



Dr. Piper Center for Social Services, Inc.

The Biography of DR. ELLA MAE PIPER March 8, 1884 – June 13, 1954

Dr. Ella Mae Piper was born in Brunswick; Georgia (near the Florida line) March 8; 1884; the only daughter of Ned Bailer and Sarah Williams. Mrs. Piper died on June 13. 1954.

Dr. Ella Piper was a well-known civic worker and businesswoman, who established the first Beauty parlor and chiropody office in Fort Myers 69 years ago. She attended Spellman College in Atlanta, Georgia and graduated from Rohrer's world-famous Institute of Beauty Culture located in New York City. She graduated August 25. 1915. Her name then was Ella M. Jones. She majored in body massage and Swedish movements and was a well known Chiropodist (foot doctor). She arrived in Fort Myers in 1915 where she opened her first beauty shop located on Jackson

Street across from Englehart's Mortuary. Later the beauty shop was moved to Hendry Street where she also began the practice of Chiropody. In 1916, Dr. piper moved her business to 1819 Evans Avenue near her home. She also owned the Big 4 Bottling Company located on Mango and Evans. The community enjoyed Big 4 soft drinks for five cents a bottle.

Dr. Ella Piper held annual Christmas tree parties for children of Dunbar Heights. Her mother, Sarah Williams, started this event in 1915 while employed in the H. E. Heitman home. Thus began an institute over the years that grew from an original gathering of 15 little girls to some 600 boys and girls who romped over her lawn at 1771 Evans Avenue every December 25th.

When Dr. Piper's mother died in 1926, Dr, Piper carried on the Annual Christmas Party with the assistance of many churches, businesses, and many community friends who assisted with contributions and gifts for the youngsters. The annual Christmas Tree Party has continued uninterrupted since Dr. Piper's death through the faithful efforts of local citizens.

In Dunbar Heights, she was a Grand Lodge Officer and Executive Board member for 26 years of the Elks Lodge. She also served as a state officer. She was the founder of the Tranquillo Temple and

organized the Triple City Council and served as Deputy of the District. She was a member of Mt. Olive Church and the Pioneer's Club. She assisted in building the Old Dunbar School in 1926.

Dr. Ella Piper was known as a philanthropist. She was instrumental in helping young people in obtaining scholarships to attend Tuskegee College, using her personal money to help some of these students. Dr. Ella Piper was well known throughout the community and often aided elderly persons, particularly the underprivileged and handicapped. It was this interest, along with the interest of children that led her to leave her property to the City of Fort Myers for the benefit of "young children and senior citizens".

History

In December 1974, city officials were approached by a group of interested citizens about the possibility of establishing a senior center. These citizens had two primary concerns: they were aware that a number of persons over 60 were not having basic needs adequately met; and that the Ella Piper property might be available for use as a senior center. This group later became the Board of Directors of the Dr. Ella Piper Center, Inc. and received permission to use the property. The organization was incorporated on June 24, 1975 and an election of officers of the Board of Directors was held. Funding began November 15, 1975 through the Department

of Health and Rehabilitation Services under Title 111 of the Older Americans Act and Title XX of the Social Security Act. Local match money was allocated by the City of Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency in its plans for housing assistance under

Section 105 (a) (2) and (8) of Public Law 93-383 Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. In January 1976, an application was made for Title X funding under the Economic

Development Act to make possible home maintenance services beginning in April 1976 and continued until the end of available funding. Inspection of the original residence of the late Dr. Ella Piper disclosed structural problems that caused the city to decide to construct a new building rather than remodel the old house as originally planned. Construction began on the new building in March 1976 and was completed in May 1976. Services were formerly transferred to the new building at the dedication held on June 27, 1976.

The center began operating as a congregate meal site in June 1976 in cooperation with the program operated by the Lee County School Board. In 1981, the Dr. Ella Piper Center became the countywide provider for congregate meals with 13 sites. In 1982, the center further enlarged its nutrition Program to provide home-delivered meals in areas not serviced by the local Meals-on-Wheels program.

The Dr. Ella Piper Center is a multi-purpose center. The goal of the center is to provide services, which meet the basic human needs, enrich the daily lives, and enhance the independent life style of elders; as well as services that impact the lives of children with special needs and at risk youth.

A Rebel Spirit with A Heart

Ella Piper lived far beyond the bounds of other blacks and women of her day.

Decades before civil rights and women's rights became part of America's Vernacular, Piper was a successful businesswoman and landowner. She opened Fort Myers first Beauty Salon in the 1920s catering to the ladies of local white society, and developed other business interests that made her a wealthy woman.

"She had what I like to call a Rebel Spirit," said Vivian Hill, A Franklin Park Elementary School Teacher who has researched Piper. "She was the type that would show many people, "if I can do it, you can do it."

But Piper is not remembered for her money or her ability to cross the color line. Nearly 35 years after her death, "Dr. Ella" is remembered for her giving spirit.

"She helped in that quiet kind of way, meeting the simple needs of people," said Ray Jackson Executive Director at the Dr. Ella Piper Center, an Elderly Services Agency established on the property that Dr. Piper left to the City of Fort Myers when she died in 1954 at the age of 70.

For instance, a family fallen on hard times might wake up to find groceries on the doorstep or a couple celebrating many years of Marriage would have their anniversary party financed by Piper.

Mary Ware remembers that when her oldest son, Walter was ready to go off to College, Piper gave him so much clothing that he was able to share with other students.

"She was just down to earth," said Ware, 79. "She was a beautiful lady in looks and her dealing with you. She loved her people."

Many details of Piper's life are sketchy. She's scarcely mentioned in Fort Myers History Books. And although her old photo album now resides in the Fort Myers Historical Museum, most of the pictures aren't marked, offering few clues about her life. What is known is that she was born March 8, 1884, in Brunswick, GA., The daughter of Ned Bailer and Sarah Williams. Little is known about Bailer except his name; much more is known about Piper's mother who worked in her later years as a domestic for a white Fort Myers family. Her mother helped pay for Piper's education at Spellman College in Atlanta and later at Professor Rohrer's World famous Institute of Beauty Culture in New York City. Piper studied as a Beautician and a Chiropodist—meaning she cared for feet, hence her title as a Doctor.

Sometime after her graduation in 1915, Piper opened a Beauty Shop in New York City, Hill said. She also began spending the summers in her mother's Fort Myers home, which stood where the Dairy Queen on South Cleveland Avenue now stands. During those summers, Piper rented a beauty shop on Jackson Street, Hill said.

Dr. Piper's customers weren't the black women of Fort Myers; her services were beyond their pocketbooks. Instead, many of her clients were wealthy white women. Including the wives of Inventors Thomas Edison and Henry Ford.

Mary Ware remembers working in Piper's shop as a young girl, sweeping up on Saturdays. "She was always ready to help the less fortunate," Ware said, "But she made her money with the white people."

She poured much of her money back into the community at large by helping to finance such buildings as the Black Hospital—Jones

Walker Hospital—and Williams Academy, a local black public school, Hill said. She carried on a tradition started by her mother in 1915, one that still continues today – The Annual Christmas Party. Hundreds of children annually gathered at Dr. Piper's home on Evans Avenue to collect gifts, sing carols and hear the story of Christ's Birth.

Dr. Piper and her husband, Frank S. Piper, bought the property on Evans Avenue in 1925. Soon after, they built her permanent beauty shop and their home on the land.

Around this time, Piper filed for and received the state permission to function as a free dealer. That meant she could buy and sell property and conduct business without her husband's approval. It was a right not many women—white or black—exercised at the time.

In addition to her salon, Piper also owned the Big Four Bottling Company in Fort Myers, which bottled soda and sold it for 4 cents a serving, Hill said. She also was one of the first women to own an automobile in Fort Myers and had a chauffeur, Hill said.

"She was a kind of pioneer both socially and financially," said Patricia Bartlet, Executive Director of the Fort Myers Historical Museum.

Dr. Piper died of a stroke on June 13, 1954.

In her will, she left her property to the city of Fort Myers, to be used for children, the poor and the elderly. The city chooses to use it for the elderly, building The Dr. Ella Piper Center there in 1976.

"From what I know of her spirit, her concern for people in general," Jackson said, "I think she would have appreciated the good we've done with the property."

This is a copy of an article in the news press by Suzanne D. Jeffries

Date Not On Article. Should be 1988 or 1989. Died 1954. Article is "nearly 35 years after her death."

For more information visit www.DrPiperCenter.org