

UNTOLD STORIES OF BLACK MONTEVALLO:

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THE PRENTICE FAMILY

In Old Camp of the coal-mining community of Aldrich, Joseph and Mattie Prentice raised a large family of at least 11 children. (A family account adds a twelfth child.) Some pursued work that took them far afield, from the coal fields of Pennsylvania to downtown Los Angeles. The two daughters married and settled in Topeka, Kansas and Little Rock, Arkansas. A few of the sons stayed closer to home to carry on their father's life of service to the local Black community. This instalment of Untold Stories highlights the positive impact on their communities of four of the Prentice sons.



The eldest, Herbert Prentice (1879-1961), went into business with his father in Aldrich. They advertised as "J. S. Prentice & Son, Dealers in General Groceries and Notions." The opening was announced March 11, 1898 in the *Alabama Time-Piece*, a black-edited newspaper published weekly in Aldrich. The grocery store opened on the Prentice lot at some distance from the centrally located company store. It offered special prices to Sabbath Schools and Secret Societies, and low prices to all: "There are but few people who know / That our prices are so low." A later notice in *Time-Piece* says, "Call and see them. They will treat you right" (May 5, 1898).

Joe Jr (1885-1960) was an acclaimed chef in this part of the world. In the 1910s and 20s he had a devoted following at the St George Hotel, which stood at the corner of Main and N. Boundary where TrustMark Bank is today. He was famous for his chicken pie and spoon bread. One traveling salesman called the spoon bread "the best he ever ate." His wife never forgot the delicious Southern fried chicken and gorgeous baked apples, the most beautiful "she had ever seen." He was a snappy dresser, serving his celebrated meals dressed in white trousers and bright silk shirts. According to a 1950 story in the *Montevallo Times*, traveling salesman "tried to make the St. George a regular Saturday night stop because of the extraordinary food."

Joe, never married, lived in 1940 in a house he owned on Valley St near the Ward Chapel AME Church. In his youth he had worked in Aldrich mines (as did his father and most of his brothers at one time or another). He may have been active in the local chapter of the United Mine Workers. In

1907 a Joseph S. Prentice was named treasurer of Aldrich Local No. 367 (*Birmingham News*, 28 Dec). Joe Jr would have been about 22 at this time.



Frank Herman (1889-1971) was the only Prentice son who followed his father into the ministry. He seems to have inherited Joseph Sr's charisma, energy, and passion for education. He completed at least one year of college. After a stint as a Baptist minister in Cherokee, Kansas, he accepted in 1925 the pastorate of the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, where he served until 1958. The church history describes him as "a great pastor, leader and preacher, dearly loved by Mount Zion." Under his leadership membership grew to 1,800, and the church school and choirs were considered among the best in the city. "He was called the "sweetheart" of the Foreign Mission Board and "prince of preachers" of the National Baptist Convention.

Robert (1891-1965) inherited some of his father's leadership skills and shared his older brother's creativity in the kitchen. He graduated from Alabama A&M College in 1913 with a degree in printing. When offered work as an assistant degree in printing. When offered work as an assistant cook, he accepted and two years later was made College Chef. He served in that position for 33 years. He seems to have been a good-hearted soul, providing loans to "scores of young men" who fell into financial difficulties. Robert was a beloved figure at Alabama A&M. The campus bulletin described him as "truly one of the landmarks" of the university. "White-haired and matter-of-fact in point of view, Mr. Prentice is a realist. Says he, 'Shucks, you have to do something for a living; and taking everything into consideration, I don't think I've done so badly.'"

After Robert's death the dining facility at A&M was named Prentice Dining Hall. The name disappeared when the old dining hall was razed and replaced. Here in Montevallo the Prentice name disappeared when the "negro" Prentice High School, named for Joseph Sr, was folded into the integrated Montevallo HS. Perhaps these Untold Stories will help to bring the Prentice name and family back into the visibility they deserve.

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Contact us at Movaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome corrections of errors of fact or interpretation.