

Walter Rolling helped shape King's history

Black History Month tribute



By Mark Pavilons

Teacher, coach, mentor.

All those qualities apply to Walter Rolling, a notable member of the community and King Township's history.

Rolling taught at the school that is now part of the King Township Museum. He taught three generations of some King families, earning the respect of many.

Rolling's grandfather came to Canada in the early 1830s from Virginia and his father owned a general store in Laskay and was one of the first black postmasters.

He was married twice but did not have children.

Walter Rolling was born May 31, 1873 in Laskay, the second oldest child of Benjamin Harris Rolling Jr. and Sarah Elizabeth Britton. He had five siblings.

Walter was a well educated man. He attended the Strange School as a boy, the closest school to Laskay, approximately a one and one-quarter mile walk away. He attended Aurora High School in 1892 and at that time, fewer than 10% of public school students enrolled in high school, for which they had to pay \$4 per term.

After high school, Walter earned his Third Class Teaching Certificate from the Newmarket Model School and his first teaching job was at a school in Aurora. Here are Walter's recollections of those first few days of teaching told to the Toronto Star in 1937:

"I took the place of a teacher who left town in despair after the class had gotten entirely out of hand and had actually partially disrobed her. When I arrived, the principal asked me if I had a club with me. When I expressed surprise, he took me aside, gave me a wagon wheel spoke, which I slipped up my sleeve. I had to use it quite frequently in those eight days, too. After I showed I meant business I had no trouble at all. When I started to teach at Kinghorn I found my Aurora experience had gone ahead of me, and the pupils were quite afraid at first."

In January of 1895, he started teaching at the Kinghorn School, S.S. #23, a one-room school house. Walter's first year salary was \$295, and to supplement his salary, he held other part-time jobs, such as selling tombstones for a company in Orangeville.

In 1910, the board of the King City School, S.S. #2, offered Walter the senior teacher's position, with a salary of \$600 a year. At first he accepted the position, but then rescinded in favour of Kinghorn. Walter offered a "fifth class" at Kinghorn, which was equivalent to Grade 9 for the students who were not able to go to Aurora for high school. Children came from miles around for that class since it was not offered elsewhere nearby.

Walter was very proud of his students and did not have a single failure in his class for 30 years. In 1932 and 1933, two of his students, Jimmie Gray and Billy Walker, won the Toronto district oratorical contest at the Toronto Normal School. Then in 1935 and 1936, second place for oratory was won by Douglas Kyle and Doris Hollinshead.

Some of the most fondly remembered school activities were Arbour Day when students cleaned up the school yard and planted some of the sugar maples that used to surround the school yard. Afterwards, they were taken to the woods for an outing. The students had

an end of school picnic at Lake Wilcox, and always attended the Rural School Fair, which was held every September. The school topics that Walter was most enthusiastic about were oratory, arithmetic, spelling, and geography.

Walter retired from teaching June 30, 1936. On this day he was presented with a gold watch, but a true celebration of his teaching and dedication to the community was held one year later on June 16, 1937, when they celebrated Walter Rolling Day.

Doris (Hollinshead) Willoughby, one of Walter's last students, described him to the King Weekly in 1995:

?Certainly, I think he was fair. He was strict. We had to behave. We got a really good education there. If Mr. Rolling ever encountered racism, it didn't bother him. I don't think he ever thought much about it. If things hurt him, he didn't show it. We went all over with him and never ran into any problems.?

Rolling had a strong interest in sports. He was on the Newmarket football team and in 1893, they won the district championship. He was also a member of the Davis Leather Company's Football Club, which was sponsored by the local tannery in Kinghorn.

While teaching, he was also involved in many of the children's sports, including coaching the Kinghorn Girls Baseball team. Walter was a strong supporter of both boys' and girls' sports.

Walter became a prominent member of the community, serving on many different boards. He served on the King Public School Board, was the secretary-treasurer for the Eversley Presbyterian Church, and from 1923 to 1943 he was the secretary of the King City Cemetery Board.

Walter died of a heart attack on June 10, 1943. He was survived by his wife, Laura, his sister, Mrs. Florence Lightfoot, and his brother, George Rolling. The funeral took place at Walter's home, with many people in attendance, a sign of the high regard in which he was held. Walter was buried at the King City Cemetery with his parents.

Information and photographs courtesy of King Township Public Library and King Museum