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DVD Documentary and Scholarly Manuscript Inject New Life into the Historic Randolph County Training School

Alvin, Lonnie, Gene and Earnestine
Thornton
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When the Randolph County Training School's graduates, teachers, parents and friends meet in LaGrange, Georgia for their bi-annual reunion on July 28-31, 2005, they will have available to them historical information about their school that was not previously available to them. A two-hour narrated DVD-documentary, with more than 300 classic photographs, and a manuscript will be featured at the reunion and sold as a source of funds to develop a RCTS Scholarship Fund for deserving students in Randolph County. The goal of the

The state of Alabama chartered the Randolph County Training School (RCTS) in 1919 and it opened in the autumn of 1920 with 73 students. It closed in the spring of 1970 with a final graduating class of 38 students after the County and State finally agreed to comply with the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision ending segregated public schools in America. In between RCTS' initial principal, James Russell, and its last principal, L.R. Hoggs, more than 2,500 students graduated from RCTS (initially named the Roanoke African American School) and went forward to make their diverse contributions to our society. Although the maroon and gold of RCTS was a mainstay on the County's educational landscape for 51 years, its rich legacy was not properly preserved and had begun to fade from the annals of history.

The Phoenix is a mystical African bird which, after years of dormancy, rises from the flames of fire and ascends to regain its place of prominence and

relevancy. The Phoenix legend applies to RCTS, which had occupied a place of prominence for the African American community and its children in Roanoke and Randolph County before becoming invisible and being lost to those for whom it had done so much. Thanks to the efforts of the extended "RCTS Family," the School's rich tradition and legacy have been recovered as a foundation upon which it can regain its rightful place in the historical annals of Roanoke, Randolph County and Alabama.

With the unselfish contributions of RCTS graduates, former teachers, principals, and parents, the history of RCTS has been captured in a two-hour narrated DVD documentary (*Behind These Silent Walls: The Tradition and Legacy of the Randolph County Training School-- 1919-1970*) and a manuscript that carries the same title. The DVD and manuscript capture the 51 year history of the School and places it in the historical context in which it was created, developed and was closed. Although the DVD and manuscript carry our names, they are community projects in every sense.

The need had long been evident and older graduates of RCTS, holding on to their precious memories, newspaper articles and pictures, frequently admonished younger graduates to document the history of the Randolph County Training School before it was too late. They feared that with death, lost memories, invidious neglect and destroyed official documents, the glorious history of RCTS would be lost. Most prominent among them were Velma Terry and the School's teachers whose early lives were, in part, centered on their school -- RCTS. Responding to the call of the elders to uncover and preserve the illustrious history of RCTS, those who loved it rallied to uncover the historical information that will help restore the lost legacy and tradition of the Randolph County Training School.

In producing the DVD documentary and writing the manuscript, we observed those who loved RCTS and understood the educational and cultural lessons that can be learned from it. We considered the short essays that they wrote about the school and noticed their pride they had in displaying historic pictures and sharing stories about their unique school experiences. The occasional newspaper stories about RCTS also drew our attention. A powerful motivating factor that led to our commitment to complete the projects was our discovery that only scant information about RCTS, a major educational institution in Roanoke, Randolph County and Alabama, was available in local, regional and state libraries. It was as if the school never existed. The historical void had to be filled. The project became a "sibling effort" and gave us an opportunity to pool our various academic, research, technological, and multi-media interests to produce "*Behind These Silent Walls*." What began as a brief PowerPoint presentation at the RCTS 2003 Reunion became a labor of deep renewed love for a school and its students and respect for its teachers and principals.

In completing the projects, we benefited from the initial pioneering research that Velma Terry completed. She was a RCTS oracle and early on insisted on the need to preserve the school's legacy. She shared her research with us an urged us to build upon it to rediscover her beloved RCTS and make it available to the children as a source of cultural pride and dignity in the face of cultural alienation, inequality and discrimination. With her work as a foundation, we: (1) examined each edition of the *Roanoke Leader* between 1919 and 1970, finding

valuable information about the school in articles written by its teachers and principals; (2) interviewed older RCTS graduates, former teachers, parents and local and regional librarians; (3) researched archival documents; and (4) examined scholarly documents for information about the approach that was used to educate African American children in the rural South during the period of the school's existence. Interviews with individuals such as James Coleman, Countess Chapman, Alfred Hill, Ceroy Pate, Rev. Robert Heflin, Rev. Myris Bell, Tavie Heflin, Ben A. Outland, John Hendricks, and Clarence Jarrells were especially useful to our effort to capture the school's early history (1919 to 1936).

Linnie Dora Pinkard was its first graduate and Dennis Ware was its last graduate in May of 1970. Between them are many good and not so good memories, and academic, athletic and other achievements that defined the RCTS landscape. The memories of students and members of the community about RCTS will vary greatly. Indeed, each individual will recall people and events differently and they will assign different levels of significance to them. All who graced the halls of RCTS will recall the halls lined with precious pictures of graduating classes, trophy cases filled with symbols of athletic triumphs against local and regional foes, and the friendships of schoolmates who

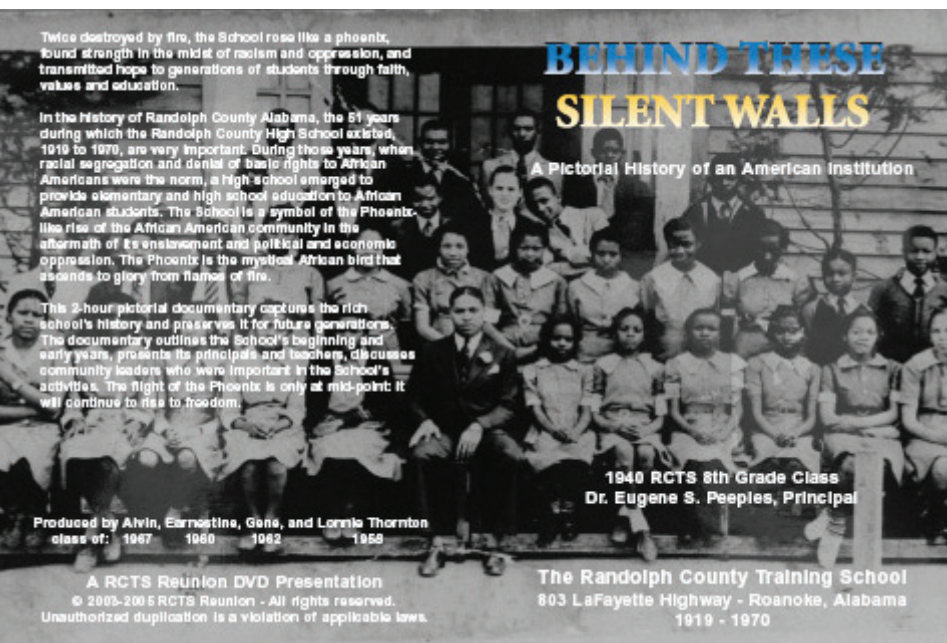
thrilled the junior and senior classes year after year. Behind the walls of this building remain the silent memories of the sound of the huge drum of the RCTS Marching Band. Behind the walls, linger the memories of the many cold, chilly winter days when the boiler wouldn't work, and the hot smoldering spring and fall days. Gone are the walks up and down the aisles on the cement floors, causing calluses and blisters on our feet. Gone are the dreams of little folk who saw the health nurse coming down the hall. Gone are the dedicated teachers who sat behind the desks and tried to help the slow child and make him or her a part of the class. Gone, gone, gone; and with it go the memories of generations of students who passed through the Randolph County Training School."

In writing the easy, Hattie P. Clark was reminding her readers of the efforts of caring teachers and support staff, the many good times that students had and the significance of the school to the African American community. She was also alerting the community to the uncertain future of African American children that was just over the horizon as the school closed. We adopted the phrase "Behind These Silent Walls" as the title of the DVD documentary and manuscript because it speaks to the RCTS walls, which housed the intellectual and cultural development of generations of African American

students, being allowed to become silent while pregnant with the rich culture and tradition of a people and their children.

An unfortunate consequence of school desegregation and the closing of rural county schools that had served the educational needs of African American students was that the history of the

schools was largely neglected as if they had no historical or contemporary importance. We understood that there is much to be learned from the manner in which students were educated at



shared the RCTS experience and the faces of caring and supportive teachers and principals.

Hattie P. Clark, one of RCTS' long-serving teachers, pinned an essay for the *Randolph Leader* on the eve of the closing of RCTS in 1970 that summarized the history of the school with the phrase "*Behind These Silent Walls*." Two months after the official closing of RCTS, Hattie P. Clark wrote: "I would like to take this opportunity to say farewell to Old Randolph -- the Randolph County Training School." She said, "... it has become one of the greatest assets within this community as far as African American people are concerned. It is all we ever had to call our own. It is the only building in Roanoke or Randolph County where we as a people felt the warmth of welcome. Our parents, fore-parents and other members of the African American community helped raise money to buy the land upon which the building now stands. Many donated hard-earned cash, when a dollar was really a dollar. Many never lived to see the fruit of their labor. Now behind the walls of Old Randolph linger only the memories of the many years which we devoted to -- silent memories of pleasure, silent memories not so pleasant. *Behind the silent walls* linger the memories of beautiful proms, which



RCTS when resources were limited and many civil and economic rights were unavailable. The core elements of the educational paradigm at RCTS were: (1) an unbroken authority structure that included the home, community and school; (2) strict school discipline administered by teachers whose authority was not questioned; (3) a keen collective community awareness of the importance of education to social advancement and overcoming oppression; (4) recognition of the central role of religion and positive values; and (5) a willingness to work hard to achieve employment and educational objectives. Hopefully, the DVD documentary and associated manuscript will highlight the need for more research on these schools and the importance of the instructional and student development approach that was used in them to produce generations of successful students.