

A.J. Smitherman

By Raven Majia Williams

In contemplating an appropriate title for the biography I wrote about my great-grandfather, a man my family refers to as Big Daddy, it became evident that out of the many contributions he made to the black and Native American races, as well as to white citizens of Oklahoma who benefited from his peacemaking, three in particular have had the most significant impact on American history. Hence the title:

A.J. Smitherman: Black Gold, Black Wall Street & Black Power

The first of Smitherman's major contributions was his work to assist Native Americans and Freedmen (blacks born on reservations) to retain possession of their 'Black Gold.' Black Gold was a term for the oil that was discovered in Oklahoma on land allotted to Native Americans and Freedmen by the U.S. government. Native Americans and Freedmen were supposed to be given 160 acres of land for every man, woman, and child. In many cases that land struck oil. The amount of wealth that Native American and Freedman retained as a result of Smitherman's help is not quantifiable, but is estimated to be in the hundreds of millions.

The second contribution is Smitherman's influence on shaping not only what blacks were thinking and doing in the thriving Greenwood District in Tulsa, also known as Black Wall Street, but throughout the nation: His newspaper, the *Tulsa Star*, was distributed throughout the United States. And as President of the Western Negro Press Association for eleven consecutive years, he influenced other editors who were helping to shape their communities as well.

A political visionary and activist, Smitherman's most important contribution may have been what he called his "great experiment," of convincing blacks to diversify their vote rather than vote straight Republican as they had since Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. He saw that Republicans were doing nothing to earn the black vote that they took for granted, and Democrats were doing nothing to earn the black vote because they believed they'd never get it. In a letter he wrote to Governor Robertson in March of 1922, after his exile to Boston, he described the success of his mission:

"Prior to June 1, 1921, I was editor and publisher of the *Tulsa Star*, the only colored Democratic newspaper in the country, and it was through the influence of my paper that the political complexion of the colored people of Tulsa was decidedly changed from Republican to Democratic majorities. Not only that, throughout the state colored people were influenced to diversify their politics and to support their friends in the Democratic party as well as the Republican party, as in no other southern state, and the *Star* blazed the way."

And still today the majority of blacks in America vote Democrat.

Growing up, my father would share with us stories of Big Daddy. He would regularly recite the epic

poem Big Daddy wrote about the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. My father could rarely get through the entirety of the poem without pausing with emotion. One particular story my father shared was about the time Big Daddy confronted a lynch mob about to hang a black man. Armed with only a briefcase filled with newspapers, Big Daddy yelled "This briefcase is filled with four bottles of Nitroglycerin. If you don't release that man immediately, I'm gonna throw it and we will all burn in hell!" Stunned, the mob turned and ran, their victim saved from certain hanging.

So it is no surprise that the many scholars and historians who have written about our Big Daddy, have all in one way or another been moved to do so by what is an undeniable respect for the man's courage, drive, and commitment to uplifting and protecting his race.

The fact that he has received little historical recognition is something that I am determined to change. It's unfortunate that his legacy has not been celebrated more after making a conscious decision to lose any and everything to empower his race. His humility played a large part in this, as he raised his children and they raised theirs to not value things like fame. One of my favorite quotes from Big Daddy is:

"There is just enough difference between celebrity and notoriety to make one hesitate before aspiring to the possession of either."

Well, I'm sorry Big Daddy. I'm committed to seeing you get the rightful credit you deserve as one of the most courageous and influential journalists in America's history.