Family Album Northwest

by Kathryn H. Bogle

Sorting through a boxful of momentoes and pictures of a long teaching career, Emma Walker Chiles pauses to examine more closely an old snapshot or two. This one is of a Christmas tree decorated by a Couch School class back in 1949; another one is of herself with a 6th grade class she was teaching in 1953 at the same school. All the faces in this latter photograph are smiling, relaxed as the children are in the midst of a Christmas program for their school room. "Joy to the World" proclaims the block letters on the blackboard. Emma Chiles stands behind her class, happy with them.

Mrs. Chiles' 1952-1953 sixth grade class at Couch School with paper mache' "pinata" made by students for Christmas pageant.

"I didn't have a spectacular career," Emma smiles contentedly as she reminisced. "I was always happy working with children. I enjoyed being among the little ones — hearing them say, 'Oh, *now* I see —.' That is why I went on to work to gain my Masters degree. I was a tough teacher I made them study. And countless times, they who had a difficult time achieving in their classwork, have come to me in later years and thanked me. They have told me: 'You are the first teacher that cared whether or not I learned.' That spells happiness for me."

Ready to start a new day at Kenton School, 1963.

Born in Louisiana, but educated in the segregated primary and secondary schools of Tuscon, Arizona, Emma won her BS degree from the University of Arizona. Her first school was in Globe, a tiny mining town in that state. The school was indeed all hers. Emma had a one-room school accomodating fifteen children scattered through grades one through eight, with the structure having been converted from the original bakery no longer in use. Emma enjoyed the challenge of the situation, faithfully lasted all year, but was ready to move on to Tuscon when the opportunity came the following fall.

Again Emma taught in a segregated situation where she was in charge of 4th, 5th and 6th grade children. Her assignments included her own favorites: Home Economics, Art and Music. To the girls of that school, Emma brought the happiness of belonging to the "Girl Reserves," a popular YWCA organization of those years.

Marriage to Clifford Walker interrupted Emma's teaching career when the bridegroom and she decided to come to "God's Country," Oregon to make their home. To make their home a real home for their children and themselves, the couple decided that Emma should be a full-time mother, and stay at home she did, for ten years, until the death of her husband.

Faced with the total care of her children, Emma made applications both at Vanport, and in Portland, to become a classroom teacher or a Home Economics teacher.

Hired in 1948 as a 6th grade teacher in Vanport, though she had had hopes of a Portland position, Emma never actually taught in Vanport. The disastrous flood of that period swept away Vanport schools and Vanport itself. Suddenly Portland had to provide housing and schools for thousands of dislocated families with children.

Portland school administrators had a few hurdles to overcome. And quickly. Here were children of all races needing to be taught. Crowds of them. They would be new to a school and many would be transferring out of that school as soon as their distraught parents could acquire more desirable housing, a situation surely unsettling to teachers as well as to the children themselves. Here also were a handful of Black teachers well recommended, committed to Vanport but standing available on the doorstep of Portland schools. Portland met its obligations. There were two Black teachers "already." Now there would be more. There had to be.

An administrator questioned Emma, "Can you be comfortable teaching white children?"

"Children are children — no matter what color they are," Emma replied. Her first white class was at Couch. She was their first Black teacher. Her love for children and her devotion to teaching soon made Mrs. Walker a beloved figure in the halls at Couch. Rapport with principal and other teachers was woven into the fabric of her several years at Couch, and when her principal was transferred to another school, he invited Emma to join his new faculty there.

Mrs. Chiles in retirement, 1976.

"There's a lot of storage space there for your art work — and," he promised, "You will have your very own sink!" This sink, prized highly by art teachers, proved to be a deciding factor, that and the 98% Black enrollment at Eliot. Mrs. Walker joined the Eliot faculty. At about this time too, Mrs. Walker remarried and became Mrs. Chiles.

Black role models are necessary "somewhere along the line" for Black children, is Emma's feeling. They can get inspiration from white teachers if they are looking for inspiration — and if the teacher has it to give. Black teachers can make a contribution to both Black and white children. "White children have come to me and have said, 'I don't know why I've been told — and they then tell me some myth they've been taught about Black people," Mrs. Chiles related.

"A belligerent child — a girl — had been disruptive in a class before mine; now she was following her old pattern in my class. One day I took her aside and I let her know that many times I had had to wear shoes with holes in the soles, and that my parents had made many sacrifices to rear me and my brothers and sisters. This girl turned out to be a different child in the classroom. The revelation that I, too, knew what sacrifice and deprivation meant in a family, reached her. She responded to me, and she responded to her work as now something reachable, achievable. We had built an understanding. What does it matter what color she was? She was more comfortable with herself."

Mrs. Chiles taught longest at Kenton School where she spent eleven years, and where, again, she was the school's first Black full-time teacher. When she went there there was one Black child among 500 children enrolled. The enrollment of Blacks has significantly altered since then.

Mrs. Chiles retired from Applegate School, a primary school of about 300 pupils. This population changed complexion with the white exodus spurred by the intrusion of a freeway into the area. Black families purchased the vacated homes and the percentage of their presence has risen sharply.

In retirement, Mrs. Chiles lives quietly and travels a bit to Hawaii or toYucatan, which she finds fascinating. Typically, she finds greatest joy with her family and grandchildren.

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NAACP elects new president

Lucuis Hicks, IV, director of the Portland State University Educational Center, was elected President of the Portland Branch, NAACP, Sunday. He will take office on January 21st.

Hicks defeated incumbent President, Reverend John H. Jackson.

Elected first Vice President was Reverend Rozell Gillmore, who was selected over Bob Boyer and Dr. Clarence Pruitt.

Thirteen persons were elected to the executive board: Mrs. Carrie Cannon, U.P. Cannon, Mrs. Janet Clammer, Ms. Cleo Franklin, Reverend L. Fisher Hines, Mrs. Grayce Kennedy, C.C. McCowey, Mrs. Bobbie Nunn, Isaac Payne, Reverend Austin Ray, Charles Straughter, Harry Ward and Harold Williams. Candidates who were not elected were Herman Houston, Thomas Kennedy and Ms. Rosie Taylor.

Additional officers elected: Ms. Brenda Knapper, Second Vice President; Mrs. Clevonne Jackson, Secretary; L.C. Ellison, Treasurer; and Mrs. Lorna Marple, Parliamentarian/Sergeant-at-arms.

"Never cut what you can untie." Joseph Joubert

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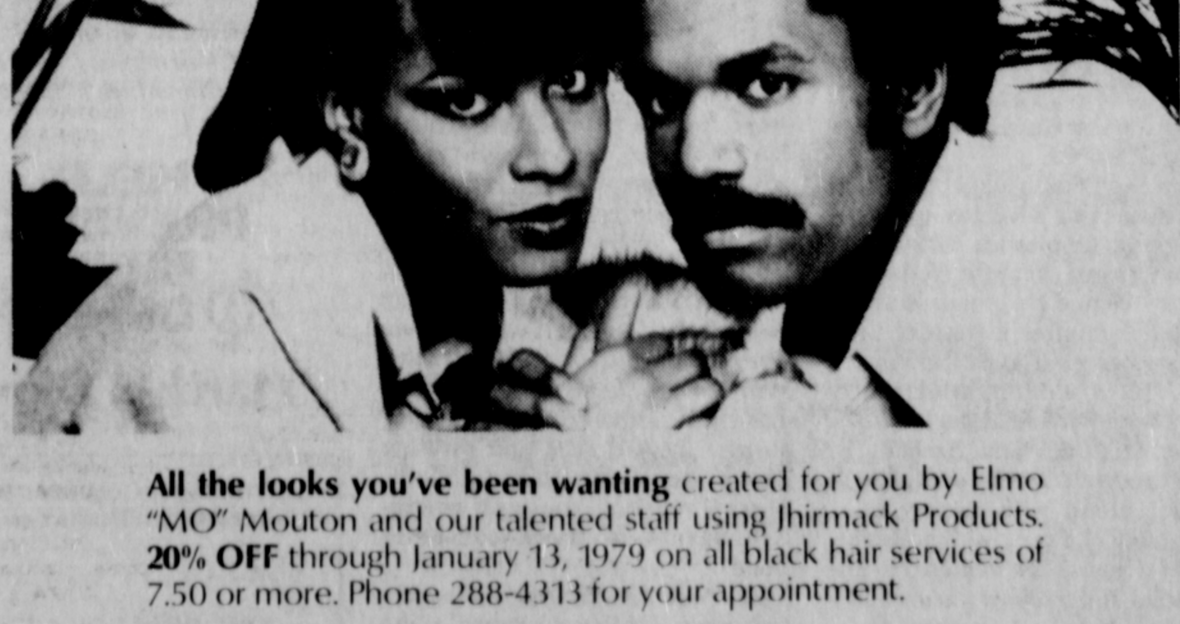

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