

Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter

by Kathie Ryckman Anderson

Era Bell Thompson, a leading black woman journalist, was not born in North Dakota, and has not lived in the state since 1931; yet for the semi-retired editor of *Ebony*, North Dakota is home. "This is where life started for me," she explains.¹

Questions such as "where is North Dakota?" and "what in the world was a nice Negro girl like you doing in that godforsaken country in the first place?"² led Thompson to write her autobiography, *American Daughter*, about the influences of her experiences in North Dakota. As a black child growing up in North Dakota during the late teens and twenties, Thompson was an object of interest and prejudice, yet she also received encouragement for her interests in athletics and writing, and made many friends. "I was very lucky to have grown up in North Dakota where families were busy fighting climate and soil for a livelihood and there was a little awareness of race," she states.³ The Rev. William Sherman, Grand Forks, who is studying the ethnic traditions of North Dakota, supports Thompson's statement: "There was an absolute minimum of hostility or prejudice towards blacks. The blacks weren't threatening to whites because there weren't many of them."⁴

Thompson, daughter of Stewart Calvin (Tony) and Mary Logan Thompson, was born August 10, 1905, in Des Moines, Iowa, and was nine when the family moved to North Dakota in 1914. In Des Moines, Tony Thompson had worked as a chef, was a trustee of the Colored Baptist Church, and was an attendant in the Iowa State Senate. Era Bell Thompson describes her father as a good speaker and an outgoing, public person. Olga Peterson Erickson, a childhood friend of Era Bell Thompson's, recalls that Tony Thompson did much of the family's cooking and that he also cooked for camp meetings near Jamestown during the summer.⁵

Like other immigrants to Dakota, the Thompson family had been drawn by the promise of a better life. Era Bell's brother Hobart had come to North Dakota in 1913 to work for his uncle, James A. Garrison, who had homesteaded near Driscoll. Hobart also worked for Robert Johnson, a black farmer who lived near Steele. When the rest of the Thompson family moved to North Dakota in 1914, Era Bell's brothers Carl and Stewart C. were 11 and 15, and Hobart was 17. Stewart and Mary Thompson had come to North Dakota at the urging of Garrison, Stewart's half-brother, to escape the problems of the city, problems which included limited job opportunities for their sons.⁶

Garrison, with his Irish wife Ada and their two children, had homesteaded, receiving a patent on 160 acres near Driscoll on September 30, 1907. Tony Thompson and Garrison's mother Mina Garrison, who was born into slavery January 19, 1821, and had come to North Dakota in 1909 to live

¹Jerry Hagstrom, "Noted editor Era Bell Thompson still thinks of Driscoll as home," *Mandan Pioneer*, July 12, 1972.

²Era Bell Thompson, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like that," *North Dakota Horizons*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1973), p. 26.

³"Bigotry Has No Boundaries, Once U Negro Student — Now Editor, Says," *Grand Forks Herald*, July 17, 1968, p. 18.

⁴Marcia Harris, "Most Blacks Have Chosen Not to Stay," *Bismarck Tribune*, February 16, 1982, p. 6E.

⁵Olga Peterson Erickson, interview at Driscoll, North Dakota, July 7, 1982.

⁶Era Bell Thompson, interviewed by Larry Sprunk for North Dakota Oral History Project, Bismarck, North Dakota, September 16, 1975 (Archives, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck).



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with her son James, died there May 21, 1911. Her obituary noted that she was an “entertaining old lady” who told about her days of slavery. According to the article, “The funeral was largely attended, as she was a woman of consistent christian character, and was liked by all our people.”⁷

When Garrison located his brother Tony Thompson, he encouraged him to come to North Dakota. “He [Garrison] wrote glowingly of the boundless prairie, the new land of plenty where a man’s fortune was measured by the number of his sons, and a farm could be had even without money,”⁸ as Era Bell Thompson later recalled. The promise of better opportunities convinced the Thompsons to move to North Dakota.

Era Bell Thompson’s reactions to North Dakota were different from those of the rest of the family. She was excited about seeing Indians and about riding ponies. Her mother looked from the train window to the bleak, treeless, snow-covered land which was not at all like her native Virginia. Tony Thompson and his sons labored on the farm and on Garrison’s threshing crew. As a child, Era Bell was not yet a part of the laboring world. The hard labor with few returns convinced the Thompson brothers, and later their father, to leave the farm.

Thompson’s first reactions were to the beauty of North Dakota:

It was a strange and beautiful country my father had come to, so big and boundless he could look for miles out over the golden prairies and follow the unbroken horizon where the midday blue met the bare peaks of the distant hills. No tree or bush to break the view, miles and miles of grass, acre after acre of waving grain, and, up above, God and that fiery chariot which beat remorselessly down upon a parching earth.

The evenings, bringing relief, brought also a greater, lonelier beauty. A crimson blue in the west marked the waning of the sun, the purple haze of the hills crept down to pursue the retreating glow, and the whole world was hushed in peace.

Now and then the silence was broken by the clear notes of a meadowlark on a nearby fence or the weird honk of wild geese far, far above, winging their way south.

This was God’s country. There was something in the stillness that spoke to Pop’s soul, and he loved it.⁹

The Thompsons lived with the Garrisons from November until the following spring, when they moved into the empty Woodbury Hotel in Driscoll, a community which had once boasted three hotels, two dance halls, two livery barns, two banks, a general store, meat market, elevator, blacksmith shop, and lumber yard. The town was losing its “boom” population, and the Thompsons were thus able to rent part of one hotel as their living quarters.

The general store across the street was owned by the Petersons, and their only child Olga and Era Bell became good friends. Olga Peterson Erickson recalls the fun they had, and how Thompson’s sense of humor entertained their friends. “Era Bell was Era Bell,” she says, “She was special to me, and we had a lot of fun.”¹⁰

Later in the spring of 1915 the Thompsons moved west of Driscoll to a place known as the “Morton farm.” In *American Daughter*, Thompson explains the kindness shown by their neighbors that first summer when money and food supplies were low. On one occasion, a Norwegian neighbor brought much-needed supplies.¹¹



Era Bell Thompson (1982).

—Photo by Norman L. Hunter. Courtesy Johnson Publishing Company, Chicago

But Thompson also points out that limited money was not unusual: “Debt was no disgrace in North Dakota; everybody was in debt, everything was mortgaged — that’s why they didn’t need money out there.”¹² The first and second generation Americans who were neighbors of the Thompsons were less aware of “race” than other Americans, Thompson feels, and were thus perhaps more accepting of their black neighbors. Thompson feels that immigrants to Dakota were too busy fighting elements to fight each other.¹³

In 1910, only 28 per cent of the population of North Dakota was classified as “native white of native parentage.” The majority were classified as either “native white of foreign parentage” or “foreign white.”

Like their immigrant neighbors, the Thompsons struggled to earn a living from the soil, and like the others were at the mercy of nature: “By harvest time the heat had done its damage, the rust taken its toll — it was a bad year for farmers. Our crop was no better, no worse, than that of thousands of others far more experienced than we.”¹⁴

⁷“Mrs. Garrison Dead,” *Driscoll News*, May 24, 1911, p. 5.

⁸Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 18.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁰Olga Peterson Erickson, interview.

¹¹Thompson, *American Daughter*, p. 54.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³Thompson, interview by Larry Sprunk.

¹⁴Thompson, *American Daughter*, p. 58.

After the family moved to North Dakota, Thompson attended school in Driscoll Township. The teacher's report dated June 4, 1915, states that Thompson attended 116 of the 180 days of school between September 14, 1914, and June 4, 1915; it is therefore likely she started school in November.

Each time Thompson faced a new situation and new people, there was prejudice to fight. Each time she changed schools she had to "break in" the students because they had previously not seen a black child, and the students would call her names until she became part of the group.

On the first day of school in Driscoll Township, Thompson and her brother Carl were taken to school by their 15-year-old cousin Mary Lou Garrison. Thompson says that she and her brother "were the first bona fide Negro children she [the teacher] or the pupils had ever seen."¹⁵ Because Ada Garrison was Irish and James Garrison black, James and Mary Lou Garrison were called "skunks" by the school children. That first day of school, like all of Thompson's first days at a new school, was difficult because much interest was shown in the new pupil. The other pupils touched her hair and stared at the palms of her hands until she, too, wondered at the whiteness of her palms and was glad the children couldn't see her feet where the color ended.¹⁶ Thompson attended school at Driscoll until 1919.

The Garrisons had obvious color combinations, but the Thompson family, too, had combinations. Tony Thompson's mother was a freed slave and his father was the Virginian plantation owner's son. Era Bell writes, "In Father's mulatto veins flowed also the blood of a Dutchman, a Frenchman, and a couple of Indians."¹⁷ When Thompson's father was killed in the Civil War, his mother married a black man.¹⁸

The Garrisons and the Thompsons were some of few black families to settle in North Dakota. In 1910 and 1920, according to census reports, blacks comprised only .001 per cent of the state's population. In 1910 there were 617 black people in the state and in 1920 there were 467.

The Thompsons spent their first Christmas in North Dakota with two other black families, the Robert and George Johnsons, who farmed near Steele. When these families gathered, Thompson notes that a large percentage of the state's Negro population was gathered under one roof.

In January, 1917, Tony Thompson went to Bismarck to serve as private messenger to Governor Lynn J. Frazier, the first Nonpartisan League chief executive. The two men had met during the previous fall when Frazier was campaigning.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸"Era Bell Thompson's History," 1883-1970 *Driscoll, North Dakota* (Driscoll: privately printed, n.d.), p. 84.

¹⁹Thompson, *American Daughter*, pp. 125-126.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 126.

²¹Era Bell Thompson, address for Bismarck Junior College Visiting Scholars Series, April 27, 1977.

²²Thompson, interview by Larry Sprunk.

²³Thompson, *American Daughter*, p. 128.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 140.

Thompson worked for Frazier during the 1917, 1919, and 1921 sessions, and Thompson mentions the Frazier twins Unie and Versie in her autobiography as schoolmates who treated her well.

Era Bell was 12 when her mother died from a stroke in 1918. She continued to attend school in Driscoll until 1919, when she and her father moved west of Harold Anderson's to a farm they had bought near Sterling; there she and her father lived in a granary and intended to build a home. They moved to Bismarck in 1920, and were again the objects of interest and prejudice, prejudice which she again was able to overcome.

When Thompson entered the Bismarck schools, there was the same curiosity and interest. She notes, "As we came panting up the long walk, a sudden wide-eyed hush fell over them, and Jessie [fictitious name] pulled me inside before they recovered."¹⁹ Thompson tells about the boy-girl games which were played at the school, and how she learned to dread them due to the reactions she knew the other students would have.

Thompson's first principal in Bismarck, Miss Mallory, "had been at North Ward for a long time, teaching now the children of her first pupils, and in all that time there had been only two colored children enrolled. One was very light, and the other very bad."²⁰

Thompson recalls that when she was a student in Bismarck, she felt some shame because she was black, as the textbooks at the time revealed black people as "thick-skulled," a stereotype Thompson could not accept.²¹ She used to cut civics class when slavery was the topic because what was said of blacks was so "ridiculous."²²

During the summer when other children would go to the swimming pool, Thompson would go with her friends. She was allowed to swim, but when a Negro man came to swim, he was not allowed to enter the pool. About this incident, Thompson's father told her that "prejudice was a funny thing. It ran every way but out."²³ Assembly speakers at the high school would tell "darker" stories, and Thompson's classmates would look at her to see how she was "taking it."²⁴

Thompson also encountered prejudice when she and the members of the high school track team went on a two-day bus ride from Bismarck to Fargo for a meet. She remembers, "All along the way people came out to see what in the world. The grown-ups stared, but little children looked at me and sometimes asked questions. I still cannot understand how those kids who had never seen a Negro before, who were too young even to read, always arrived at the same conclusion."²⁵ After that hurt, she no longer sat by the window.

When the team stopped to eat in Valley City, a waitress took all the orders but Thompson's. Thompson has a clear memory of how the teacher handled the situation. When the waitress asked if "she" [Era Bell] wanted to eat too, "I didn't get an opportunity to answer that or to select my food either. Miss Wallace [fictitious name] was very efficient."²⁶

In the spring of her senior year, when the track team made a trip to Fargo, Thompson convinced a classmate to go to a movie downtown, but the usher directed Thompson to go

upstairs. She didn't attend the movie and writes of the incident, "I came up against a new opponent called prejudice, and lost, hands down."²⁷

Thompson was on the track and basketball teams at Bismarck High School although she is less than five feet tall. She also wrote for the school newspaper, and also distributed her own newspaper, "Snap," which contained her humorous writings. The senior class poem she wrote and delivered on class night "was received with ovations and much laughter."²⁸

When she graduated from Bismarck High School in 1924, she did not have the money to attend college; she therefore enrolled in a post-high school commercial course at Mandan High School. Her father had opened a secondhand store at 204 E. Main in that city. While Bismarck had few blacks — the 1925 North Dakota census lists 19 — Mandan had fewer — only five in 1925. Era Bell Thompson, age 19, and Lizzie Stewart, age 50, whom Era Bell recalls being called "Nigger Liz," were the only black women listed on the 1925 Mandan census.

As had happened at other schools, students stopped to stare. "The first few days the little class was divided between those bent upon being nice to me and the others," she recalls. And just as in the other schools, Thompson won the students over: "By the end of the second week they were all bent on being nice to me, vying to walk home with me."²⁹ Not until the summer of 1925, when Thompson went to Minneapolis-St. Paul, was she in a community which consisted of more than a handful of black people.

Thompson enrolled at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks in the fall of 1925. At UND, she saw some of her friends from high school, but found that some weren't sure how to react to her. She was turned away from the Young Women's Christian Association, and even the black family whose name she had found and to whom she had written nearly did the same, suspecting that she might be a "street woman." Thompson says she might have grown to be far more "straight" than she might have otherwise because she was always fighting the stereotype that a black woman might be a prostitute.³⁰

While at UND that first year, she worked for board and room with a Jewish family. As in high school, Thompson excelled in athletics, establishing five UND women's track records in the dashes, hurdles, and broad jump and tying two national intercollegiate women's track records in the 60 yard dash and the broad jump.

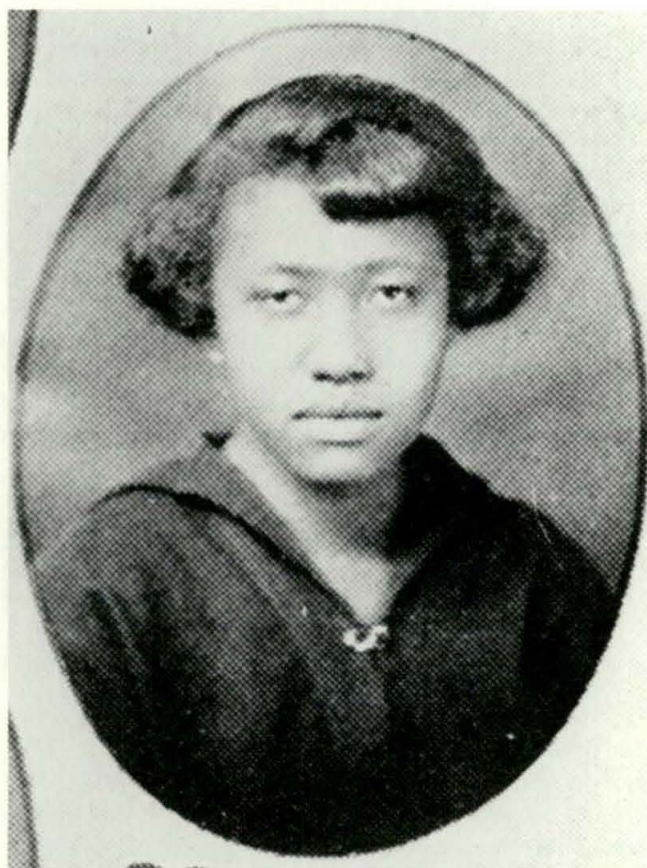
Bismarck classmate and friend Barbara Register was named the most athletic University co-ed, and Thompson was named "the most representative co-ed in track."³¹ Thompson's photo appears in the 1928 *Dacotah* for this recognition, and she is also pictured with the all-varsity field hockey team.

Thompson also wrote for the campus newspaper, the *Dakota Daily Student*. She was women's athletic editor when another promising North Dakota journalist, Edward K. Thompson, later editor of *Life*, was editor-in-chief of the student publication.

Thompson attended the University until April, 1927, when pleurisy caused her to drop out of school. She then returned to Mandan.

Thompson's first trip to Chicago occurred in 1928. Chicago proved to be a different world: "All around me now were colored people, lots and lots of colored people, so many that I stared when I saw a white person."³² Thompson was surrounded by black people, and she was shocked to discover that blacks can be as prejudiced as whites.

She hadn't had the same experiences as the black person in a city ghetto and so discovered that she didn't have the same bitterness. She reflects that "So many black people have never known white people and they grow up hating them. Although I lived through many of the things that they came into contact with, it hasn't made me bitter because I had the opportunity to know other white people who were friends to me."³³



With a serious demeanor that belied her reputation for "pep" and "zest," Era Bell Thompson posed for *Prairie Breezes*, the 1924 Bismarck High School annual.
—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁸"Seniors Make Merry Here in Class Program," *Bismarck Tribune*, May 22, 1924, p. 8.

²⁹Thompson, *American Daughter*, p. 151.

³⁰Thompson, interview by Larry Sprunk.

³¹"Barbara Register Elected as Most Athletic 'U' Co-Ed," *Dakota Daily Student*, February 22, 1927, p. 1.

³²Thompson, *American Daughter*, p. 193.

³³Barbara Hjelle, "Obstacles Didn't Stop Driscoll Native," *Bismarck Tribune*, July 12, 1982, p. 13.

Thompson feels that the prejudice in North Dakota differs from the prejudice she has found in cities. In cities, the prejudice is inborn, but in North Dakota, people are afraid of what they are not familiar with.³⁴ Due to her background, she wasn't used to thinking of race all the time. She had gone to Chicago with white attitudes, and found herself to be a racial misfit. "I've never really adjusted to black life in Chicago. I've found as much prejudice among blacks as among whites. If it came to a division of the races in this country, and I had to make a choice, I couldn't. I would just leave," she recently said.³⁵

When she worked on a small black magazine in Chicago that summer, Thompson was just beginning to discover black culture. She discovered the Negro renaissance in literature, writers such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, and W.E.B. DuBois. "[N]ever before had I read of black people beautified, Negroes exalted," she writes of DuBois' *The Dark Princess*.³⁶

Her father's illness and subsequent death on July 29, 1928, brought her back to Mandan, where she operated her father's secondhand store until the bills were paid. While Thompson was running the store, one man told her that he thought all black women were prostitutes. After the bills were paid, she closed the store and worked for James and Ada Garrison, who operated a secondhand store in Bismarck. For naming a bedspring "King Koil" Thompson was awarded \$25 from the company; she used the money for a trip to Grand Forks early in 1930 to visit friends. They told her about the pastor of the First Methodist Church, the Rev. Robert E. O'Brien, who was interested in the education of Negroes. That fall, Thompson returned to Grand Forks, where she worked for room and board with the O'Brien family — Robert, Mabel, a master's candidate in the art department,³⁷ and their four-year-old son Edward. "I didn't know then how rough it was for them to take me into their home," Thompson says; "There was a Ku Klux Klan organization in Grand Forks at the time, and the Rev. O'Brien's mother was a Klan leader in Indiana."³⁸ Mrs. O'Brien recalls that Era Bell kept the family "laughing most of the time," and that Edward adored Era Bell.³⁹ The O'Brians became Thompson's foster family.

When the O'Brians decided to leave Grand Forks, they selected a school which would admit Thompson as a student.

³⁴Thompson, interview by Larry Sprunk.

³⁵*Bismarck Tribune*, February 16, 1982, p. 6E.

³⁶Thompson, *American Daughter*, p. 197.

³⁷Mabel Day O'Brien, "A Survey of Art in 388 North Dakota Homes" (Unpublished master's thesis, University of North Dakota, 1931), is a study of art selection in North Dakota homes and of how North Dakotans viewed art.

³⁸Era Bell Thompson, address for Bismarck Junior College Visiting Scholars Series, April 27, 1977.

³⁹Mrs. R.E. O'Brien, personal letter, July 13, 1982.

⁴⁰"Resident Comes Full Circle," *Bismarck Tribune*, July 28, 1977, p. 24.

⁴¹Gen Middaugh, "Negro Editor Proves Success Is Personal," *Bismarck Tribune*, August 26, 1966, p. 12.

⁴²Arna Bontemps, "Race Without Bitterness," *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, May 5, 1946, p. 4.

⁴³*Library Journal*, April 15, 1946, p. 586.

O'Brien accepted the position of president of Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa. Thompson was graduated in 1933 with a B.A. in social science. Morningside did not offer a program in journalism, but she did write for the college newspaper.

Following graduation, she left the O'Brians and moved to Chicago to seek employment. "I was a racial misfit in Chicago," she says. "In a sense I was less accepted there by blacks than I was in North Dakota by whites. When I denied coming from the South, as Blacks did then [1930's], I was called a liar. My language was interesting too. The dialect was Midwestern, and there were Scandinavian and Hebrew phrases in my vocabulary."⁴⁰

Thompson went to Chicago with a philosophy that she had gained from the Rev. O'Brien: "I have always believed that I could do anything I wanted to do, if willing to make the necessary effort and sacrifices." Although Thompson believed the philosophy, she found that wasn't true in Chicago during the Depression. Thompson worked as a domestic laborer and at various writing jobs during those first years in Chicago. For five years, 1942-1947, she was an interviewer for the Illinois and United States Employment Service.

In 1945 Thompson applied for a Newberry Fellowship to write a book about North Dakota, but when the committee found out about her background, they asked her to write an autobiography.

American Daughter, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1946, is the story of Thompson's life, beginning with Thompson's family heritage and the reasons the family moved to North Dakota. Thompson writes about North Dakota in positive terms, but when she returned to the state to do research she was turned away from two Bismarck hotels.⁴¹ The book is dedicated to the memory of her parents and concludes with Thompson's then current employment with the United States Employment Service. Thompson does change many of the names in *American Daughter*, although her friends are able to identify most of the people she describes. When *American Daughter* was reissued in 1967, Thompson was awarded the Society of Midland Authors' Patron Saints Award.

Most reviews of *American Daughter* are positive. Arna Bontemps wrote, "The campaign for broader friendship and more complete understanding between racial elements in the United States will be strongly assisted by the publication of Era Bell Thompson's cheerful and warm-hearted autobiography."⁴² Another reviewer said, "*American Daughter* is a story of growing up in the West and Middle West that is moving, human, positive, triumphant. Entertaining and well-written."⁴³

Ralph Ellison, who would later publish *Invisible Man*, pointed out Thompson's exceptional situation in his review, "Stepchild Fantasy." Ellison declares, "Because she knew an environment in which she was often the lone Negro child, her experience has been exceptional. She was free of the repressing effects of segregation; she knew whites intimately, both at home and at school, and she was able to see them in a more human perspective than is possible for the majority of

Negroes.”⁴⁴ Ellison does not agree with Thompson’s belief that friendliness and humor will bridge the gap between black and white Americans, and he concludes that Thompson’s autobiography should be read as only one black person’s view. Thompson has always recognized the unique experience she had in North Dakota, and about this review she says, “Had I lived my early life among Blacks, perhaps my rage would have been much like his.”⁴⁵

Following the appearance of *American Daughter*, North Dakota Senator William Langer had a chapter, “Blizzard Bound,” read into the *Congressional Record*.⁴⁶ Thompson recalls that Langer also took her into the Senate dining room for lunch and enjoyed the attention he received from Southern congressmen as a result of his guest. Once when Langer was in Chicago, Thompson took him on a tour of the city; when the car was stopped, a policeman checked to see what a black woman and a white man were doing together.⁴⁷

After *American Daughter* was published, Thompson was offered a job with Johnson Publishing Company, which had begun publication of *Ebony* in November, 1945. The publisher, John H. Johnson, told Thompson that she should “learn about Negroes.” Since 1947, most of Thompson’s writing had been for that company. From 1947 to 1951 Thompson was an associate editor of *Ebony*, and from 1951 to 1964 she was co-managing editor. In 1964 she was named international editor of Johnson Publishing Company, a position she still holds although she is semi-retired.

Thompson has written editorials and more than forty by-lined articles during those years with *Ebony*. Although there are few bylines in the first issues of *Ebony*, an article which carries her signature reveals her sense of humor: “Single men: bachelors are fair game for leap year husband hunters.”⁴⁸ Another article which reveals her sense of humor is “Mirth and Misadventures of a Woman Traveler.”⁴⁹ She has also written an article entitled “Short People, Arise!” in which she says, “. . . it is time to set Shorty free.”⁵⁰

Her sense of humor also shows when she talks about her first trip to the “deep South.” She had been sent to New Orleans to write a story about the Mardi Gras, and was “scared to death” that she would do something wrong, yet she recalls one experience with a chuckle. She was waiting for a bus to return to the dormitory where she was staying because blacks were not allowed in hotels. When the busses came by and said “White” she did not board. After a while, she realized there were black people getting on the busses also, so she did too — and went to the black section at the back of the bus. Only later did she discover that the busses were manufactured by the White Motor Company.⁵¹

When this writer sent two articles to Thompson, the Thompson section of a thesis and “Era Bell Thompson: North Dakota Remains ‘Home’ for American Daughter,” written for *This Week in North Dakota History* October 5-9, 1981, Thompson responded, “Amazing!” You know more about me than I do.”⁵²

Thompson has used her unusual background and interest as resources for articles about intra-racial adoption and the

effects on the children. She was interested in the subject due to her kind treatment by the O’Brians.

In one of these articles, “Adoption controversy: blacks who grew up in white homes,” Thompson is pictured with Robert and Mabel O’Brian, her “foster parents,” and briefly states her background.⁵³ Although not mentioned by name, the O’Brians and Olga Peterson Erickson are part of an article, “Some of my best friends are white.” In this article, she writes, “I was reared among white people and went to school with their children. My dearest playmate was a blue-eyed blonde. In the language of the Southland, I could say I had a ‘white mammy,’ for after my parents died I was taken into the home — and the hearts — of a white couple whom I still regard as my family.”⁵⁴

Thompson used another experience, a radical mastectomy in 1964, as the basis for an article, “I was a cancer coward.” She wrote the article “to help others facing radical mastectomy.”⁵⁵

Thompson recalls one assignment as the most thrilling, covering the gathering which included Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” oration.⁵⁶ Among those she has interviewed are Eleanor Roosevelt, Louis Armstrong, Adlai Stevenson, Mahalia Jackson and Sammy Davis, Jr.

As international editor for Johnson Publishing Company, Thompson was able to indulge one of her loves, traveling. “As international editor, I have flown to Tanzania on a hunting safari, to Tasmania in search of a lost tribe of Aborigines, to Tonga to interview the last South Sea Island queen, to the edge of the Sahara Desert to visit the centuries old mosques of Timbuktu. I’ve even spent a rather pleasant night in a Johannesburg jail,” she writes.⁵⁷ She has traveled extensively in six of the seven continents, and since 1930 has traveled to 124 countries.

Africa, Land of My Fathers, published in 1954, is a travel book based on a three-month tour of 18 African countries. The purpose of the trip is stated, in Thompson style, in the introduction:

⁴⁴Ralph Ellison, “Stepchild Fantasy,” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 29-23 (June 8, 1946), pp. 25-26.

⁴⁵Era Bell Thompson, personal letter, July 12, 1982.

⁴⁶Patricia Bossert, “American Daughter Back On Plains Says State Has Been Good to Her,” *Minot Daily News*, July 22, 1972, p. 14.

⁴⁷Thompson, interview by Larry Sprunk.

⁴⁸Era Bell Thompson, “Single men: bachelors are fair game for leap year husband hunters,” *Ebony*, 3-7 (May, 1948), pp. 54-59.

⁴⁹Era Bell Thompson, “Mirth and misadventures of a woman traveler,” *Ebony*, 17 (September, 1972), p. 90.

⁵⁰Era Bell Thompson, “Short people, arise!” *Ebony*, 30-12 (October, 1975), pp. 152-160.

⁵¹Thompson, interview by Larry Sprunk; Doris Eastman, “Driscoll Did Well By American Daughter,” *Fargo Forum*, July 16, 1972, p. B2.

⁵²Era Bell Thompson, personal letter, January 12, 1982.

⁵³Era Bell Thompson, “Adoption controversy: blacks who grew up in white homes,” 29-8 (June, 1974), pp. 84-94.

⁵⁴Era Bell Thompson, “Some of my best friends are white,” *Ebony*, 30-10 (August, 1975), pp. 154-157.

⁵⁵Era Bell Thompson, “I was a cancer coward,” *Ebony*, 26-11 (September, 1971), pp. 64-71.

⁵⁶Mrs. Joe Wold, “After ‘Exploring the World,’ Era Bell Came Home Again,” *Wilton News*, July 20, 1972, p. 1.

⁵⁷Era Bell Thompson, “Humble beginning was asset to former student Thompson,” *University of North Dakota Alumni Review*, 60-7 (March, 1977), p. 1.



In 1946, this photograph appeared on the dust jacket of *American Daughter*, Era Bell Thompson's autobiographical novel.

—Courtesy University of Chicago Press, Chicago

More than twenty years later, the prominent alumna's picture was part of *Foundations*, a history of Bismarck High School published in 1980.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection



"I, too, wanted to return to the land of my forefathers, to see if it is as dark and hopeless as it has been painted and to find out how it would receive a prodigal daughter who has not been home for over three hundred years. And I wanted to know what my own reactions would be to my African ancestry."

What she discovered is stated in the conclusion: "Africans are my brothers, for we are of one race. But Africa, the land of my fathers, is not my home."⁵⁸

"I know who I am. I found my roots before Alex Haley [author of *Roots*] found his," she told a North Dakota audience in 1977. "Thanks to my North Dakota childhood dreams, I have been where I wanted to go and have done what I wanted to do."⁵⁹

With another *Ebony* editor, Thompson edited *White on Black: The views of twenty-two white Americans on the Negro*. The essays in the volume were written by a variety of prominent white Americans, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Pearl S. Buck, William Faulkner, Steve Allen, Jack Dempsey, and Billy Graham. The essays were published in *Ebony* between 1950 and 1963 and represent changing views on the white-black theme over those years.⁶⁰

Thompson's accomplishments have been recognized by North Dakota on several occasions. In 1976, Thompson was awarded the Roughrider Award, "the highest award that can be given by the State of North Dakota to current or former citizens of the state." The award is given for "genuine achievements of lasting significance" to those "who have been influenced by the state in achieving national recognition in their fields of endeavor, thereby reflecting credit and honor upon the state and its citizens."

The award was presented during the Bismarck High School class reunion for the classes from 1887-1930. Recipients of the award receive a leather scroll of recognition and a bust of Theodore Roosevelt, and their portrait is placed in the Roughrider Gallery at the State Capitol in Bismarck. Thompson had only one regret about the award, that her father did not live to see it.

In 1981 Thompson was inducted into the University of North Dakota Athletic Hall of Fame. "Thompson probably is the most famous athlete in UND and North Dakota history," reports said.⁶¹

In 1969 Thompson was awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters from UND. During Black Study Week in 1979, the Black Cultural Center at UND was renamed the Era Bell Thompson Cultural Center.

Thompson was honored in 1966 at a dinner in Bismarck sponsored by Medora Branch of American Pen Women, North Dakota Press Women, the North Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, and Zonta Club. Her home area of Driscoll sponsored "Era Bell Thompson Days," a three-day celebration in her honor, in July, 1972.

⁵⁸Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1954), p. 281.

⁵⁹Era Bell Thompson, address for Bismarck Junior College Visiting Scholars Series, April 27, 1977.

⁶⁰Era Bell Thompson and Herbert Nipson, editors, *White on Black: The Views of twenty-two white Americans on the Negro* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1963).

⁶¹"5 are chosen to UND Hall," *Grand Forks Herald*, April 29, 1981, p. 2C.

In 1975, she was in Driscoll to plant evergreen trees in memory of her parents at the Driscoll-Sibley Park, which is adjacent to the farm where she and her family lived. The Driscoll Gay 30's Club, a community organization of those who lived through the 1930's, initiated the idea for the park, the site of the Battle of Stony Lake between the troops of General Henry H. Sibley and Sioux Indians. The site was a part of the "Morton place," childhood home of Thompson.

Thompson has lived in Chicago since 1933, but regularly returns to North Dakota to visit friends, the family farmstead near Driscoll, and the cemetery where her grandmother Garrison, her parents, and her brother Stewart, who died in 1981, are buried. In 1978, her brothers Carl and Stewart returned to North Dakota with Thompson to see her oil portrait in the North Dakota Hall of Fame at the State Capitol. Carl now lives in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and Hobart lives in Kansas City, Kansas.

For a long time, her philosophy remained as optimistic and positive as the conclusion of *American Daughter*: "I know there is still good in the world, that way down underneath, most Americans are fair; that my people and your people can work together and live together in peace and happi-

ness, if they but have the opportunity to know and understand each other. The chasm is growing narrower. When it closes, my feet will rest on a united America."⁶² In 1982, Thompson added, "Recently, the chasm has widened, but God willing, it will not remain so."⁶³

Thompson's life story is not like that of the majority of North Dakotans, although her family, like thousands of immigrants to Dakota, was drawn by the possibility of available land and a better life. Thompson's life story is an inspiration to all who are considered minorities, whether the minority be female, black, or midwestern.

And where, for Thompson, is North Dakota?

"It is where my uncle homesteaded and my father was messenger to North Dakota's first Nonpartisan League governor. It is where I herded cows as a child and broke track records as a student and operated a secondhand furniture store left by my father — a place in which I loved living as a child and love remembering now."⁶⁴

⁶²Thompson, *American Daughter*, p. 296.

⁶³Era Bell Thompson, personal communication, August 16, 1982.

⁶⁴Thompson, *North Dakota Horizons*, p. 27.



North Dakota's Rough-rider Hall of Fame, located in the State Capitol, includes this portrait of Era Bell Thompson. Named to the gallery in 1976, Ms. Thompson was honored for her editorial, literary, and athletic accomplishments.

—Courtesy North Dakota Tourism Promotion Division

