

# WHEN TOUSSAINT CONDUCTS

By LENORE GREENBERGER

SEVEN years ago a small group of students at Hunter College organized the Toussaint L'Ouverture Society for the purpose of studying Negro history. They named it for the Haitian general, born the son of African slaves, who resisted Napoleon's order to restore slavery in San Domingo and died in a French prison in 1803. The club now numbers approximately one hundred members. One of the most active of all Hunter societies, Toussaint is characterized by a sincerity of purpose which marks it as an organization which knows where it wants to go and how to get there.

For example, in 1936, Dr. William H. Huggins spoke at a meeting on the history of the Negro, tracing it back to the kings of ancient Egypt and through to the present ruler of Ethiopia. "The present wealth of material on the contribution of the Negro to African culture," he said, "belies the popular fallacy that the Negroes have always been drawers of water and hewers of wood." A prize of twenty-five dollars was offered in 1939 for the best essay on the contributions of the Negro to American history. Miriam Panger won the competition with her essay called "The Negro and the Reconstruction Era." Soon after, in 1940, Toussaint opened a drive to have a course in Negro history instituted at Hunter College and conducted an open meeting called "Why Negro History Should be Taught in the Colleges." In February, 1943, the American Negro Culture course was added to the college curriculum with Mrs. Adelaide Hill, first Negro member of the faculty, as instructor. The catalogue describes the course as dealing with the origins of the Negro people, the organization of African society, interaction between Africa, Europe, and the New World, the institution of slavery in the United States, the social status of the Negro (within the group and society at large), and the cultural contribu-

tions of the Negro people. In connection with this course a shelf of books dealing with Negro culture was added to the tenth floor library. Recent additions to the shelf were paid for by the proceeds from a dance held on December 11 at the Audubon Ballroom.

Toussaint takes a vigorous interest in current Negro problems and maintains direct contact with many prominent Negro organizations. When the argument that the Negro press was an obstacle to the advancement of Negro people was first raised, Toussaint called a meeting in order to discuss the question "Is the Negro Press a Hate Making Organ?" In a discussion of the cartoon "Bootsie," which appears in *The People's Voice* and portrays the Negro in a light which might be objectionable to the sensitive colored person, it was pointed out that although the value served in perpetuating the stereotype is a questionable one, Bootsie is no more a true picture of the Negro than Moon Mullins is of the white. Speakers at the meeting were Oliver Harrington, former cartoonist of *The People's Voice* and Dan Burley, editor of *The Amsterdam Star News*. As a result of this forum the press committee of Toussaint was developed in order to give Negro youth an opportunity to express itself. Among the papers with which the committee maintains contact are *The People's Voice*, *The Amsterdam Star News*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, and *The Afro-American*.

In 1942, Frances Benson, Elaine Bailey, Marjorie Mullet and Sylvia Alves represented Toussaint at the National Congress of Negro Youth meeting held in Washington, and three delegates were sent to the meeting of the youth group of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People held at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, in October, 1943.

Toussaint organized the recent anti-poll tax meeting held at the college. The meeting was conducted through the combined efforts of eight clubs, differing widely in political beliefs, but able to unite behind a common cause. Over one thousand post cards were sent to senators and funds were collected to be used in sending telegrams, as a result of this meeting.

In line with their active interest in the down-to-earth problems of the Negro in the community, the members of Toussaint have taken upon themselves a difficult and worthy project. They have volunteered to work on a big sister basis with the Riverdale Orphan Asylum which houses two hundred colored boys and girls ranging from eight to sixteen years of age. The majority of the children are not true orphans but the products of broken homes or families that cannot support them. The part which Toussaint plays is one of psychological importance. Because the orphans live in groups of twenty-five with cottage parents and participate only in mass activities, each child tends to lose his individuality. The orphanage is insufficiently and poorly staffed and cannot provide individual attention. Toussaint members try to supply this missing element by working with the orphans, visiting them, writing letters, taking them on trips or to the movies, and inviting them to their homes. The club members keep alive the spark of personality by convincing each child that a special interest is taken in him.

"If most of us with families feel insecure when we go out to face the world," explained Frances Benson, president of Toussaint, "think of how this insecurity must be doubled for orphans. Then, too, these are colored orphans; their problem in adapting themselves to the community is not only that of the orphan, but that of the Negro."

Realizing that it was difficult for it to help in the problems of sixteen-year old boys, Toussaint enlisted the aid of the Meroe Society of City College and formed the Inter-Collegiate Riverdale Committee. Last Christmas Toussaint sponsored a concert in the

Little Theatre at which the Furman Fordham Glee Club sang. The proceeds went for a Christmas party for the children at Riverdale. Over the summer the girls raised funds for work with the orphanage by giving a program at the Y.W.C.A., at which Kenneth Spencer, who played Gabriel in the all-colored musical *Cabin in the Sky*, Mercedes Gilbert, actress and dramatist, and Marion Cumbo, cellist, appeared. On Thanksgiving the Social Service Society of Hunter visited the orphanage.

If the activities of Toussaint as a whole have been impressive, so too, are the records of the girls who have belonged to it. Anita Taitt is now working as a biology technician at Hunter and is in line for promotion to a teaching position. Henrietta Mays is taking the library course at Columbia. Patricia Williams, who was president of Toussaint three and a half years ago and secretary of SSGA, is studying at the New York School for Social Work. Marjorie Knight is teaching biology and hygiene at Voorhees Junior College in Denmark, South Carolina. Kathleen Saunders is working for the government in the field of ballistics. Elaine Bailey, former Toussaint president, was chairman of the Educational Advancement Committee. Ruby Gillespie, a June 1943 graduate, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Florence Lucas is now a lawyer. Margaret McKinney is a member of the Social Science honor society, Alpha Chi Alpha. Mrs. Adelaide Hill, who teaches the American Negro Culture course, is executive secretary of the Urban League at Englewood, an organization developed to help the Negro in his housing, placement, and job problems.

Frances Benson, "Benny" to her friends, is the present president of Toussaint and is listed in "Who's Who in the Universities." She appeared in the Hunter High School version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and occasionally a high school chum still greets her with "hi, Topsy!" She sang on the Town Hall Stars of Tomorrow program and on Bob Emery's Rainbow House show over WOR. This summer she acted in the presen-

tations of the lives of famous Negroes over The Great American Series heard on WNYC. Her love of singing led her to organize the Toussaint choir, which, Frances says wants to do "everything from soup to nuts." If the rendition of "White Christmas" at the Interclub chapel was a fair sample, the rest of Hunter would like to hear the equivalent of an eight course dinner. The choir was enthusiastically received and Frances had to beg off an encore because of lack of time by saying that "the choir belongs to the union, and the union says all Hunter girls must go to class."

Like other groups at the college Toussaint has adapted its program to the war, and its war committee has cooperated in the various bond, book, and other drives sponsored by the college. Dr. Robert D. Clark of the department of psychology at City College spoke on "The Question of the Negro Soldier." The society entertained service men of the 372nd Infantry at the 23rd Street barracks. Frances Benson has appeared at several shows at the Stage Door Canteen and many of the girls are active at the Harlem Defense Recreation Center.

The rest of the college has learned to look forward to something gay when Toussaint entertains. At Carnival they did a series of

African and Haitian dances. This year, for Freedom Festival, they put on a series of Russian, South American, Mexican and African dances.

Most Hunter students are surprised to learn that the Toussaint L'Ouverture Society has been joined by several white students who are sincerely interested in the problem of the Negro. Toussaint's aim is to better Negro-white relationships and foster mutual understanding, and the greater part of its program is planned with this in mind. Frances Benson feels that although to some it may seem that the program is limited to phases of the Negro problem, actually the scope of inter-racial activities includes all minority groups and affords an opportunity to understand the influences which cultural backgrounds have on people's thinking.

"Within our college community of seven thousand students," says Frances, "there are numerous occasions to demonstrate how inter-racial understanding serves to extend democratic practices. As a Hunter organization our aim is to make it possible for the student to get the most out of her extra-curricular life; and if Toussaint L'Ouverture is not the full answer to an individual student's needs, we will still feel proud to be only a small part of that answer."



### *What Chaucer Said*

*By Margaret Mahon*

Chaucer said "hus,"  
But today we say "house."  
To rhyme with papoose  
Chaucer said "hus."  
Instead of our "goose,"  
Should we say "gouse"?  
For Chaucer said "hus,"  
But today we say "house."