

MATTHEW B. POLK

When Matthew Polk graduated from the Howe Institute in New Iberia--which at that time had the only black high school between New Orleans and Beaumont, Texas--he planned to pursue a career in medicine.

But it was the early 1930s. Going to college and medical school would have been a financial burden for Polk and his family. Instead, Polk received a bachelor's degree in education from Leland College in Baker in 1936.

He then went on to touch the lives of hundreds who passed under his tutelage during his 33½ years as principal of the Jeanerette Colored School, making his mark on the history of education in Iberia Parish.

Polk who doesn't mind revealing his age as 79 "and three-quarters," was born in 1912 near the old Daughters Hospital in a section of New Iberia known as Brooklyn.

He was the only child of the Rev. Branch and Marie Polk who operated a grocery store.

"I was a little workhorse in my preschool days. I'd help in the family grocery store and deliver groceries with my mother," Polk said.

The former principal attended grades 1-12 at the Howe Institute, once located where the parish courthouse now stands. Before going off to college, he sold insurance for the Eagle Life Insurance Co. and the People's Insurance Co.

"After I received my bachelor's degree, I was called in by Superintendent L. G. Porter to replace a science teacher at the Iberia Parish Training School. The principal was A. B. Simon," Polk said.

He was there only one and one-half years when he was appointed principal of the Jeanerette Colored Elementary School.

It was about that same time, in 1938, that Polk married Edith Bijou. The couple has been together 53 years.

"That school developed from the Jeanerette Colored Elementary School to the Jeanerette Colored Junior High to the Jeanerette Colored High School," he said.

The school continued to expand, eventually outgrowing the facilities on the campus.

"We started holding classes in all the Benevolent Society halls," he said. "The original school had been established in a little frame building on Canal Street, but in November, 1949, we moved into a new school on Pellarin Street and continued to develop the school's facilities."

Under Polk's guidance, the school built a gymnasium, a stadium and established science, home economics, industrial arts and

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music sections. The school eventually formed football and basketball teams as well as a band and Glee Club.

"We had a fine academic situation there, with all that was needed for academic and social development. Later we became an accredited high school," Polk said.

The fruits of his effort have been plentiful, according to Polk, with many of his former students going on to professional careers.

"The products have been very nice," he said. "We have a good number of teachers, ministers and a doctor. Many of the students are teaching in various colleges in America. They keep in touch with me.

"One of them, Ned Doffoney, came to visit about two weeks ago to tell me he was promoted to vice president of the Los Angeles City College."

Polk received his master's degree from Prairie View University in Texas in 1956, working on his degree during summer months.

He retired in 1970, about the time, he said, when some of the major problems were just making their way onto the school campuses.

"We didn't have much of a discipline problem compared to now," Polk said. "The teachers and principal had control then. I had a strap, but in 33 years I only used it on one boy."

The school later became the Francis M. Boley School, named after one of the principals who served before Polk. Plans are being made to hold a reunion of all former students who attended school under Polk, from the graduating classes of 1937 to 1970.

"They all loved him," Edith Polk said. "They still do."

In 1981, some of his former students got together to celebrate Matthew Polk Day." One of his former students, Iberia Parish School Board member Rita Holmes, served as mistress of ceremonies.

The Polks have one daughter, Zerita Polk DePass, who also became a teacher. She is married to Alfred DePass and they have one daughter, E. Osborne, a Marine stationed at Camp LeJeune.

Polk's adopted sister, Rita P. Willis, and her daughter, Paulette, also live in New Iberia.

Until recently, Polk's hobby was tending to a 12-acre farm in Loreauville, where he raised cattle and swine. Now, he rents the farm.

"But if I stay healthy, I'm thinking of getting some goats."

GREETINGS!

To the Classes of J.C.H.S. and F.M. Boley:

I hereby acknowledge my indebtedness to those of you who have taken time to willfully collect, assemble, and disseminate this information highlighting that which occurred in the past, the past being so dear.



Your achievements have been more than noteworthy and excelled all my dreams and expectations. You have executed your career choices with clarity and fortitude, and you have been zealously productive, pushing, always forward, blazing new trails and new frontiers.

If you are awaiting more "words of instructions" in light of your own renown achievements and accomplishments, the words would simply be: "Carry on."

Realizing that no man travels his way alone, but that which he puts into the lives of others, will, someday, come back into his own, I can say, without fear of contradiction, my children, your successes are the jewels you have given back into my life, whose glows make the work of the past more than worthwhile.

And so, I pass this legacy on to you: Vini vidi vici sublimity: non nobis sed allis- "Not for ourselves, but for others."

Again, accept my heartfelt gratitude and sincere appreciation for having had the opportunity to serve you as principal. I assure you, the pleasure was all mine.

*Appreciatively and lovingly yours,
Matthew B. Polk, Principal
Jeanerette Colored High School (J.C.H.S.)
Francis Marion Boley High (F.M. Boley)*