

Black History Celebration brings pilgrimage of thousands to county each February

What started out as a simple idea to raise awareness and pride among a church congregation has grown into one of the area's largest and longstanding celebrations of Black History.

On Saturday, Feb. 22, 2014, Mt. Olive M.B. Church will host the 20th Annual Black History Parade and Celebration. The event has grown from humble beginnings with a few hundred participants into a huge gathering - a pilgrimage of sorts - drawing thousands of residents and visitors together in the Knobtown Community of Greene County. While the main action centers around the parade, many other activities coincide, including multiple family reunions and other events.

"It really has grown into something special," volunteer Amanda Joyce Johnson says. "People from all over the country mark this date and come to Knobtown to celebrate with us."

Johnson said she knows of at

least six family reunions planned in conjunction with this year's event. She says many people, who can only come 'home' to Greene County once or twice a year, choose to do so in February for the Black History Celebration, as opposed to coming at Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Attendance is regularly above 5,000 and Johnson and other officials are expecting the 2014 event to draw the biggest crowd yet.

But what got it started?

"The whole month of February was set aside to recognize some of the accomplishments of Afro-Americans who shaped this country and the world," Johnson's mother, Lynette J. Walley says about the event's origins. "This was a time for many of us to take a hard look at history, and see many names and faces absent from the history books."

"Oliver (her husband) and I used what resources we could to make sure our children, and others, knew some form of Black History. We taught Black History



State Line native Level Walley, a veteran member of the Mississippi Highway Patrol is shown leading the procession of a past Black History Parade in the Knobtown Community. The event, which draws thousands of visitors to the county each year, is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.

classes at our church. We sponsored Black History programs at the schools and circulated pages and pages of material to anyone who would read it."

But, in 1994, those efforts were

ratcheted up to a whole new level. During a trip to Atlanta to visit another daughter, Celeste Walley-Jean, who was a student at Spelman College, the idea of a parade surfaced. When that idea

was shared with the Walley's church family, history was made.

See PILGRIMAGE

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