**Charles Wesley Hatcher (1920 - 1972) & Elizabeth Hatcher**

**Coming to Yellow Springs**

Charles Wesley Hatcher Jr. brought his wife, Elizabeth, and their two children to Yellow Springs, Ohio in the winter of 1955.  Charles had roomed there for months as he settled into his position as Personnel Manager at Vernay Laboratories.

The Hatchers, like many African Americans of the time, were looking for a place to raise their children comfortably and enjoy the opportunities that White Americans with the same accomplishments naturally expected. Both Charles and Elizabeth came from strong family backgrounds, which encouraged success.

Charles was born an only child in Fort Worth, Texas in 1920, and when he was nine, he, his parents, his mother’s two sisters, their husbands and children moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. They were in search of better schools. Cincinnati was also the end of the railroad line that followed the route the three men in the family traveled in their jobs as railway postal clerks.  Railway post office clerks were considered the elite of the postal service’s employees.  For Black men to attain such a sought after position during this period was unusual. Eventually, all three families lived together in Avondale, a Black section of town, in a large house that provided a separate floor for each family.

Elizabeth was born in Cincinnati to Edmund and Esther Oxley in 1919, the youngest of three children. She wouldn’t meet Charles until years later.  She lived with her parents and two siblings on the West Side of downtown Cincinnati. St. Andrews Episcopal Church, where Elizabeth’s father was pastor, was the center of the Oxley’s lives. The church, located on the street behind their house, was connected to the nursery school that her mother, Esther, supervised.  Esther also ran an employment agency from the church, which brought together mothers of her day care children and employers who informed her of available jobs.

Charles was always industrious and from a very young age liked earning his own spending money.  In Texas, before he was eight, he sold The Pictorial Review to ladies in the neighborhood. At twelve he sold copies of The Pittsburgh Courier to people he knew and eventually developed a list of regular customers. When Charles was 14, his grandmother came to Cincinnati to stay with the family because she was ill.  The drugstore was supposed to deliver her medicine to the house, but it always arrived late or not at all. This problem gave Charles an idea.  He went to the drugstore early one morning and asked the owner if he needed someone to make deliveries. Impressed with Charles’ initiative, the pharmacist hired Charles for a job that he kept until he entered college.

Because of the racial discrimination existing outside their neighborhoods, support from their families as well as the people surrounding them were paramount to Charles and Elizabeth’s personal development.  St. Andrews became the base for many of the events important to Cincinnati’s Black community.  Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops formed there.  Speakers from Cincinnati and other cities came to talk at St. Andrews about topics of interest such as health and religion.  Since schools like the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music were not open to the Black community, Esther and Edmund opened a school at the church where both children and adults were encouraged to take music, dance and drama lessons.

Charles and all his family were members of the Baptist Church.  This as much as any of his experiences united him with Black traditions.  Charles’ family often entertained and offered lodging in their home to Black celebrities performing on the road who were barred from the White hotels and other establishments. Many places like movie houses, restaurants and swimming pools were restricted.  Family, community and neighborhood schools protected Charles and Elizabeth from these realities. Not until they entered White high schools did they directly feel the sting of racism.

Charles’s father had a running protest with the principal of the high school Charles attended because Black students were not allowed in the swimming pool. Charles Sr., an officer in the Cincinnati chapter of the NAACP, believed it was his duty to condemn this discrimination.

For Elizabeth, high school was a place to go to fulfill academic requirements and then leave. She felt no warmth for her school because she as a black student was excluded from most extracurricular activities.  She could not join social clubs and resented being kept from swimming classes, a required part of the White curriculum. Sometime after 1937 when Charles and Elizabeth had graduated from high school and met at the University of Cincinnati, they along with others participated in organized, peaceful protests at the segregated movie houses in the city until the theaters were opened to Blacks.

Elizabeth was a full time student at the University of Cincinnati, and Charles took classes there in the evening while he worked at Christ Hospital during the day. Soon after Elizabeth graduated from the university in 1941, she and Charles married.  Drafted into the army during World War II, Charles chose to enlist in the Marine Corps. He served at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina where he brought Elizabeth and their first-born, Charles Oxley (Chuck).  After the war, Charles moved the family to Cambridge, Massachusetts so he could attend Harvard Business School on the GI Bill.  He graduated in 1947 earning an MBA Degree.  The family returned to Cincinnati and in 1948 their second child, Laura, was born. The Hatchers lived in the Walnut Hills section of town, a middle class Black neighborhood at the time.  They designed and built a house on a dead end-street behind the Walnut Hills High School campus.

Chuck attended the neighborhood elementary school until seventh grade when he entered Walnut Hills High, his dad’s alma mater.  The Cincinnati Street Railway Company hired Charles as an Assistant Vice President. Elizabeth taught downtown on the west side serving the community where she was raised.  When in 1953 Hays/Porter, a combination elementary, junior high opened in the same section of town, Elizabeth accepted a job at Porter, the junior high, teaching physical education and science.  She brought Laura downtown with her everyday to attend Hays. Charles and Elizabeth with their children were settling into Cincinnati maintaining their extensive family and church connections.  They were planning to stay.  But Charles soon realized that his job was not satisfying his aspirations. He was stuck in a position with an empty title and a limited future.  So when a unique offer from Vernay Laboratories in Yellow Springs, Ohio came to him, he accepted it. He was not looking for prestige, and he wanted more than to just be a provider. He wanted his family to prosper and have access to the economic and social choices that would allow him and the people he loved to fulfill their dreams.

He believed Vernay Laboratories, a small, thriving company that manufactured rubber parts for the automotive and medical industries, would provide that opportunity. Hired as personnel manager with the promise of becoming treasurer someday, Charles would receive a good salary and the certainty that he could grow within the company. Sergius Vernet, founder and president of Vernay Laboratories, was a brilliant inventor who followed progressive hiring policies.

When Charles moved his family to Yellow Springs in 1955, the Vernets, who spent winters in Florida, opened their house to the Hatchers. Charles had been staying in one room while alone in the town, and this offer would give the family a comfortable place to live while they searched for their own house. The Vernet mansion was set back on a street of modest homes a few blocks from Vernay Laboratories and in the mouth of Antioch College.  Some of Vernet’s neighbors were factory workers at the company.  Others were professors at Antioch. Still others were something else. Yellow Springs’ demographics did not limit relationships or where one lived in town.

The Hatchers found a simple, little house on West South College Street. Acres of field behind and to the west of their property contained only a tiny farmhouse in its center where Omar Robinson the black owner of those acres lived with his wife and child. That field would later become Omar Circle, a middle class predominantly black development of ranch style houses. The Howards, a Black family, lived next door to the Hatchers on one side, the Porters, a White family on the other.  The neighborhood was mixed. All the children in Yellow Springs went to the same schools. Chuck entered Bryan High in the middle of his eighth grade year; Laura entered Mills Lawn in the middle of second grade.

In the fall of 1956 The Yellow Springs Public Schools hired Elizabeth as a sixth grade teacher at Mills Lawn School.  She was the first Black teacher in the system since 1887.  Her class reflected the diversity of the town. The students were different races and nationalities.  Their parents were blue collar, white collar and professors at Antioch.  John Lithgow, the actor, was in her class. His father directed “Shakespeare Under the Stars” at Antioch.  Elizabeth was a creative teacher, and her students inspired her.  One of the activities during the year was the students’ own theatrical version of King Arthur’s Court.  The parents appreciated Elizabeth.  Some became close friends.  The Superintendent of Schools, however, did not like her being there.  He badgered her the entire year using her teaching methods as an excuse for his bigotry.  He would linger outside her classroom door or appear in her room without notice. Elizabeth had good teacher friends that supported her at the school, although the superintendent’s wife taught right across the hall.

Elizabeth developed a friendship with the young Black custodian at the school. He would stop in her classroom from time to time to talk with her.  His visits helped ease some of the tension. The next year, this custodian, James McKee, joined the Yellow Springs police, and a couple of years after that became Yellow Springs’ first Black chief of police.

The superintendent fired Elizabeth at the end of the school year. This developed into a town issue.  The Board of Education then fired the superintendent and rehired Elizabeth. The superintendent and his family left town, and to the dismay of many, Elizabeth chose to resign. Eventually, she commuted to Dayton, Ohio to teach. Later, she received her Masters from Wittenberg University. She became a counselor and then a principal in the Dayton School System. Although Elizabeth was more comfortable working in the Black community, she still appreciated Yellow Springs.  She understood that the strength of the town through its town meetings is what overcame and finally corrected the unfortunate situation at Mills Lawn Elementary.

As personnel manager, Charles was always concerned with maintaining the ethnic and gender diversity of the company that Sergius Vernet had begun. He networked with   administrators in high schools and colleges in the area to find employees that would continue the tradition.  Elizabeth Hasty, an African American Yellow Springs resident and friend, was often Charles’ go-to person when she was a counselor at Xenia High School and then at Central State University.

Charles’ title had changed from personnel manager to director of administrative services but not until 1970 when Marie Treuer retired as treasurer at age 73, was Charles promoted to Vice President/Treasurer at Vernay.  After that, 65 became the mandatory age for retirement at the company.

Elizabeth and Charles were great friends of James and Eddie Dixon. In the seventies, during James’ presidency at Antioch College, Charles was put on the Antioch Board of Trustees. Throughout Dixon’s tenure beginning in 1959, the president had helped grow Antioch College into Antioch University with undergraduate and graduate campuses all over the country.  In 1975, his idea of changing one campus into an “international network” of campuses was quite controversial. As chairman of the board’s special committee on finance and management, Charles supported Dixon’s vision.

The Hatchers enjoyed success in their years in Yellow Springs, which gave them the opportunity to expand their experiences.  They purchased 250 acres of woods and farmland in southeastern Ohio.  They put a mobile home on the property and would go there on the weekends.  They loved hiking the woods.  They raised Black Angus cows for a while and later grew Christmas trees and a peach orchard on the land.  They traveled extensively, across the country and abroad.  In 1967, after Laura had graduated from high school, Charles and Elizabeth moved to an old house they had restored on fourteen acres between Yellow Springs and Xenia.  They filled it with the antiques they had collected through the years.

In 1987, two years after Charles retired from Vernay, he and Elizabeth moved back to Cincinnati.  They purchased a two-family home in Hyde Park, lived in half the house and rented out the rest.  They were there some years until they became independent living residents at the Deupree House, also in Hyde Park.  Charles passed away there in 2007.

At this writing, Elizabeth, age 98, resides at Hyde Park’s Marjorie P Lee Episcopal Home.  One woman who cares for Elizabeth also cared for Elizabeth’s father, Reverend Edmund H Oxley, at the same Episcopal home where he died in 1972 at age 92.

*Source: Charles B. Hatcher*

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