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Miller, Nicholas, "2010 Adventist Historians' Conference: T.R.M. Howard" (2010). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 6.

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March 25, 2010

2010 Adventist Historians' Conference: T.R.M. Howard

Opening Dinner and Keynote Address

This is Nicholas Miller, blogging from Takoma Park about the [Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians](#) (ASDAH) meetings here at Washington Adventist University. We had a very enjoyable opening evening in the Sligo Church Fellowship Hall. After welcomes by Joan Francis, WAU history professor and President of the ASDAH and WAU president Weymouth Spence, Douglas Morgan, WAU history professor introduced the main speaker of the evening, Dr. David Beito, Professor of History at Alabama University. Dr. Beito is author of *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Struggle for Equal Rights and Economic Opportunity*. What follows is a highlight summary of the presentation, which covers the life and career of Adventist-educated Dr. T.R.M. Howard.

Summary

Who has heard of Medgar Evers, Fanny Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks? (Mostly all in audience.)

What about T.R.M. Howard? Largely overlooked. Died in 1976, with no mention in Time magazine or even Ebony.

There is a good argument that if it were not for Howard, we would never have heard of Evers, Hamer, or Parks.

Howard was widely known in the 1950s; Listed by Chicago Defender (leading black newspaper) 1955 Honor Roll, listed him number 1 as leading civil rights voice in Mississippi.

Howard was born in Murray Kentucky, in the 1910s. As a boy he got a job in local hospital where he worked for a white doctor, Dr. Mason, who was an SDA. Because of Dr. Mason's influence, Howard joined the SDA church as a boy; Mason helped Howard into Oakwood College. Howard took the white doctor's name as part of his own, hence the M initial in his name.

Howard appeared on cover of Oakwood yearbook; went on from Oakwood to Union College in Lincoln, NE, to complete undergraduate education. Wrote letters to Oakwood, 1929, complaining about some level of discrimination at Union, including eating in cafeteria separately.

Worked as a literature evangelist during time in school; had positive experiences at Union as well, but segregation began to develop in 1930 and 1931.

Won all the oratory contests at Union, went to a national convention, anti-saloon league, where he took top honors.

Earned MD degree in 1935 as the only black graduate from Loma Linda College of Medical Evangelists. Married Helen Howard in 1935, from black elite community.

First medical director at the Riverside Sanitarium in Nashville—the first black Adventist Sanitarium; then accepted a position in 1942 as chief surgeon at the Taborian Hospital in Mississippi; set up insurance companies for blacks, as well as health-care services.

Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) in 1955 created by Howard. This was the vehicle that brought Myrlie and Medgar Evers to public attention; Evers sold insurance in Howard's company, and promoted membership in NAACP.

Also, [Fannie Lou Hamer](#) attended Howard's regional meetings, her first exposure to civil rights activism.

Howard campaigns for enforcement of Brown v. Board; in governor's office refused to except separate but equal, demanded integrated school system. In response to governor's comment that "90% of blacks in Mississippi supported segregation,"

Howard said, “would you believe me if I told you that 90% of African Americans didn’t want to go to heaven.” Newspapers ran the headline that Howard called the governor a liar.

Involved in Emmitt Till murder case (Till was a young black man, murdered by southern white supremacists), Howard helped organize witnesses for the prosecution. When Till’s murderers were acquitted in the face of strong evidence, Howard went on a nation-wide lecture tour to stir up activism because of Till miscarriage of justice.

In Alabama, he was hosted in Montgomery by an unknown young pastor named Martin Luther King, Jr., where he spoke to an audience about the Till case. In the audience was Rosa Parks. Three days later, Parks made her famous decision to not give up her seat on the bus, which led to the Montgomery bus boycott. Parks later reported that she had Till in her mind when she refused to move from her seat.

Howard continued involvement with civil rights issues, but also continued his medical activities, and became an accomplished international big-game hunter. He helped Jessie Jackson get his political career off the ground, and Jackson preached the sermon at Howard’s funeral in 1976.

Howard was not one to dwell on his historic achievements, and he moved on to other projects. This in part explains his relative lack of recognition in recent times.


During the Q & A session, it was disclosed that Howard became somewhat distanced from the Adventist church after leaving Riverside Sanitarium, which was precipitated by some disagreements over administration. Still, Howard continued a connection with the church, presenting health segments at Adventist evangelistic campaigns into the 1960s, and supporting Oakwood College and LLU Medical School until his death.

The talk was supported and illustrated by a multitude of pictures and slides of Dr. Howard, his friends, and the locations of his activities. A recording of about three minutes of a speech he gave at Madison Square Garden on civil rights reforms was also played. It was a lively and well-received overview of an extraordinary and important life, shaped by Adventist education and, to some degree, sensibilities.

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