

Helping to Bridge the Gap

Mary McLeod Bethune, a Florida Negro leader since the beginning of the century, was born in a cotton picker's hut in South Carolina. Self-educated, she founded Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach and served as its president and president emeritus for 50 years. She died last May at the age of 79. This was one of the last articles she wrote.

By MARY McLEOD BETHUNE

SOME 20 YEARS AGO, a stalwart White leader in Florida, with great concern for the future of democracy, extended to a Negro leader an invitation to speak before the student body of the college of which he was president.

Word of this then unheard-of-gesture on his part reached the controlling powers of the school and he was given an ultimatum: "A Negro has never spoken from the platform of this college and NEVER will do so."

Chagrined and crestfallen, he paid a visit to the Negro leader, traveling several miles to appear in person. With tears in his eyes, he told the Negro that he had extended the invitation in good faith; that he believed it would render a real service to the

community, to the school, to the faculty and students to have them hear the kind of message he knew this person could and would bring.

He explained the dilemma in which he found himself. He was debating the question as to whether he could, with his own convictions as they were, continue as a president of a college which had demonstrated an attitude so adverse to his own.

Then, squaring his shoulders and with a look of calm determination in his eyes, he told the Negro that the invitation still stood.

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THE NEGRO LEADER was deeply touched. But without hesitancy told this far-seeing enlightened college president that perhaps a great deal could be accomplished through such a speech and through the example and sacrifice that the college president was willing to set and to make.

"But," said the Negro leader, "your college and the state of Florida need men like you. And while I appreciate the honor that you pay me, I believe far more good will be accomplished by your remaining president of the college than by anything I could possibly say in 15 or 20 minutes of speech-making. With you at the college helm, there will come a day when attitudes will be different."

For years following this incident the Negro leader and this college president worked cooperatively for the good of Florida and humanity.

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FIVE YEARS AGO, the board of trustees of this same college broke all precedent in the South by inviting that same Negro leader to become the first of the race to receive an honorary degree from a Southern White educational institution.

This school was Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., the oldest institution of higher education in the state. The president was Hamilton Holt, one time editor of Harper's Weekly. I was that Negro leader.

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IT WAS WITH pardonable pride that I received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humanities from Rollins



MRS. MARY McLEOD BETHUNE
... cotton field to college presidency

College and joined many other dignitaries in participation in the Rollins College annual feature of its "live magazine"

This one experience is indicative of the power of democracy which like leaven can and will permeate the whole structure of our society. Men of conviction and purpose, men who recognize the values in human dignity, men with hearts tuned in to God—even as this college president—can leaven so great a mass of humanity.

The world hangs breathless, on the brink of uncertainty, waiting for more men crowned with the blessings of democratic idealism, fearless enough to put it into action.

I believe in mankind. I believe in the spirit of God which lifts and inspires men to be and to do their best. I believe in democracy which is the essence of man's deep longing to know harmony and peace in an atmosphere of good will and understanding.



HAMILTON HOLT
... Rollins College president died in 1951