

Bessie Blount Griffin: Inventor and Forensic Scientist

Can you write with your left hand and your right hand? Can you write with your teeth and your toes? Bessie Blount Griffin could do all of these things. She used her education and knowledge to help injured soldiers. She was also a handwriting expert and crime fighter.

Bessie Blount Griffin was born on November 24, 1914 in Hickory, Virginia (now Chesapeake, Virginia). As a young girl, Bessie loved solving problems. She also loved teaching herself new skills. Bessie liked writing with her left hand. But her elementary school teacher only wanted her to write with her right hand. So Bessie taught herself to write with both hands. She also taught herself to write with a pencil in her teeth. She could even write with her toes.

Bessie loved learning. She decided to become a nurse. She received her training at Community Kennedy Memorial Hospital in New Jersey. Then she decided that she wanted to become a physical therapist. A physical therapist helps people who are injured or sick learn to move more easily. Bessie attended Union Junior College and Panzer College of Physical Education. She became a physical therapist. She then began helping soldiers who had been injured in World War II.

Some injured soldiers were not able to feed themselves. Bessie invented an electronic feeding machine to help solve this problem. The machine helped soldiers become more independent. Bessie also invented a tool that an injured person could wear around their neck to help them eat. She received a patent for this invention in 1951. A patent is a license from the government that prevents other people from copying an invention. Bessie also invented disposable cardboard bowls that could be used in hospitals. She created the bowls by mixing together pieces of newspaper, flour, and water. Then she baked the bowls in an oven. The country of Belgium still uses her bowl design in all of their hospitals.

Bessie also liked helping injured soldiers learn to write again. She began to study and learn about different types of handwriting. She decided to change careers. She became a forensic scientist. A forensic scientist uses science to help the police solve cases and fight crime. Bessie helped police departments in New Jersey and Virginia. In 1977, she became the first African American woman to train at the famous Scotland Yard in London.

Bessie continued to learn and study for the rest of her life. She also enjoyed being friends with other inventors like Theodore Edison. Theodore Edison was the son of Thomas Edison who invented the electric light bulb. Bessie Blount Griffin died on December 30, 2009. She was 95 years old.

Questions

1. Why did Bessie teach herself to write with both hands?
2. Why do you think Bessie became a nurse and physical therapist?
3. What is a patent?
4. What does a forensic scientist do?