

# T.M. Cook: Educator, magistrate, citizen

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Staff Writer

(In observance of Black History Month, The Herald Independent will publish each week during the month a feature story on an Unsung African American Hero, a Fairfield County resident who has quietly contributed to the community.

We are interested in suggestions of men who would be good subjects for a story during the last week in the month. Call staff writer Bobb Hane at 635-4016 to make your suggestions.)

He was the first African American magistrate in Fairfield County since Reconstruction.

He was a member of the Fairfield County Council and a member of the State Guard.

He was a long - time principal of Geiger Elementary School.

He has been actively involved in his church, New Hope AME, since he was a child.

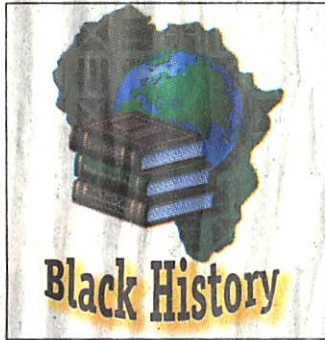
Thalmer (T.M.) Cook, 78, has spent a lifetime, quietly giving to Fairfield County.

Cook was born and raised in Rion. He went to New Hope Elementary School, which was run by his church, and is a Fairfield High School graduate.

After working several years for the Rockton - Rion Railway, he was drafted and served in the Korean War.

After returning from the War, he went to work for the veneer plant, but he decided, "I can't do this all my life. I have got to get some education." He enrolled in Allen University and completed four years of college in two years and eight months.

Cook married a high school friend, who was an educator. They have been together



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**T.M. Cook takes a moment to sit and talk about his life. Photo by Bobb Hane**

## CITIZEN

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for 56 years.

"I always wanted to leave society better than I found it," Cook said. "I wanted to leave it in better shape than I found it. That was my primary reason for going into education. I tell you I would not take anything for it."

Years after his retirement, Cook still has former students who approach him and thank him for being a part of their lives. Some have even thanked him for spanking them as students.

Cook served as Geiger Elementary School principal for 26 years, after having served a Great Falls school as a teaching principal.

"I loved my job," Cook said. "That's why I say that I was born to be an educator."

Cook would like to see today's educators, respected more than they are.

"I don't attribute that just to educators," he said. "As far as I am concerned, society as a whole has declined radically. A lot of it is coming from what we watch on television. A lot of these gangs for example, they pick up a lot of that

stuff from television. I would like to see us have more respect and more authority to discipline children."

Cook became a hearing officer for the Fairfield

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County School District in the 1990s, following his retirement.

After his tenure as a hearing officer, Cook assumed an interim principalship at Kelly Miller Elementary School.

Having served in the military when it was integrated, Cook did not find the integration of Fairfield County public schools to be frightening.

"In Fairfield County, we happen to be in a county,

where it wasn't so volatile at that time," he said. "People were pretty good here. We had good people of every race in Fairfield. They did not cause any major conflicts at the time.

It really wasn't that bad. I don't remember one thing racially that happened to me during integration."

In 1970, magistrates in the County were elected by the general public. Cook decided to run and he won.

"I did that for seven years," he said. " (Before running for office) I didn't like how some people in the community were getting justice when they needed and I did not feel they were getting compassion, when they needed it."

As if that were not enough service to the community, Cook served on County Council for about a year and a half in the late 1970s.

In what free time, Cook has he enjoys riding his motorcycle and gardening.

"I think those kinds of things help to keep you young a little bit," Cooke said. "Some people just retire and do nothing and after a while they are gone."