Maude Mackey

Racism, segregation, and slavery have plagued not only the world, but in past centuries, the United States. These conditions have since been studied and taught throughout our years of schooling. However, rarely are cases of family struggles focused on and researched in a student context. Generational impacts can thoroughly be seen when examining the history of families as they have endured these burdens. Also, key sociological concepts can be more clearly applied in such situations. One family in particular has a lot share through their own experiences and recorded history. They are the Mackey family, and in particular we will examine Maude Mackey and her history.

Maude Sherman Mackey was born October 1874 the daughter of Joel Mackey. She became a Berea college student in 1887, and later married her husband John Walker in December 1897. Her son of 4 years old died 1903 due to an appendicitis operation that resulted fatally (MS). What is rather interesting about Maude is that her wedding was rather praised in a local newspaper. It reads as follows: “Yesterday there was a quiet though very stylish wedding in this city which united the lives of two well-educated and highly respectable members of the best colored society…” (Climax). This raises interesting questions about the life of Maude Mackey. How did she become perceived as a prominent member of society? This was also during a time of great prejudice against African Americans, even despite the abolition of slavery in 1865 (NARA). As well, her education came from Berea College, which was under some pressure from the population which disagreed with interracial education. What challenges did Mand likely face when trying to earn education at Berea?

In the case of her wedding, it is astonishing to hear of what is likely a white oriented newspaper praising her wedding, although it did still specifically state it as being in “...colored society” (Climax). This being a time of segregation as well, it’s highly unlikely her family and skin color gave an ascribed status of being respected, she likely earned it through her education received at Berea and possibly making an impact on the community. Research has had little to
show on this subject specifically pertaining Maude, as this is a town wide opinion and it would be difficult to track down a solid reason why she was so respected. Her father, Joel, was educated at Berea College as well, which may have set a better foundation for her status.

In the case of Maude’s educational challenges, it is likely that there were many. At the time of her enrollment, Berea College’s student body was composed of at least half African Americans, standing as a model for interracial education. However, this was a time where many also disagreed with the college’s goals, and other townsfolk would periodically attack the campus, in an attempt to scare the students off. This was a time before the Day Law was created as well, with tensions gradually building (Sears, 71). Although slavery had already been since abolished, Maude had to endure large amounts of racism. Despite her education and kindness, there would always be those who would harshly treat her solely because of her skin color. However, Maude would push through these challenges, and use her education to start a hair parlor, and would become respected enough to have her son buried in a “white” cemetery, as well as have herself noted in the local newspaper. Her education and business helped her achieve a positive status among whites, the dominant group of society. It is unknown, however, whether her achievements provided a truly better life her two children. In the manuscript, her first son Joe is only briefly listed as having a farm labor position, and her second son as having no occupation. However, in 1904, the Day Law was enacted, which could have placed a great hindrance on her children’s education (Sears, 71).

It is difficult to answer many of our questions of families during this time period. Maude’s achievements may have been many, but are likely undermined by white society during the time. Research has taught me how despite the great education that blacks achieved in past centuries, and no matter the manner of their success, it was constantly undermined by others, which makes not only living during the time more difficult, but it arouses difficulties in discovering specifics about great people in the past. Prejudices not only made life difficult for many, but resulted in spectacular history being lost and forgotten. It is important to recognize these moments of the past, so that we may build a better future today, and ensure that history is never lost tomorrow.
References

Mackey family manuscript. N.d. N.p. Hutchins Library, Berea KY. MS.

