H-Net Reviews
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Earl M. Middleton, Joy W. Barnes. *Knowing Who I Am: A Black Entrepreneur's Struggle and Success in the American South.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. xii + 183 pp. + 24 pp. of plates. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-715-3.

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Commissioned by Phillip Stone

Uncommon Sense

Earl M. Middleton's *Knowing Who I Am* is a pleasure to read. He skilfully entwines his memoir with significant historical and regional events, and while he is aware of his story's distinctiveness, his tone is not self-important. He has observations and lessons to impart; a major theme of the book, and of Middleton's life, is common sense. As he tells his story, it is apparent to the reader that Middleton possesses uncommonly good sense and talents.

One thing I love about autobiography is learning history from someone who was there. Middleton includes interesting details that set a scene or give us a background briefly but solidly. One example is a history of how Claflin University was founded (p. 6). Middleton segues from how his grandparents came to live in Orangeburg, South Carolina, to how Claflin has been prominent in the family's endeavors since its establishment; his grandfather, Abram Middleton, was an original trustee of Claflin University and moved to Orangeburg because he was greatly involved in the university's business. This passage could easily have devolved into a detailed chapter about Orangeburg's history or even Claflin's history, but Middleton trusts that readers can find such information elsewhere and gives us just enough to get our bearings in time and in the town. Similar examples bring alive his experiences as a Tuskegee pilot-in-training and as a jilted delegate to the 1956 Republican National Convention.

Personal anecdotes about segregation and how the South Carolina legislature operated are welcome exceptions to the brief historical overview. On page 93, Middleton explains that a Confederate flag displayed on a particular home in Orangeburg is a daily reminder of how the owner's father had fired Middleton's friend when he signed a 1955 petition asking that black children be admitted to the public schools closest to their homes. Middleton mentions a number of times that he shuns bitterness as unproductive, but a constant reminder like that flag makes it difficult to forget and move on. Regarding elected service, I learned that until Middleton introduced legislation in 1978 to change it, every automobile tag in South Carolina expired on the same date. A change to rolling expiration dates definitely seems like common sense. I also had not known that there is a toll-free number available to check on the status of any given bill under consideration.

Middleton was encouraged by friends, family, and business colleagues to write *Knowing Who I Am.* Similarly, he was encouraged to run for political offices, but it is apparent that before taking any actions, Middleton thought them through in terms of his big picture. He stayed in the South because "a primary business goal for [him] was to be in a line of work that would help improve the lives of blacks" (p. 77). In addition to having a societal vision, Middleton also excelled at long-range business strategy. By owning his own businesses and succeeding at them, he was able to work on civil rights issues without endangering his family's livelihood. Middleton describes his many accomplishments in this context, expressing pride in himself personally and as an example to other African Americans, while using someone else's words to eliminate any suggestion of arrogance: "Earl's getting his flowers while he's still alive!"

Any book is more valuable if I want to learn more as a result. In *Knowing Who I Am*, one passage described how Wade Hampton and his followers were instrumental in "wrest[ing] from freedmen their hard-won rights" (p. 90). I have lived in the South for more than thirty years, but I did not know that these riders were known as the Red Shirts. Middleton's mention that the transport ship (*Kota Inten*) he was on to the Pacific in April 1945 was not segregated made me wonder why a ship would be inte-

grated when the barracks at Tuskegee were not. It seems that for those serving in the Navy, all ships were directed to be integrated sometime in 1944, while President Roosevelt had proclaimed that blacks be permitted to join the Navy's Seaman-Fireman Service in 1942. Another curiosity was that Middleton was active in organizing the first Tuberculosis Association of Orangeburg County for blacks (p. 76). I had not realized that the American Lung Association began as the Tuberculosis Association.

Middleton is obviously proud of successes in Orangeburg and Orangeburg County, incorporating brief histories of how prominent corporations and people came to be there. As with historic events, these discussions are succinct and serve to inform the reader who has seen the name Zeus or Ethyl only from Interstate 26.

Examples of "common sense" that Middleton champions are: to use credit sparingly (p. 83); that circuit judges should not be elected by the legislature, because many of the legislators are attorneys who try cases before the judges they elect (p. 122); and that education in its many forms "must continue to be in the forefront as a 'way out' of poverty and poor health habits" (p. 136). Many of us know about the credit and education but applying such knowledge consistently is less common than it could be.

Beyond its value as a readable story, I was impressed with the thoroughness of the book's index, particularly of individual names. Anyone from an Eagle Scout to a flight instructor is included in the index, however briefly they were mentioned in the book. The bibliography is also useful for readers interested in South Carolina history. I recommend *Knowing Who I Am* as a primary source for history, a testament to the importance of family documentation, and a how-to book for businesses as well. Earl Matthew Middleton died in 2007 knowing who he was, and thanks to this admirable book, all of us can know him too.

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