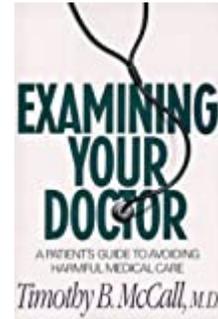


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Yvonne S. Thornton. *The Ditchdigger's Daughters: A Black Family's Astonishing Success Story.* New York: Plume, 1995. vii + 261 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55972-282-7.



Reviewed by Valeri Drach-Weidmann (Highland Park Public Library)

Published on H-New-Jersey (April, 2007)

An American Dream Realized

The early 1950s was not an era of opportunity for African Americans in New Jersey. Neighborhoods were segregated, and banks refused loans to black families seeking homes in white neighborhoods. Blacks lived in inferior housing and attended schools that did not prepare them for the possibility of higher education. They worked largely in menial and repetitive jobs with little hope of advancement. What kind of a future could a black child, especially a girl with dark skin, expect? Race almost certainly determined class.

Nevertheless, in 1950s Long Branch, New Jersey, Donald Thornton, a black ditchdigger at Fort Monmouth, made an outrageous claim. After being teased by his fellow workers for having five daughters and no sons he declared that all of his children would become doctors and wear “scripperscraps” (stethoscopes), around their necks (p. 4). Thornton and his wife Tass worked at whatever jobs they could get to support their daughters’ education and even built a house in a white neighborhood with their own hands when a bank refused them a mortgage. Though the Thorntons struggled to purchase music lessons and instruments for their daughters, the fam-

ily formed a band, the Thornton Sisters, that performed at colleges throughout the Northeast to help support the family (p. 140). Donald kept his daughters studying and off the streets. The family had one goal—to educate their children to do valuable, respectable work.

Ten years ago, in *Ditchdigger's Daughters*, Yvonne S. Thornton, M.D., with writer Jo Coudert, chronicled her parents’ efforts to launch the professional lives of their daughters in Long Branch. Living in a project apartment in Seaview Manor, Donald Thornton managed to enroll his daughters in Garfield, the local white school, instead of the segregated school in their own neighborhood. After they graduated, Donald kept his daughters close to home. They matriculated at Monmouth College, even though they were accepted to other schools, including Howard and Barnard. Yvonne, the third daughter, was the first to become a doctor, graduating from Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1973.

Thornton’s readable, fast-paced memoir was chosen to be New Jersey’s One Book choice for its inspirational message and accessibility to many different age groups. Thornton and Coudert’s writing is compelling and per-

fect for older children and teens who might not otherwise find themselves reading. Although her story is uplifting, Thornton does not hesitate to portray the sacrifices endured by her parents and sisters during the 1950s and '60s. While Donald and Tass worked several jobs, the children put off socializing, dating, and making friends to devote themselves to study and musical rehearsals. In the end, two of Donald and Tass Thornton's daughters became doctors, one a dentist, one a court stenographer, one head of a science department in a private school, and one (a foster daughter) a nurse. While Thornton might have portrayed her family's relationship to their white teachers and classmates in greater detail, overall this is an inspiring and well-written portrait of an American family.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-new-jersey>

Citation: Valeri Drach-Weidmann. Review of Thornton, Yvonne S., *The Ditchdigger's Daughters: A Black Family's Astonishing Success Story*. H-New-Jersey, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13046>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.