

George Clem: Professor, Intellectual

The following column is a special part of the continuing series on leading members of the Greeneville black community. This one is about George Wilson Clem, who in his relatively short life became an outstanding educator and community leader. The George Clem School was named in his honor. This weekend, Homecoming '86 activities in the black community will include a wreath-laying at Clem's grave.

By MARY BROWNLOW

George Wilson Clem was an intellectual. His goal in life was to succeed for others, that they might become successful.

Charles Sumner and Lula Wilson Clem were born in Greeneville, and became the proud parents of a daughter, Ruth, and a son, George.

George Clem was born May 3, 1908 in Greeneville at 126 Pearl Street. The original brick house has been replaced with a new brick home owned by Mrs. Jack (Charicey) Bowers. His father was a well-known brick mason and his grandfather, also named George Clem, owned and operated a brick kiln. His sister, Ruth Johnson, was a school teacher for some 50 years. She lives in Johnson City today.

George Clem was a member of the AME Zion Church.

He attended Greeneville College High School. A lover of books, he spent much of his time reading. An obedient youngster, he enjoyed playing the ukelele. He also played some football.

As a young man, George was employed by the late Quincy Marshall O'Keefe, former editor of *The Greeneville Sun* and mother of the late *Sun* Publisher Mrs. E. O. Susong.

Mrs. O'Keefe showed considerable interest in his development and provided opportunities for him to read from her own library. She also bought other books for young George, which they would discuss together at great length.

It is said George Clem read every book in the O'Keefe library. From the beginning he was particularly interested in literature concerning education and the philosophy of education.

George was an excellent student. He graduated as salutatorian of his class.

He attended Tennessee A&I and graduated as valedictorian of his class, with a Bachelor of Science degree. His first teaching job was in Lebanon, Va., where he received the nickname of "Professor." He then went to Ohio State University to earn a Master of Arts degree.

George's schooling was cut short because his father became ill. He came home to care for his parents.

He was married to Dorothy



GEORGE CLEM
"The Professor"

Leovell of Kentucky. She was a classmate at A&I.

Sometime after he returned home, he taught at Pruitt Hill School and then at the Greeneville College High School, where he served as principal.

The school operated in two buildings: a Recitation Building, where regular classes were held, and an Assembly Hall, where chapel and devotional services were held. The Recitation Building was a concrete block structure, and the Assembly Hall was a brick structure.

In 1937, the transition from a two-year high school to a four-year high school was begun under Clem's direction. In 1938 the transformation was completed, and the school became an accredited four-year high school.

More grades meant more work for Prof. Clem, but he was willing, for his aim was "a greater school for his people."

Prof. Clem personally conducted spelling bees and prepared the young people for the contests, some of which took place as far away as Nashville.

Especially talented in dramatics, he prepared many productions and presented them throughout Greene County. The Greeneville College High School, and the teachers themselves, performed productions for each grade level. They were acclaimed as "outstanding."

Prof. Clem began an in-service program in the school. This involved meeting monthly with the teachers, reviewing books, studying the latest teaching trends, discussing ways a better education could be given to the children.

Prof. Clem emphasized and enforced a physical education program, which meant even more programs and activities.

Before the state made possible the hot lunch program for the school, Prof. Clem himself began a hot lunch program, and the teachers took a week about preparing the meals. He was so enthusiastic about the progress of the school that he passed his enthusiasm on to others. His motto seemed to be "Onward Together."

During Prof. Clem's time there were "Blue Ribbon Parades" in which the students received their health shots for the year, and Pet Dairy provided "Brown Mules" when the parades were over.

Prof. Clem instituted methods of instruction and advanced ideas that were considered ahead of his time.

Together with his wife, also an educator, he worked diligently toward the goal of providing for the Negro students of Greeneville and Greene County an education equal to that of their counterparts. He died, probably of meningitis, while working to make that goal a reality.

In recognizing of his outstanding contributions and as a final tribute



RUTH JOHNSON
George's Sister

to a remarkable man, the mayor of Greeneville and the Board of Aldermen decided to rename the town's Negro high school in honor of Prof. Clem. This was done in 1939, when Mrs. Clem was principal.

The modern brick building that stands today on Floral Street was not erected until the 1950s. It continued to serve as the school building for the Negro students of Greeneville and Greene County until its students were distributed throughout the city and county schools in 1966.

Today the George Clem building houses the main offices of the superintendent of City Schools and the Headstart Program.

A memorial service was conducted in honor of Prof. Clem in the school on Nov. 13, 1964, with an unveiling of his picture to be placed in the school.