



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

New Castle's Newfound African American History

By Bette McDevitt

When the Lawrence County Historical Society invited Jean Speight to present a program on the history of African American residents of New Castle, things took an interesting turn. A missing history was gathered and written, to be read by future generations.

For 25 years, Speight, a retired elementary school teacher, had presented programs on black history to packed audiences at the Second Baptist Church. But when it came to local history, she was up against a wall. There were no records, so Speight did what any resourceful person would do: “I decided to get the black folks that lived it to come and talk about it.” Then she wrote it down.

Speight was inspired by a project called “American Slave Narratives” undertaken by the Works Progress Administration from 1936 to 1938. She composed a questionnaire in January 2010 and sent it to 32 elders in the black community of New Castle ranging from age 60 to 95, inquiring about their family roots and their arrival in the area, their work, their churches, and their memories. She encouraged the elders to share the questionnaire with relatives who no longer lived in the community, and to bring their written responses and

memories for an evening’s discussion one month later in the Lawrence County Historical Society Center. One partially blind and deaf respondent, in her 90s, wrote (in longhand) a four-page scholarly dissertation explaining that the boll weevil’s arrival in southern cotton fields caused the blacks’ northern migration.

History came by word of mouth from locals. “There was often, in the responses to the interviews, mention of a Reverend W.W. Nelson, a pastor at Second Baptist, who returned to his hometown in Virginia and urged people to join him in New Castle and work in the tin mill here. There was also mention of a P. Ross Berry, a fine bricklayer who did the brickwork on the courthouse and a local church in 1851, before moving to Youngstown. Now Mr. Berry must have had a mamma and a daddy, and why weren’t they mentioned?” Speight did find, in an early census, a Thomas Berry, who was a barber.

The evening’s diverse audience of 50 people was the largest in attendance at any event held in the Historical Society Center. “My opening remarks were that when you read a history of New Castle, there is no mention of black folks. For example, the AME Zion Church was founded in 1844. Now, why was that not included in the history of New Castle? I read every book on New Castle history at the public library and the Historical

Society Center,” said Speight. She found just one photo referencing African Americans, showing hod carriers at a local mill.

One woman said she had traced her family back seven generations and discovered that her four-times-removed grandfather was given to a white family as a wedding gift. Most African Americans cannot do that much genealogy. Enslaved Africans, as shown in Valerie McDonald’s research and resulting 2008 University of Pittsburgh exhibition at the Heinz History Center titled *Free at Last?*, were listed by first names only and as “property.” Slave ship manifests listed, if anything, first names only. And when they arrived, African Americans were forced to take their owner’s family name, creating further obstacles for genealogists.

Speight grew up in Cowan, Tennessee, and moved to New Castle early in her marriage. She believes she found her family roots in Gambia. “I was walking through a village there and these people grabbed me and said ‘Come see your sister!’ and we followed them to a woman at a stall who looked like a member of my family. So I think I am a member of the Wolof tribe from Gambia, based on my facial features and body structure. I choose to believe that.”

During the conversation at the Historical Society Center, many people recalled

Frances Boyd Johnson (1905-1985). Her mother, Grace Boyd, founded Second Baptist Church on Bell Avenue in New Castle. Frances's daughter, Charlotte Johnson Razo, participated in the Historical Society Center discussion. Photo courtesy of Charlotte Johnson Razo.



Jean Speight Photo courtesy of Jean Speight.




living in company houses near the mills with Hungarians and Poles; as incomes increased, workers moved into segregated neighborhoods. Elders recalled that their mothers didn't work outside the home, but took in laundry and did ironing for white families. In later years, they worked "on the hill" cleaning houses for white families, and it was common knowledge that they better not be caught "on the hill" after dark.

Young people in the audience asked what they did for fun, and elders described games such as "kick the can" before the conversation turned, with discreet giggling, to the speakeasy

or "juke joint" where they were forbidden to go, and then to the bordello, which brought puzzled looks to the younger faces. One woman in her mid-90s explained in a matter-of-fact tone what went on there.

No one wanted the evening to end, but by 10 o'clock, the board members brought it to a close with promise of another conversation. Speight plans to gather the written information, along with photos and a visual recording, and present it to the Lawrence County Historical

Society. "Then there will be a written record of black folks in New Castle," she said. 

Jean Speight and the Historical Society will host another presentation on February 9, 2011 at 7 p.m.

Bette McDevitt is a regular contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.