



## **Marian Cheek Jackson**

Marian Jackson, as a child living in a one- hundred-year-old house in Carrboro, early knew the importance of community. Her grandfather, a mason who had once been a slave, built the house for his family. Many of the University's and Chapel Hill's old stone walls reveal his skill. When Marian's father Kennon Cheek grew up, he also found a job at the University and later established the Janitorial Association of the University. The family was among the founders of St. Joseph's Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Eighty-nine years ago, as an infant, Marian became a member of that church.

Marian's father helped found the Northside School which Marian attended. She dreamed of going to college and becoming a social worker. When her father died in 1930, her dream seemed impossible. A professor helped Marian's mother keep the family home. A neighbor, Walter Riggsbee, checked on the little family. Professor William Coker had married an Episcopalian, Louise Venable, and both wanted to support education. When they found out that Marian wanted to go to college, they

decided on St. Augustine's College, an Episcopalian school. In 1941, with help from the Cokers and a \$500 scholarship, she entered St. Augustine's as a work-study student. She loved being at the college. When she graduated, she was offered a job at North Carolina Mutual. She gave up a scholarship for graduate work at Spellman College and took the job because her mother and grandmother needed her at home. She began a life of leaving each morning to work in Durham and of returning to her home in Chapel Hill each evening. She married her high school sweetheart and the couple had two sons.

She was the church secretary and St. Joseph's was the center of her life. It was not just a church, but also a place to learn and to feel a part of a community. The church hosted a choir of children who performed each year in the University auditorium. A group of adults came to St. Joseph's to learn to read and write. And social events were held regularly. In summer the whole church went on picnics. For all of the activities, Marian Cheek Jackson organized, took care of problems, and then kept organizers for the next program on track. Her titles suggest the variety of her deeds: Director of the Board of Christian Education, Secretary of the Missionary Society, at local and district levels. Each year, on the anniversary of the church's founding, as church historian, she writes the history of the church for that year and presents it. "Without a past, no future," she said. "All of this is a way to give to others and to make a way for others to follow." She has a little prayer she offers daily, "If I have caused one person to go astray, dear Lord, forgive me" as well as her favorite scripture passage, the Twenty-third Psalm.

Marian Cheek Jackson has enjoyed the warmth of community, the feeling of being a part of a long history, and of belonging to this part of the world. Her church and the University have been the pillars which supported this. A center for recording oral histories of ordinary townspeople is named after her: The Marion Cheek Jackson Center for Saving and Making History. She said some things have changed for the better in Chapel Hill-Carrboro: race relations are better because things are not as separate and divided as they used to be. Nevertheless, she declared, there is still room for a lot of improvement in race relations.