Grace Campbell, Pioneer Communist

GRACE CAMPBELL (drawn from a photo)

This is the story of the Negro woman who won scholastic honors and held public offices, but gave her main energies to the only political party she believed could help to liberate her people. Her life is part of the history of the Communist Party of Harlem.

By OTTO HALL

HISTORY records the pioneering work of many Negro women in the struggle against the oppression of their people. This fight has continued through the 300 or more years of chattel slavery, up to the present time—some 80-odd years after their emancipation. These courageous women played a great role in the achievement of this emancipation. Their life marks many glorious pages in the history of the Negro people in America. Many other women, who have followed them, are carrying on their tradition. Such is the story of a modern Negro woman pioneer, Grace Campbell.

Grace Campbell often said that the study of the lives of Phyllis Wheatly, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and others gave her the courage to help carry on the fight for the complete emancipation of her people. She was active in many fields. She was a teacher, a pioneer in the fight against juvenile delinquency, and founded the first shelter for unmarried Negro mothers in New York City. She helped establish the first tenant's organization in Harlem, and found an educational forum which helped to break through the tissue of lies, that were then, and are still being spread about the Soviet Union.

But the one thing, in which she had the greatest pride was her participation in the founding of our Communist Party. She was the only Negro woman charter member of the Party.

Grace Campbell was born in Macon, Ga., October 11, 1879, shortly after the end of the Reconstruction Period. A few years later, her family moved to Washington, D.C., where she received her early education.

As a young schoolgirl, she was soon to learn about Jimcrow, which was soon to completely envelope that city. She remembered the fight in which she participated against the establishment of segregated schools in Washington.

After finishing high school, Grace Campbell entered Howard University and graduated with high honors. Her public career began in 1898 when she was appointed director of kindergartens in the Negro schools in Washington. She worked at this job for 10 years, finally resigning to enter the University of Chicago for further study.

After obtaining her Doctorate in Social Science, she came to New York in 1910 and entered into social work among the youth of this city. While engaged in this work, she became aware of the terrible plight of unwed Negro mothers for whom there was no refuge in the entire city. At that time, the plight of all unwed mothers was bad enough, but Negro women were the worst sufferers. They were receiving no help of any kind. They were referred to as "fallen women," treated as outcasts and driven into lives of prostitution and disease. Grace Campbell decided to do something about this situation. So, in 1915, she established the first shelter for Negro women in Harlem. This was the first of its kind in the city of New York. Through it, many such women, who had been neglected, were started on the road to rehabilitation.

It was this kind of work that led her into the ranks of the Socialist Party, which she joined in 1916. The Socialist Party was at that time the most Progressive political party in the country. Grace Campbell began to study the works of those great revolutionists and social scientists, Marx and Engels. In 1917, she ran for Alderman on the Socialist ticket. But the Socialist Party, even at the height of its influence, did not seem to attract many Negroes. The Negro Socialists brought these matters to the attention of the leaders of that party from time to time, but were given very little consideration.

At the People's Educational Forum in Harlem, which Grace Campbell helped to organize, Algernon Lee, a leading Socialist, spoke on the Socialist program for a better world. Grace Campbell asked from the floor, "Mr. Lee, what is the Socialist program for organizing the Negroes in the South?" Mr. Lee answered: "We have no program for this work, because we have a big enough job to do here. But if you people want to go down there and organize them, we would have no objection."

This steamed up many of the Negro members. Some quit the party in disgust; others gravitated toward those left wing elements who were carring on a struggle against the right wing opportunists and who wanted action on all fronts. Grace Campbell joined this group. In 1919, after the successful Russian Revolution, this group broke away from the Socialist party and formed the American Communist Party.

The Communists from the beginning were active in the struggle for Negro rights. And in the Communist Party, Grace Campbell found an organization in which she could work. In 1916, she was appointed to the Board of Child Welfare in this city. The following year, she was appointed Probation Officer for the Municipal Parole Commission, where she worked until 1924. At that time, she received an appointment as the first Negro Attendant for the Court of General Sessions, a job she held until illness forced her to retire in 1942.

On all these jobs, she worked with the understanding of a Communist

In spite of her work, she was arduous, she found time to carry out her Party tasks. She was active in many organizations. In the early years of our Party, she was one of those who helped organize the African Blood Brotherhood. This organization was mainly composed of left wing followers of Marcus Garvey (U.N.I.A.) when that organization's activities became centered on the back to Africa idea, and away from the program of struggle right here at home against the oppression of the Negro people. The African Blood Brotherhood, organized the Negro people for defense against mass attacks (Race Riots) and lynchings. It had branches in many cities of the North and also in the South. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, where mobs led and inspired by the local authorities attempted to carry through a mass lynching of the Negro people, the Negroes defended themselves so ably they were able to rout the mob. The Department of Justice accused the A.B.B., of starting the riot, and called for an investigation of that organization.

In 1922, Grace Campbell helped organize the first Tenant's organization in Harlem. At this time, many Negroes were being crowded out of sections in which they formerly lived, and were moving into Harlem. This was areal bonanza for the landlords.

Among her many activities, was the meeting up of an educational forum in Harlem sponsored by the Friends of the Soviet Union. This organization was dedicated to the task of spreading the truth about the Soviet Union.

She was active in the defense movement that sprang up all over the world for the freedom of Sacco and Vanzetti. She fought for the freedom of the nine innocent Scottsboro Boys, accompanying the Scottsboro mothers to meetings all over the city. She herself spoke at many mass meetings organized for their defense. Had she been living today, she would have been in the forefront of the fight for the freedom of the Ingram family, the Trenton Six and the twelve Communist leaders.

Grace Campbell was modest, unassuming, moving about her tasks with gentle but firm dignity and could not be swerved from her objectives. She strove to better conditions in her community. She was always willing to lend a helping hand to people in need, never questioning their religious or political beliefs nor did she consider whether they were white or colored in giving this help. Her life is a part of the history of the Communist Party in Harlem. Grace Campbell died June 6, 1943.

There is a Communist Club, in the Eleventh Assembly District named in her honor. This is quite fitting, as this was the district in which she lived during the latter years of her life. The Grace Campbell Communist Club is dedicated to the tasks of carrying on the community work for which she was famous.