

AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

BESSIE SMITH "EMPRESS OF THE BLUES"

By Gwen Walker

Bessie Smith was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee; possibly 1894, but 1895 is on her gravestone. Orphaned by the age of eight, Bessie sang in the streets of Chattanooga for spare change before joining a minstrel troupe as a child performer.



GWEN WALKER

In 1912 she met and worked with "Ma" Rainey in Moses Stoke's Show.

She married a policeman in 1923 from Philadelphia. It was said that Bessie developed a drinking problem which may have caused her husband to leave her for another woman.

Her career reached its height during the 1920's. She began performing for large audiences in both the North and South; and frequently appearing at New York City's Apollo Theater.

Bessie could have earned as much as \$2,500 a week, making her one of the highest paid Black performers of the era. Even during the 1929 stock market crash she found herself earning half her usual salary.

Her recording career began in 1923 and recorded some 200 discs over the next decade. Her prime recording years were 1923-28. Her first recording was a new version

of "Down Hearted Blues," a song popularized by another famous blues singer, Alberta Hunter, and Louie Austin, the equally famous female jazz pianist. Smith's rendition sold 780,000 in less than six months. Other recordings sold as many as ten million copies.

A blues singer who never betrayed her rural southern roots, Bessie preferred to play to live audiences even in the north. Unfortunately, her refusal to "whiten" her act for urban middle-class audiences probably hastened her loss of popularity in the 1930's. Smith had a regal presence on stage. She was attractive with a lovely round face and dimples.

Among her most important legacies is her tremendous influence on contemporary and later generations of blues singers and jazz performers such as Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday,

Mahalia Jackson, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, Dinah Washington, Odetta, and Janis Joplin. Her artistry survived through her recordings, which Columbia reissued in full in the early 1970's.

For more than three decades after Smith's death her grave at Mount Lawn Cemetery in Sharon, Pennsylvania, remained unmarked. Bessie's life ended in a car crash in Clarksville, Mississippi in 1937. When knowledge of the

unmarked grave became widely known, Juanita Green, a nurse who headed the North Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP (and who had scrubbed Bessie Smith's floors as a child) with Janis Joplin, bought a gravestone. The inscription reads: "The greatest blues singer in the world will never stop singing."

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BESSIE SMITH

LEARNING HEALTHY

(Continued from Page 21)

recipes healthier, and each day for lunch experimented with making meals that not only were good tasting, but also lower in fat. The women were given pre- and post-tests about nutrition. The average score on those tests improved from 59 percent pre-training to 74 percent post-training.

The researchers then recruited African-American women through the Grace Hill Neighborhood Health Center in St. Louis' inner city. The 66 women who completed the program either met with a dietitian or worked with one of the newly trained educators.

"These women really wanted to do better, but many did not realize just how much fat they were consuming," says Debra Haire-Joshu, Ph.D., co-investigator and research assistant professor of medicine at Washington University School of Medicine.

"Many of the women told us that they had no clue how much they were actually eating until they sat down with a dietitian or peer educator," Houston says. "We spent lots of time clarifying the concept of 'serving' as opposed to 'helping.' A woman might have four or five 'servings' of mashed potatoes with gravy, but since she had only one 'helping', she might believe she was eating less than she actually was."

Using structured interviews, the researchers found that after eight weeks of training, women trained by their peers had more knowledge of general nutrition and fat content of foods, and were able to more easily read and understand food labels, than those who received standard consultation from a registered dietitian.

"Our dietitian could have done much better because she is very talented, but we wanted to provide more 'usual' care," Houston explains. "That kind of care at Grace Hill, given the case load, is to have someone come in, discuss some problems and some basic solutions in about 15 minutes. That's typical care in most clinic settings and even some hospital settings."

The peer educators had multiple visits for longer periods of time. Many of the peer educators took their pupils to the grocery store and provided other support as well. "I think the study says a lot in terms of cost because professional counseling by a dietitian will cost you more," says Haire-Joshu. "What the peers do is also valuable because it is an ongoing process. Health professionals come and go, but the peers remain in the community."

To Be Continued

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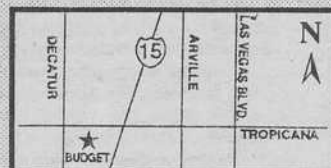
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