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**MELVIN B. TOLSON – TEXAS RADICAL***by Gail K Beil*

Melvin Tolson was a poet, playwright, novelist, professor, popular lecturer, journalist, and debate coach during his long career in historically black Southern colleges. Particularly at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, he was more than that. He was also identified as a campus radical by colleagues and students, a Christian socialist, and a Democrat when most African Americans called themselves “Lincoln Republicans.” During his long teaching career he molded the lives of a number of the courageous leaders of the modern civil rights movement.

Tolson described himself in a poem that became his epitaph.

Bootblack and Poet  
 Dishwasher and Teacher  
 Cook and Philosopher  
 Waiter and Lecturer  
 Meatpacker and Mayor  
 Humorist and Humanist  
 Coach of football and drama, boxing and debate  
 Fighter for Freedom – Lover of Man.<sup>1</sup>

This was an accurate description of Tolson’s life, but his role as teacher and fighter for freedom is being forgotten as his reputation as a poet and playwright grows.

Tolson began his teaching career in 1924 in Marshall where he remained until 1947. At Wiley, a small Methodist-related institution founded by the Freedman’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church North in 1873, he inspired one of his students to become a leading civil rights leader in the 1960s, another who successfully sued to integrate the University of Texas School of Law, and others who changed the segregated face of the nation in quieter ways.

Born in Missouri in 1898, Melvin Tolson was a Methodist preacher’s son. He was educated at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, the nation’s first historically black college. He found his first job at Wiley College in 1924, after receiving his bachelor’s degree in English.

Tolson’s son and namesake, Dr. Melvin B. Tolson, Jr., said his father chose to come to Wiley College for two reasons. “I’ve been told that at the time he finished Lincoln, his father, who was a Methodist Episcopal minister, knew of the fine reputation of Dr. M.W. Dogan and Wiley College. I don’t know if he knew Dogan [president of Wiley College from 1895 to 1942] personally, but the whole black Methodist Episcopal Church was one – all the leaders knew each other – that’s the reason he got the appointment.”

Dr. Tolson also said that Wiley College was among the best of historically black colleges, “the Fisk University West of the Mississippi. It was known as a place where the faculty enjoyed academic freedom.” That freedom was a

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*Gail K Beil lives in Marshall, Texas.*

luxury not available on many historically black campuses where even personal habits of the faculty were matters of censure by college presidents. Dogan might be uncomfortable with the statements, writings, and actions of some of his faculty, but he stewed in private. Once, after Tolson made a heated speech to the board of trustees gathered on the steps of the Carnegie Library, Dogan stepped to the podium and said quietly that Tolson did not always speak for the administration.<sup>2</sup>

That freedom, as well as Dogan's encouragement for faculty and students to have meaningful dialogue outside the classroom, offered Tolson an important additional forum, under a tree on the campus or in his own living room at night, to educate and influence his students. "Students would see Tolson coming across the campus, sometimes barefooted, and they would flock around him," said Mildred Lewis Mason, who studied under him in the early 1930s. "He loved to argue – he would argue with a tree."

Miss Lewis, who graduated from Central High School in Marshall, was a high school classmate of Tolson's wife, Ruth Southall Tolson. Mrs. Tolson had not graduated from high school when Tolson married her in 1922, so even though she was the mother of four children, Ruth Tolson determined to graduate from high school and then from Wiley College.

"She decided her children were not going to get ahead of her," Dr. Tolson said. Not only was she older – and the subject of teasing from some of her younger classmates – she suffered from a handicap. "My mother came from a family where every second child was hard of hearing. She was number four." She graduated with her eldest son, Melvin Jr., from Wiley College in 1939.<sup>3</sup>

In 1933, the first African American in Texas with a Ph.D., Dr. J. Leonard Farmer, who first taught at Wiley College in 1920, returned to the East Texas college. His precocious son, James Farmer, Jr., enrolled at Wiley the following year at the age of fourteen. Dr. Farmer was admired by Tolson for his intellectualism and his preaching ability. The son soon became one of Tolson's top debaters and an actor in many of the plays Tolson directed. The boy later founded the Congress of Racial Equality, and by so doing joined Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, and Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to change the way the nation viewed the Negro race. Dubbed by the media "The Big Four," they became the most important leaders of the modern civil rights movement. "The banquet of my Wiley years was the tutelage of Tolson," Farmer said.

Farmer's description of Tolson, found in his autobiography, *Lay Bare the Heart*, captured the essence of his teacher.

A scholar without credentials (he had only a bachelor's degree) a poet and dramatist who had not yet published, Tolson taught English. But that was the least of the things he taught. He stretched the minds of all whose minds would be stretched.

When he read to us of Harlem, he came fully alive. New York was Mecca to him and every summer he went to kneel at its altar. In that off season he

worked on his masters at Columbia. Breathing the air of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and others of the Harlem Renaissance, he recharged his batteries. He engaged in argument those thinkers who could teach him as he taught us. He also peddled his poems to publishers and his folk operas to producers. Only 34 at the time, he spoke of New York in hushed tones, as of the promised land.<sup>4</sup>

Farmer's words reflect not only Tolson's influence on his own political beliefs but his way with words, both spoken and written, an eloquence he attributed to Tolson.

Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who visited Wiley College at least three times, returned Tolson's admiration. Hughes' column, "Here to Yonder," published in the *Chicago Defender* in 1945, provides a cogent impression of the Texas poet and firestarter:

That Texas is some state! I've been down there once or twice myself. And I've found some pretty amazing things – including Melvin Tolson

Melvin Tolson is the most famous Negro professor in the Southwest. Students from all over the world speak of him, revere him, remember him, and love him. He is a character. He once turned out a debate team that beat Oxford, England. He is a great talker himself. He teaches English at Wiley College, in Marshall, Texas, but he is known far and wide. He is a poet of no mean ability, and his book of poems, "Rendezvous With America," is a recent fine contribution to American literature.

But Melvin Tolson is no highbrow. Kids from the cottonfields like him. Cowpunchers understand him. He is a great teacher of the kind of which any college might be proud ... And the likes of him is found no where else but in the great State of Texas – because there is only one Tolson!<sup>5</sup>

If Dr. Farmer was the campus intellectual, Tolson was the firebrand. During Farmer's sojourn at Wiley, Tolson was threatened with lynching if he did not leave town. It took Dogan's intervention to save Tolson. Dogan called the town's most influential banker, Hobart Key, to help save his outspoken professor and the college's English department. The banker, doubtless aware of the financial contribution the college made to Marshall's economy, did so. Precisely why Tolson was threatened in Marshall is the subject of speculation. Farmer thought it might be because Tolson organized a boycott of local stores. Melvin Tolson, Jr., didn't think so. His father was a great speaker and much in demand for high school commencements, fraternities and churches, but except for his union organization work among sharecroppers in Arkansas late – in the 1920s, he was not an organizer of protest, according to his son. He provided instead its inspiration.

The saga of Tolson's debate program is an example of academic life on the Wiley College campus in the 1930s and 1940s. Debate was among the most popular extracurricular activities. Contests between the teams of two colleges, black or white, usually were staged in the home college's largest auditorium. "Debate was so popular, you could charge admission and get a full house," remembered Melvin Tolson, Jr. "At Wiley, when you had debates, whatever team was coming it was a prize occasion. People piled in."<sup>6</sup> Each year a nationwide debate topic was chosen; it was timely, controversial, and required

debaters to do considerable research and to hone arguments on both sides of topics as broad ranging as self-government for the Philippines, free trade, or federal support for education. Each debater on a two-man team was allowed a ten-minute speech and a five-minute rebuttal; winners were determined by how well one team met and defeated the arguments of the other.<sup>7</sup>

In a rattletrap Ford whose eccentricities once saved their lives – it stalled just before crossing a railroad track in a thick fog in Arkansas one night, some ten feet from a train traveling sixty-nine miles per hour – Wiley's legendary teams toured the country.<sup>8</sup> They broke new ground in 1930 with their first interracial debate, held in Oklahoma City at Oklahoma City University. Later, they debated Texas Christian University, the University of Kansas, and Kansas State University. Proceeds from ticket sales to the debates enabled Tolson to support his team and its travels.

The most spectacular encounter Wiley debaters had may have been with a team from England's Oxford College that was on a good-will trip across the United States in 1933. But the crowning moment for the team of fifteen-year-old James Farmer, Hobart Jarrett, and Henry Heights came in 1935 in Los Angeles when they debated the national champions of that year, the University of Southern California. This trip was made in Dr. Farmer's Dodge, a much more dependable vehicle than Tolson's old Ford. The business managers of both teams were particularly pleased, since more than 1,200 tickets had been sold for the event even before Tolson's three-man team arrived in Southern California. The audience grew to 2,300 on the night of the debate.<sup>9</sup> Fearing that his debaters would be overwhelmed by their University of Southern California opponents since the Trojan speech department was larger than all of Wiley College, Tolson refused to let them tour the Southern California campus. Before a packed house in Bovard Auditorium, Wiley beat Southern California. Hobart Jarrett wrote an article about the adventure in the NAACP's publication, *The Crisis*. "Interracial debates are a real adventure for both Negro youth and white youth," Jarrett wrote. "For centuries the Caucasian has believed that his superiority lies in his brain power . . . . There was a time when white colleges thought that debating against a Negro institution was mental dissipation, but that view has passed forever. Negro teams have shown they are as capable as their white opponents despite the library handicaps which limit research."<sup>10</sup>

Tolson's experience in Los Angeles included a visit with movie star Mae West, who read about the debates and sent a request to meet the fabled coach. Her autographed photograph, now in the Library of Congress with Tolson's papers, was one of his prized possessions. Although black college debaters were not allowed to join Pi Kappa Delta, the honorary debate fraternity, Tolson was asked to contribute an article to its journal, *The Forensic*.

"From the time Floyd C. Covington, who presided, opened the program until its close the vast audience was held in rapt attention by the scholarly presentations of both teams. All through the debate warm applause cheered the speakers as they scored strong points or relieved the tenseness of their appeals with clever and witty thrusts," wrote Tolson in *The Forensic*.<sup>11</sup>

Debates held in Marshall often included a few whites in the audience. The elaborate effort to preserve segregation while enjoying the challenging atmosphere at Wiley was described by a white Marshall school administrator, Emma Mae Brotze, and her English teacher sister, Selma. As young women they often attended Tolson's debates with their Presbyterian minister. "They would seat us right down front," Miss Emma Mae Brotze said. "Then they would leave a row of empty seats, then the Negro audience would be seated."<sup>12</sup>

James Farmer's debating skills, honed by Tolson, stood him in good stead when he hammered out the argument for the founding of the Congress of Racial Equality in 1941, as he defended his actions and those of CORE before two presidents, and most certainly when he agreed to debate Malcolm X three times during 1961, debates that both men agree Farmer won.<sup>13</sup>

Tolson's reputation as a writer, educator, and debate coach led Texas Governor James Allred to authorize him to represent Texas at the August 4, 1935, "National Negro Day Celebration" held during the International Exhibition in San Diego, California. "We are glad to have a man of your standing represent Texas, and are quite proud of the name Wiley College has made for itself through its debating team, with you as coach,"<sup>14</sup> Allred wrote.

Debating was not the only intellectual experience Tolson offered Wiley students. He read his own poetry and plays to his classes for their critique and comment. In 1938 he organized the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, had three of his students write one-act plays for its first contest, and invited V.F. Calverton, drama critic, writer, editor of *Modern Monthly*, and columnist for *Current History*, to judge them. Calverton, who was white and was well known to Harlem Renaissance writers and poets, was particularly fond of Tolson. "Mr. Tolson is a bright, vivid writer who attains his best effects by understatement," Calverton wrote. "The Negroes he describes in his poems come to life, candidly, unforgettably."<sup>15</sup>

Calverton's visit to Wiley was quite an experience for the students, the faculty, and particularly for President Dogan. Calverton, at young Farmer's invitation, but with Tolson's encouragement, agreed to spend a week at Wiley for the small sum of \$100, providing Tolson could arrange other Texas appearances. He arrived in a convertible with a woman not his wife, and refused to stay in the segregated Hotel Marshall - "how barbaric" he wrote Farmer, Jr. So his hosts arranged for accommodations in the home of one of Wiley's music teachers.<sup>16</sup>

Calverton put Dogan's teeth on edge by smoking a huge stogie in the auditorium, which also served as the chapel. "Dogan saw him with the cigar and was very disapproving," said Farmer. "But Dogan wasn't about to say anything because he hoped Calverton's visit would lead to more funds for Wiley."<sup>17</sup>

Calverton found two of the three plays presented by Wiley College "positively lousy - too lousy to say much about." The third, however, was "the best amateur play I've ever seen." One of Wiley's actors, Virgil Richardson, was singled out as outstanding, and Calverton was able to get Richardson a part in a professional play in New York. Farmer's acting talents did not fare so

well. Calverton said that Farmer never quit being Farmer, and was better off sticking with the critical thinking required of a debater.<sup>18</sup>

In his "Cultural Barometer" column in May 1938, Calverton wrote of his Wiley College experience:

This month at Wiley College, Marshall, Texas, a Play Festival was organized by the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, which is a Negro cultural organization of great influence in the South. Attending the festival were dramatic groups from the following Negro universities: Dillard University, New Orleans; LaMoyné College, Memphis; Texas College, Tyler; Houston College for Negroes, Houston; Langston State College, Langston, Oklahoma; and Bishop College. Among the plays produced the most interesting were three one-act plays: A Southern Tragedy by Orange Clemens, a sharecropper's drama laid in Arkansas; The Road to Damascus by Jimmy Lilly and Inaree Miller, the tragic story of an outcast octoroon and an old Negro man, and Dawn, [by Jimmy Lilly] a play built around the unconventional love life of a Negro professor in a Negro medical school. All these plays were written by students at Wiley College under the direction of M.B. Tolson.<sup>19</sup>

Calverton also described dramatized reviews of books by T.S. Eliot, Carl Sandburg, and Robert Briffalt, performed in a crowded auditorium, which "have increased the sale of books in the community, and have made books the most vital form of conversation on the campus."<sup>20</sup>

When Calverton died unexpectedly in 1940, Jim Crow laws kept Tolson from flying to New York, the only way he could have attended the funeral. In despair, Tolson wrote a tribute to his friend and mentor in the memorial issue of *Modern Quarterly* dedicated to Calverton.<sup>21</sup>

Seventeen-year-old Farmer and another of Tolson's student debaters, Benjamin Bell, inspired by their English professor's nightly bull sessions and his own commitment to the NAACP, decided the time had come to organize a chapter on the Wiley campus. Bishop College, across town, had had a chapter for a year, and the town itself had one as early as 1919, although it folded as a result of the Longview race riots. Another was organized in 1927.<sup>22</sup> The Wiley students did not face an easy task, for Dogan, who had spent forty years as Wiley's president, was not anxious to create controversy in a town whose African American population exceeded its Caucasian. Roscoe Dunjee, editor of Oklahoma City's *Black Dispatch* newspaper, sent a telegram to Wiley College requesting Dogan's assistance for Juanita Jackson, field secretary for the NAACP, in her efforts to organize a youth chapter at Wiley College. Dogan replied:

"We will do all we can to make the coming of Miss Jackson comfortable. As stated in my wire, we will talk over with her the advisability of organizing an NAACP chapter here. You understand, I am sure, that racial antagonism can more easily develop in sections where Negroes constitute a large part of the population, as is the case in Marshall. I support the NAACP financially because I feel it is a fine organization, but up to this time, it has not been thought best by some of us here in Marshall to form a chapter here."<sup>23</sup>

When Farmer, Jr. wrote a two-page letter to Jackson three months later, he told her, "You have no idea what a battle we have had to wage here at Wiley

against powerful opposition. We have met rebuffs at every hand where opportunities could have meant much to our cause." Farmer promised a "dynamic membership campaign" and, ever conscious of the rivalry between Wiley and Bishop, promised that by the following year Wiley would make Jackson proud. "You have a number of hustling chapters ... but remember reserve number one place for the Wiley College chapter. WE WILL EARN IT! [The emphasis was Farmer's]. Farmer expected to have at least seventy-five members by 1938, and if Marshall or Wiley College was afraid of dynamic Negro speakers, "We will have able speakers, even if we find it necessary to bring white citizens or men from other cities here."<sup>24</sup>

Farmer's bravado in 1938 grew into the courage to found CORE, and lead the nation's first restaurant sit-ins in Chicago in 1942, the bloody Freedom Rides in 1961, and the deadly Mississippi Freedom Summer voter-registration drives in 1964, events that contributed to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Farmer was not the only civil rights pioneer who drew inspiration from Tolson. Another was Herman Sweatt, plaintiff in the successful lawsuit to integrate the University of Texas School of Law, filed in Austin in 1946 and finally decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1952. Sweatt graduated from Wiley College in 1934 and told an interviewer that in addition to his father, the man with the most influence on his life was Tolson. "When directed against racial discrimination, Tolson's eloquence was devastating. Whether speaking to black students in his classes or to white students at the University of Texas, the gentle genius captivated his audiences with his satirical wit, his imagery and his piercing analysis," wrote Michael Gillette in *Black Leaders: Texans for Their Times*.<sup>25</sup>

Probably at the invitation of J. Frank Dobie, on March 11, 1946, Tolson spoke to the organization "Common Sense" which met at the Community Congregational Church located near the University of Texas campus. Sweatt's unsuccessful attempt to enroll in the School of Law had made statewide newspapers. Homer Rainey, demoted from the presidency of the University to academic dean in 1944, had just been fired from that position for his liberal views. Tolson, speaking to a packed house, mentioned both and urged the students to sign the petitions available in the hall for Sweatt's admission to the U. T. School of Law. As he had done for years with his speeches to all-black audiences, Tolson made it clear that in his view racism had economic roots, "That is why the Negro wanted a mule and forty acres of land after the Civil War, for without economic independence he couldn't hope to have political freedom."<sup>26</sup>

One Wiley student became President Lyndon Johnson's icon for the need to pass a meaningful civil rights bill in 1963 and 1964. She was Zephyr Wright, the Johnson family cook. When Michael Gillette, then oral historian for the LBJ Library, interviewed Wright on September 4, 1980, she told him, "The one person that helped me most was Dr. Tolson, because he would help me in the evenings. He helped me with diction and things like that, and he was very, very good."<sup>27</sup>

In 1948, another of Tolson's students and a classmate of Farmer, Fred



Lewis, filed suit through the NAACP against the Harrison County Citizen's Party, an all-white political party that had chosen every candidate for city and county office since its founding in 1874. The NAACP won the suit in 1950, and Lewis attributed the courage to take on the white establishment in his hometown to Tolson's teachings.<sup>28</sup>

Tolson began writing a regular column for the *Washington Tribune*, an African American weekly, in 1937. He called it "Caviar and Cabbage," an expression students said he often used in class to demonstrate the randomness of the subjects he would cover. For the next seven years, Tolson wrote about his experiences at Wiley College, his favorable view of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, and his disgust about the situation in which Negroes found themselves in the United States. Although he heard the siren song of communism and felt that capitalism was the great force pulling his people down, he never joined the Communist Party and remained loyal to the social gospel of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He could best be defined as a Christian socialist. He saw the value of defending the common man, and had little use for "mouth Christians" no matter their race.<sup>29</sup>

In a column on the death of lawyer Clarence Darrow, Tolson wrote:

The case of Clarence Darrow points a lesson. Black folks are too easily deluded by superficial facts. Call a man an infidel or a radical and you can hoodwink us to death. Why should a black man fear a radical? The abolitionists were radicals in their day. At one time it was radical in America to say, 'I believe the black man has a soul; I believe a black man can be educated.' If it had not been for the radicals, every black man would be in a cotton patch with a white man standing over him with a forty-four and a horsewhip three yards long.

And whenever you hear anybody denounce radicals, remember this: persecuted races get their rights only through the agitation of radicals. The man who denies the truth of this is as dumb as Balaam's jackass. Amen!<sup>30</sup>

Tolson also addressed the heart of his own concept of Christianity in his account of a Mother's Day sermon delivered at Wiley College by Dr. Farmer, who brought his own brand of radical theology learned at Boston University School of Theology to the pulpit:

Said Dr. Farmer: "Jesus was teaching contrary to the social and religious traditions of his people... Yes, the Big Boys were against Jesus, and if He should return today the Big Boys would be against Him. They would call Him an infidel, an atheist, a radical, a red.

In one clean sentence, Dr. Farmer pointed out the dilemma of a man like Jesus - a man who wants to help the people: "The more popular He became with the masses, the more hostile these leaders became toward him, and the more determined to destroy them."

Parents say, "Take the world as it comes and make the best of it." Christian youth says, according to Dr. Farmer, "Change the world and make it what it ought to be. I'll take my stand with American youth and Dr. Farmer and Jesus, the young radical."<sup>31</sup>

Tolson left Wiley College for Langston University in the Oklahoma city of the same name. Dogan had retired in 1942, and soon Wiley was in chaos. A student strike paralyzed the college in 1947, but that alone was not the reason for Tolson's departure. Mrs. Tolson believed her husband to be unappreciated by the faculty and the alumni of the school, both of whom had made many promises to their outstanding English professor. One of the unfulfilled pledges was a new building, to be called the Log Cabin Theater, to house Tolson's dramatic productions. By 1947 Hobart Jarrett was chairman of the English Department at Langston University in Oklahoma, and he invited his old mentor to join him. Tolson really did not want to leave his East Texas college. But instead of asking him to stay, Wiley College President I.W. McCloud told Tolson to do whatever he himself wanted. Ruth Tolson resented such indifferent treatment on the part of the administration.<sup>32</sup>

There were economic considerations as well. Wiley College did not offer retirement benefits, but state-supported Langston did. Tolson's sons also believe that Tolson's desire to write had a good deal to do with the decision. He had published his first book of poetry, *Rendezvous With America*, in 1944, but was too busy with other pursuits to complete other works, including plays, a novel, and a three-volume book of poetry he called *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*. Wiley's loss was the literary world's gain, for Tolson, not so involved with debate or other pursuits, completed works begun earlier, published more poetry in contemporary magazines, and finished the first – and only – volume of *A Gallery*. Another occurrence made leaving easier. Debate was no longer as exciting as it once was. After World War II other entertainments killed it as a spectator activity.<sup>33</sup>

While he was living in Langston, Tolson chose to enter the political arena. In 1954, he was elected mayor of the historically black town. He served eight years, facing the difficulties one might expect in an economically deprived community and adding grist for his writer's mill. When his service was over, he wrote in his journal: "I wouldn't take anything as a writer for having lived in an All-Negro town: I now know what is human, what is American and what is Negro."<sup>34</sup>

In 1964 Tolson, who was a heavy smoker most of his adult life, was diagnosed with cancer. His first surgery resulting from the disease was in April 1964. By December the doctors told him he had six months to live. They missed their prediction by about a year, and Tolson lived the last eighteen months of his life as vigorously as he had the previous sixty-six years.

In those months he received many awards for his poetry and plays. In 1966, he returned to the days of his Texas radicalism and inspiration to his students. He reviewed James Farmer's *Freedom When?* for the *New York Herald Tribune* on February 20, 1966. In it he called his former student, retiring as executive director of CORE, the Negro's greatest spokesman. He was a "mystery guest," surprising Farmer when the latter was honored by dignitaries including Sammy Davis, Jr., Harry Belafonte, and Duke Ellington at New York's Philharmonic Hall on March 6.

In the years since his death on August 29, 1966, in a hospital in Dallas, Tolson's fame as a writer, poet, and playwright has grown. But history largely has failed to record the inspiration he provided his students. This may have been his greatest contribution.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This poem appeared in the obituary of Tolson, September 3, 1966. Tolson was buried in Guthrie, Oklahoma. A copy of the program is among Tolson's papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>2</sup>Description of former student Mildred Lewis Mason. Interview with author April 9, 1999.

<sup>3</sup>Author's telephone interview with Melvin Tolson, Jr, August 9, 2000.

<sup>4</sup>James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart* (Fort Worth, 1983), pp. 116-117.

<sup>5</sup>*Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1945.

<sup>6</sup>Tony Scherman, "The Great Debaters," *American Legacy*, Spring 1997, p. 40.

The author was a Spring Branch (Houston) High School and Oklahoma State University debater from 1950 to 1960. Debates at that time were conducted in the same manner as they were in the 1930s and 1940s, although they did not draw the crowds in the 1950s they had before World War II.

<sup>7</sup>Tolson, "Caviar and Cabbage," column "I Get the Jitters," in the *Washington Tribune*, April 16, 1938.

<sup>8</sup>Although a team consisted of only two debaters, three men went to Los Angeles. Having three debaters, Farmer said, allowed Tolson to vary the team according to their strengths and whether they were on the negative or affirmative side in each round. The author, a friend of Farmer for more than fifteen years, talked often with him about his years at Wiley.

<sup>9</sup>Hobart Jarrett "Adventures in Interracial Debates," *Crisis*, August 1935, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup>Melvin Beaunorus Tolson, "Interracial Debates," *Forensic*, July 1935, pp.16-19.

<sup>11</sup>Author's interview with Emma Mae and Selma Brotze in Marshall, February 12, 1984.

<sup>12</sup>Farmer, *Lay Bare*, pp.224-227.

<sup>13</sup>Governor James Allred to Melvin B. Tolson, June 17, 1935. Tolson papers, Correspondence, file C. Library of Congress.

<sup>14</sup>V.F. Calverton, "The Cultural Barometer," *Current History*, February 1938, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Farmer remembered that Calverton took over the apartment of a bachelor professor who agreed to move out. Tolson remembered that it was an English teacher's home. Farmer, *Lay Bare*, p.138; Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson: Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (Columbia, Missouri 1983), p. 105.

<sup>16</sup>Calverton's visit is recorded in Farmer, *Lay Bare*, pp.143-147, as well as recounted in the author's interview with Farmer, March 13, 1999. Tolson's experiences with Calverton are found often in his "Caviar and Cabbage" columns.

<sup>17</sup>Farmer, *Lay Bare*, p.145.

<sup>18</sup>V.F. Calverton, "Cultural Barometer" *Current History*, May 1938, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup>V.F. Calverton, "Cultural Barometer" *Current History*, May 1938, pp. 46-47.

<sup>20</sup>Farnsworth, *Tolson*, pp. 60, 64.

<sup>21</sup>NAACP Branch files, Library of Congress, "Marshall," "Bishop," and "Wiley" folders. Bell may have had a role in the forming of the Bishop chapter. A postcard identical to the one he wrote Juanita Jackson from Wiley was written to her with a "Bishop College" return address. Bishop organized its NAACP chapter the year before Wiley College, according to NAACP records.

<sup>22</sup>Dogan to Dungee, March 12, 1937, NAACP Branch files, Library of Congress. Dogan actually misspelled Dunjee's name with a "g" where there should have been a "j".

<sup>23</sup>Farmer, Jr. to Jackson, June 4, 1937 NAACP Branch files, "Wiley College" Library of Congress.

<sup>25</sup>Alwin Barr and Robert A. Calvert, eds., *Black Leaders: Texans for Their Times* (Austin 1981), p.163.

<sup>26</sup>Helen Campbell, "'Problem is Economic, not Racial,' Negro says," the *Daily Texan*, March 12, 1946, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup>Gillette's interview with Wright, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

<sup>28</sup>Author's interview with Fred Lewis, January 3, 2000. Lewis placed all his correspondence with Maceo Smith, then president of the Texas NAACP, and all the legal documents relating to the case in the Marshall Public Library.

<sup>29</sup>Robert Farnsworth, ed., *Caviar and Cabbage: Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from the Washington Tribune, 1937-1944* (Columbia, Missouri 1982). All column quotations are from Farnsworth's book.

<sup>30</sup>Tolson, "The Death of an Infidel," *Washington Tribune*, April 2, 1938.

<sup>31</sup>Tolson, "Portrait of Jesus, the Young Radical," *Washington Tribune*, June 4, 1938.

<sup>32</sup>Author's interview with Melvin B. Tolson, Jr., August 9, 2000.

<sup>33</sup>Author's interview with Melvin B. Tolson, Jr., March 14, 1998.

<sup>34</sup>Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson*, pp. 210-212.