

No longer ... 'Lonely in the Rural South'

■ Once the subject of an *Ebony Magazine* article as the poorest family in Choctaw County, the Bishop children have succeeded despite the odds

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

YANTLEY — "You have to do something to become what you want to be," says Henry Bishop. "You have to get your education, and you have to work for it. My father taught us that."

It was the summer of 1967 when an *Ebony Magazine* reporter made his way down the dusty back roads of Choctaw County, bound for a 35-acre farm where 16-year-old Henry was helping to work the fields with his father. Hoping to catch a glimpse of the loneliness and hopelessness that seemed to exist within their generation during that time period, the reporter looked to Henry for insight into the heart of young black Americans in the rural Deep South.

When the reporter left Choctaw County, he took with him a perception of the South that would fill his writings with a sense of longing and loneliness — emotions he saw in Henry's eyes. His pen would reveal an unforgettable glimpse into the life of a family who had few material possessions, few modern amenities, even fewer avenues into the outside world — and what seemed to be little hope for a brighter future for their children.

When 'Lonely Youth in the Rural South' appeared in *Ebony Magazine* in August of that year, the struggles of the early days of the Civil Rights Movement had served to give black people in the South more rights. But times were still tough for poverty-stricken families who were struggling to survive.

James Bishop and his wife Bennett were sharecroppers in the Yantley area, living in the depths of poverty on land he rented for \$50 a year. To bring in a little income for his family, James drove a school bus for the Choctaw County School System. Along with his income from selling some of his produce, he brought home an annual income of less than \$1,000 a year.

For Henry and his 9 siblings, there seemed little to look forward to, little to dream about, little to hope for.

"It's hard here," young Henry told the *Ebony* reporter, "and there's nothing to do down here but work."

But Henry had dreams, dreams that included an education and a better life. It was a dream that was shared by his brothers and sisters — a hope that was implanted within them by their parents.

"I want to travel and do things," he told the reporter.

Opportunities for travel — or even going to college — might have seemed remote for the Bishop children. Their intense poverty might have seemed to rule out most options in the eyes of the world. But through the efforts of their parents, the children were taught to believe differently, to appreciate what they had, and to work hard for it.

"They said we were the poorest family in Choctaw County," says Henry's sister Peggy Bishop McCall. "But we didn't know we were poor."

"We didn't have any money," Henry adds. "But our father and mother

made sure we had what we needed. Whatever we ate, we grew. Everything we had were things we could make ourselves. We made our own corn meal, grease — we didn't buy anything. We didn't have to."

"They tried to give us food stamps, but Daddy just wouldn't accept it," says another sister, Prentella Bishop Jackson. "He just worked his 35 acres and did what he could to make it."

An important part of the Bishop family was their faith in God. Both James and Bennett placed much emphasis on church attendance and insisted that the children attend with them.

"My daddy was a deacon at Little Hope Baptist Church," says Peggy. "He made sure we went every Sunday, even when we were the only children there."

"We were taught to have faith," recalls Henry. "They taught us what was right, and I tried to do everything they taught me to do."

And when it came to school, James and Bennett were adamant that their children did their work, and did it well.

"When Daddy said something, he meant it," says Prentella. "When he told you something, you knew you had to do it. You better not come home with a bad grade."

Like most other children in the South during that era, life on the farm meant that everyone in the family pitched in to help. Henry, Prentella, Peggy, and the other siblings were expected to do their part, while also keeping up their grades at school.

"Our mom and dad made sure we were raised right," says Peggy. "We all had to work hard at home, and we had to go to school. They insisted on that."

The Bishop children agree that, although they rarely acknowledged it at the time, they eventually owed their futures to the lessons learned from their parents on that Choctaw County farm. They were lessons that would pave the way for each to pursue their own dreams.

And they did.

In 1968, shortly after the *Ebony Magazine* article appeared, Henry left Choctaw County, traveling to Illinois to pursue his. Because he was not yet 18, he found it difficult to find work, and returned to the county later that year.

"I drove a school bus with Dad for awhile," he recalls. "But I left again in '69, and I never moved back."

Henry joined the United States Marine Corp and served for 4 years. His service was a source of pride to his father who had served in the U.S. Army during World War II, earning the prestigious Silver Star.

After Henry left the military, he joined the workforce in Cleveland, went to college, and obtained his degree in computer programming.

Today, most of the other Bishop children are also college graduates, several with high-level degrees. Prompted by their parents' insistence on academic excellence in high school, most of the siblings attended college on academic scholarships. Although they are scattered now into several states, all have been successful in their own



Submitted photos
Henry Bishop was the focus of an *Ebony Magazine* article in August, 1967. He is pictured here just prior to his graduation that following spring.



James and Bennett Bishop were married in 1947. The couple raised 10 children on less than \$1,000 per year.



chosen fields.

The oldest of the siblings, Carrie, went on to become a teacher, and now lives in Atlanta. The second daughter Patricia, a former teacher and principal, attended Harvard University, earning her doctorate degree. She now lives in Greensburg, LA.

Diane, who is now deceased, earned her masters degree in business, and Lenora obtained her degree in cosmetology, while their brother Ank graduated from Lawson State Community College. He passed away in 1994.

The youngest of the Bishop daughters, Peggy, is now a minister in Shelby County, and James Jr., who passed away in July of last year, ran his own cleaning business in Birmingham for over 20 years. The baby of the family, Edward, who was born in 1970, now works for BFI.

The only one of the siblings who still lives in Choctaw County, Prentella, attended college classes in Thomasville and has worked as a substitute teacher in the Choctaw County school system.

Their father eventually attended college himself. The former bus driver earned his certificate in automotive mechanics and got a job working on school buses for the state.

In 1977, James and Bennett bought their own property and moved a few miles away from where they had farmed on rented acreage for more than 13 years.

James passed away in the late 1950's. In his memory, and in honor of his military service, he now has a brick bearing his name on the sidewalk leading up to the Choctaw County courthouse.

Bennett, now 82, still lives in their home on the property they purchased in 1977. She has since raised two of her grandchildren, including her grandson Derry, whom she adopted.

Now 56, Henry has been working for the national corporation Zircoa in Cleveland for more than 2 decades, where he is instrumental in the production of ceramics that are distributed for use by such companies as Corning, G.E.

and a host of others.

"I've been on my job 23 years, never missed a day in my life," he says. "No matter what, I always go to work. My dad taught me if you are going to do something, do the best you can."

True to his father's example of hard work and diligence, in addition to his high-level job at the factory Henry has recently begun his own towing business. A single parent, he is raising a teenage daughter alone — a daughter who is now the same age he was when he became the subject of the *Ebony Magazine* article in 1967.

But Henry says his daughter is being raised in a much different atmosphere than the world he grew up in. Her world has more opportunities and fewer struggles, more hope and less loneliness.

Yet the world where Henry grew up served to give him something that he is trying to instill into his daughter — a strong work ethic and the knowledge that dreams can come true.

Henry and his brothers and sisters still look back at their days on the farm as a time when life was hard and dreams seemed distant. But they also see it as a place where longing and loneliness might have continued into their adult lives, if not for the lessons taught them by their parents.

"My daddy was my hero," says Prentella. "I still think about him a lot. When I go to his grave, I tell him he's still my hero."

From the poorest family in Choctaw to successful teachers, businessmen, and ministers, the story of the Bishops is one of triumph over adversity, of determination over destitution, and it's one of parents who raised their children to work hard toward a better life despite it all.

And it's a story of children who, despite the



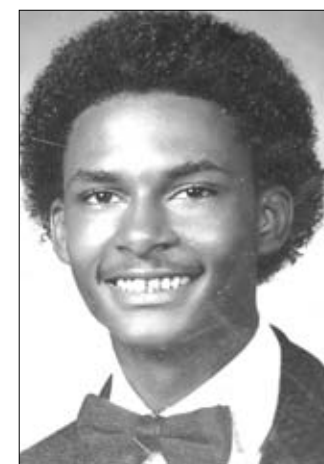
The oldest of the Bishop children, Carrie (pictured on left) went on to become a school teacher, while Patricia, right, earned her doctorate as is a retired teacher and principal.



Diane Bishop, left, now deceased, earned a masters in business. Lenora, right, got a degree in cosmetology.



Peggy Bishop McCall, left, is now a minister in Shelby County, AL, while the baby of the family, Edward, works for BFI.



Ank Bishop, left, passed away in 1994. He attended Lawson State Community College. RIGHT: James Bishop, Jr., who died last year, owned his own Birmingham business.



Prentella Bishop Jackson, left, is the only one of the siblings who still resides in Choctaw County. At right is the Bishop's adopted son, grandson Derry.

odds, grew up to no longer be 'Lonely Youth in the Rural South'.

"When my father died, one of my sisters said, 'Daddy, you don't have to worry. We'll get our education,'" Henry remembers. "And that's just what we did. It's what he

wanted us to do."
(ED. NOTE: The Choctaw Sun would like to thank Alabama Southern Community College for helping to secure a copy of the *Ebony Magazine* edition in which the 1967 article was published.)