

" LAWYER WALKER OF GLOUCESTER "

(AS TOLD TO TWO NORTHERN FRIENDS)

"And yet, money-raising for such schools is always difficult and without the big, generous Funds and Foundations we could not have carried on. I can never say enough in appreciation of their help to supplement our own inadequate resources but yet we must never give up efforts to make our people shoulder as much of the responsibility as they possibly can. That sense of responsibility is vital to our well-being."

"A money raiser has to be careful. Appeals for my people that move some white folks to active help, like the little old deaf Quaker, seem only to increase race antagonism in others."

"Can you give an example of that?" I asked.

"Why yes," he replied: "the time I asked our school trustees to qualify for a Rosenwald grant for Negro schools. You see, it was this way. The Rosenwald Foundation made grants for school projects it approved provided the trustees furnished their quota. But when I put a proposition for improvements of our schools up to our School Board they flatly refused. They didn't seem to want us to get on anyway."

"What did you do then?" I asked. "Did you have to give up?"

"Oh no," he said, "I just put on my hat and went to Chicago to talk over the proposition with Mr. Rosenwald, himself. I told him it was my people who really were being punished instead of the School Board. My proposition to him was that we be allowed, under his rules, to side-step our non-cooperative School Board altogether and somehow raise the money ourselves since we were the interested parties."

"I couldn't make him see, at first, that what he was trying to relieve us of was what we were willing to shoulder ourselves since our School Board had refused to help and the alternative was to give up our determination

to have good schools.

"To show what I meant, I told him about Old Poplar School; how we earned the lumber by overtime at the saw-mills, worked on the building ourselves and finally raised enough by penny collections to get the thing finished—all pulling together. I said we wanted to be independent of School Boards, if necessary, and of worrying over whether they were for us or against us. We wanted to get on without them if they didn't want to help us."

"This story finally put the proposition over but I shall never forget the expression on Mr. Rosenwald's face when at last my project struck home. When I said, "Mr. Rosenwald, we want to be let in on our own salvation! he burst out laughing and said, "All right then! I will match dollar for dollar whatever you are able to raise yourselves when a School Board won't come across!"

"I never heard a story to match that one before," I said. "It was..."

"Well, I went home feeling our self-respect had been saved," he said, "but I confess that when I faced the problem of again raising money for another Gloucester school, I felt a little as I did when I went out of Old Bottom Jail with thirteen delinquent boys hanging onto my coat tails and no idea what to do with them."

"Plainly it was now up to me to devise means by which my people could earn extra money to give for the school because many of them were so poor they could not contribute even to a penny collection. However, I firmly believe that their inability to give ought not to stand in the way of their feeling they were free and useful citizens having a privilege, as well as an obligation, to share in the community project of getting a new

school to which their own children could go. Surely even the poorest had that right! It must not be presented as a burden, but as an opportunity to use their freedom by refusing to remain inactive and ignorant, whatever the School Boards did."

"Right here in Gloucester we were in immediate need of a High School so that we could start training our own teachers. Our achievement in getting a new school building with the whole of two rooms and additional teacher had seemed, in the early days, a big step forward but most of the children who were taught did not go beyond what would now be called the fifth grade and that was not far enough. My career as a teacher had lasted only six years but the education of my people continued to be one of my keenest, ever-present interests. As I realized the limitations of our provision I became more and more dissatisfied and began to plan for a school that would carry Negro boys and girls through the seventh grade. It seemed to me that the white School Board members would be glad to see us providing teacher-training for our own young people. Wouldn't you have thought that way too? White teachers did not want positions in schools for Negroes."

"You were certainly right!" I replied.

"On several occasions I took up this matter with the School Board but was met with lively opposition, first on one point and then on another. One member made the excuse that there was no money for such an undertaking as a High School for Negroes. The Superintendent of the Gloucester Public Schools emphatically expressed the opinion that, beyond knowing how to read and write, Negroes didn't need any further education. He, for one, would never approve the appropriation of one penny towards any advanced training."

"Inwardly, I became very indignant when the mental ability of our children was attacked. I held onto my temper but, as I left the room, with the picture of their eager little faces before me, I turned and said, "Gentlemen, I am sorry you cannot help us but we are going to have a High School anyhow!"

"I hadn't an idea in the world as to how it could be done but if the white people would not let any part of the colored people's tax money go towards training Negro teachers we must, somehow or other, build such a school ourselves. I asked a group of colored men to my home to confer on the matter. This was followed by a public meeting at Bethel Church to lay the project before all of our people."

"Most of them showed their usual moral courage and enthusiastically decided that it was right to have such a school. And since we could not get it from the School Board they would all begin to raise the necessary funds themselves."

"The need was so obvious that this time we got a loan from the Bank, appropriations from the Jeanes and Rosenwald Funds and the balance we raised penny-nickel-and-dime fashion."

"A few opposed us, as always, and contributed nothing but discouragement and criticism. This is always the case with a project requiring imagination and idealism. But the opposition couldn't hold the rest of us back. Again we did the impossible."

"That was the only really practical way to manage," I said approvingly. "But tell me some more."

"I suppose you would like to hear about my most daring adventure of all," he exclaimed. "It happened at a much later date and was due to my

being over tempted by a bargain at an auction. There was special need, at that time, for a boarding department for the Gloucester Training School."

"The Gloucester Training School," I said, "I thought it was a High School that you succeeded in building."

"That was the High School," he replied. "We just called it the Training School because of the prejudice of some white people to Negroes having facilities on a par with schools their own children attended."

"But to return to my story," he went on, "the Training School was the only place in Gloucester where our boys and girls could go beyond the seventh grade. There was no building where the girls could live whose homes were too far from the School to make the daily journey. But so eager were our people to take advantage of what the School offered that many pupils came twenty or twenty-five miles in motor trucks or automobiles. Others drove from twelve to fifteen miles daily in buggies. I saw this state of affairs could not continue yet we not only had no room for them in existing buildings but no money was available to put one up. Again, there had to be a pioneer plunge for the sake of betterment."

"Now, it happened that not far from our School was a forty-three acre farm belonging to the County with an old building on it that was once used as an almshouse--originally a slave-owners' mansion. It happened that, just at this time, the old place was put up for sale at public auction at Gloucester Court House. Everybody went including myself. Suddenly, although I didn't have a dollar, I started in bidding with the rest because I was struck by the idea that the place was the practical answer to our need for a boarding department of our teacher-training enterprise! I was

so carried away by this idea and by the realisation that the opportunity would not come again, that I kept on bidding until, all at once the auctioneer called out 'Going, going, gone!' and, pointing his finger at me, he shouted: "T. C. Walker, it's yours at \$2,175.00!"

"For a moment I sat there dazed, I confess. However, possession of the place seemed so altogether right for the future development of our school that I had been confident as I bid, that others would realize our necessity and would help pay for the property. But I was to have a few realisations myself first. I was sharply reminded of the financial side of my newly assumed responsibilities when the Commonwealth Attorney touched me on the shoulder and told me to come right over to his office to make the down payment and fix up the papers."

"I had not faced the fact that a down payment had to be made immediately but I certainly was not going to fail on a deal. So I played for a little time--until the next day--and went to Hampton just as fast as I could get there."

"Luckily for me, Doctor Buttrick, of the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, happened to be there with Doctor Frissell when I burst in with the news about the old almshouse and told them what a fix I had gotten myself into for the School. To my immense relief they were very sympathetic and saw the matter just as I did because it was acreage near the school and had a building on it already."

"Doctor Buttrick said: 'I'll take care of one thousand dollars for a cash payment so you can go back to the County Treasurer and settle that. And I'll take up the matter of title with my Board.' The hope was that the Board would retain the title until I could somehow complete the

purchase price.

"So with a thousand dollars in hand I went back and faced the Commonwealth Attorney who gave me time to get the balance.

"This I finally did with the help of a Bank loan and contributions-- mostly from Northern friends of Negro education. Three other colored men went with me to the Bank where I borrowed what was still owed on my personal note. This the other two endorsed. I had hoped I could raise the rest from my own people but some of the men were disgruntled. They didn't see the necessity for the purchase and so I had to assume the entire obligation myself."

"You don't mean," I said incredulously, "that they let you do that? How could you manage with all your other responsibilities and struggling movements?"

Lawyer Walker parried this question a little. "Oh, I managed," he said, "but it took me two or three years to do it. You see, some of my people couldn't understand what it was all about. That shows how much they need education. They thought I was scheming to get control of this property myself because it was in my name after I completed the purchase price. So, in order to show them that I was acting in good faith, I finally got the County surveyor to cut off twenty acres, including the part on which the house stood, and Mrs. Walker and I signed a deed giving it to the School Board. We then fitted up the old slave mansion as a boarding place for the girls and teachers. It houses thirty."

"So the girls were cared for at last! But what to do with the boys? Fortunately, there was another building on the property that had been a laundry and we decided to use it for them. But we had no furniture for it.

However, a man named Carter, who had three boys of his own, got a club, of which he was the leader, so interested in this project that the members said they would raise enough funds to fix it up. We now have seven buildings and nobody blames me any more for what I did, without a dollar, at the auction. What I saw in the future for our training School has now become its past."

"It has become a most interesting bit of history!" I amended.

"All pioneering is history I suppose," he said reflectively.

"But I must tell you of one of the liveliest occasions in our fight to get the schools we had been paying for for years. An illiterate old Negro made a last minute rescue of one of our dearest projects after the white people had raised every objection possible to it because, they explained, they were "opposed to Negroes having so much education!"

"Certain members of the white School Board, and some County authorities too, did not hesitate to pile one insult on another when I went before them to make a plea for my people. So I took to the argument that if they would put themselves in our place they might see the situation as it really was. I said: 'Hearing you folks talk like that makes it difficult for me to keep my people from getting prejudiced against white folks. It is a question of justice. We pay our taxes.'"

"Well," they finally said, "You can use our discarded high school building if you will move it onto the two acre tract"—referring to one they had in mind."

"But another Board member immediately objected saying: "That tract is too small. "

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Thomas Calhoun Walker Autobiography

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Alternative title: Lawyer Walker of Gloucester (as told to two Northern friends)

Author: [Walker, Thomas Calhoun, 1862-1953](#)

Abstract: This collection consists of an original manuscript used for the autobiography The Honey-Pod Tree: The Life Story of Thomas Calhoun Walker, which was published in 1958. Walker was born into slavery in Virginia and attended Hampton Institute to practice law. As a lawyer, he defended many African Americans in Gloucester County, Virginia and eventually served as the Administrator and Consultant in Negro Affairs for the New Deal's Emergency Relief Administration in the 1930s.

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