

# Dr. John E. McGhee

## **Black American History Month**

February is Black History Month. This is the time for past and current achievements of Black Americans in the United States to be recognized. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, a black historian, founded Negro History Week in 1926. Until the 1970's, Black American heroes, scientists and inventors were left out of the history books in public schools. In 1976, February was set aside as Black History Month and it is now celebrated every year throughout the U.S.

## **Local African-American Achiever**

Dr. John E. McGhee was a black research scientist and biochemist at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Northern Regional Research Center in Peoria, Illinois. Dr. McGhee had a 30-year career with the USDA. He made valuable contributions to soybean research and renewable resources for continuous production of fuel.

He was born in Gary, Indiana, in 1931 and was the fourth of nine children born to Willie and Elnora McGhee. Johnny was a sickly child and missed more than a year of high school due to illness. In spite of this setback, he managed to graduate from high school in Decatur, Illinois, and was head of his class. At an early age, he decided he wanted to become a chemist, although his high school counselor encouraged him to choose a career as a teacher. In fact one counselor said to him, "...but there are no black chemists". Johnny replied, "George Washington Carver was a black chemist". Dr. McGhee earned a BS degree in Chemistry and Biology from Millikin University in Decatur, a MS degree from Bradley University and a PhD from Illinois State University.

Dr. McGhee spoke 5 other languages— French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Portuguese. He was a language interpreter at the United Nations. He played acoustic guitar and often gave private lessons in his home. He was involved in the Peoria community as a counselor for the Boys and Girls Club and the Boy Scouts of America. Dr. McGhee died at his home in Peoria in 1990 after suffering a long illness with a rare form of bone cancer.



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