Untold Stories OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

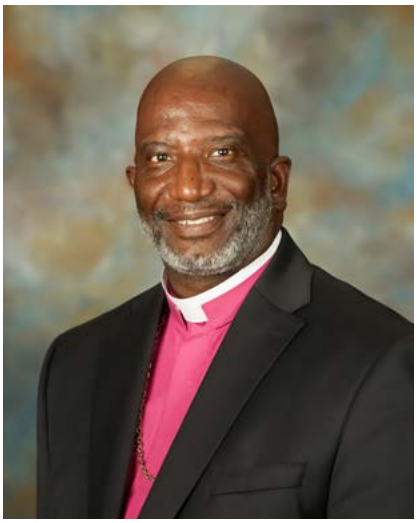
Vol. 3, No.10

BORN TO THE SUBURBAN LEAGUE: THE LEGACY WE INHERITED – PART II

By Elvin B. Thompson

Ed. note: Thompson – pastor, teacher, speaker -- continues the story begun last month of his personal journey into activism. He looks back to his grassroots involvement in Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign, honors the local mentors who set him on this path, and traces the way some unsung individuals in Montevallo and Alabaster taught him "to be a Black man rooted in Shelby County but aware of a much larger stage." His reflections on the legacy of the Suburban League conclude next month. – kk & js

I didn't grow up hearing the word "activist." But I grew up around people who acted. Folks who showed up when there was no camera, no crowd, and no credit coming. They didn't call it organizing. They just called it doing what needed to be done. And before I had the language for it, I had the example. Before I ever chose to get involved, I had already been claimed—by memory, by legacy, by the kind of quiet courage that lived in the bones of our community.



DR. ELVIN B. THOMPSON
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By 1984, I was no longer a child watching from the side. I was a teenager, stirred by the energy and momentum of Jesse Jackson's historic presidential campaign. But my involvement didn't begin in some bustling headquarters or crowded call center. There was no command center in Montevallo. No strategy board. No staff. The movement didn't need a stage—it lived in front porch conversations, in church basements, and in lodge halls across small-town Alabama.

Montevallo and Alabaster both worked together. It was not unusual to see the same familiar faces active in the NAACP also serving in the Suburban League. Sometimes the meetings were held in Montevallo—other times in Alabaster—hosted by Mr. Robert Tolbert and his group, which included Mrs. Bobbie Hill Kidd. In Montevallo, members gathered in sacred and trusted spaces like Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, Ward Chapel AME, and the Mason Hall. These were more than buildings—they were sanctuaries of strategy.

I couldn't name them all if I tried, but a few names not yet mentioned in the first part deserve to be lifted here—Henry White, Lester Cathy, Eugene Vassar, and Amos Nicks. Each one played their part, steady and committed. And though he wasn't an official member, Mr. Henry Thrift—who owned and managed Montevallo's baseball team—was a key financial supporter whose generosity helped sustain the movement.

I was mentored by two men who helped shape my sense of purpose: the late Rev. Roger Shack and Mr. Will Brantley. Both were respected leaders in the Montevallo and Alabaster communities. Though not members of the Suburban League, they were high-ranking members of the Masonic Lodge—a body I would later join. Their influence stretched far beyond ceremonial titles. These men were seasoned martial artists—black belts who had traveled internationally, bringing back not only trophies but a widened worldview. Their stories of discipline, travel, and strength gave me a new imagination for what it meant to be a Black man rooted in Shelby County but aware of a much larger stage.

Under their guidance, I helped work the grassroots terrain of the campaign. We weren't working from a database of unregistered voters. We didn't have scripts or canvassing apps. We knocked on doors and asked the question plainly: "Are you registered?" If not, we shared how. If yes, we asked them to vote—and to help someone else do the same. We were ambassadors of belief—not just in Jesse Jackson's campaign, but in the power of ordinary people to make a difference.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Additional accounts of the Suburban League can be found in the Untold Stories section of themontevallolegacyproject.com. Do you have stories or photos that would build up our picture of the League? We would love to hear from you at Montevallolegacy@gmail.com. Submitted by Kathy King and James Salter.