

James Weldon Johnson Honored By Yale University

Carl Van Vechten Donates Noted Author's Works

BY LILLIAN SCOTT

NEW YORK—The dreams of gentle, scholarly men like the late James Weldon Johnson are seldom of wealth or power, but of knowledge and a language of truth. The creation, therefore, of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters in his name by his good friend, author Carl Van Vechten, was especially fitting.

Most outstanding Negro of American history, Johnson, who died June 26, 1938, had had a widely diversified career.

Having taken his bachelors and masters degrees at Atlanta university, he did postgraduate work for three years at New York's Columbia university, took a Litt. D. at Talladega college, attended Howard university for a time and began his career as principal of a high school at Jacksonville, Fla. He was admitted to the bar and practiced in Florida.

GOES TO NEW YORK

In 1899, he went to New York to collaborate with his brother on comic operas. They gained international fame as composers and writers, presenting such light operas as "Under the Bamboo Tree", "Congo Love Song", "Maiden With the Dreamy Eyes" and more than a score of others. Together they wrote more than 200 songs. In 1906, James Weldon, a Republican, was appointed by President

Theodore Roosevelt to the U. S. consular service in which he served at Venezuela, and Nicaragua until 1913.

He then returned to New York to take up his musical and literary work and did the English libretto for the Spanish Opera "Goyescas" produced in 1915 at the Metropolitan Opera House.

NEGRO ANTHEM

Author of the Negro National Anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing", Johnson also composed "The Creation" a folk poem which was presented in 1926 at Town Hall, New York with Serge Koussevitsky, director of the Boston Symphony, conducting. It has previously been produced in Vienna. The establishment of the Collection in the Yale University Library would have pleased Johnson, too, as he had often lectured at Northern universities. At Yale it is conveniently located for white scholars and serves as a magnet to many Negro writers.

MANY AUTHORS INCLUDED

The collection, due to Van Vechten's untiring efforts already has the complete works in manuscript

of James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Owen Dodson, Chester Himes, Arna Bontemps, Walter White and some manuscripts if not all of Countee Cullen, George S. Scuyler, Alain Locke, E. Franklin Frazier, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Booker T. Washington, and Carl Lawrence Dunbar. Eventually it will possess all of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois' work, and that of Charles W. Chestnut.

Interviewed in his large, ornate New York apartment, Van Vechten told the Defender "It would do more good at a white university. Since I started it, every university has tried to start one including Duke, Princeton, and Harvard. None has as much fine source material as we have."

Van Vechten, who is gaunt and white haired declared, "James Weldon Johnson was one of my most intimate friends. I admired him enormously. Yale asked me to put my collection there. And as I wanted others to give too—I didn't think it could be better named"

He recalled gravely that he and Johnson had a mutual understand-

ing that whichever survived would take over all the papers and materials of the other. Van Vechten had even noted this in his will, in case he succumbed first.

GALLUP IS CURATOR

He is enthusiastic about the facilities available at Yale for storing the scores of handsome blue boxes comprising the Collection. He is also proud of Donald Gallup, the curator, whom he considers especially able.

Yale University is in Van Vechten's words, "the first white college in the North, I believe, to make any determined effort to secure such material." And as to the Collection's significance, its founder says, "Any collection that is unique is bound to be used by scholars all over the country. This particular Collection is more of Negro literature, dating from the time Negroes really began to write—about 1900. In general you'd find more here than anywhere else and of a very personal nature, too—letters, photographs, clippings and so on."

Although the Johnson Collection emphasizes literature, it also has

original manuscripts of musical compositions by Grant Still, Philpita Scuyler, Ulysses Kay, W. C. Handy and Rosamund Johnson, a brother of James Johnson. In addition it has the voluminous collection of photos taken by the versatile Van Vechten.

MODERN SCRIPTS HOUSED

Besides the manuscripts of Ann Petry's "The Street" and Willard Motley's "Knock on Any Door", there are also many books by white authors in first edition, inscribed by the author. There are boxes of material too, on the Negro and Communist, the Negro and the Catholic Church, etc.

A collector to his finger tips, Van Vechten has not ignored the fascinating minutia of the Negro's life in America. He has scads of theatre programs, tickets, periodicals and the entire correspondence of Joel Spingard with Dr. Du Bois, his own with Johnson, and Paul Robeson dating back to the time when the latter was in Russia.

Van Vechten has not been content to give the Collection an initial push and then forget it. He continually seeks new materials

for it and most unusual of all, catalogues and compiles it. Then it is shipped up to Yale. With a wide grin, he remarked, "I've saved them a good deal of trouble especially when the material first went up as they didn't even know the names of some of these people. Most libraries have so much back work to do; the material gets stacked away, and nobody has the time to work with it." He recalled an anecdote about the British Museum which years later found material in its basements the staff had forgotten it even possessed.

JOHNSON'S WIDOW HELPS

He will continue to compile the Johnson Collection materials with loving care before consigning them to Yale's permanent keeping. Standing ready with as great interest to encourage the growth of the Collection is Johnson's partician widow, Mrs. Grace Nail Johnson. Strongly imbued with the memory and significance of her husband's great work as a teacher, poet, crusader and author, Mrs. Johnson has no little appreciation of Mr. Van Vechten's efforts to make his heritage a living one.

Already the Collection has an untold amount of material. Even indefatigable Mr. Van Vechten hesitates to affix a number of all the books, manuscripts and separate items in it. With a ghost of a sigh but one that is pleased nonetheless, he says merely, "The amount is countless."



YALE UNIVERSITY'S LIBRARY has become the home of a great collection of Negro Art and Letters named in honor of James Weldon Johnson (first picture), most outstanding American Negro of all time, author, composer and lecturer. Picture 2, shows the Yale library building which houses the collection; picture 3, Fred Wroczina looks over photographs, many of them taken by Johnson's friend, Author Carl Van Vechten, founder of the collection; picture 4, William Vining of the Yale Library staff looks into one of the manuscript boxes which are blue with red name plate and gold lettering; picture 5, Van Vechten, himself internationally known as a writer, looks over a manuscript with Johnson's widow, Mrs. Grace Nail Johnson, in Van Vechten's New York home, and picture 6, John McGovern, a veteran interested in the works of Langston Hughes, inspects some of the manuscripts of this prolific poet which are contained in some 20 boxes in the huge collection.

