

Obituary of Ora Lee Malone: Labor leader fought for voting rights, civil rights and women's rights

St. Louis Public Radio | By [Gloria S. Ross](#)

This article first appeared in the St. Louis Beacon, Nov. 6, 2012 - Ora Lee Malone, a union organizer and foot soldier for social justice causes over the span of half a century, died Tuesday (Oct. 30, 2012) at Beauvais Manor on the Park in St. Louis. She was 93.

She had been infirm for some time said a niece, Carol Jackson.

Services for Mrs. Malone will be at 11 a.m. on Wednesday (November 7) at Centennial Christian Church in St. Louis.

Her fight began with voting rights for blacks in Alabama during a time so dangerous that she knew a man who was shot for attempting to vote. Her struggle moved north to St. Louis where she organized a garment factory union of mostly black workers. Eventually, she joined Nelson Mandela's fight to end apartheid in South Africa.

"She lived a life of struggle," said Lew Moyer, the former longtime head of the local Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. "But she was strong in her convictions."

Lift every voice

Mrs. Malone's first major foray into social justice came when she was a young woman in Alabama.

"I remember this old man had been shot in the back because he tried to vote," she recalled in a 1973 University of Missouri-St. Louis oral history interview.

She was undeterred by the violence, aware that the greatest threat was usually less blatant.

"Every time anybody tried to vote, you had all these obstacles," Mrs. Malone said.

She worked to help repeal the Boswell Amendment, which was enacted in 1946 to prevent African-Americans from registering to vote by requiring “interpretations” of the Constitution.

“It was supposed to be for everybody, but it wasn't,” Mrs. Malone said. “The catch was, you could memorize the whole Constitution, but if they asked you something and your interpretation didn't satisfy the registrar, who was probably an eighth-grade dropout, you were turned down.”

Opponents won repeal of the amendment, but problems persisted.

“The thing that really cleared it out was the Voting Rights Act of '65,” Mrs. Malone said.

By 1965, Mrs. Malone, who went to Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of the Voting Rights Act, had become a well-known labor leader and social activist.

She had arrived in St. Louis in 1951 and found a job as a piece-worker at the California Manufacturing Company, a men's jacket manufacturer. Most of the employees were women. The firing of a young woman cued her entrance to labor activism.

“[The Garment Workers Union] decided that they would come out and start leafleting the shop where I worked,” Mrs. Malone said in *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, a collection of narratives of St. Louis African Americans in the Twentieth Century. “The company would keep us there 'til night, telling us what they were going to do to us if we organized a union.”

Unmoved by the company's threats, she scheduled a meeting for the 60 workers with the union representative. They all signed their union cards and she was elected the shop steward of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, the first predominantly black union shop in St. Louis. There she remained for 19 years.

“For a woman and a black woman to stand up to management took a lot of guts,” said Jackson, a U.S. District judge. “She cared so much about the average worker and she believed that everyone was entitled to fair treatment in the workplace.”

When Jackson was an attorney, Mrs. Malone enlisted her legal services in her social justice fights. She was known to involve all of her family members when needed – and someone was always needed.

Heck of an organizer

She subsequently spent another 19 years as the union's international representative for the St. Louis District, the first black to hold that position. She represented nearly 30 stores and three clothing and textile factories in St. Louis, eastern Missouri and Southern Illinois.

"She was a heck of an organizer," Moyer said. "She knew how to bring people together."

When the Textile Workers Union of America boycotted clothing giant J.P. Stevens and Co., Mrs. Malone devised a unique local tactic.

"Ora would have us go into stores and we'd put all these J.P. Stevens-made items in our carts, take them to the counter and leave them," Moyer said. "We'd tell the clerk that we wouldn't buy J.P. Stevens, and walk out of the store."

It took 17 years, but J.P. Stevens was finally organized.

Mrs. Malone helped organize numerous efforts that she viewed as equally important or connected to the labor movement.

In the 1960s, she helped establish the St. Louis chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, a labor and civil rights organization, and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, serving on its national executive board.

During the 1970s, she co-founded the national Coalition of Labor Union Women, the New Democratic Coalition and served as legislative chair of the Christian Women's Fellowship.

She was there at the inception of the Women's Political Caucus, working with Bella Abzug and Betty Friedan to advocate for the Equal Rights Amendment, to get more women elected and to address so-called "women's issues" such as pay equity and day care.

Her retirement from the union in 1989, didn't give her much free time.

Mixed up in causes

She became a commissioner for Metro (then Bi-State Development Agency) and the St. Louis Regional Convention and Sports Complex Authority, the agency charged with overseeing the construction a stadium to lure a new football team. It was completed in 1995.

“She was a commissioner for the (Edward Jones) Dome in years when there were few blacks being represented in that fashion,” said Joan Suarez, former regional director of UNITE, an Amalgamated successor organization.

Mrs. Malone helped ensure that 20 percent of the workers were black and at least five percent were women.

“You can’t do economy and social justice for all those years and just sit down,” said Suarez. “She didn’t sit down in retirement.”

After working in St. Louis for decades, she once declared that she believed the city to be worse than Alabama, except in the area of voting.

“You have such hidden prejudices in St. Louis that you don't run into in Alabama,” she said.

She set about making changes that sometimes landed her in hot water. She offered no apologies.

“I always felt I was right when I got mixed up in all these causes, and most of the time they would come around to my way of thinking,” she told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in 1988. “When you have to fight all your life for everything, when you have to scratch and struggle for everything, maybe you become kind of hard-headed about certain things, determined to see things through.”

She tangled with the NAACP, an organization she strongly supported because of its Legal Defense Fund’s work on voting rights. She chastised them for giving an award to the publisher of the St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

“All Duncan Bauman and the rich Globe-Democrat has ever done was condemn blacks,” Mrs. Malone said.

She walked the picket lines during the 1970s teachers’ strikes in St. Louis. She was on the frontlines in the fight to save Homer G. Phillips Hospital. From the moment she arrived in St. Louis, she had her hand in every political race. She

helped DeVerne Calloway become the first black woman elected to the Missouri Legislature in 1962.

“In any campaign that was going on that I agreed with that particular person's philosophy, I worked on (the) campaign,” she said.

Then she watched them like a hawk. She said of national officials: “You can't just send these great misguided missiles up to Washington and forget about them.”

In the '80s, she joined the Free South Africa Movement.

When the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists wanted to put bodies in front of the U.S. consulate in Washington, D.C., to protest apartheid, Mrs. Malone was there.

“I knew Ora would do it,” Moyer said. “There was no argument; next thing I know, I saw Ora on TV getting arrested.”

As South Africa worked its way toward eliminating apartheid, she continued to enlist the aid of the Teamsters to ship tons of fabric so that the women could make clothing. After Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, she made a trip to Botswana.

“It was an amazing trip for a little girl from Mobile, Ala.,” Jackson said.

She had begun her shipping habits closer to home, sending pickup-truckloads of canned goods and clothing to civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer to help poor people in Mississippi.

Steal away

Ora Lee Thomas was born on Christmas Eve in 1918, in Brooksville, Miss., William and Lillian Thomas's eldest child. She was raised in Whistler, Ala., a stone's throw from Mobile. She would go back and forth between her grandparent's Mississippi farm and her parent's home in Whistler, attending private school mostly in Mississippi. She attended a semester of junior college in Alabama before going to work full-time.

Despite a limited education she was well-read.

In a 1988 Post-Dispatch profile, she confided that she regularly skipped family events to steal time alone to read by kerosene lamp in the bedroom she shared with two sisters.

She married Sturdivant Malone, a Merchant Marine. They had no children.

Mrs. Malone was preceded in death by her husband, her parents and three brothers, Albert, John and Grantford Thomas.

In addition to her niece, survivors include two sisters, Annie Jackson and Manassie Williams, both of St. Louis; three brothers, Marvin Thomas, of St. Louis, William E. Thomas, of Mobile, Ala. and Robert Earl (Jean) Thomas, of New Orleans.