Merze Tate

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The Homestead Act of 1862 enabled the great grandparents of Merze Tate (Harris 1981) to migrate from the east in Ohio into central Michigan. Many other blacks, whites, and immigrants from northern Europe also migrated to central Michigan. The Homestead Act provided 160 acres of unoccupied public land to each homesteader for a nominal fee after five years of residence.

Merze Tate was born during a blizzard in 1905. The weather precluded the medical doctor from making the visit. A German neighbor officiated but left the medical examination and the preparation of a birth certificate to the medical doctor. The physician listed her as a "white child," thereby causing her some problems when she applied for a passport to study and travel in Europe.

Merze Tate graduated as an honor student from high school in Michigan. Her undergraduate studies were completed at Western Michigan Teachers' College (now Western Michigan University). She was awarded a tuition scholarship and earned her room and board by working in the home of a white businessman. Merze taught for one year after receiving a Teacher's diploma. She returned to the college with enough funds to cover the cost of room and board. She completed the B.A. degree in three years and became the first African American to earn the B.A. degree at this college. She earned it with the highest scholastic average of any of the classmates of her year (forty-five A's and six B's).

Despite her grades, the Western Placement Service could not find her a teaching position in Michigan. In the 1920s, Michigan did not employ colored teachers in secondary schools. Chagrined and embarrassed, the dean of women, the registrar, and the president gave Merze Tate a loan to look for employment outside of Michigan. She then applied for teaching positions in St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Cincinnati. She was offered positions in all three cities. She chose Indianapolis because it was closer to her family in Michigan. The teaching position was at the new Crispus Attucks High School located in a predominantly black neighborhood. While teaching at the school from 1927 to 1932, she attended summer sessions at Columbia University, receiving her M.A. degree in 1930.

Her next formal education was at Oxford. She enrolled as Oxford's first African-American woman in 1932. She studied international relations, diplomatic history, advanced economics, and international law and received a Bachelor of Literature degree in 1935. Merze was the first African American to be awarded that degree at this venerable institution.

She accepted a dual position as dean of women and as an instructor of history at Barber-Scotia College in North Carolina during the 1935–1936 academic year. She next taught at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina in the fields of political science and history. A Rosenwald Fellowship and a leave of absence for the 1939–1940 academic year enabled her to devote full time to her studies at Harvard. She was the first African-American woman to receive the Harvard University and Radcliffe College Ph.D. degree in government. She was also inducted into the Beta Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa at Radcliffe College.

After graduating in 1941, she accepted positions as dean of women and associate professor of political science at Morgan State University. In 1942, Professor Tate accepted an associate professor position at Howard University. She and Dr. Caroline Ware of Howard University became the first women to be employed in this department.

Washington, D.C., provided an exceptional environment for Merze Tate. She took advantage of opportunities at the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations. She served as a Fulbright Scholar to India from 1950 to 1951.

Merze traveled extensively in Europe, the Middle East, Hawaii, Bangkok, Singapore, Japan, Wake Island, and Manila. She gave speeches at universities and conferences throughout the world. Between 1962 and 1977, Professor Tate read scholarly papers before professional associations, including the American Historical Society and the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History.

Merze was also a philanthropist. She established funds at three academic institutions that assisted her in achieving her career objectives: Western Michigan University, Radcliffe College and Howard University. She endowed a Merze Tate Fellowship for the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute at Radcliffe in 1971. The fellowship is open to both graduate and postgraduate students who need funds to complete an academic project. She funded a Merze Tate Scholarship at Western Michigan University in a 1974 Unitrust agreement. It was designed to help good and deserving students.

A second trust fund was established in 1981 in order to procure computerized equipment for word processing, computer terminals, and instruments in the usage of minicomputers for the Merze Tate Center for Research Information Processing in an education building on the campus. The Merze Tate Fund at Howard University was started in 1977. It provided for the Merze Tate Seminar in Diplomatic History. Many students look forward to this impressive event annually.

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Finally, Merze Tate belonged to the President's Club of Western Michigan University, Radcliffe College, and Howard University. Merze Tate was a prolific writer. Visit www.apsanet.org/ps/tate/ to see her bibliography.

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