



Student Name:

Class Period:

Date:

Meet the Originals

Texas Originals is a radio series about people who made an impact on Texas. You can hear it online and on radio stations around the state. Read or listen to the episode on Melvin B. Tolson. Then, answer questions about it.

Melvin B. Tolson 1898–1966

Poet and educator Melvin B. Tolson inspired generations of students to stand up for equal rights and dignity.

Tolson was born in Missouri in 1900 and grew up in the Midwest. In 1924 he began teaching at the historically Black Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. His students included James Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, and Heman Sweatt, who challenged the segregated University of Texas Law School.

A dedicated mentor, Tolson coached Wiley's debate team through an impressive ten-year winning streak. In 1935, they defeated the national champions from the University of Southern California. Under Jim Crow segregation, African Americans did not often meet elite white schools in competition, so the team's success symbolized progress and equality. The film *The Great Debaters* depicted this David-and-Goliath story with Tolson portrayed by Denzel Washington.

Tolson was also a brilliant and inventive poet, drawing upon both the western tradition and the distinctive rhythm and vernacular of the blues. His masterpiece *Harlem Gallery* chronicles, as he put it, Black Americans' "New World odyssey, / from chattel to Esquire!" In 1947, the African nation of Liberia named him poet laureate.

President Lyndon B. Johnson invited Tolson to the White House in 1965 to present his latest poetry, a crowning achievement in his long and remarkable career. Tolson died the following year in Dallas.

Check for Understanding: Answer the questions below based on evidence from the episode on Melvin B. Tolson. Refer to the text included above if needed.

1. Where did Melvin B. Tolson teach literature and coach debate?
2. What themes and traditions did Tolson draw upon in his poetry?

Going Further: Write or discuss your answer to the question below, supporting your answer with evidence from the episode or additional information you have learned in class.

3. **Taking a Position.** If you could choose between being a great debater and a great poet, what would you choose? How are these similar and different? Explain.