

The Pushback: Librarian and Activist Effie Stroud Frazier

Effie Stroud Frazier, whose library career spanned from the 1930s to the 1970s, is one of those pioneering African American librarians who should be more widely known for the contributions she made to librarianship. Stroud Frazier was born into an impoverished Black family, and her journey to librarianship was shaped by the intersecting forces of racism and classism. An examination of her early life growing up in racist Colorado Springs provides a foundation for understanding her career trajectory and activism in librarianship and beyond.

Effie Stroud Frazier was born Effie Evelyn Stroud in Lincoln City, Oklahoma, in 1909, the fourth of eleven children born to Kimbal Dolphus “K.D.” Stroud, an African American school teacher and minister, and Lulu McGee Stroud, a member of the Creek Indian tribe.¹ Shortly after Effie’s birth, K.D. moved the family to Colorado Springs; he had moved to Oklahoma – then known as Indian Territory -- to escape the racial segregation in Texas, but after Oklahoma became a state in 1907, segregation came there, too.² Colorado Springs had appeared a beacon of hope for better opportunities for African Americans after his experiences of Southern segregation living in first Texas and then Oklahoma; however, upon arrival to the city in 1910, the family quickly learned that a strict racial caste system existed there, too. African Americans in Colorado were restricted to working in mostly domestic and manual labor jobs, so K.D. was forced to discontinue his teaching career to take various odd jobs before finding longer-term employment shoveling coal at the Rock Island Railroad yards five miles from home.³

The poverty and racism were cruel. The family would sometimes be out of fuel to heat their home – especially during the cold, harsh winters when K.D. would be out of work – and Stroud Frazier and her siblings were constantly hungry as their father’s wages were not enough to provide for their basic needs. When there were meals, they often consisted of beans and

sometimes corn as they were eventually allowed to pick these crops from the property of some local landowners and a kindly neighbor.⁴ To help support the family, Stroud began working at the age of nine doing domestic labor,⁵ the only kind of work really available to Black women at the time.

In addition to the hardships imposed by poverty, the Strouds, like all of the African Americans in Colorado Springs, dealt with racial discrimination, abuse, and terror. As Stroud Frazier would later state, “The attitude of Colorado Springs towards its black citizens was completely, astonishingly, negative. We weren’t even allowed on certain streets in this town! . . . we were chased; we were stoned; dogs were set on us.”⁶ White children would frequently stone Stroud Frazier and her siblings as they made their way to and from school. Stroud Frazier would bear a permanent scar under her eye where one of the stones had hit her.⁷

Fortunately, Stroud Frazier had examples of active resistance to racism all around her as her family confronted racial discrimination and abuse in ways ranging from subtle to more confrontational, through a mix of individual and collective action. Through their actions, the Strouds showed a concern for what would be best for African Americans collectively, and they believed that a combination of respectability and activism would help the race to achieve equality. And Stroud Frazier was no exception. It was this Stroud spirit that fueled her drive to succeed at the highest levels against immeasurable barriers and to challenge discrimination and inequality, including later in her librarianship career.

In spite of the hardships imposed by the realities of racism and poverty, Stroud Frazier made high grades in school, as did all of the Stroud children. K.D., who was forced to give up his teaching career, “prized education to the extent which is almost unbelievable” Stroud Frazier would later recall.⁸ Stroud realized early that she loved English -- stories and the English

language captivated her as a child.⁹ By the time she graduated high school in 1931, she knew she wanted to go to Colorado College, study English, and become an English teacher. Lack of money, as usual, would be an obstacle to immediately realizing her plans as she could not afford to attend Colorado College.¹⁰ This was in spite of being at the top of her class scholastically. All of her grades were mostly As and Bs and she was most likely the first student at Colorado Springs High School to ever receive an AA-plus in any subject.¹¹ She even attracted national attention for winning a state prize in an essay contest given by the American Chemical Society.¹² Famed African American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois wrote her a letter of congratulations after learning of her win.¹³

Due to lack of funds, Stroud Frazier intended to work for a couple of years post-graduation to be able to make enough money to attend Colorado College. A fateful meeting with white Colorado Springs businessman Henry Sachs at her high school graduation ceremony would change all of that. Sachs had been following Stroud Frazier's many scholastic achievements in high school and approached her after the ceremony to inquire about her post-high school plans. When Stroud Frazier informed him that she would have to work a couple of years to afford to attend Colorado College, Sachs made a most extraordinary offer; he would fund the tuition for her first semester in college, and if she maintained the same high grades in each semester of college that she had in high school, he would renew the scholarship each year. Stroud Frazier accepted the offer, later saying, "Naturally, I burned the midnight oil – I mean literally, because we only had coal-oil lamps in those days – and naturally, I did make the same marks, or similar marks in college that I had in high school."¹⁴ Thus, Stroud Frazier was able to graduate Colorado College in 1927, with her tuition fully paid for the four years by Sachs. Sachs also made the same offer to Stroud Frazier's high-achieving older brother Kelley Dolphus after

learning that he was working to make enough money to attend Colorado College as well. The Sachs scholarship would later become institutionalized, and to this day, the Sachs Foundation continues to offer scholarships to Black students to attend Colorado College.¹⁵

Stroud Frazier's experiences at Colorado College would prove pivotal to her decision to pursue a career in librarianship. Stroud Frazier did not initially want to be a librarian – she wanted to be a school teacher and had double majored in English and education; however, due to racial discrimination, she was denied the opportunity to take a course in practice teaching, and practice teaching was required in order to take the exams to become a teacher.¹⁶ Stroud Frazier would forever be bitter about this; at times expressing palpable anger over this denial. She had been working as a domestic for the dean of her school and his wife, and although they seemed to like her personally, “they were influenced also by this anti-black – in those days, it was anti-Negro – attitude,” and they did not protest the school's refusal to allow Stroud Frazier to take practice teaching or even go into a classroom to *observe* teaching being done.¹⁷ As a result, Stroud graduated less than one percentage point below cum laude from Colorado Springs in 1931 with no career prospects beyond domestic labor.

Eventually, Henry Sachs found out with great dismay that Stroud Frazier was working as a maid – at the home of the Colorado College President, no less – and he approached her about applying for a Rosenwald Fellowship to study library science at Hampton Institute, a historically Black institution in Virginia.¹⁸ The Rosenwald Fellowship had been recently developed to increase the number of African Americans in library science, a relatively new field at the time. With Sachs' help, Stroud Frazier applied for and obtained the fellowship, becoming among the first crop of African American students to do so. Although not her first choice of career, librarianship would provide her with a way out of the domestic work she had been consigned to.

After obtaining her bachelor's degree in library science, Stroud Frazier moved to New York City and began working at the 135th Street Branch Library in Harlem, New York (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) where she worked with the famed Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature.¹⁹ There she would collaborate and interface with such Harlem Renaissance luminaries as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, as well as the noted sociologist who had written her a note of congratulations on the American Chemical Society essay contest several years earlier – W.E.B. Du Bois. Stroud Frazier had fortuitously arrived during a time when the New York Public Library system was striving to increase the number of African American librarians at the branch,²⁰ and she gained valuable experience there.

In 1934, Stroud Frazier moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, and became the head librarian for the segregated Dunbar Branch of the Indianapolis Public Library where she would remain for a decade.²¹ Stroud Frazier's name often appeared in the local African American newspaper *Indianapolis Recorder* for her library outreach; for example, on February 22, 1936, the paper mentioned a presentation she gave to the PTA of one of the public schools on the topic of "What the Library has to offer the public and its many advantages in every line of study."²² She also gave presentations on African American history, such as one on "The Negro and his discovery," and even wrote her own column entitled "Literary Corner about Books and Reviews."²³

Stroud Frazier eventually left Indianapolis in 1944 due to the mistreatment she suffered from the intense racial segregation there and returned to New York City to work in the public library system.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, she became a school librarian in the New York City school system, and eventually became its chief librarian. It was here that perhaps Stroud Frazier made her biggest mark on librarianship. Stroud Frazier was incensed that school librarians received lower pay than teachers even though they were required to have more training so she fought

successfully alongside other school librarians to get their pay raised to equal that of the teachers.²⁵

Her time in New York would bring other successes. Ever the student, Stroud Frazier received her master's degree in library science from Columbia University in 1951. In 1964, she met and married Clark Frazier, brother to esteemed sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. With her husband, she was able to travel the world, including annual trips to Europe, and she was finally able to engage in hobbies like going to classical music concerts.²⁶ She also won many awards and accolades for her community activism, like the large community clean-up project she helmed as chairperson of the board of the Fieldstonale housing project, a condominium development in Riverdale-on-Hudson.²⁷ She would later recall her time with Clark as the happiest ten years of her life, and at Frazier's urging, she retired from librarianship in the early 1970s.²⁸ After Clark's passing, Stroud Frazier eventually returned to Colorado Springs in 1978 since she still had family there. Back in Colorado Springs, she became a volunteer librarian at her church and continued this work until her death in 1994.²⁹

For Stroud Frazier, librarianship allowed her to finally become a teacher of sorts as a school librarian, although not the English teacher she had so desired to be. Stroud Frazier's life and career illuminate the struggles faced by many early African American librarians due to racial segregation and inequality. Her story should be more widely known.

¹ John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Friends of the Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum: Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, 1990).

² John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District.

³ Effie Stroud Frazier, interview by Cheryl Coleman, May 30, 1980, Colorado College Archives Oral History Collection, Tutt Library, https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/untoldstories/stories/effie_stroud.html; John

Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 157.

⁴ Stroud Frazier, interview.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 159.

⁸ Stroud Frazier, interview.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 167; Stroud Frazier, interview.

¹² Stroud Frazier, interview; John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 167.

¹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, "W. E. B. Du Bois to Effie Stroud, June 24, 1926," MS 312, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, accessed May 29, 2021, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b174-i374>.

¹⁴ Stroud Frazier, interview.

¹⁵ "Colorado College: Inaugural Stroud Scholars Rise to Challenge," *Boettcher Foundation* (blog), April 26, 2021, <https://boettcherfoundation.org/colorado-college-inaugural-stroud-scholars-rise-to-challenge/>.

¹⁶ Stroud Frazier, interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stroud Frazier; John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 168.

²⁰ Ethelene Whitmire, "Breaking the Color Barrier: Regina Andrews and the New York Public Library," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 42, no. 4 (2007): 409–21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25549439>.

²¹ Stroud Frazier, interview; John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 168.

²² “Miss Effie Stroud Speaks,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 22, 1936, Hoosier State Chronicles: Indiana’s Digital Historic Newspaper Program, <https://newspapers.library.in.gov/?a=d&d=INR19360222-01&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->.

²³ Effie Stroud, “Literary Corner about Books and Reviews,” May 2, 1936, Hoosier State Chronicles: Indiana’s Digital Historic Newspaper Program, <https://newspapers.library.in.gov/cgi-bin/indiana?a=d&d=INR19360502-01.1.10&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->.

²⁴ John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 168.

²⁵ Stroud Frazier, interview; John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 168.

²⁶ Stroud Frazier, interview; John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 168.

²⁷ Stroud Frazier, interview; John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 168.

²⁸ John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 168–69.

²⁹ Stroud Frazier, interview; John Stokes Holley and Friends of the Pikes Peak Library District, *The Invisible People of the Pikes Peak Region: An Afro-American Chronicle*, 169.