

[Kelsey L. Pharr, Negro Undertaker]

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Couch [Life?] - [Kelley L. Clarr -?] [History Negro Undertaker?]

FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

Miami, Florida

LIFE HISTORY

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Kelsey L. Pharr (Negro)

1025 N.W. 2nd Ave

Miami, Fla

(Undertaker)

Bertha R. Comstock, Writer

KELSEY L. PHARR, NEGRO UNDERTAKER

Kelsey L. Pharr, Miami's Negro undertaker and welfare worker, disclaims all credit for anything he has achieved, individually, or as a factor in racial uplift. On May 30, 1939 he will have been a resident of Miami for twenty-five years, all of which have been spent in working for his people. Reluctantly he told the bare outlines of his own history, but when he begins to discuss the topics of welfare among Negroes, he loses his diffidence and his face glows with earnestness.

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He is a youngish looking man, clean cut and dressed in a business suit that in well fitting and he always looks well groomed. His voice is rather low and his accent and choice of words show culture. His office is simply furnished with good taste and very clean, and the young secretary who presides at the information desk is alert, business-like and courteous; in short, there is nothing about the Pharr office that indicates a Negro atmosphere; the dark faces of the professional man and his assistant are the only facts that indicate anything racial.

Pharr was born in Salisbury, North Carolina, not quite fifty years age. His parents, born free, were from South Carolina, where three of his grandparents were slaves. One grandfather was an Indian, but there is no record to show to what tribe he belonged. As Kelsey is the name of the master to whom his slave ancestor owes a name, he figures that Pharr must have been the Indian name, but he has no way of verifying names or dates. His mother died when he was six weeks old, and he was cared for by his grandmother and later by other female relatives or by a hired nurse. He attended school in Salisbury, where his father was employed in the railroad yards. On account of his keen sense of hearing, he was made a car inspector and served in that capacity for 26 years, being the only colored inspector in North Carolina.

Living in Salisbury gave the boy an opportunity to go to school. There was a good Negro school, grade and high school courses, and after that the Negro Normal School and the A.M.E. Zion College. Young Pharr did well in his classes and was ready for the college when he found himself facing financial problems.

“How did you earn the money?” we asked.

“Well, I cleaned three offices every day, - a doctor, a 3 dentist and a lawyer, and received \$1.50 per month from each one. Then I kept a barber shop in order, and part of the time I drove a taxi, and had a little piece of ground outside of town where I raised the feed for my horse.” He had some help from home, but not enough to enable him to attend school

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without earning part of his expenses. He was living again with his grandmother, and she lived to see him finish his junior year at college.

“She lived to see me a man, and had helped me to a place where I could take care of myself.” “She was a good Christian woman,” he continued, “and it pleased her to see her grandson making good. I became superintendent of the A.M.E. Sunday School when I was sixteen years old. and continued in that office until I moved from Salisbury. That also was a pleasure and a comfort to my grandmother.”

He took his Bachelor's degree at Trinity Methodist College and then entered Tuff Medical College in Boston, with the intention of serving his race. He came to Miami to work as a waiter and bell hop in the old Royal Palm Hotel in 1914, in order to finish his medical course.

While in Miami, the colored undertaker died and Pharr, with three of his fellow waiters, bought out the undertaking business, he giving his service and his partners furnishing the 4 capital. He went north immediately and took a course in embalming. In six weeks' time he was able to pass the New York State examination for embalming and came back to Miami and took charge of the business. It took three years to pay his three silent partners and take over the whole business for himself. Then he realized he must expand.

And at this point he revealed a fact that few people knew until a short time ago. “I needed a little money to expand my undertaking business. I went to Mr. Roddy Burdine and told him all about it, and asked him to loan me some money. He said I had an honest face, and he loaned me nine hundred dollars without any security except my word. That's the kind of friend he was. He never said very much about what he did, but I am not the only one he has helped, both white and black. I paid him back as quickly as I could. What he loaned me made it possible for me to improve my business and give a better service, and that of course increased my income. It enabled me to get a more and better paying patronage and I have been successful because Mr. Burdine was my friend. Few people

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know anything about all the good he did and how often he gave a helping hand to those he befriended.”

Asked about the [prevalence?] of voodooism in colored town, he said there is lots of it. Where does it come from and why does it have such a hold on the Negro?” “It comes from the Bahamas and from Jamaica and especially from Haiti, and it holds the Negro because he is naturally a superstitious creature. That in one of the things which the church and the school must persistently and strenuously resist. We have to educate our children to know how foolish [these?] things are, and give them religious instruction that will turn their hearts to the true God and the teachings of Christ. We have to lift them out of their superstition and give them new ideals.”

We mentioned that it was rumored that Father Devine expects to establish a “Heaven” in Miami. He said, “I would not be surprised if he did; he has a large following here.”

“Is it true that he was in Miami a year ago?” He replied, “I think it is; many of our people are carried away with him, and there are some who follow him who are not colored.”

“What is your opinion of him?” we asked. “Oh, he /is just another racket.- just another scheme to get ignorant, easily impressed victims into the net. Nobody knows, and nobody seems to be able to find out where he gets his money, but he gets it and keeps on going. We have to reach our people through the church and school; [charlatans?] like Father Divine work upon the credulous and the only way to save them is to cure them of their credulity.”

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“What can you tell us about the Funeral Insurance Plan to which so many Negroes adhere?” “Well,” he said, “that is another racket. It was started as a means to help colored people save towards a fund that would pay funeral expenses when needed. We found that funerals were costing too much, and people were being fleeced and being made to pay often more than double what the funeral really cost, and unless they fulfilled every

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requirement laid down in a contract hard for them to understand, they did not get any benefits at all. For instance, the contract required that the death must occur in Dade County. If you happened to be in another county and met with an accident, your contract was void. If you were all paid up except for one payment which was not due yet, you lost everything because you were not paid up at the time of death. The racketeers were so persuasive that you could not keep our people from signing up with them. We got up a committee and went to Tallahassee and tried to have the racketeers dealt with by legislation on the ground that they were doing an insurance business without a license. The effort failed because it had white backing.”

“Then,” continued Pharr, “we saw that we must fight fire with fire. I, at once, organized a funeral benefit society of my own, had canvassers all over colored town, and registered 7 hundreds of subscribers. But I also did this: I gave them a square deal, so that they got the worth of their money, and I also made it a leading item in my plan, that if they die before their contract was paid up, they were properly buried and the family had time to pay the balance, and no matter where they died, they were given burial. They did not have to die inside of Dade County; that's how we got rid of that racket. There are many more partial payment and installment payment plans that must be taken care of. I intend to serve my people in this way as long as I live.” He has over five hundred members of his funeral benefit organization, upon which he about breaks even, for he has overhead expense that takes the small profit.

Regarding his family, Pharr said his wife was from South Carolina, and a graduate of Clifton Collage. She died eleven years ago and he does not care to remarry. His one son is now a senior at Northwestern University, Chicago, and will graduate this coming June with music as his major. He has already had auditions at Hollywood and is also signed up for a concert tour. He received the medal this year for being the most outstanding student.

“Did he attend the Miami schools?” I asked.

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“Just the grade school,” he answered, “the colored high school was not good enough when he was here. We have a 8 different man this year and he has brought the standard up and in still building a school where we can send our children with perfect confidence.”

He referred to Moseley Meredith, who was appointed to the principalship of the Booker T. Washington school to succeed Austin. All fifty-four teachers in this colored high school have college degrees, and all will eventually have life certificates. This is a project for which Pharr has worked energetically.

The work among the young people of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church is also a major project with him; he is president of the society of his own church in Miami, which is exerting a strong influence upon the young Negroes of this area, especially giving them social activities to keep them away from evil associations, encouraging them to make the most of their school and especially to abstain from gambling devices and occult practices. For twenty-three years he has been at the head of the young people's work of his denomination throughout the south, and has lent his influence to the development of the spiritual life among the young people of the several states where this church is working.

References

Material for this article comes almost entirely from an interview with Kelsey L. Pharr at his office in colored town.

His name was furnished me by Rev. Daniel Iverson, pastor of the Shenandoah Presbyterian Church, who in Chairman of the Conference on Interracial Relations, an organization of white and colored workers in the Miami area. They seek to arbitrate differences, help the colored workers by advice and by interceding with officials, etc. Dr. Iverson was unanimously chosen for the chairmanship of this important body because he is a southerner, from an old South Carolinian family, and knows the Negro. “I love them”

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he says, “for I was born among them and have been associated with them all my life. I know them and they know me.”