



Alton's Black History: POPS - the Bronze Mayor of Alton

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
February 7 2018 9:48 AM



ALTON - Alton in the 1930's was a more swingin' place thanks in part to Joel "Pops" Russell.

Russell was born in Mississippi, and traveled to northern states when he was a young child with his father. He then received his education in Missouri and Illinois - while spending much of his time traveling the nation and world in a jazz band. He eventually settled in Alton where he attended embalming school, quickly becoming Alton's first black undertaker, but Russell never gave up his dream and talent of music.

The fruit of that dedication was "Pop Russell's Lads of Swing." Russell both organized and performed with that group, which played dances, Easter services, community events and the Salem Baptist Church Annual Picnic held in Johnson's Grove, Illinois.

During his time in Alton, Russell was also a member of the Alton Chapter of the United Brothers of Friendship and the director of a weekly newspaper called The Question.

In the 1930s, through a contest hosted by the St. Louis Call Newspaper, Russell won the prestigious musical title of "The Bronze Mayor of Alton" with a whopping 69,060 votes.