



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

March 2025



Mattie Lee Ray

Blue Mountain College - Class of 1930

Blue Mountain, Mississippi

B. A. History

Eunomian Society

Mathematics Club (1, 2, 3, 4)

Sunday School Class President (2, 3)

Local Club (2, 3, 4)

Stray locks – Independence –  
Scientific spirit.

## Upcoming Exhibit

### History of Berkley First UM Church

- At Berkley First UMC  
Palm Sunday—April 27
- At Berkley Historical Museum—April 30



Watch Behind the  
Museum Doors Video

## A Special Teacher

by Don Callihan

Miss Ray was my fourth-grade teacher at Pattengill School in Berkley, Michigan, during the 1950 – 1951 school year. She was a tiny woman, about five feet tall and weighing about 100 pounds. She had sharp features, short hair—on the light side—and wire-rimmed glasses. Miss Ray was from Mississippi and talked with a slow, friendly, southern drawl.

She was born Mattie Lee Ray on March 25, 1909, near rural Blue Springs, Mississippi—about halfway between New Albany and Tupelo—to John Elihue and Hattie (Givens) Ray. John Ray was a farmer. Mattie Lee began her education at Blue Mountain College in Blue Mountain, Mississippi, in 1927. She graduated in 1930 and taught in Mississippi before coming to Pattengill School at the beginning of the 1945-1946 school year.

### Mattie Lee and Her Sisters

Looking at the 1927 yearbook for Blue Mountain College, The Mountaineer, it is hard to imagine that a simple farm girl could be a student there. The appearance of most of the girls and the tone of the yearbook suggest a level of sophistication that a girl of modest means may not possess. The same could be said for her sister, Elma. In the 1922 yearbook, Elma is listed as a sophomore, and the 1925 yearbook lists her as a faculty member teaching English and geometry. In 1966,

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## A Special Teacher

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Elma was still a faculty member, this time under her married name of Elma L. McKinstry. Another sister, Louise Ray Talley, graduated from Blue Mountain College and taught at Berkley School before moving to Longfellow School in Royal Oak.

### Blue Mountain College

The education of the Ray girls is directly traceable to a Confederate Civil War general. In 1873, former General Mark Perrin Lowrey (1828-1885) founded the Blue Mountain Female Institute because he believed that providing an education for women was crucial to the post-war recovery of the South. Lowrey, his sons and his grandson ran the college until 1960, even though the Mississippi Baptist Convention assumed control of the school, now Blue Mountain Christian University, in 1920.

### Miss Ray at Pattengill School

In fourth grade at Pattengill School, the textbook for reading was *Singing Wheels*. It revolved around the character of Tom Hastings, a young boy living in the tiny, fictional settlement of Hastings Mills in the mid-1800s. The book revealed much about pioneer life, which Miss Ray further enhanced.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, when Miss Ray was teaching in rural Mississippi, the area lacked many of the modern conveniences common in the Metropolitan Detroit area: running water, indoor plumbing, and electricity, to name a few. Small towns in Mississippi more closely resembled the settlement of Hastings Mills. Using her early experiences in Mississippi, Miss Ray brought the events described in *Singing Wheels* to life. She brought in items like those described in the book for us to see and helped us experience some of the typical chores we read about.

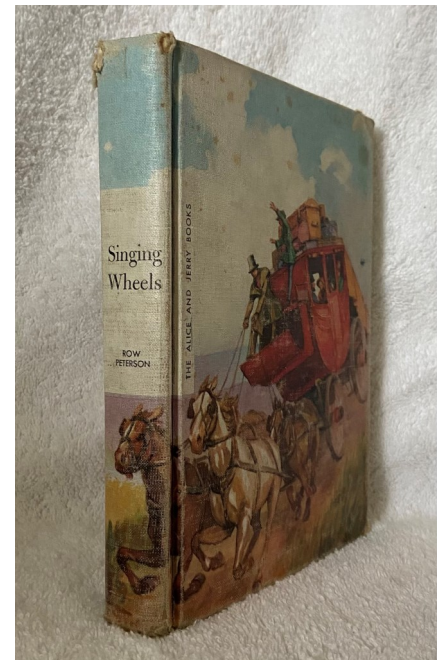
One day, she brought her butter churn to school, and we churned butter. On another occasion, we made lye soap, starting with bacon grease and lard from home. She also brought in "cracklins" (fried pig skin) for all of us to taste. I don't know if she made or bought them, but they were delicious. She also described how she rode to school on a horse or a mule during her Mississippi teaching years. As a proper lady wearing dresses and skirts, she rode side-saddle. She still had the saddle and brought it in so we could see how a side saddle lent itself to riding while wearing a skirt.

Miss Ray continued her hands-on learning experiences the following school year. An article in the December 17, 1951, edition of *The Daily Tribune* is headlined: "Candy Pull, 4th Grade Fun" "Mattie Lee Ray, a teacher at Pattengill School in Berkley, and her fourth graders had a sorghum molasses candy pull. 'Singing Wheels,' a book used by the students, suggested the pull. Miss Ray and 34 fourth graders pulled candy for the afternoon."

### Miss Ray Moves to Hamilton School

Sometime before 1958, Miss Ray moved to Hamilton School, where her hands-on teaching continued. The *Daily Tribune* reported in a caption under a photograph on November 11, 1958, that "Pioneer Days for 30 fourth graders at Hamilton school, Berkley, is an annual affair. . . Social studies and the reading unit involving pioneers is the basis for the presentation for parents. Miss Mattie Lee Ray is the teacher."

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**Singing Wheels—4th Grade Reader**

*Singing Wheels* was the 4th-grade reader used in Miss Ray's Class. It was one of the Alice & Jerry series books used in the Berkley School District in the 1940s and 1950s. I loved this book as well as *Engine Whistles*, the 5th-grade reader.

The book begins with travelers on a stagecoach driven by Lightning Joe. A young boy is sitting next to Joe in the driver's seat. We soon learn his name is Tom Hastings, and he is traveling to join his family. "My pa is out West at Hastings Mills, and my ma is, too. They came west more than a year ago. They brought my sister Sally and my brother Jim with them. I had to stay with my grandpa and grandma and go to school. But my ma got lonesome for me. So now, Lightning Joe is taking me home. He a friend of my pa's."

The journey continues with an adventurous event on eve-rypage. One of those events is the stagecoach traveling through a driving rain. As mud became a problem, ". . . the

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road changed to a corduroy road made of logs placed side by side. When the road had first been made, the places between the logs had been filled with earth to make the road as smooth as possible.” With the fill washed away, “. . . the travelers held on to their seats with all their might as the stage rose and fell from log to log.”

This is where I first learned about corduroy roads, and to this day, when I hear the word, the image from *Singing Wheels* fills my imagination

The Alice & Jerry book series (20 books total) was written by Mabel O'Donnell and illustrated by sisters, Florence and Margaret Hoopes. O'Donnell, attended the University of Chicago and Columbia University after graduating from East Aurora High School, in Aurora, Illinois. She returned to Aurora, and served as a teacher, principal and curriculum coordinator in the East Aurora School District. In 1946 she resigned to become an editor for Row, Peterson & Co, the Alice & Jerry series publisher. She had already made her name, having written the first book in the series in 1938.

The book continues to be in print. Amazon describes the book “as a real learning adventure with interesting stories about early American life on the frontier. The book provides an informative and illustrated introduction to American history for school-age children.”

## **A Special Teacher** *continued from page 2*

### **In Memoria**

Miss Ray continued teaching in Berkley until her death on Saturday, May 25, at Grace Hospital in Detroit, after a three-week illness. She is buried with her parents in the Wallerville Baptist Church Cemetery, Wallerville, Union County, Mississippi. She had lived in Royal Oak since 1945 and was a member of First Baptist Church, 309 N Main St, Royal Oak, MI (Today, the church is known as Genesis, The Church). Her sister, Louise Talley, had lived with her at 535 W. Fourth, Apt 14, since her husband, Ray M. Talley, passed away in 1959. Ray Talley is probably responsible for Miss Ray coming to Michigan. He and Louise had lived in Detroit in the 1930s before going to Richmond, Virginia. After a few years in Richmond, the couple returned to Detroit in the early 1940s, where Ray was a successful real estate salesman.

The Ray sisters' achievements are memorialized at Blue Mountain Christian University by the Ray-McKinstry-Talley scholarship for elementary education in memory of Mattie Lee Ray, Louise Ray Talley, and Elma Lois Ray McKinstry. I am happy to learn that Miss Ray has been memorialized. She was an excellent teacher who positively influenced my life.

### **My Assignment**

In Miss Ray's class, one of my assignments was to give a speech on George Washington. I went home and looked up George Washington in our movie-theater-acquired encyclopedias. My dad helped me prepare the speech which I memorized and recited in her class. Doing the research for that speech made me aware that the calendar had changed back in the 1700s, as two dates were given for Washington's birth. The first was on February 11, 1731, and the second was on February 22, 1732. My dad tried to explain the two dates to me at the time, but I did not understand until years later.

At the time of Washington's birth, England and the Colonies were using the Julian Calendar. In 1752, however, Britain and all its colonies adopted the Gregorian calendar, which moved Washington's birthday one year and 11 days to February 22, 1732.

The calendar problem began when Julius Ceasar implemented the Julian calendar in 45 B.C. Astronomers at the time pegged a solar year at 365.25 days and thus added an extra day every four years. However, an error was made; an additional day was added every third year. This made an average calendar year 365.3333 days. The solar year was 365.2422 days. The error accumulated over the years. Another problem occurred because the year did not change on January 1 but March 25. Thus, Washington's birth year was 1731 because the year did not change until March 25. Had the year changed on January 1, his birth year would have been 1732.

The Gregorian calendar, the one we use today, improved the accuracy of the calendar using the following: “Every year that is exactly divisible by four is a leap year, except for years that are exactly divisible by 100, but these centurial years are leap years if they are exactly divisible by 400. For example, the years 1700, 1800, and 1900 are not leap years, but the year 2000 is.”(see QR Code) England did not adopt the Gregorian Calendar until 1752. That year, the year began on January 1, not March 25, and eleven days were removed from the calendar in September. September 2 was followed by September 14. eleven days thus had to be added to Washington's birthday to adjust it to the Gregorian calendar.



# Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and Berkley Map prints.



**New Christmas Coffee Mug** - Available for \$15 in early November at the Museum, the Library, and City Hall

## NEW! - Original artwork prints from Berkley artists

L to R, The Berkley Theater Marquee by Steven Patterson, Downtown Berkley—January 13, 2024 by Dale Carlson, The Vinsetta Garage by Steven Patterson.



## Get the Newsletter

If you wish to receive *The Museum Corner* each time it is published, please put your name and email address in the body of an email and enter the phrase “*The Museum Corner*” in the subject line. Send the email to: [museum@berkleymich.net](mailto:museum@berkleymich.net)

## Donate Items of Historical Interest

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: [museum@berkleymich.net](mailto:museum@berkleymich.net). Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

## Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to [museum@berkleymich.net](mailto:museum@berkleymich.net) indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

## Photo and Text Credits

Mattie Lee Ray photo from the *Mountaineer*, Class of 1930, Blue Mountain College. *Singing Wheels* photo by Don Callihan.. Historical references are from *The Daily Tribune*, Ancestry.com, and Wikipedia.

## Visit Us

**Berkley Historical Museum**  
3338 Coolidge Highway  
Berkley, MI 48072  
248-658-3335  
[museum@berkleymich.net](mailto:museum@berkleymich.net)

Hours: Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM  
Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

Visit us on the web at  
[www.berkleyhistory.org](http://www.berkleyhistory.org)

Facebook: Berkley Historical Museum

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X: [@BerkleyMuseum](https://twitter.com/BerkleyMuseum)

The Museum Corner Editor:  
Don Callihan

The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.