tampa.

Manatee County was isolated, and the white population was very southern, many from Georgia."

Dunn also discovered a strong evidence of intermarriage between blacks and Seminole Indians in Manatee County.

He found living conditions of blacks improved starting in the 1940s.

"Things got better for three reasons," Dunn said. "The white population changed after World War II. Many blacks had gone to Europe and seen a better way of life. Air conditioning also helped. Before, people in the north wouldn't even think about living in Florida with the heat."

His book also delves into the activism of black people.

"A big change in Florida happened in 1946," he said. "That's when blacks were allowed to join the Democratic Party, the party that had controlled the state."

Although Dunn hopes to finish his book in the next few weeks, he said chatting with people like Elias has enriched his own life.

"Ms. Callie has seen so much in her life," Dunn said. "She's almost deaf, but she knows what she's talking about."

Leaning forward in her chair, Elias straightened her cream sequined blouse and in a deliberate tone said, "I still read, and I still vote. And I still remember."

PHOTO/TIFFANY TOMPKINS/The Herald: Callie Elias, 99, is known as Miss Callie. She loves to read, especially her Bible.

PHOTO 2/TIFFANY TOMPKINS/THE HERALD: Marvin Dunn, above, is writing a book taking a historical look at blacks in Florida, including a Manatee County perspective from Callie Elias, top.