

## THE JOHNSON FAMILY

James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida on June 17, 1871 the son of James and Helen Louise (Dilette) Johnson. His father had some aptitude for music. His mother, much more developed in this direction than his father, had favorably impressed him with her singing in a church choir, and he pressed his suit until she agreed to become his wife. His father did hotel work in and out of New York and finally settled down in Jacksonville, Florida. In that city their children were born. When James appeared his mother fell seriously ill, and a friendly white lady living next door with an infant about the same age as James nursed him from her breast. James therefore claimed that in contradistinction to the southern whites who boast of having been brought up by their "black mammys" he could lay claim to having had a "white mammy."

In Jacksonville the youth studied in the public schools. Next he entered Atlanta University from which he was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1894. He started his career as a teacher in a small town in Georgia, but soon became principal of the Stanton School in Jacksonville, which he developed into a high school while serving there acceptably several years. During this period he studied law. He was admitted to the bar in Florida in 1897 and practiced in Jacksonville.

Feeling the urge for greater achievement, he went to New York in 1901 to collaborate with his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, who had by this time finished his course in the Boston Conservatory of Music. They entered upon the production of songs for light opera. The words being written by James Weldon and the music by J. Rosamond. From that time until 1906 they produced the most popular songs in the United States. Among these stood out "The Czar of

Zam," a light opera played in the Drury Lane pantomimes that Klaw and Erlanger imported from London. The Johnsons then had the good fortune of being called upon to produce special songs for stars on the stage. They wrote "I've Got Troubles of My Own," "Since You Went Away," and "Louisiana Lize," for May Irwin; "The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes," for Anna Held; "The Maid of Timbuctoo," for Lillian Russell; "My Castle on the Nile," for Bert Williams; "Oh! Didn't He Ramble," for George Primrose; the "Congo Love Song," for Marie Cahill; and "Fishing," for Fay Templeton. The "Congo Love Song" alone brought the Johnsons \$13,000 in royalties.

J. Rosamond Johnson continued with Robert Allen Cole as a partner in composing and singing popular songs which were warmly received by theatre-goers throughout the United States and Europe. These actors were depicting the new life of the free and happy Negro who got joy out of living in a world of his own. These new interpreters could not accomplish all they desired. They could not break off entirely from what had long been in vogue in caricaturing the Negro, and some of their songs did not rise to a much higher level than that of those of the plantation, but these new artists made a long stride in introducing the genuine musical comedy which, finally supplanted the minstrel. The partnership of Cole and Johnson was brought to an untimely end by the death of the former in 1911, but Rosamond Johnson with a modified program has continued his career in the musical field.

James Weldon Johnson felt the urge for another service, and he abandoned Broadway in 1906. Fortunately, he and his brother had written a popular song dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, and the latter as President of the United

States appointed Johnson as United States Consul at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, in 1906. He was later sent to serve in the same capacity at Corinto, Nicaragua. There in the midst of various revolutions he had difficult tasks to perform. At one time the situation became so tense that a detachment from a United States fleet was placed at his disposal. He passed out of office when Woodrow Wilson came into power and refused to approve Johnson's promotion to the post in the Azores.

Johnson had made such a fine impression in the diplomatic sphere, however, that when Warren G. Harding was campaigning for the presidency he called upon the diplomat to make a survey of conditions in Haiti. On the basis of his findings, Harding made the occupation of that island by the United States a campaign issue.

On leaving the diplomatic service, Johnson became the contributing editor of the *New York Age*. When Shillady, after being mobbed because of trying to extend the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People into Texas, resigned as Executive Secretary in 1916, Johnson succeeded him. In this position he developed rapidly as a leader among men. His editorial column in the *New York Age* proved popular because of the informative interpretation of men and measures which it always carried. In this way, moreover, he could bring before the public the great issues of much concern to the Negro race in the fight for full recognition as citizens.

Entering upon the work as Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Johnson took the task seriously. He first made a survey of the country with respect to the Negro. He toured especially the South, interviewing Negro leaders and prominent whites. He

was well received by the best of the white element, especially the editors of the leading dailies, among the most cordial of whom was Clark Howell, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Talking privately, some of these distinguished Southerners, as Johnson related this experience to the writer, were liberal in their views; and it is most unfortunate for the students of history that Johnson did not accept the advice to record and publish these impressions.

In the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Johnson was immensely successful. In the first place, he was not unwisely radical. He did not endeavor to win immediately all the battles of the race, and in his manly fight for the great issue at stake he did not always infuriate his enemies. Under such leadership the work of the Association expanded. Friends of freedom from both races came to swell the ranks, and with this nation-wide support he could lead the Association in its fight on the Ku Klux Klan and in its demand for national legislation against lynching. Largely because of Johnson's efforts this crime was made a national issue, and the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill passed the House of Representatives, although it failed to secure the action of the Senate.

In 1930 Johnson resigned as Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to accept the position as professor of creative literature at Fisk University. There he had the opportunity to direct along productive lines those advanced students with the ambition to achieve in this sphere. His work was so well done at Fisk that in 1934 he was made visiting professor in the same field at New York University. At the time of his death students in Washington, D. C., were organizing to have him offer such an extension course in their city.

During these years Johnson deeply impressed the public as a writer of a high order. His first

important literary production was a novel entitled *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which appeared in 1912, and was republished in 1927. He won a place for himself as a poet in bringing out in 1917 *Fifty Years and Other Poems*. Following *Self-Determining Haiti*, produced in 1920 in protest against the American occupation of that country, came his useful anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1921. His *Book of American Negro Spirituals* in 1925 and 1926, respectively, greatly increased his reputation as an interpreter of Negro culture. Likewise impressive were *God's Trombones* (seven sermons in the form of poems) in 1927, and *St. Peter Relates An Incident of the Resurrection Day*, in 1930. *Black Manhattan*, a history of the Negro in New York City, produced in 1930, *Along This Way*, an autobiography given to the public in 1933, and *Negro Americans, What Now?* published in 1934, show Johnson's grasp of the Negro's background and status in this country and what he believed the program of the race should be. He contributed to magazines like the *Crisis*, *Century*, *Harpers*, *The American Mercury*, and to the new *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He wrote the English version of the libretto to the grand opera "Goyescas," produced at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in 1915.

In the midst of these tasks, Johnson found time to serve humanity otherwise. He once edited a daily newspaper, said to be the first by a Negro in this country. He served as Director of the American Fund for Public Service from 1934 to his death. He was a member of the Ethical Society. He functioned as a trustee of Atlanta University, his alma mater. For his valuable service in behalf of his people, the Spingarn Medal was awarded him in 1925. Both Talladega College and Howard University availed themselves of the opportunity to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Literature.

In 1910 Johnson married Grace

Nail, the daughter of John B. Nail, a retired business man who recently passed away. The Johnsons lived in New York City with the exception of such temporary residence elsewhere as his services required. They had a comfortable summer home at Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He was killed in an automobile accident on June 26, 1938. He left no offspring.

## A Significant Letter

October 11, 1948

Dear Mr. Woodson,

I wish to thank you for the fine tribute you paid my family in the June issue of THE NEGRO HISTORY BULLETIN. Many have complimented the write up you published of my sister Alice Victoria Weston.

Is it possible for me to secure from you about a half dozen copies if I send price per copy, plus postage. So many of our friends as well as my brother, the Artist, would like copies.

You left out, however a most illustrious member of our family, Professor James A. Henry of Chattanooga, Tennessee, after whom an elementary school and the Y. M. C. A. in Chattanooga are named. He was also grandmaster of the Masons for the state of Tennessee for over thirty years before his death.

When Uncle Ed, Judge Henry, left Atlanta University to study Law at Howard, Uncle Jim left there, too, and became principal of the Howard High School in Chattanooga. He died at the school while dismissing his class in 1914, two months before my father died.

There is also a discrepancy in your article. My father was born in 1840 in Canton, Mississippi, was twenty-five years old at the close of the Civil War. He told me that he was twenty-five years old when he entered the Perry Academy in Perry, N. Y. where he was educated. He was seventy-three years old when he died in 1914.

Thanking you again for the splendid tribute, I am

Respectfully yours,

(Miss) MABEL C. THOMAS