

Thomas Vaughns, Marianna



Thomas Vaughns has seen a lot in his 99 years, as a member of the famed Tuskegee Airman during World War II and a veteran of the Korean War, as a 20-year county extension agent, as horticulture specialist at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff for 14 years.

His agriculture career began during the days of segregation, continued through the Civil Rights Era and continues through board service and his regular advice to others who seek his wisdom.

A native of Marianna, Vaughns earned an undergraduate degree at Arkansas AM&N (now UA-Pine Bluff) in 1949. He did graduate work at Michigan State University and the University of Arkansas.

As Extension Agent in Crittenden County, Vaughns implemented a pilot project for small farmers whose farms were in economic crisis. Beginning with 30 acres of vegetables in 1955, this enterprise grew and resulted in 2 million pounds of produce annually and the employment of 1,400 people within six years. His leadership led to the establishment of the Arkansas Vegetable Growers and Market Association Cooperative, an organization that helped small farm families save their farms, produce income and provide jobs. The venture was replicated in five counties and 6,000 people were employed by 1968. Vaughns also led an active 4-H program in the county.

Following his 20-year career in Crittenden County, Vaughns was promoted in 1972 to a Horticulture Specialist position at UAPB, which saw new farm markets created through his consultation until his retirement in 1986. He impacted countless young people, providing the encouragement and the financial means for many to get through college.

Vaughns was featured in a *Washington Post* article in 1986, where he was dubbed "The Black Guru" for his innovative work with small farmers in the Arkansas Delta. Vaughns was also the subject of a *People* magazine article in September, after he was presented with four World War II medals – the World War II Victory Medal, the American Campaign Medal-World War II, the Good Conduct Army Medal, and the Honorable Service Lapel Button – as replacements for medals he earned that had been lost over the years. He was also presented the National Defense Service Medal for his service in the Korean War, which he had not previously been awarded.

Vaughns has seen service on his family farm, in the U.S. Army as a member of the original Tuskegee Airmen, where he served as a mechanic, AmeriCorps VISTA, Delta Service Corps, and 4-H Clubs of America, to name a few.