Taylor-Hicks Family — One of the Largest In The United States

Some 1,000 descendants branch out from original families in Northumberland and Brunswick Counties in Virginia and include actors, lawyers, doctors, writers, and just plain folks from all walks of life

By Elizabeth Murphy Oliver
City Editor

The Taylor - Hicks Family reunion held in Baltimore, May 11 - 13, brought over 500 descendants of that family from "near and far" for a weekend of visiting, renewing old acquaintances and a final banquet and church service. The family springs from Lunenburg and Brunswick Counties, Virginia.

However, that was not all. It was revealed at the banquet that the 500 present "are only the beginning."

James Bridgeforth, the postmaster at Baltimore's Druid Station, disclosed that the Taylor - Hicks Family is in reality "the largest in the nation."

He offered as proof a 6 - page story from a magazine published in 1977 which told of over 3,300 members.

The research done over 14 years by Mrs. Thelma Doswell, - a Washington D.C. special education teacher, states that she has traced the forebears back to 1725.

He'll be here next time

BILL COSBY, a native of Philadelphia, Pa. and member of the Taylor - Hicks family, will be present when the entire clan from across the nation, over 1,000 members will assemble in Baltimore. Bill Cosby, one of the most prominent of black TV, motion picture and stage stars, is "a cousin on the Gee family branch" and from the Morgans and the Bridgeforths side. The next Taylor - Hicks family reunion is set for "sometime around Thanksgiving" in Baltimore. For information relatives may send letters to Mrs. Bettye Shell Graves, 3713 Barrington Rd., Baltimore, Md. 21217.

Her research deals with the lineage of the Blackwell family and through her own three generations of the family, her son Cosby and grandson Stephon, she has interviewed numerous relatives.

Here is a brief account from EBONY Magazine, June, 1977, which clearly shows the family from the Virginia counties of the Taylor - Hicks families — Lunenburg and Brunswick Counties.

In addition, when you look at the list of the guests printed today from the register of the book of the Baltimore reunion, you see the Blackwells, and the other branches Mrs. Doswell mentions.

(EBONY, JUNE, 1977)

In 1735, Ama, a woman of the Soninke tribe of what is now Senegal, was bought as a slave at a public auction by James Glenn Blackwell of Yorktown, Va.

Ama's daughter, Tab, married Jack, an Ashanti who had been brought to Virginia in the middle of the 18th century.

Eleven generations later, in her Hyattsville, Md. home, Mrs. Doswell proudly unveils a 9 - by - 12 ft. oil - on - canvas Blackwell family tree listing every relative (including distant cousin Arthur Ashe) from Ama to those born as late as October, 1971.

"I was at a family reunion in 1957, and about 150 relatives were milling around the house," Mrs. Doswell recalls.

"There were quite a few people that I didn't know. We'd walk up to each other and ask "Who are you and who are your parents?" On the way home I told my mother I wanted to know how all these people were related to her."

The next day, Mrs. Doswell went to Lunenburg County, Va., where she was born, to visit her mother's mother.

As the old woman rocked in her chair, she spoke of Mrs. Doswell's great grandfather and his 26 children by two marriages.

Fascinated, Mrs. Doswell interviewed other family members and obtained many names and dates of births, deaths and marriages and information about where they lived and worked.

Then began a long, complex, time - consuming search through court records in six Virginia counties. She hand - copied wills, birth and death certificates, receipts, manumission records, church membership rosters, and countless other documents.

She visited the state archives in Richmond to find any documents relating to her ancestors and the family that owned (and perhaps mated with) them.

Mrs. Doswell was able to decipher more than the rudimentary when - born, when - died information.

Manumission records, which legally documented freed slaves, provided physical descriptions of each man, woman and child.

Other records listed occupations and indicated monetary value of slaves. She discovered that African tribal names were passed from generation to generation when parents gave their offspring African names in addition to Anglo names.

"This research told me there are four races of people in my background," says Mrs. Doswell, a genealogist certified since 1971 by the Board for Certification of Genealogists. "There were the Africans, the Europeans, the American - born people and the Indians."

Mrs. Doswell has copyrights on two family trees, a family coat - of - arms of the black members of the Blackwell family, various poems and other writings. A copyright on the family flag, which she designed, is pending.)

COSBY AND ASHE

Mrs. Bettye Graves, one of the natives of Brunswick County, Va. now a teacher of 35 years service in the Baltimore schools, also gives more on the Blackwell - Taylor - Hicks - Bridgeforth Connection "which I know full well," she accents.

The entire family will be gathered by Mrs. Graves in Baltimore "sometime around Thanksgiving" and her cousin from Philadelphia, Pa., the famed Bill Cosby (they're still very close) will certainly be there, she adds.

Mrs Graves also notes Arthur Ashe the famed tennis pro, is from South Hill, Va., the Morgan Branch of the family.

Bill Cosby and Mrs. Graves have often talked about it, she notes.

Therefore, with the help of the AFRO and other newspapers in Virginia, Mrs. Graves expects the family will arrive in Baltimore "by the thousands" in the late Autumn.

"Once the news gets on the family grapevine, they'll suddenly appear," she states.

The family is certainly distinguished.

For example, one of the sixth generation of those present at the Baltimore reunion is Joseph Reid who graduated from Harvard University Law School June 8, 1979.

His brother, Vernon Reid, a student at the Naval Academy when he was 17, was graduated from Indiana University and is now a bond specialist in Baltimore.

James Lokeman, age 11, is graduating from Gist Elementary School in June Sister Kathi Reid is getting a masters degree at Georgia University.

The four are children of Mrs. Ardelia Reid Lokeman and the late Vernon Reid. Their stepfather is James Lokeman.

THE BANQUET

BUT BACK to the gathering of the more than 500 Taylor - Hicks Family in Baltimore, the program at the final banquet at the Pikesville Hilton Hotel was a brilliant affair, a seated dinner from "soup to nuts", and dancing until "the wee hours", an occasion befitting such a distinguished family. Mrs. Etta Davis of Baltimore presided.

The printed program cover page held the drawing of the family tree. The original was presented to the oldest member present, Stanley Taylor, age 70 who by the way was accompanied from New York by four generations of the Taylor men, his direct kin.

Mr. Taylor also received the AFRO citation for the family "which springs from Lunenburg and Brunswick Counties, Virginia," from AFRO City Editor Elizabeth M. Oliver. A major branch office of the AFRO chain is in Richmond, Va.

The Family Tree contains as one of the branches the Blackwell Family of whom Mrs. Doswell speaks in her research.

The tree was originally designed by Elsie Johnson of Philadelphia, one of the younger members of the Taylor - Hicks descendants.

Welcome was given by Ganntt Holt and the family history by Mrs. Mae Fortune who later in the evening was cited as the "Mother Figure".

The Bridge of Memories was led by Mrs. Grace Taylor and the Candle Light Parade of descendants of the deceased members preceded the prayer by the Rev. Marshall Strickland, pastor, Pennsylvania AME Zion Church.

A silent prayer was followed by the songs of all the youngest members.

Tributes went to Hattie Mae Hicks Langley who reared 22 children, Sophia Taylor Hansaid and Mrs. Fortune from Mrs. Ardelia Lokeman, Edith Watkins and Ann Holt.

Special recognition went to Stanley Taylor, the oldest and Jerome Harrison, 3 - year - old - son of Herbert and Lillian Harrison of New York.

WE'RE ALL ONE

Mrs. Gertrude Blackwell Bailey, noted poetess and author of three books, a native of Meredithsville, Brunswick County, Va., read her poem dedicated to the family.

The poem contained in "If Words Could Free Us" book is in its 8th printing. She is the daughter of Gertrude and Frank Blackwell.

Mrs. Bailey summed up the reunion, "We're all one family. We have the same blood running in our veins. We have a history of making it. We are all examples to our race and our nation."

The salute to the family's "Unsung Heroes", John C. Taylor, Marshall Moore and Samuel Hicks; outline their many contributions and was given by Eric Taylor, Louise Wallace and Hattie Waters.

The tone for the gaiety of the evening was set by Mrs Sallie Robinson who set the guests to rocking and clapping as she sang, "We're Groovy, Downhome People."

Avorn Davis was accompanied by Mrs. Seong Kuk Kim as he sang "Keep the Faith".

The Taylor - Hicks Youth Group sang "Getting to Know You". Grace was by Mrs. Marie Jennings and the Rev. Mr. Strickland.

Hostesses, all members of the family, included Chere Johnson, Faith Johnson, Mary Johnson, Nancy Gibbs, Jeanna Boyd, Charlean Harris, Barbara Hill, Essie Powell, Patsy Frazier, Deanna Smith, Kathi Reid, Phyllis Boyd, Linda Carrington and Barbara Carrington.

Mrs. Fortune's history states the family began when Virginia was still a Colony in Brunswick County, Va. with the marriage of John C. Taylor and Betty Garland and when Charles Hicks married Sophia Hawthorne.

Mrs. Graves discloses other later members include the star Bill Cosby, one of the Gee - Branch and Mrs. Louise Gee Murphy, a Baltimore school principal; Mrs. Mable Ossaru Gee, Samuel Brewington, a school principal. Mrs. Murphy is the daughter of Mary and John Gee.

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OLDEST AND YOUNGEST — Stanley Taylor (second left) the oldest member of the Taylor-Hicks family at the reunion received the framed drawing of the Family Tree and also on behalf of the entire clan the AFRO citation presented by Elizabeth M. Oliver, City Editor. His wife is right. Far left is Mrs. Mae Fortune, daughter of Eliza Hicks Williams, who was named "The Mother Figure" since she and her mother welcomed and loved all family members through the years. The youngest person present at the Baltimore reunion is the cute tot, Jerome Harrison, age 3, who is the son of Herbert and Mrs. Lillian Harrison of New York.

FOUR GENERATIONS OF THE TAYLOR MEN include (L TO R) John C. Taylor, Baltimore, one of the 13 children of Hattie and Munford Taylor; Stanley Taylor, David Taylor, John C. Taylor Jr. and John C. Taylor III and Phillip Taylor, all of New York.

JAMES BRIDGEFORTH, head of the Baltimore Druid Hill Post Office, revealed his branch of the Taylor-Hicks family present at the celebration and reunion included these persons (L to R, kneeling) William Stith, Robin Bridgeforth, Selani Stith, Cheri Grade, Crab Watson. (L to R, standing, front row) James Grade, Ava Bridgeforth, Pearl Green, Ola Grade, Marie Williams, Arche Stith, Cecelia Norwood, Gwendolyn Watson, all of Baltimore; Mary Boyd, New York; Edith Brown, Roslyn Bridgeforth, James Bridgeforth (L to R, second row) Ernestine Bridgeforth, Joyce Bridgeforth, Leonard Bridgeforth, Clarese Stith, Tania Bridgeforth. (REAR) Ernestine Bridgeforth Stith, Marie Williams, Karen Webb, Andy Webb, all of Baltimore.