
Presentation to Community Unity:

US civil rights activist Amelia Boynton Robinson

Presented by Carol Smith on February 14, 2008

Fun Fact Question: George Washington Carver was (*choose one*)

- a. an agricultural chemist
- b. a famous black man whose birthplace is a national monument
- c. an important contributor to the 19th & 20th century American economy

With a monument in Selma, Alabama, describing her as a mother of the civil rights movement, Amelia Boynton Robinson has been working for the cause since she was ten years old, according to Carol Smith. Smith met Amelia, as everyone calls her, when Smith served as her escort during a 2001 protest of a public hospital closing in Washington, DC. She was so impressed with this dynamic woman, soon to be 97 years old, that she is on a campaign to make more people aware of Amelia and the part she has played for 80+ years.

Descended from both free African-Americans and slaves, from Native Americans and Germans, Amelia has lived by the motto of making friends of all races and loving those who oppress or hate. Her parents were businesspeople and travelers. Though Amelia herself lived most of her life in Selma, Alabama, she continues to travel around the world as the vice chairwomen of the Schiller Institute, working for economic justice and to end racism and poverty.

A Tuskegee graduate, Amelia was influenced by the philosophy of Booker T. Washington. George Washington Carver was a personal friend and godfather to her first child. In 1930 she married Samuel William Boynton and together for 50 years they worked to register black voters in Selma. Smith described them as "Mr. & Mrs. Civil Liberties." Amelia first met Coretta and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1954. King himself was reluctant to come to Selma in the early '60s because of its racist reputation. Amelia, always undaunted, went on to become the first black woman ever to run for Congress in Alabama, and the first woman, black or white, to run on the Democratic ticket in the state. She continued to push voter registration with her slogan "A Voteless People is a Hopeless People." Pursuing this in March, 1965, she helped organize the 50-mile protest march from Selma to Montgomery. It is known as the Bloody Sunday March because Governor George Wallace's Alabama state troopers beat and gassed the marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The local sheriff then refused to call ambulances. Amelia too was prominently beaten and gassed, which Smith said ruined her once beautiful singing voice. A special monument now stands in Selma with Amelia's image and that of Marie Foster on it with the words "Mothers of the Civil Rights Movement—Before and Beyond the Bridge."

Amelia did move beyond the bridge, as she tells in her autobiography entitled *Bridge Across Jordan*. She remained active in Selma until the mid-70s, working for national causes such as the Resurrection City protest in Washington, DC and the peace movement, and local issues of

getting black people on the ballot, promoting senior citizen subsidized housing and helping start businesses for people who lost their jobs for protesting or registering to vote. In 1990 she was awarded the Martin Luther King Freedom Medal. Also in the '90s, the play she wrote in 1936, "*Down Thru the Years*" (performed in 1936 to raise money for a community center) was performed again. It was based on her ancestors' success over slavery. In 2000, just short of 90 years old, Amelia spoke to the National Press Club about how the Voting Rights Act, that she had worked so hard to achieve in 1965, was still under assault. Now approaching her 97th birthday, Amelia Boynton Robinson continues to travel the world describing her lifelong struggle for social and economic justice. In fact, she just returned home after a two month trip to Denmark, Sweden, Italy, and Germany.

Last year, the mayor of Tuskegee declared Feb. 18th - Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson Day. In accepting the award, Amelia pledged her continued inspiration and motivation, especially to America's youth, "For as long as I have breath." Today, Amelia and the Schiller Institute's focus is the economic and financial crisis manifesting itself in the housing and subprime mortgage meltdown. They are promoting a solution to the crisis with the proposed Homeowners and Bank Protection Act (the Firewall Bill) based on what FDR did in the 1930's to deal with the Depression.

Carol Smith is available to discuss Amelia and the Schiller Institute's work with any interested group or individual at 812 968-4046.

Fun Fact answer: Actually a, b and c are all correct! George Washington Carver, a personal friend of Amelia Boynton, was an African-American agricultural chemist, whose work on soil improvement, crop diversity, and new products from peanuts, soybeans, sweet potatoes and cotton, greatly enhanced the economy of the US, particularly in the South.