

Emanuel, Lillie Henrietta (1898–1976)

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Nathaniel G. Higgs, Ph.D., is a retired minister, educator, and administrator who worked forty-one years for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He is the son of Pauline Emanuel Higgs and the nephew of Lillie Henrietta Emanuel.

Lillie Henrietta Emanuel was an Oakwood College alumna and distinguished language arts professor, who worked in the Seventh-day Adventist educational system for 49 years.

Lillie Henrietta Emanuel, commonly known as

Henrietta Emanuel, was born on August 31, 1898, in Atlanta, Georgia. She was the oldest of three siblings born to Henry Emanuel and Ophelia Pauline Johnson. Ms. Emanuel was born Lillie Emanuel. Following the death of her father, she adopted the name Henrietta in his honor. Moreover, she also wanted to have a middle name in the same manner as her siblings and other relatives. Henrietta's parents operated a small business; her father was a tailor and her mother a seamstress. Anna Knight, the Adventist missionary, educator, and evangelist, studied the Bible with the Emanuel family. Subsequently, Ophelia and her daughters joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church on October 12, 1912. Henrietta, Pauline Elizabeth (her sister), and their mother remained faithful Seventh-day Adventists throughout their lives. Raymond, her brother, died in 1905 from a tragic fire-related accident. Her father remained a Christian Scientist until his premature death from malaria.¹

Henrietta was a voracious reader whose mental acumen and ability to recall exceeded her chronological age. In June of 1912 she completed the eighth grade in the public school system. Learning about an Adventist school in Huntsville, Alabama, Henrietta's mother sought to send her away to the Oakwood Manual Training School.



Lillie Henrietta Emanuel

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

When Henrietta applied for admission, she was denied for not meeting the age requirement. While she waited, Anna Knight and Phoebe Brooke (a white Adventist woman) tutored her in Latin and Greek, music, and physiology. Lillie received a great academic foundation. Henrietta took and passed the examinations and obtained her teaching certificate.²

In 1917 Emanuel taught for one year in the Madison County public school system in Georgia. Afterward she finally received her acceptance from Oakwood. Henrietta commenced her studies in the summer of 1918.³ From that time, Emanuel taught school and attended summer sessions at Oakwood, working toward her high school and junior college diploma, which she received in 1934.⁴ Beginning in 1918 Emanuel taught exclusively within the Adventist educational system. She taught in Savannah, Georgia; Orlando, West Palm Beach, Jacksonville, Fort Lauderdale, Miami, and Dania, Florida. In 1948 Emanuel earned the Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Oakwood College.⁵ Then in 1950 she accepted a call to be an instructor at Oakwood College in the English Department, where she taught until her retirement in 1967. There she taught grammar, Methods of Teaching English, Spanish, and literature.⁶ Emanuel taught all school levels: elementary, secondary, and higher education. Her career of teaching spanned fifty years (one year in public education and 49 years in Adventist education). In 1955 Emanuel received the Master of Arts degree from the Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City.⁷ On her retirement she was awarded the distinction of professor emeritus.⁸

Emanuel loved teaching the English language. She was very knowledgeable in literature. As children, Nathaniel Higgs and his siblings corresponded with their dear Aunt Lillie, only to have their letters returned later, with misspelled words and grammatical mistakes circled with an expository note. It appeared as though every article she read, her critical eyes were arrested by the slightest error in usage. She was a student of French, German, Latin, Russian, and Spanish. Her library contained the rarity of books which college students often borrowed when certain books were unavailable in the campus library. Her personal library at home looked like a college library annex.⁹

Emanuel was highly regarded by her students. One of her students, Frank E. Moorer, wrote:

When I arrived at Oakwood in the fall of 1957, I had no real grasp of the English language. Thus, I was not equipped for my first year of college English. I was fortunate to have a good English teacher, Ms. L. Henrietta Emanuel, who was gruff but a kind woman. She was well grounded in her field, and she knew how to impart knowledge to her students—even to me, despite my lack of preparation.¹⁰

Another of her students voiced his memory of his teacher. Byron William Cartwright says, “Yes, I remember Miss Emanuel. She was my first-grade teacher in Camp Landing [Dania, Florida], in a one-room school where she lived in a room on the back part of the school. She taught me how to read. Her favorite word was *foo-ee*, and everybody liked her. She’d stay on you until you learned what you were to learn.”¹¹

Emanuel enjoyed music and poetry, and enjoyed composing both. One of her poems appeared in the 1935 edition of the Oakwood *Acorn*. In June 1940, at the dedication of Moran Hall, she wrote a special song of dedication, performed at the event.¹² Emanuel played the violin, piano, and harmonica. For many years she sang in the tenor section of the college choir, and with her violin she accompanied the pianist at song service every Sabbath morning. In 1933 Emanuel was invested as a Master Guide (Master Comrade at the time), earning several honors in the program. One of her favorite honors was astronomy, and she often took students on night hikes to identify the seasonal constellations. Emanuel was kindhearted and would do whatever she could to help students in need.¹³

Henrietta Emanuel never married, nor had any children. Her closest relatives were her sister's family. She lived a full life until health began to fail. She died on August 17, 1976, in Huntsville, Alabama.¹⁴

Lillie Henrietta Emanuel will be remembered as an erudite scholar, a beloved educator, a talented musician, and a brilliant poet. Furthermore, she was a staunch supporter of Adventist education who dedicated 49 years of her life to the cause.

SOURCES

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"Miss Lillie Henrietta Emanuel obituary." *North American Informant*, November-December 1976.

Moorer, Frank, et al. *Creating Community: Life and Learning at Montgomery's Black University*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University Alabama Press, 2008.

Oakwood College Bulletin 1934–1935, 1955-1956.

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NOTES

1. L. Henrietta Emanuel, interview by Jannith Lewis, "Oral History Interview of Oakwood College Faculty Member Taped in 1973 at Oakwood College Library by Librarian," Oakwood University Archives.
2. Ibid. See also Agust Ogiste, "Life, Times, and Contributions of Henrietta Emanuel" (Oakwood College, 1974), 3.
3. L. Henrietta Emanuel, interview by Jannith Lewis.

4. Ibid. See also *Oakwood College Bulletin 1934–1935*, 37.
 5. *Oakwood College Bulletin 1955–1956*, 9.
 6. Ibid.
 7. F. H. Hagemeyer to Lillie Emanuel, December 21, 1955, Oakwood University Archives.
 8. *Acorn* 1967, 7, Oakwood University Archives.
 9. Nathaniel G. Higgs, personal knowledge.
 10. Frank Moorer et al., *Creating Community: Life and Learning at Montgomery's Black University* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University Alabama Press, 2008), 60.
 11. Byron William Cartwright, interview by Nathaniel G. Higgs, Stone Mountain, Georgia, May 7, 2018.
 12. Ogiste, 7.
 13. Nathaniel G. Higgs, personal knowledge.
 14. "Miss Lillie Henrietta Emanuel obituary," *North American Informant*, November-December 1976, 8.
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