A TRIBUTE TO LEAH ELIZABETH GRIFFIN

Class of 1928—Deceased July 14, 1964

By Her Cousin Ethlynne Holmes Thomas

Leah Elizabeth Griffin—born October 2, 1901 in Albany, Georgia, daughter of Joseph Benjamin and Elizabeth Holmes Griffin of Smithville, Georgia and Albany. Father and grandfather diversified farmers of a former plantation; mother, assistant principal in the Albany school system of the junior high school and eventually the senior high school where her brother, Arthur C. Holmes, was the supervising principal of the colored schools of Albany.

Leah received her elementary and junior high training in the public schools of Albany and completed her high school training at the Atlanta University college preparatory school. She received the A.B. degree at Atlanta University in May 1923.

A serious college science student, Leah knew in the junior year that she would devote all her energies to realizing the budding dream of becoming a doctor of medicine. She discussed this ambition with Miss Mabel Hancock, her biology instructor, who had given up such a dream and settled for a professorship in the small Negro college in Atlanta. Miss Hancock had been attracted to Atlanta University by a pageant entitled "The Open Door" which Gertrude Ware Bonsie, daughter of the founder, Edmund Asa Ware, had written and presented in New England. It depicted Atlanta University as an "Open Door" to hundreds of soul-hungry, benighted Negro youth who sought to prepare themselves culturally and professionally for an humanitarian service to their race and country in fulfillment of the American ideal. While the lives of Ira Aldridge, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson served as an answer to those who might question whether the sons and daughters of slaves dared so to pioneer, the University used this dramatization to interpret and advertise its motto: "I'll Find a Way or Make One." Leah participated in a student presentation of "The Open Door" in Atlanta and its impact on her ambition and determination to become a doctor triggered her activity and set in motion a chain of events which led to Dr. Edgar H. Webster's moving interest in her convictions, Miss Bell C. Morrill's sponsorship of her wish to select a school of medicine to attend, and eventually a Quaker scholarship and acceptance at famed Woman's Medical College in Philadelphia.

What a miserable two months Leah passed on the farm following graduation from Atlanta University until that glorious day in latter July she received word that the last obstacle had been hurdled and in the fall she would actually become a medical student.

As her eldest female cousin, I was the recipient of sketchy notes separated by long intervals of silence. Medical school was no cynosure, it demanded a "last full measure of devotion." It was not Albany—it was not Atlanta where the Negro had created miniature cultural and political oases within which he was a complete being—acceptance of whites and by whites was the 'open door' ideal, because those whites who came south to teach in Negro colleges were moved by a missionary zeal to practice as well as teach the Christian law of love in all relationships. Leah found acceptance; she also found rejection. She studied and learned some of life's finest lessons at Woman's Medical College. All students find and/or make their acceptance—their rejection—at least in part.

One of the finest lessons came as a summer experience when students were signed up to take care of private patients for the summer. Tired after the year's grueling demands, Leah longed to go back to the big farm where her most difficult chore would be to can and preserve the bumper fruit crop and cold pack the vegetables. Under patient coaxing, she was euchered into accepting the care of an aged, invalided grandmother in a family of multimillionaires. She who came from a family where there was a togetherness she cherished, experienced a new concept of frugality, simplicity and elegance. Daily she joined the grandmother and other younger women of the family on the porch overlooking the mountains to darn socks for the men folk. She heard a great nephew discussing by a jury of his elders as to his fitness to purchase a $50.00 jalopy. The gamut of his life's choices were examined as proof of his worthiness to be entrusted with any type of vehicle. The family's joy and the boy's triumph as he won his car were touching. These were not new experiences for Leah. She did not know that to the wise and healthy these actions and attitudes were so valuable. Then there were the professors to whom she became endeared at Woman's Med. How hard won these cherished new friendships were! They had to be deserved. Woman's Medical College had not earned the reputation of being the world's finest medical college for women through easy discipline.

And then an accident around which the rest of her life is pivoted occurred. A severe brain concussion followed a deadening blow on the head in the swinging doors at City Hall. Then followed months of seclusion and convalescence in Philadelphia and then in Smithville. Her determination to complete her work at Woman's Medical brought her back to earn the medical degree in 1928. On August of 1928 she was

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married to Dr. Robert Peale Matthews of Philadelphia, for whom eleven months later and two weeks after she had completed her internship at Mercy Hospital, she bore a son.

Leah practiced medicine in Philadelphia for nine years until her brother Jim—Dartmouth College and Harvard Law school product—died at her home of unknown causes. Frequent visits to Georgia had showed her the great need for good doctors in that state to serve her people. The Negro doctors in Albany, Smithville, and Americas were growing old and feeble; so were the white doctors. It was not easy to get well-prepared young doctors to come to small places. When Leah decided to come home, the entire populace welcomed her. She began practice in a modest office vacated by an ailing physician. Her goal was to serve as a pediatrician and have a small, adequate hospital for children. Her practice spread over the color line and became general. Even the usual difficulties women doctors face in a male medical world seemed non-existent, so zealous was her work, so effective her results, so satisfied were her patients, and so needed her services. She instituted special clinics for pre-natal care. Today a generation of fine children in four counties are proof of the effectiveness of this pre-natal program. She regularly attended national clinics to keep abreast of innovations and the swift changes produced by invention, discovery, and untiring research. She moved into larger, better equipped quarters in order to take adequate care of her staggering load of patients.

Then in 1940 a tornado ripped into the southwest corner of Albany, destroying 38 city blocks and leaving devastation and hundreds of dead and maimed victims. The elderly doctors of both races soon fell in their tracks—doctors from nearby towns came to help—but Leah was on her feet working without any rest save cat-naps for nearly three weeks. A nervous break-down following this exhaustive experience hospitalized her for several months. Soon afterward, her father died and cautioned that she could never practice on such a wide scale again. Leah moved her practice to the spacious farm house where she could look after her ailing mother and care for the farm folk of three counties. Here she worked for twenty years, her practice again growing so large that she had to cut out night and Sunday work.

A fine professionalism, badge of the excellent school from which she received her training marked even her smallest endeavors. Nurses working with her attest to her skill and exactitude. She died quietly July 14, 1964. An autopsy revealed that she had cancer of the jaw, but succumbed to other complications.

Leah was long a member of The Segregated National Medical Association. At her death she was a member of the State Medical Association and for years was President of the South West Georgia Medical Association. She was a faithful member of Bethel A.M.E. Church in Albany, and served unflaggingly in all church and civic work as far as she was able, as consultant and participant.

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PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Bradley, Illinois—Dr. Miriam Klein is looking for an assistant to make house calls, no deliveries, take emergency calls at the hospital, and to take over in her absence. Suggested compensation—a guaranteed amount per month and a percentage on house calls and night calls. Plans for a future partnership could be worked out after a trial period. There are two 250 bed hospitals in that area. Dr. Klein has been in practice there for twenty years and is a member of the A.A.G.P. For further details write to her at 371 W. Broadway.

San Diego, California—Dr. Viola Erlanger, WMC '15, is retiring and is interested in having a WMC graduate take over this practice. She has a general practice, including gynecology and pediatrics. The address to ask for further details—330 Kahnia Street.

Beaver Falls, Pa.—Physicians wanted, particularly general practice. This community badly needs a G.P. to work and live in this small town atmosphere near a major metropolitan area. The great opportunity offered for a hard working, young doctor would almost guarantee her future. Hospital connections are excellent with two hospitals operating as a single administrative unit. Their Chamber of Commerce Medical Facilities Committee is prepared to make whatever arrangements that are necessary to establish a new arrival. Direct inquiries to: Mr. Benjamin E. Shore, Manager, BEAVER FALLS AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, 720 Thirteenth Street, Beaver Falls, Pa. 15010.

Lowell, Mass.—Dr. Mona Mehan, WMC '36, chief of radiology at St. John’s Hospital, would like to find an associate. If you are finishing a residency or interested in a position with her, or have any names to suggest, she would appreciate your writing to her.

Irvine, Kentucky—Dr. Virginia Wallace, WMC '36, has been in general practice in this community for 26 years but is going into Public Health and will be leaving in December 1965. Anyone taking this position could go to work right away.

She is interested in one or two young women to take over this general practice in Irvine, which is located in the foot hills of the Appalachian Mountains on the Kentucky River, 60 miles from Lexington.

Women as doctors will be well received and welcomed in this community and cooperation will be given in getting a new doctor settled.

Dr. Wallace has sent us an excellent resume of the practice, facilities and locality which make it a very attractive offering. Anyone interested please communicate with Dr. Wallace for detailed information.