

KELLY MILLER:— HIS LIFE & WORK

One Drink And One Smoke Was Sufficient To Last Negro Educator 76 Years.

(By C. H. Wetmore in The Washington Post). ¹⁹⁴⁰

The Nation, as well as Washington, lost a noble man when Kelly Miller passed on as the old year neared its end.

I knew him well and am proud to say that during 1935-36, when his request was first made upon me to assist in writing his autobiography, which I did on two or three days a week by asking questions and placing his answers on paper.

This work was nearly completed when a cataract made him nearly blind and he was compelled to undergo three operations. When he recovered, his sight was dim and he was not able to complete the story of what he named "My Span of Time."

Kelly Miller escaped being born a slave by six months. At the age of 6 years, clad only in a tow shirt, he was sent to a one-room school by parents who could neither read nor write, but were curious to know what it was. Within a week their curiosity was satisfied in a measure when Kelly brought home a copy of McGuffey's First Reader, and proudly showing them a picture he spelled the word C-A-T.

One year later he had his first smoke. He filled an old pipe of his father's and kept puffing until the bowl was empty. Then the world turned upside down while he rolled in anguish between rows of cornstalks. That smoke lasted him all his life.

And the one drink of ardent spirits which he took while a freshman at Howard University also was his only draught of liquor. He never possessed a watch, nor a fountain pen and never owned an automobile. The radio he accepted as an educational asset and he considered a piano for his daughters in the same light.

Headquarters for the Miller family was a two-room shack on a South Carolina farm owned by a former Confederate soldier and worked by Kelly Miller, Sr., as a sharecropper. Two girls slept in one of the rooms with mother and father; seven boys slept in a corn crib which was delightfully cool in the summer and warm in winter when filled with cotton.

Mornings, the boys, clad in tow shirts, would scamper over to the shack, pulling tufts of cotton from their hair as they went, then sit upon boxes drawn up to a table where fried bacon, cornpone and 'lasses awaited them.

Early in life young Miller proved himself a prodigy in mathematics. Later, during his student life at Howard he was given private instruction in astronomy at the U. S. Naval Observatory, and when he was graduated from college he took a postgraduate course in higher mathematics at Johns Hopkins University.

A New England missionary society paved the way for Miller to enter Howard, by paying his expenses to Washington and giving him a \$10 bill. Thus, on his own, he was compelled to work his way as many other young men have done.

It was the missionaries' plan that he should study for the ministry, but during the preparatory course, which Miller cut down from three years to two, he made visits to the Library of Congress, where he read Darwin and Huxley and arrived at the conclusion that he would not be good material for the pulpit; and so he matriculated in the academic course.

Lack of money worried him greatly, not because of personal comforts which he must forego, but he feared that death might claim someone back home and he would be unable to attend the funeral.

One day—it was during Grover Cleveland's first administration—he saw a placard in a window that caused him to take an examination under the new civil service law. When summer came he got a job as waiter in a Massachusetts seaside resort. He was standing with a tray filled with dishes when some one said: "Kelly, here's a telegram for you."

Miller, trembling with anxiety concerning the old folks, said: "Open it and read it to me. My hands are full."

A second later the tray fell on the floor and Kelly Miller, hatless, bolted through the kitchen, out the rear exit and ran to the waterfront where a steamer was due to leave for New York. He worked his passage, happier than ever before in his life, for he carried in his pocket the notice that he had been appointed a clerk in the Pension Office, salary \$600 a year. Arriving in Washington as helper to a truck driver, he told the dean of men of his good fortune and an arrangement was made by which he could continue his college course by attending night courses after serving the Government in daytime.

After his postgraduate course at Johns Hopkins, Miller returned to Washington and became instructor of mathematics in the public schools. A year later his alma mater called him to become a member of the faculty. First, professor of mathematics, then professor and subsequently dean of sociology, he was retired for age as dean emeritus of Howard University.

Notwithstanding his many activities as instructor and writer, Miller found time to deliver lectures to both white and colored audiences from coast to coast. His last public appearance was in 1937, when he stood on a platform once occupied by Theodore Roosevelt and delivered the Founders' Day address at Tuskegee Institute.

By the written word and by speech Miller played a prominent part during political campaigns, and doubtless influenced many voters. When Landon was nomi-

nated he said, "We need more than an expert accountant for President." He was an admirer of Eleanor Roosevelt and expressed the opinion that, by her own works, rather than her association, she had won the right to the title, First Lady of the Land.

The crowning achievement to Kelly Miller's well-spent life came during the last two years when the board of trustees of Howard University approved his plan for an anthropological exhibit and archives, dedicated to the Negroes of the world, and set aside a wing of the new library building for that purpose.

The dean, his eyesight blurred, but his brain active as ever, was working out details for his plan when the clock sounded finis to his span of time.



FAIRFIELD NATIVE

This is the late Dr. Kelly Miller, who was born in Fairfield County, educated at Howard University, and later taught there. Two schools, one here in Fairfield and one in Washington, D.C., are named for the well-known black educator. Miller's mother was a slave and his father a tenant farmer. He was the author of several books and a number of pamphlets.