

Black leader's legacy lives on

By Jannell McGrew
Montgomery Advertiser

The head of the Montgomery voting rights movement and the first black person from Alabama to be a U.S. marshal, Rufus A. Lewis has sealed a permanent place in the city's history.

Lewis, who was known as the father of Montgomery's voting rights movement, dedicated much of his life to rousing blacks to push for equality by registering to vote.

Those who know him best say his first love was promoting voter registration, civic education and political participation. He died last year at the age of 92.

"He was a pure and true activist," said Gwendolyn Patton, longtime civil rights leader and archivist for Trenholm State Technical College. "He was consumed."

"Whatever function he went to, whatever meeting, regardless of what the meeting was about, and if he found someone was not a registered voter, he would immediately go to the trunk of his car and pull out voter information and talk about the importance of registering," she said.

Before his death, Lewis donated to Trenholm a collection of writings, letters and other memorabilia he had accumulated during the years he was a leader in the voting rights drive.

In recognition of Lewis' accomplishments and in honor of Black History Month, the Alabama Democratic Conference will host an evening of oral history Thursday at 6:30 p.m. at the Rufus Lewis Library. The program will feature a recorded interview with Lewis.

"There's an old African proverb that when you lose an elder you are in mourning because the history and the knowledge is gone with them," said Robert Smith, field coordinator for the Alabama Democratic Conference.

"One of the things we wanted to do before (Lewis) passed was to record his ideas about voter participation and the



File

Rufus Lewis, right, is sworn in as a federal marshal by U.S. District Court Judge Frank Johnson in this file photo from 1977.

COMING UP

- **What:** Presentation of recorded interview with the late Rufus Lewis
- **When:** tonight at 6:30.
- **Where:** At the Rufus Lewis Library, 3095 Mobile Highway
- **Admission:** Free
- **Contact:** (334) 263-4040

civil rights movement. We wanted to collect a lot of his thoughts and the things he went through so that we can have a personal recollection of how hard it was," Smith said.

Lewis became an activist in the early 1940s. In 1960 he was one of the founders and the first county president of the Alabama Democratic Conference, the black caucus of the state Democratic Party. He corresponded with many other leaders in the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s.

Lucille A. Times worked closely with Lewis during the movement.

"He did whatever he could to help people. He believed in people being treated right. That's what we fought for many years. You wouldn't want to meet a better person than him," she said.

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"ADC Young Democrats Host Black History Month Oral History Program"

ADC Young Democrats will be hosting a Black History Month evening of oral history, February 10, 2000 At 6:30 pm. at the Rufus Lewis Library. The program will feature a recorded interview of late Mr. Rufus Lewis.

For many years Mr. Lewis was a prominent Montgomery businessman and owner of Ross-Clayton Funeral Home. For a time he also worked at Alabama State University. Of course, those who knew him best say that his first love was promoting voter registration, civic education, and political participation. As the owner of a popular nightclub called the Cit-

izens Club, Lewis required all members to become registered voters for the first time.

In addition to being one of the founders of the Alabama Democratic Conference in 1960, Mr. Lewis was the first African American to be appointed as a United States Marshal in the Middle District of Alabama in the 1970s. Before he died he donated his extensive collection of papers and political documents to the library archives at Trenholm State Technical College in Montgomery, Alabama.

The upcoming event is free and open to the public. So please come out and enjoy it.