



## THREE LINKS WITH M.S.U. HISTORY

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# Myrtle Mowbray, '07: MSU's first black graduate, remembers M.A.C.



Myrtle Mowbray: "Dinner and a dollar"

How times do change!

Just ask Myrtle Mowbray, a graduate of the class of 1907, Michigan State's first black graduate and a recent visitor on campus.

She was here when Morrill Hall was the Women's Building, the Administration Building was just next door to that, and the boys' dorms were in a row across the river where Wells Hall now stands. There wasn't a Cowles House, or a big, well-lit library, but — "faculty row" extended from the Women's Building down past the current West Circle Dorms. Dr. Kedzie, known as the strictest professor on campus, was head of the Chemistry Department and he would lock his building to keep late students from inconspicuously creeping into their seats.

"When I first entered, I thought the school to be a wonderful place, so large already," Ms. Mowbray said with a laugh. She feels the changes made on-campus today are absolutely marvelous.

"My father worked in the capitol downtown, and I used to come up on weekends to visit him. When it came time for me to go to college, he said it was either Michigan Agricultural College or none at all, he couldn't afford anything else. I would've been delighted to go down the Ann Arbor way, since M.A.C. didn't appeal to women then. My first thought was 'What could I do at an agricultural school?'"

After coming to Michigan State, Ms. Mowbray found she could do a lot. Her first year she lived with the school secretary, a man named Brown. There

she helped with meals, and learned cosmetology, thus earning her room and board. The following year she housed with a Professor Neuman, but after that, she moved to Lansing and commenced to earn money other ways.

"I sold scissors for a clothing store after school and worked as a waitress catering in a club where often my pay was dinner and a dollar." She said she felt lucky to be able to do these things.

Being one of four black students on campus and the only black woman, Ms. Mowbray wasn't bothered by an inactive social life. She says she was too busy.

"I didn't feel any different because of my race. There were sororities for girls, but I was so poor, I didn't have the time or money for those things."

Her classes were what every woman took then, called the Women's Course. It took five years and was geared to make them good wives and mothers. Curriculum included piano, music, a certain amount of art, home economics, sewing, foods, English, German, history and chemistry. This was a liberal education in those days, she says.

Today, having a Black President at MSU seems astounding to her. "I so wanted to come back to see his first commencement, but just couldn't make it. Dr. Wharton is remarkable, especially at a university this size and stature because black folks just haven't held these positions before." Her only disappointment, she adds, was missing President Wharton again since he was out of town during her visit.

"I constantly follow the news clippings about him to see how he's regarded and how his family is treated," she says.

What advice would Ms. Mowbray give a young black woman today? "I'd tell her to get as much education as possible, and push for more, although remaining a bit satisfied with the way things are today. She should try to do the best she can and excel as much as she can, aspiring to anything a white woman aspires to.

"My husband and I often say we were born too soon. We would like to go on and do a lot of the things that young kids are doing today, but just don't have the strength now."

But Ms. Mowbray is still doing a lot. She taught in high schools and colleges in Missouri and Kansas with her degree and has been retired 24 years, now living in Kansas City. She is chairman of Kansas City's Model Cities Program and was a delegate at the President's Conference on the Aged in Washington in 1971.

After almost casually walking into the Alumni Association offices and announcing that she was MSU's first black graduate, Ms. Mowbray had a busy day. She was hustled over to WKAR-TV for an interview, and escorted all over the campus to see the newer buildings and view the older ones still remaining from her days on campus.

"I wanted them to put out the red carpet for me when I came back, and they sure did!" she chuckled on her way home.

—CINDY STEINWAY