

EDITOR'S PICK

Behind the Name: Who is Lovie Watson?

By FOSS FARRAR CourierTraveler Correspondent

Feb 26, 2022

1 of 2



Lovie Watson Park in northwest Arkansas City is named after the matriarch of the well-known Watson family. She came to Ark City in 1929.

Photo by FOSS FARRAR

On a hot June day in 1971, Cowley College student Virgil Watson Jr. took a break from studies to attend the grand opening of a park in the northwest neighborhood of Arkansas City just a couple of blocks from his childhood home.

It was a special occasion for Virgil, scores of his relatives, a diverse group of Ark City people including city officials, the local band, members of the naval reserve, clergy, and officials from the meat cutters union.

They were there to honor Virgil's grandmother, Lovie Watson. The park was named for her, as a tribute to her for raising 10 children, on her own during the Great Depression, under strict Christian principles and with the expectation that they respect and serve others as Jesus did.

The Watson family does not care to boast about its important role in advancing race relations in a positive way in Ark City, particularly for the African-American community in our town, Virgil Watson Jr. said Friday.

Among Lovie Watson's children and grandchildren are respected teachers, clergymen, coaches, medical care professionals, and the first and second black mayors to serve Ark City.

For example, one of Lovie Watson's grandsons, C. Edward Watson, is both a pastor and an attorney. He was elected the first African-American president of the Wichita Bar Association.

"It shows young African-American people what is possible," Virgil Jr. said. "We're a part of that history, that legacy and have left an impact on the community."

The Legacy

Lovie Watson died at age 78 in August 1981. She was born and raised in Arkansas. She was married in 1918 to James Watson, and came to Ark City in 1929. Her husband left home after several years, and Lovie, who had an eighth-grade education, was left alone to raise the children.

All but two of her 10 children — five boys and five girls — have since died. Survivors are Chuck Watson, former recreation director at Winfield State Hospital and Training Center, former assistant football coach at Cowley College, and local youth program coach; and Arceolla (Watson) Fields.

"She was everything to everybody," Arceolla Fields said Thursday. "She raised 10 of us and she loved us. She loved people, young people, everybody."

Chuck Watson said in a 1981 Traveler interview: "My mother's life was the church first. In her philosophy of life the church was not a building or something like that. It was a way of life and she brought us up to respond to and respect others and to try to exemplify Christ in our own lives. That was her whole philosophy."

Fields said that among her late siblings there were three ministers, two missionaries, and Ark City's first black mayor, Virgil Watson Sr. Six of her brothers, including those who also served in the ministry, worked at Rodeo Meats for many years.

Lovie Watson was a member of the Church of God in Christ, and in 1931 she was installed as church mother, a position she retained until her death. She was president of the Youth Guild from 1943 until 1952. She was district missionary of the Wichita district for 10 years and state counselor for the women's department of Kansas Southwest.

Chuck Watson said Lovie worked hard raising her children. During World War II, when Strother Field was used as a military training base, she took in washing and ironing from the soldiers. But mostly, she raised her family on the proceeds of her eldest son's job. He had to quit school to help support the family.

Park is planned

Virgil Watson Jr. said the idea for a park in the northwest area of Ark City to be named in honor of his grandmother originated with Gwen Nelson, president of Cowley College. Nelson headed the Ark City Chamber of Commerce's park committee.

The local chamber endorsed the proposal during a meeting Dec. 17, 1969, according to Traveler archives. The board of directors unanimously approved to buy the site and to move ahead with a fund-raising drive to provide the \$5,000 purchase price.

By the early 1970s, Nelson served on the city's Community Relations Council, along with Virgil Watson Sr., and Watson helped him and other civic leaders make the plan for the park become a reality. Other members of the council at that time included Travis Morris, George Sybrant, Bob Spear, and Bob Reinkemeyer.

Virgil Watson Jr. recalled the mix of people attending park dedication in 1971.

"There was a good representation of the community, people from all walks of life — community groups, city commissioners, clergy, people from all over the town," he said.

Chuck Watson's son, C. Edward Watson grew up just a block away from the park named for his grandmother. Now the pastor of the neighborhood church, St. James Church of God in Christ, Watson said Lovie played an integral role in his upbringing.

"I went to her house every day, from kindergarten until I was 14," he said. "I certainly felt loved, supported. She was a tough disciplinarian but never disciplined me because I did what she said."

Watson, who now lives in Wichita and commutes to Ark City to preach on weekends, said Lovie was a woman of great conviction and tenacity and passed those qualities on to her children and grandchildren.

"Can't do was not a part of her MO," he said.

Watson said his father, aunts and uncles grew up under Lovie's care during the Great Depression.

"They were poor growing up in the Depression and Lovie insisted they should be fruitful in community and church work," he said. "And they passed that on to us. They wanted us to be active and not just sit on the sidelines."

Edward, Virgil Jr., and another grandson, Ark City city commissioner and former mayor Charles Jennings recalled the frequent family gatherings at Lovie's home.

"The entire family used to get together every holiday at her house on Fifth Street," Virgil Watson said. "We all lived within several blocks of each other, all in the same neighborhood, and when something was going on, we all went to grandma's house."

Charles Jennings has fond childhood memories of those family gatherings.

"It was not unusual to see a toddler, a teen or old-timer together," he said. "She built families, and she advocated sibling love."

The most compelling thing Lovie Watson did was to call all 10 of her children together, regularly, to address the things that would preserve and promote family unity, Jennings said. The effect of those family meetings has definitely impacted three generations.

"Lovie Watson's image before me was that of one harmonious existence," Jennings said. "She was never slow to encourage and certainly not afraid to correct. But her words always challenged us to do better and to be better."

"Whether she spoke to a child, an adult or even her peers, the message was embraced because she lived with the same integrity that she taught and expected of others," Jennings said.

The park today

Virgil Watson Jr. said that the northwest community park today is used by a diverse group of people.

"It's one of our city parks," he said. "I was there in '71 when I was in college and I frequent it today. I go around the walking track on a bicycle with my eight-year old granddaughter. I see people walking, jogging, on bicycles. It's a great health benefit."

Arceolla Fields, 88, also frequents the park.

Fields said she takes walks in the park for 30 minutes every morning.