

Looking back with Miss Amy

This is a series of articles on the memories of Miss Amy Bailey — woman, teacher, friend, family planning advocate and one of the 'then' movers and shakers of the Jamaican society who, now in the best years of her life, still has much more to offer.

By Yvonne Grinam

At 94 years of age, Amy Bailey has lived longer than most women. And she has seen a lot in her lifetime. She has seen the first black Jamaican girls work as tellers in Jamaican banks at a time when this was taboo, she has seen the devastating convulsions of two major World Wars and the comparatively minor political tremors at home in the 1930s.

Yes, she has seen changes and she herself has been an active participant and sometimes architect of these changes, particularly as they affect women here.

As a woman, Miss Amy has endured the pains and the heartaches that most women feel. She has never been married, neither has she mothered a child, but she has been a confidante and mother to thousands of young people who have passed through her life and hands as a teacher.

Born in 1895, Miss Amy was trained as a teacher, as were her other sisters. But she used her training as a teacher to branch out into other areas, which has benefitted not only herself but her fel-

low men and women.

"I was born in 1895 in Manchester, the fifth of eight children. Five of my six sisters were teachers and two of them were the first two blacks to have gone to Wolmer's in 1905.

"Why did we all go into teaching? Well, my dear, in those days there was nothing else for young, black girls to do. Some did become telephone operators, some became store clerks; but my Dad saw that as a catch, so he urged us towards teaching.

First teaching job

"For two years after leaving college, because of my illness" (she was afflicted with severe dysmenorrhoea) "I couldn't really be very active so I stayed at home and while I was there I taught myself book-keeping, accounts and commercial work.

"Shortly afterwards, I got a teaching job. I started teaching at the Kingston Technical High School in January 1920 and left there after a very long time.

"Apart from teaching, I developed an interest in politics and social work, and myself and May Farquharson started the Save the Children Fund in 1938. I had a deep interest in children and women.

"I used to go into the market just to look at people and I saw that the black girls and women — and men also — were at a disadvantage. Back in those days I remember the black men did not want the black women because they wanted to 'lift up' their children. This was in the



1930s. Amy Bailey

"At school, I would teach them short-hand and commercial skills but when they went out the commercial world did not want them. The banks, the Civil Service didn't want them. I taught them and they were taught well".

(One of the many students who came under Miss Amy tutelage was Editor Emeritus of the *Gleaner* Theodore Sealy whom she taught short-hand).

"The young people were frustrated but I used to urge them to be prepared. I used to write lots of articles to the newspaper about their frustration and the general situation and people began talking about it.

"I remember going into a store and the manager saying to me, 'But what you writing about, we have black girls'. I asked him, 'Where are they?' He said, 'They're upstairs'. And I asked him, 'Why can't they be downstairs in the front, serving me?'

"Of course, he said to me that the brown girls don't want to associate with the others. I told him that as a matter of fact I want to see everyone downstairs serving — all colours as long as they have the ability.

Civil Service

"Don't get the feeling that I don't like whites or whatever. I like all

kinds of people but at the time it was the principle of the thing.

"We eventually got the Civil Service and the banks to start hiring blacks. I remember how it happened; with me talking to Governor Denham when he came to visit Kingston Technical one day. After I told him how disgruntled the young people were after they left school and could not work at what they were taught, he promised that something would change.

"Everyone thought that the Principal, Dr. Harris, was going to trounce me when he called me to his office.

"But I told him, as Shakespeare had written, 'there is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune'. I told him that I saw that tide and I took it.

"In the end, a committee was set up and an arrangement was made for all Technical School students to take the Civil Service exams. This was 1938-39.

"From this they began taking them into banks and then businesses. Now times are different and I felt really proud that I was able to do it for the students. I didn't do it for myself because I got nothing out of it.

"One thing I stressed to them" (her students) "was that their work and behaviour patterns had to be good."

Miss Amy has made contributions to family planning, housecraft training for young women and many other areas.