

‘Prof’ McNeill was proponent of school, sports

by Elizabeth S. Kemp

William McKinley McNeill was a local instructor who taught at the Redstone High School. He began teaching there in the mid-1930s. Better known as “Prof” by his students, he wore many hats. McNeill taught math, chemistry, physics and physical education.

He coached three sports – football, basketball and baseball – and served as assistant principal when Dr. John H. Hayswood had to be away from school. McNeill arrived at school at 7:30 a.m. and usually left around 6 in the evening.

McNeill graduated from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte with a degree in science and math. He taught his math and science classes with a zeal that was enjoyed by most of the students. Early in each school year students learned to solve formulas and do lab work. The courses were made interesting by using a hands-on approach.

McNeill had a zest for learning, so in the mid-1940s he enrolled in the graduate summer school program at the University of Michigan. It should be stated that in those days not many black people attended the University of Michigan. One had to be an exceptional student. McNeill studied summers there until he received a master’s degree in education with a concentration in math.

At the same time, McNeill continued teaching at Redstone High School. One often wondered just how he was able to succeed in so many activities at the same time.



William McKinley McNeill

When those students played out of town, Redstone used the field there. The audiences were integrated because boys of both teams enjoyed watching each other play the games.

Debating team excels

“Prof” McNeill loved students and sports. He was interested in seeing boys and girls excel in athletics as well as receiving an all-around good education. To that end, he organized a debating team

among interested students. One year Redstone students won first place in the North Carolina Debating Society held at A&T State University in Greensboro. “Prof” McNeill was proud of his students who had listened to his instructions and practiced hard to reach first place within the contest.

Each year outstanding students in the junior class had to prepare and write speeches for an oratorical contest. The contest had visiting judges to select the best speakers, who won prizes. McNeill taught the students how to select a topic, write a speech, memorize and deliver it before an audience.

No gym at Redstone

In those days, Redstone High School had no gym. Basketball games were played on an outdoor court. Whenever it rained, games could not be played. All sports practices were held after school. Football and baseball games were different because Redstone shared the local city ball field with Lumberton High School students.

Raising funds for sports

Professor McNeill gave generously of his time, skills and finances. In those days the school did not have an athletic budget as schools do today. McNeill kept a running account at Clark’s Sporting Goods Store in Fayetteville. The account was in his name, but many of the teachers helped him to sponsor fund-raisers to pay the bills for athletic equipment for

the boys and girls to play sports. Some teachers helped McNeill raise money so that Redstone could rank with the other high schools in nearby towns.

Since the school had no buses for transportation to and from games, McNeill had to rent them. He spent so much of his personal money on school activities that he stated he hated to see income tax time come around, because that was when his wife would find out just how much he had spent on school activities. Needless to say, she was not always pleased, but went along with him because she realized how much he loved what he was doing for black children within the Lumberton School District.

Redstone was a small school with about 500 students in those years, but the teachers were dedicated so that students felt proud and excelled against many hardships. William McKinley McNeill, along with John H. Hayswood, caused students to have that reputation. The students held him in high esteem.

McNeill regarded Dr. John H. Hayswood as his mentor. He had attended Johnson C. Smith at Hayswood's urging. Upon graduating he was invited to teach in the school where he graduated.

Being married to Inez McNeill, a first-grade teacher at Knuckles in South Lumberton, was a plus for William McKinley McNeill. They both devoted their lives to improving the lives of children. Although they did not have children of their own, they educated several nephews and nieces, children of their sister, Robie French. The children were Lee, Edward and Vashti French.

McNeill had also studied business administration at the University of Chicago. He put that training to use by owning a grocery store and a farm. He delegated other people to run those businesses for him.

Hayswood principal

It is noteworthy to state that William McKinley McNeill became principal of J. H. Hayswood High School, a newly constructed school, in 1949. His mentor, Dr. Hayswood, retired and the Lumberton School Board appointed him principal.

At the Hayswood School, his students had the first indoor gym. McNeill was able to hire coaches and other teachers to do many of the activities that he had once done alone. McNeill served as principal from 1949 until his death in 1964.

McNeill was a member of First Baptist Church on East Second Street in Lumberton, where

Dr. E.B. Turner is pastor. He served at various times as superintendent of Sunday school, church clerk, treasurer, deacon, trustee and chairman of the Scholarship Committee. In 1958 he was named Man of the Year by the men of First Baptist Church.

Active in many civic activities, McNeill was a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, a Mason, and was a member of the credit union and other state teachers' organizations.

Each year former Redstone and Hayswood students return in August to a school reunion in Lumberton where they gather to reminisce and honor the memories of William McKinley McNeill and his mentor, John H. Hayswood. Class members lay a wreath on each grave.

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William McKinley McNeill with his wife Inez