

Etta Moten Barnett **PIONEER WOMAN 2001**

This inductee, a noted singer, was the first African American woman to perform at the White House. She played meaningful, dignified roles in 1930s Hollywood films and on the stage at a time when many African American roles in movies and musicals were demeaning. She was an early nontraditional student at the University of Kansas who graduated with such distinction in her voice major that the Fine Arts Dean urged her to consider a career on the stage in New York.

Etta Moten Barnett was born in Texas in 1901, the daughter of Ida Moten and Freeman Moten, an African Methodist Episcopal minister. As a child she sang in the church choir and sometimes stood on a box so she would appear as tall as the adults with whom she sang. From the beginning she had a big, deep voice. She moved to Kansas City as a teenager, and her family lived in a house near the famous jazz district at 18th and Vine Streets. High quality education was a priority for Etta, and she attended Western University in Kansas City, Kansas, a black institution founded as a Freedman's School in 1862. In the 1920s she sang with Jackson Jubilee Singers, a well-respected Kansas City group that traveled in the summers.

When she arrived at the University of Kansas in 1927 to pursue a fine arts degree, she a nontraditional student — she had been married, had three daughters, and was divorced before she became a college student. At KU she was a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and performed in all-black plays. Discrimination was a daily occurrence for African American students at KU, and Etta was one of the students who complained to Chancellor Ernest Lindley about the policy against African American students using the swimming pool. These protests led to a change in the policy, although many other restrictions remained. She had her own radio show on the local WREN station in Lawrence. Her senior recital was attended by more than a 1000 people at Hoch Auditorium, and she sang in Italian, German, and French, in addition to English. The local newspaper reported: "With a pleasing personality and excellent stage presence, coupled with a contralto voice of real beauty, excellently trained, she went through the exacting program with the ease of a professional artist." She graduated in 1931 with a degree in voice and was urged by Donald Swarthout, then the School of Fine Arts Dean, to pursue a professional career in New York. The man who would become her husband—Claude Barnett, head of the Associated Negro Press, a wire service for black newspapers, helped her along the way. He provided letters of introduction for Broadway producers and Hollywood executives.

Etta Moten Barnett landed roles in two Broadway shows —“Fast and Furious” and “Zombie” and then headed to Hollywood where her voice was dubbed for Barbara Stanwyck for the song “St. Louis Blues” in the movie *Ladies They Talk About*. She was also featured in the 1933 film *Flying Down to Rio* starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire and the *Gold Diggers of 1933* with Dick Powell and Joan Blondell. She became a star of NBC radio and was a favorite of the African American community. In fact, it was the black staff at the White House who encouraged Eleanor Roosevelt to invite Etta

Moten Barnett to the White House to sing for the President in 1934. One of her most famous roles was that of Bess in *Porgy and Bess*. She auditioned in George Gershwin's apartment in 1935, and while not cast in the original musical (which was written for a soprano), she won rave reviews in the 1942 revival that toured throughout the country. In 1944, she returned to KU with some of the cast to perform songs from the musical. Throughout the next three decades, Etta and Claude Barnett traveled throughout the world, especially to Africa, representing the U. S. government, and Etta occasionally performed. She also toured the Midwest for the KU Lecture Bureau in the 1950s. She was the United Nations' official representative to the Decade of Women conference in Nairobi, Kenya, and has received honorary degrees from Lincoln University, Spelman College, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and other institutions. She remains active in Chicago organizations and spends time talking to African American children and as she puts it "inspiring the young" to recognize the importance of education. With her daughters, she continues to travel.

Despite her wide acclaim, Etta Moten Barnett maintained her unassuming charm and friendly, modest demeanor. As she told the *Kansas City Call*: "To my way of thinking, success is fifty percent ability, twenty-five percent initiative, and twenty-five percent contact with the right people." The University of Kansas is honored to have as one of its graduates this outstanding vocalist, actress, educator, and role model. The Commission on the Status of Women is proud to recognize Etta Moten Barnett as the Outstanding Pioneer Woman for 2001.