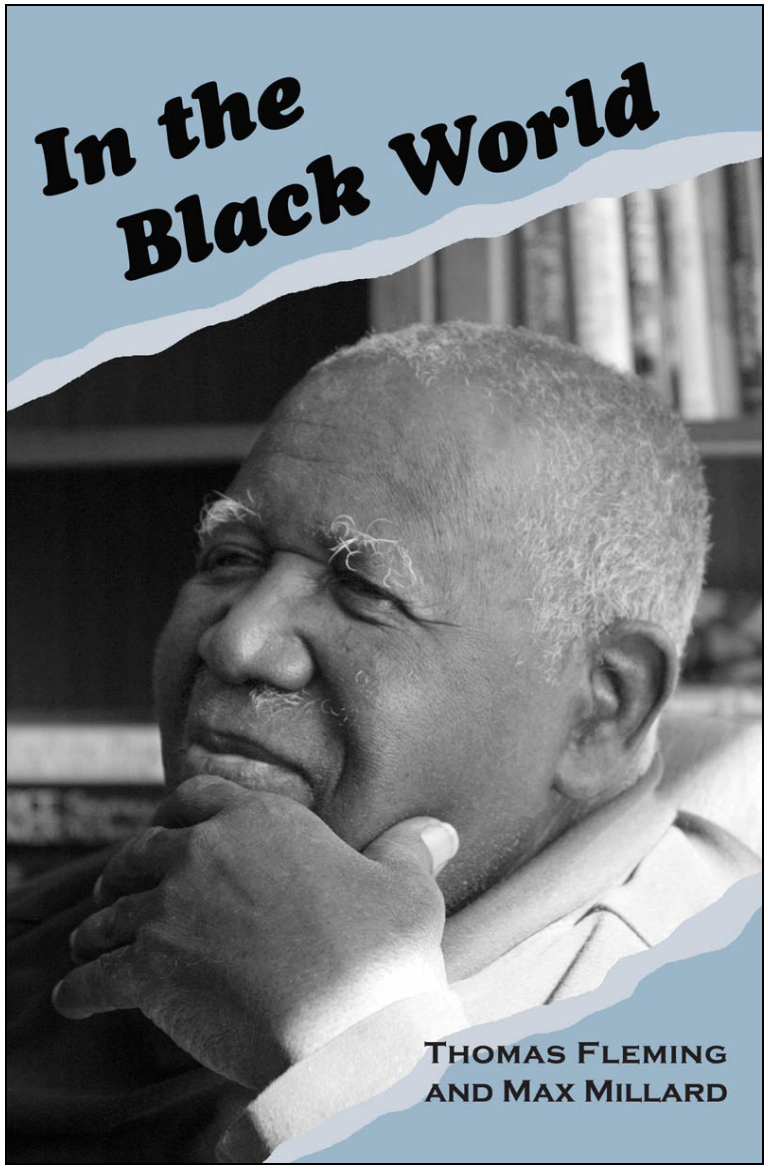

In the Black World

By Thomas C. Fleming
and Max Millard

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Dedicated to Jack Bair

Cover photo of Thomas Fleming
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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Fleming, 1907-2006

By Max Millard

Thomas Fleming died on November 21, 2006, the week before he would have turned 99. When I got the tearful call from his adoptive niece, I felt as if a mountain had crumbled, because Tom seemed indestructible. I had seen him 10 days before and planned to attend his birthday party the following weekend at the retirement home where he lived. The party would go on, but instead it would be a celebration of his life.

Tom was a legendary San Francisco newspaperman. His career began at the *Spokesman*, a radical black newspaper published from 1931-1935, continued through his brief stint as a columnist for the *Oakland Tribune* in 1934 — when he was the only black writer for a daily newspaper on the West Coast — and culminated in his appointment in 1944 as the founding editor of the *Reporter*, a black newspaper that later merged with the rival *Sun* to form the *Sun-Reporter*.

Except for a six-month hitch in the U.S. Army during World War II, he wrote for the newspaper each week for more than 61 years. No daily paper in the San Francisco Bay Area hired a full-time black reporter until 1962, when Ben Williams made the jump from the *Sun-Reporter* to the *San Francisco Examiner* — thanks to a recommendation from Fleming.

As a reporter for the black press, Tom Fleming covered nine national political conventions, met two

presidents, and got the inside story on everything from the student strike at San Francisco State University — which gave birth to the nation's first ethnic studies department in 1969 — to the Jonestown tragedy of 1978, which claimed more than 900 lives. He continued to write for the *Sun-Reporter* until the age of 98.

I knew Tom for only his last 11 years, when he was past his peak as a newsman, but he still had the qualities that made him successful — a gift for storytelling, an uncanny memory, and a streak of stubbornness coupled with dignity. We became acquainted in the summer of 1995 when I began working as a staff writer and copy editor for the *Sun-Reporter*. Tom held court in the downstairs editorial office, where he spent most of the day reading newspapers, greeting visitors, talking on the phone and composing his three weekly columns — an editorial, the Police Blotter, and the Weekly Report, a commentary on national or world events. He had a loud, high-pitched, inflective voice, often punctuated by raucous laughter which rang throughout the rambling two-story building.

He could also be prickly. One time a woman came in and peered at him through the half-door that separated the lobby from the office. She asked, "Are you Thomas Fleming?" He said yes. She said, "Is it Thomas or Tom?" He bellowed back: "It's Mr. Fleming to you!"

Tom had many close friends and admirers who would drop by and hang around the office. I think they came mainly for his stories. He was like a living time machine: if someone mentioned a person they both knew, Tom could go on forever with details about the person's family members, mutual acquaintances and

personal history.

His favorite stories were set pieces that he told over and over, especially about famous people he had met. I once told him that he should write a book about his life. He said that many people had made the same suggestion, but that he couldn't be bothered to do it himself. Later I

Thomas Fleming's time machine. Drawing by Tony Taliaferro.

showed him the list of historical figures profiled in Columbus Salley's 1993 book, *The Black 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential African Americans, Past and Present*. Tom had seen or met 45 of them, from Marcus Garvey to Malcolm X.

In February 1996, for Black History Month, TV station KQED in San Francisco aired an excellent half-hour documentary titled *Crossroads: A Story of West Oakland.* It told about Oakland's historic role as a railroad hub and a magnet for black Americans leaving the South. Tom saw it, and it must have triggered some memories, because the following week he started writing a new column, "Some Reflections on Black History."

Tom began the series by telling about his arrival in Oakland in 1926, when he applied for a job on the Southern Pacific Railroad but was instead hired as a bellhop on a passenger ship. In each column, Tom followed a pattern of combining personal anecdotes with historical facts, with the theme of how a black man could succeed in a white man's world. The series appealed strongly to readers, and Tom wrote 55 installments before ending it in the spring of 1997.

His life changed abruptly in April 1997 when the *Sun-Reporter* moved across town, from Tom's neighborhood in the Fillmore district to an office in the Bayview district. Commuting was difficult, so he retired as the paper's executive editor, but continued to write two commentaries a week from his home. When I left the *Sun-Reporter* in August 1997, I asked Tom if I could collaborate with him on his memoir. He agreed.

Over the next 18 months, I recorded about 100 hours of interviews with him at his densely packed Fillmore

Street apartment, surrounded by shelves of history books and jazz recordings. Setting the tape recorder between us, I perused his previous black history columns one paragraph at a time, asking him to expand on the details and to explain anything that I found unclear.

With his permission, I blended his written and spoken words to create a new column, "Reflections on Black History," which began with his years as a small child in Jacksonville, Florida. The National Newspaper Publishers Association, a wire service for the black press, agreed to syndicate it, and soon the column was appearing in dozens of weekly papers nationwide. The *Columbus Free Press* in Ohio offered to feature it on their website, and created a separate page for all of Tom's columns. I also developed a lengthy email list, and sent out the column to hundreds of people every week.

Tom soon began receiving as many as 10 emails a week, ranging from rhapsodic to racist. I printed them all for him. Many of them contained historical nuggets that enhanced the project.

One day he surprised me by handing me a long, unpublished manuscript about his earliest years that he had written in the 1970s. For me, it was like an archaeological treasure. Although it was too late to use it in the columns, the document was invaluable later in creating a rounded portrait of his boyhood.

When Tom wrote about his first railroad job, as a waiter on a train ferry in 1927, a reader identified the ferry as the Ramon, and sent me a photo of the boat's interior. Tom had never told me the name of the ferry, and had not seen it for 70 years. On my next visit, I showed him the photo and asked if he could identify it. Without hesitation

he replied, "It's the Ramon."

His black history writings and his retirement as the nation's oldest working black journalist brought him a new celebrity, which led to speaking engagements at colleges, bookstores, libraries, and civic organizations. He was interviewed for several documentaries, and profiled by mainstream newspapers throughout California. These appearances and write-ups provided more raw material for the book-length memoir I was cobbling together.

I began each of our sessions by showing him a draft of the next column I was about to send out. He would study it carefully — often grumbling at the way I rearranged his words — then tell me what changes to make before he would approve it. His memory was prodigious but not infallible, and he bristled when I challenged him by showing him a book or article that conflicted with what he remembered. Each week, as our readership grew, our relationship became more strained.

In February 1999, for our 71st joint column, I handed him a severely edited version of his story about Langston Hughes. Tom had met Hughes several times in the 1930s, and treasured his memories of the great black writer. To check Tom's accuracy, I consulted Arnold Rampersad's two-volume biography of Hughes, which had been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The book confirmed most of what Tom remembered about Hughes' sojourns in San Francisco, but contradicted some of his statements about Hughes' travels in Europe and Asia. Incensed by my changes, Tom said that he no longer wanted to continue the project with me.

I sent out the column anyway, but only to the website. Without the readership of the black press and

my email list, the barrage of emails stopped. I continued for 15 more columns, without his permission. The *Columbus Free Press* maintained Tom's page online, and over the following years, his writings attracted hundreds of new readers.

We didn't speak again for almost a year. Then our friendship blossomed again, and I began visiting him quite often, especially to pick up his editorials and retype them for the *Sun-Reporter*. I never mentioned the black history project to him, but sent him copies of all the emails sent to him. He wrote on an old manual typewriter, and never learned to use a computer. He didn't realize the permanency of articles posted online. But I feared the column would lose credibility unless his historical statements could be verified.

In 2001, I transcribed the rest of the recordings, edited the 86 columns into one long narrative, added the information from Tom's manuscript and other sources, spent days fact-checking, and completed a draft of the book. It was about 95 percent Tom's words, 2 percent corrections, and 3 percent my own words to smooth the transitions. I sent it to a handful of historians and journalists for their feedback. They responded enthusiastically, and provided some useful feedback.

A local publisher offered to publish the work, and printed several proof copies for review purposes. I gave one to Tom. But he didn't like my editing, and wouldn't allow it to be published. Again, we parted company and the project lay dormant. Eventually I renewed my friendship with him and visited him occasionally to work on a few articles for other publications, but I stopped mentioning the book.

Life intervened, and I didn't return to the project until 2011. By then it was possible to do much more thorough fact-checking, thanks to the growth of the Internet. I decided to self-publish the first half of his story under the title *In the Black World, 1907-1932*. I printed 200 copies, which sold out, and commissioned an e-book version for Amazon.com.

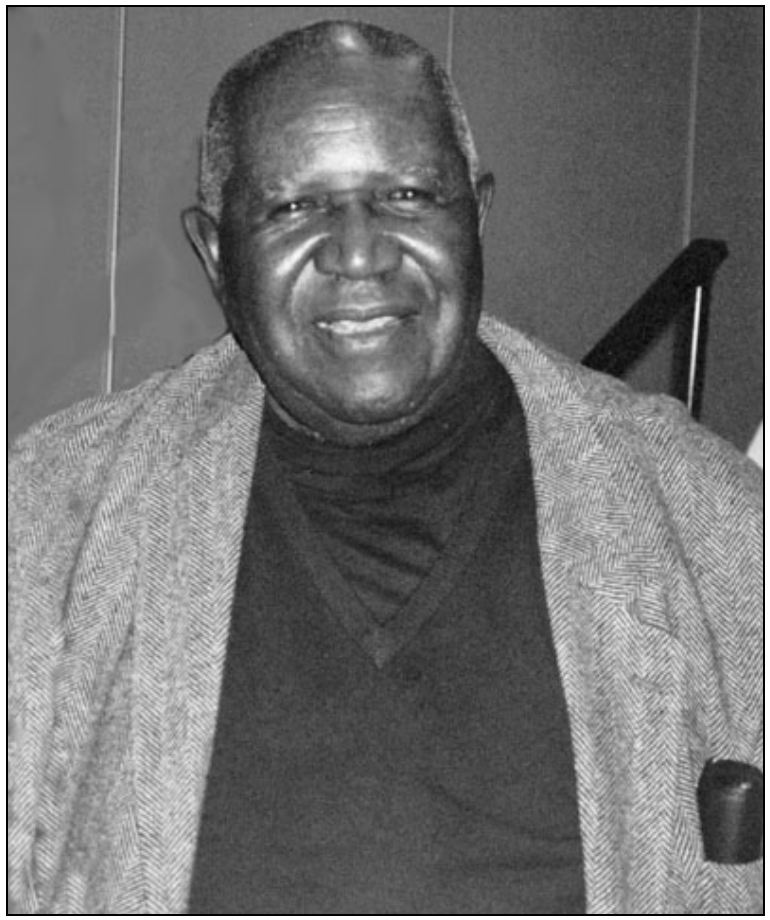
The title came from Tom's description of life in Jacksonville in the early 20th century: "You knew that you had to sit in the Jim Crow section at the theater. You knew you couldn't go to the same schools as whites. You knew you couldn't go in any restaurant unless it was all black. You were completely separated, even in the hospitals. So you just lived in a black world."

This volume covers Tom's life story from 1907 to 1948, when the *Sun-Reporter* was well established. The final chapters, which borrow heavily from Tom's editorials in the last decade of his life, tell of the newspaper's historical impact and his views of racial progress in the early 21st century.

Tom's recollections from the 1950s onward could have filled another volume longer than this one. Those stories died with him. But his early years perhaps make the most interesting reading.

Few African American writers share Tom's richness of experiences, from life in the segregated South, to Harlem, to rural California, to the San Francisco Bay Area — all in his first 18 years. Before he became a journalist, he was a farmhand, a bootblack, a ship crewman, a railroad cook, a government-paid writer, a machinist, and a soldier. In all these circumstances, he was acutely aware of the history happening around him, and how he fit into the picture. His

life story, told in his own words, establishes him as a heroic pioneer whose role as an eyewitness to California's black history may never be equaled.



Thomas Fleming, 1998. Photo by Max Millard

JACKSONVILLE, 1907-1916

When I started remembering things, I was living in Jacksonville, Florida with my paternal grandmother Phoebe. I never did learn what her maiden name was. She was half Seminole Indian and half black, and she spoke very bad English. I think she was what you'd call one of those black Seminoles. Because the slaves would run away and the Seminoles would accept them in their townships.

Phoebe's first husband, my grandfather James Fleming, died long before I was born. He was born a slave in South Carolina and perhaps took the name of his former master. After slavery ended, he wandered to Jacksonville and met my grandmother there.

Phoebe was a formidable figure who ruled the lives of her family. Her second husband, Wyatt Wright, was a stable keeper and wagon driver for a large drayage firm in Jacksonville. Drays were heavy wagons that were used to haul goods. He drove them about the city making deliveries. Wyatt's job provided him with a house — in which we all lived — and a large corral and barn where he kept more than 50 horses and mules.

Wyatt resisted my grandmother's domination by taking to the bottle, and sometimes he took out his frustrations on the animals. He went into the corral at night wearing only his shoes and nightshirt, armed with a long bullwhip. He would start the animals running around by snapping the whip. They would squeal and snort when struck, and Phoebe would rush out of the house in her nightgown to berate him.

Blacks did all of the teamster work in Jacksonville —

Thomas Fleming in 1912, age 4.

driving teams of horses. Those were considered black jobs, and few white men sought them. Blacks also drove most of the hacks — horse-drawn buggies that were the forerunners of gasoline-operated taxicabs.

The stables were located in Brooklyn, a mostly black district of Jacksonville separated from the rest of the city by a bridge. Blacks had their own grocery stores and meat markets. But there was a white police officer next door to us, and he had a daughter about my age who was at our house all of the time.

My grandmother lavished her affections on the males in her life — first my grandfather James Fleming, then my father Courtney Thomas Fleming, and then me. Phoebe called me "son." I took advantage of my special position as a male and Phoebe's first grandchild. My cousin Lillian was about my age, and if she ever hit me, I hit her back. Even if I had tormented her, Phoebe would chastise her and embrace me in front of her.

I was born in Jacksonville on November 29, 1907. I was named after my father, but perhaps he did not like the "junior" status which such males receive, so I was given the name Thomas Courtney Fleming.

My mother, Mary Golee Jackson, was from Montgomery, Alabama. She was born in 1887 and was the youngest daughter of 11 children. Her mother, my Grandma Jackson, was the product of a white male and a black woman. Grandma Jackson was as white as any white person in the country, and she took the name of her father's family, O'Connor. My mother's father, my Grandpa Jackson, was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

My mother came to Jacksonville after the death of

her parents. She married my father when she was 19 and he was 20. Phoebe opposed it because she did not want to lose her only son. I came along one year after the marriage, and my sister Kate 18 months later.

My parents had a stormy marriage. I don't recall any of the abuses my father heaped upon my mother, but she told me later about his beatings and his womanizing. After a few years they got divorced, and my mother and Kate moved out. My father stayed with Phoebe, as did cousin Lillian and myself. I slept in a cot in my father's bedroom. Lillian's mother, my aunt Katherine, would take up with a boyfriend and come back for short spells when the romance broke up. Phoebe was a strict churchgoer who saw that Lillian and I went to Sunday school every week, and she constantly talked about the sins of the world.

I remember well a day in 1912 when Phoebe was in the backyard, boiling clothes on an open fire, in one of those big cast-iron pots that black women used. She was stirring the clothes with the awfully smelly yellow soap she made out of tallow and lye, when my mother arrived and told Phoebe that she had come to take me to California.

They got in a big argument, and Phoebe physically drove my young and very small mother out of the yard. My mother did not have the time, or was too naive, to seek legal help, so she and my sister left without me. But she wrote to me every week, and she had two sisters and two brothers in Jacksonville who came to see me, and bought me clothes.

My father traveled a lot, sometimes railroading as a Pullman porter on the sleeping cars. All of the porters were black, and some crack trains had black maids. The

cars were named after their inventor, George Pullman.

Boiling clothes, Hinds County, Mississippi, 1930s. Photo by Eudora Welty.

Other times he worked at sea. He even went over to Europe as a cook on a freighter. But none of the transatlantic passenger ships hired blacks. He was a voracious reader, although he had only attended school up to the fifth year.

All the students and teachers at my grammar school in Jacksonville were black. With help from the old man, I learned to read fairly well in the first grade. I started to read some of the paperback books he bought, and found out, much to his and my own pleasure, that I did very well.

VAUDEVILLE

My father played the violin with dance bands between his jobs on the railroad, and he fronted bands himself. Sometimes they were hired to play for wealthy whites in Palm Beach.

My introduction to music occurred around 1914, when my father took me on a dance date and got permission for me to sit on the bandstand and play a kazoo with the band. From that day on, I became a devotee of popular and jazz music, collecting jazz recordings and attending concerts, theater dates and nightclubs. All the bars or taverns had jukeboxes containing the hits.

I don't know whether jazz started in New Orleans: Black musicians didn't write down too much of what they did for the history books. They started out entertaining black audiences, but the really good ones moved easily in the white world and earned more.

Most white musicians read the score from a music

stand and turned the pages while they were playing. Blacks had music stands too, but they never looked at them, even though most of them could read music. Blacks could improvise, and the way they played depended on how they felt. They enjoyed what they were doing, and wanted people to feel good. And they always tried to excel one another.

When a jazz group was playing, you would hear someone yell out: "Every tub!" It meant: "Every tub rests on its own bottom." On stage, it was used when everything got real hot, because the music was coming to an end. So everybody joined in and tried to make the music sound as good as it possibly could.

Jacksonville was the biggest city in Florida, and a lot of vaudeville came there. In the white neighborhoods, blacks could sit only in the "crow's roost." My neighborhood had its own theaters, which few whites attended.

A vaudeville show had about five acts, generally including a comedian, a dancer and a vocalist. The least-known came on first, and the show built up to the star. Most of the larger vaudeville theaters had a house band or pit orchestra which accompanied all the singers and dancers. The musicians lived in the area, and they received the musical arrangements ahead of time so they could practice before the show opened.

The vaudeville shows ran continuously every day from about 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning until midnight. The show always began with a silent motion picture: A piano player sat facing the screen and provided the background music. Then came the stage acts, which generally lasted a little longer than the movie.

Bert Williams (l.) with George Walker, early 1900s. After Walker died in 1909, Williams became a headliner with the Ziegfeld Follies. From then until his death in 1922, he was perhaps the most famous black entertainer in America. W.C. Fields, who appeared in shows with Williams, described him as "the funniest man I ever saw — and the saddest man I ever knew."

Around 1915, Bert Williams, the great black comic, came to Jacksonville with a vaudeville show, and I went to see him. He played at the Strand Theater, which catered to nothing but blacks. I'd heard his name a lot, even then. The talk was that he had a diamond installed in his upper teeth, which flashed every time he opened his mouth. He went up higher than any black entertainer before him. He was the first black to become a star in the Ziegfeld Follies, an annual revue in New York.

His regular costume was a tailcoat and trousers too short, a battered silk hat, and oversize shoes that slapped the floor very hard when he walked. He blacked his face, like a lot of black and white comics did in minstrel shows. He came out and talked all his ridiculous talk. He sang too, in his style. It was more like a monologue done in a singsong way, and very earthy.

He sang about bad luck and being without money. He recorded some comic songs for Columbia Records, and in one he said: "You ask me what I need. Well, I needs everything from my hat down to my overcoat in." I saw him just that once, but I remember him so well because I was watching the diamond all the time I was there.

LEAVING THE SOUTH

Phoebe's health began to decline, and she took to her bed. I came into her bedroom one morning and asked for a nickel. She could not get the words out, but pointed to her purse. I went to the nearby store and made a purchase of candy. An hour later, when I came back, one of the old man's lady friends, who had been living with him and taking care of Phoebe, was crying and told me that my grandmother was dead. I was the last person to see her alive. I was too stunned to cry, but felt a great loss for the one person who had idolized me ever since I could remember.

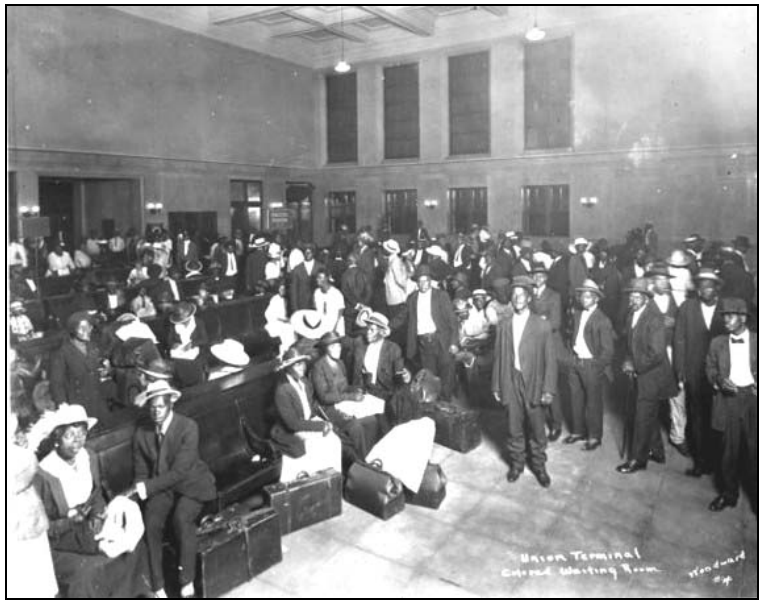
Shortly after the funeral, the lady friend, who had been looking forward to matrimony, began to argue with my father on the subject, and they fell out. He took a table leg and gave his onetime love a beating right in front of me, then threw her out of the house. At that same time he was also courting a younger woman, Luvina, the daughter of a well-to-do butcher in town. He married her shortly after his breakup, then migrated to New York City by himself, leaving Luvina and me behind.

Blacks were pouring out of the South to escape segregation, particularly from states bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Most went to New York, and many went to Philadelphia, Boston and Detroit. Those who went ahead wrote to their relatives and friends and told them how life was better in the North. My mother's older sisters, Aunt Sarah and Aunt Katie, moved to Detroit during World War I. Both married, and their husbands worked for the Ford Motor Company, which was then engaged in producing war materiel. My aunts lived the rest of their lives there.

You'd have to have seen the segregation in Jacksonville, to realize how rigid and humiliating it was. It was one of the most vicious things that a man could have ever thought of. The streetcars had a sign posted behind a row of seats, and when you got on, you had to walk to the back and sit behind the sign. As more and more white people got on, they moved that sign further back, until there wasn't any place for blacks to sit at all. And you'd better

not talk back to any white person.

The old people always warned me about what I couldn't do, and I observed it. They didn't try to explain it to me, but I was always very curious about it. That color thing was very powerful. You never knew when the blow was going to fall on you. And you instinctively tried to avoid any conflict, because it could cause something very unpleasant to happen.



Colored waiting room, Union Terminal, Jacksonville, Florida, 1921. Courtesy of Metro Jacksonville and Florida State Archives.

Thomas "Daddy" Rice in costume. By 1900 the laws of racial segregation were known as Jim Crow laws.

You knew that you had to sit in the Jim Crow section at the theater. You knew you couldn't go to the same schools as whites. You knew you couldn't go in any restaurant unless it was all black. You were completely separated, even in the hospitals. So you just lived in a black world.

The term "Jim Crow" came from a song first performed in 1828 by Thomas "Daddy" Rice, a white entertainer who blackened his face, then sang and danced in imitation of a crippled and unsophisticated plantation slave. The Jim Crow character became a staple of minstrel shows and helped spread the stereotype that black Americans were unworthy of integration.

When my father went to New York, he left me with my mother's older brother, William "Bud" Jackson, who took very special care of me. Uncle Bud had a prestigious job as the collector for a white furniture company that sold to blacks on credit. He frequently took me on his daily collection rounds. Those were proud days for me, riding with my uncle in his horse and buggy. Automobiles were very rare.

Uncle Bud and his wife, Aunt Jane, had a daughter named Celeste who was two years older than me. She and two of her cousins, Alfonso and Sylvester, jumped me one day to show their dominance. I whipped Celeste and Alfonso, who was a rank coward. Sylvester hung on as long as he could — he was a tenacious little rascal — but I soon had all three of them bawling and running away. Aunt Jane did not take time to ask what happened, but took after me. I hid out in the neighborhood until Uncle Bud came home and I could explain my side of what happened. Jane went for me, but Uncle Bud halted her,

saying that all I had done was defend myself.

Thomas Fleming's uncle William "Bud "Jackson in horse and buggy he used as a collector for a furniture company, Jacksonville, Florida, 1910.

The old man sent a few dollars for my care and wrote occasionally to me. He lived in Harlem, the largest black community in the nation, a city within New York City. In one letter, he wrote that he wanted me to join him.

My father knew the crew members from quite a few ships, since they all stopped at Jacksonville. So he contacted a friend on the Clyde Line, which had a fleet of steamers that went up and down the East Coast. The ships were all named after Indian tribes. The stewards — cooks, waiters and porters — were all black. The chief steward

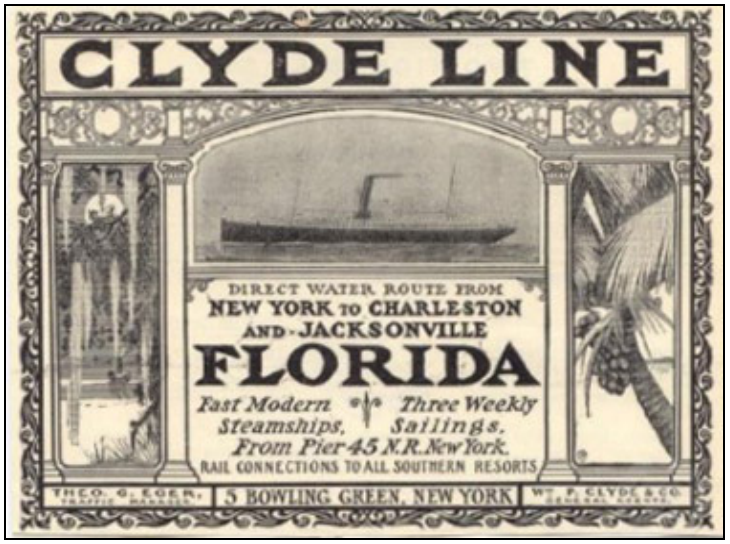
was always white. My father asked his friend who worked as a waiter on the Mohawk, would he bring me to New York? He said yes.

Around about April 1916, when I was 8 years old, Uncle Bud drove me to the dock with my bag. I bid my uncle goodbye, and the waiter calmly took me on board, where he led me to the living quarters of the stewards' department and said, "Stay in here until this ship clears the harbor. I'll come and tell you when you can go up on the deck."

I heard the great engines throb to life and the deep tone of the ship's whistle. The trembling of the great ship grew in intensity as the ropes were cast off, the propeller came to life, and the ship began to back away from the pier. The pilot turned the prow, and the ship headed for the mouth of the St. Johns River to enter the Atlantic Ocean and begin her northward journey.

About two hours after leaving, my dad's friend told me I could go out on deck. I accepted the invitation and went to the lower outside deck, where the steerage passengers were confined. When the other crew members saw me, they knew I was a stowaway because this sort of thing went on, and there weren't many blacks on the ship as passengers. I quickly found my sea legs as the ship adjusted its movement to the gentle swells.

We came into Charleston, South Carolina the next morning. My first cousin, Sam Fleming, met the ship and came on board to see me. Sam was a bootmaker in Charleston and had a contract to make boots for inmates in the state prison. It was the only time I ever saw Sam. He stayed on the dock as the ship backed out into the stream, and waved at me until the ship got out of sight.



Travel poster for the Clyde Line.

The second night at sea, the steady rolling of the ship brought me my first attack of seasickness. It seemed as if I would lose my very intestines following a violent period of vomiting. The next morning I felt good. Later in the day, the ship passed Sandy Hook in New York Bay and began its journey up the Hudson River. A tugboat moved alongside, easing the ship to the pier on West Street. Ropes were dropped, and the ship was soon tied up. The old man came aboard, picked me up and hugged and kissed me, then guided me to a trolley car.

* * *

HARLEM, 1916-1919

Our destination was a large, run-down building on West 133rd Street between Lenox Avenue and 7th Avenue, where the old man rented a room with a West Indian family. The day after I arrived, he took me to Public School 89 and enrolled me as a third grader. All the grammar schools in New York were numbered, and didn't have names.

Public School 89, Harlem, 1919.

It was a mixed school, the majority of the students being black. Harlem wasn't entirely black then, but the

white exodus was in full swing. All the teachers were white except for a few tokens, as blacks found it hard to get teaching jobs in the North.

All the buildings in Harlem had running water and gas, and many had electric lights. For every apartment, the gas company installed a meter with a coin slot, and you had to put in a quarter for a certain number of hours.

I saw a lot of things that I'd never dreamed about. For the first time I saw elevated trains, subways and double-decker buses, which traversed Fifth Avenue, passing through Harlem. You could sit in the streetcar where you wanted to, and most restaurants served blacks. But some were so expensive that they immediately suspected that the blacks couldn't pay.

My father was glad to have me living with him, but most of the time he was traveling, and I was too young to stay in his room alone. So he boarded me out to a woman who kept children of working parents. About six black kids were living there, sleeping two in a bed. The woman put me in bed with a kid who had chicken pox, and I got it. She saw to it that all of us said our prayers at night, and she read to us from the Bible: "Thou shalt not steal" and things like that.

My father worked all the time, but he didn't want the responsibility of a family life. About the only time I'd see him was when he came to pay for my keep. Then the woman would tell him what clothing I needed, and he would give her money to buy it. At Christmas we had a tree with candles. The next day there was a gift under the tree for each child.

A lot of times I felt lonely. Maybe that's one reason I started reading so much. I went to the Harlem branch of

the public library, and if they didn't have a book I wanted, I'd take the subway to the main library downtown.

After a year or more had gone by, my father sent for his wife Luvina, and I left the boarding home and moved in with them. We lived in a flat in a five-story building on 138th Street and Lenox Avenue.

Whenever my father was gone, I was left alone with my stepmother. That's when the problems began. Maybe I was more independent than she thought I should be. I had learned how to do a lot of things for myself — even how to fix food — from the time I was about 7 years of age. She tried to correct me, and maybe she went about it wrong. Whenever she attempted to strap me, we'd have a fight, with me acting like a regular little monster. I told her, "You're not my mother." She complained to my father, but he did not make things better.

Luvina was a very good-hearted woman, just 19 years of age, lonely in the big city, married to a philanderer with a brat of a son, to whom she tried to give the affection that a child needs from his mother. Later I realized that she was right and I was very wrong, but that was after I was older and reflected some on my life.

BLACK ENTERTAINERS

The center of black life in Harlem was 135th Street. It had the YMCA, which was a cultural center for blacks, a branch of the New York Public Library, and the Lafayette Theatre, the main theater for blacks in New York. I used to attend it during my first year in Harlem. It was white-owned and run, and had all black entertainers. It regularly

presented some of the greatest black talent — both musicals and serious drama. I saw some all-black films there, produced and filmed by blacks.

In front of the Lafayette was an elm tree known by black entertainers as the Tree of Hope. If they had long periods of unemployment, they would come by and kiss The tree and rub its bark, hoping to get a break. And because so many of them got jobs, the name stuck.

A few blocks from the Lafayette was a motion picture house, the Lincoln Theater. That's where Fats Waller started playing the pipe organ on weekends when he was 12 years of age. His given name was Thomas. His father was a minister at the Abyssinian Baptist Church and his mother played piano. Fats attended P.S. 89 the same time I did. He was a few grades ahead of me, but I saw him at school a lot, and went to hear him at the theater. Everybody marveled at his talent and followed him around between classes, trying to get close to him.

He wore a cap, and like all the boys of that age, he wore knee pants, or knickerbockers. And he had bulging frog eyes. Whenever I talked with him, he was full of wisecracks. I guess he got his nickname in grammar school because he was fat then. Nobody picked a fight with him: He was big enough to look out for himself.

After I left New York, I lost track of him and didn't follow his career until years later, when his records started coming out. I saw his picture in the national black papers and he looked just about the same: He was still wisecracking.

Fats became one of the most popular entertainers of his time, mostly because of the very enthusiastic style of piano he played. He was also a composer and singer.

Fats Waller (1904-1943), who attended Public School 89 in Harlem with Thomas Fleming, dropped out at 15 to join a vaudeville troupe and went on to become one of America's greatest jazz artists and songwriters.

He worked theaters and nightclubs, he appeared in a few movies, and he cut a lot of records. He was probably best known as a songwriter. He usually collaborated with Andy Razaf, who wrote the lyrics. Razaf was a successful writer for the musical stage, who was a grand nephew of Queen Ranavalona III of Madagascar.

Fats wrote a flock of songs that were tremendous hits:

Andy Razaf, African-born writer for the American music stage, was Fats Waller's favorite lyricist.

"Honeysuckle Rose," "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Your Feet's Too ig," "'Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do." Other entertainers, black and white, played and recorded his numbers.

They're being played yet. Fats didn't make much money out of the pieces he wrote because he'd normally sell them as soon as he composed them and lose all of his rights. He was always short for money. He chased women a lot, and had a wife and a son at home. He lived high, all the time. He was a man of tremendous appetites for life, which I think included everything.

In December 1943, the news went around the world that Fats had died. He had been in Hollywood to make a picture, and was returning to New York. The train was pulling into the yard in Kansas City when he had a sudden heart attack, and that was it. He was 39 years old.

* * *

Bert Williams was followed in the Ziegfeld Follies by Ethel Waters, the first black female singer to get really into the white world. Williams, Waters and other black entertainers had contracts with the Orpheum Circuit, the largest and most prestigious vaudeville chain. The acts were booked in New York, then made a circuit around the country, appearing wherever there was an Orpheum Theater. The chain's flagship, the Palace Theater in New York, was the number one vaudeville house in the nation. Anyone who played the Palace, black or white, had made it on the big time.

Jewish entertainers called New York the Big Banana. But the blacks called it the Big Apple, and I guess people liked that sound better because it outlasted the other name.

A black vaudeville chain, the Theater Owners' Booking Association, TOBA, had theaters in the East Coast, the South and the Midwest. They were owned by

enterprising whites who saw an opportunity to put a theater in every large black neighborhood. There were TOBA houses in Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, St. Louis, Kansas City, and as far west as Oklahoma City. The world-famous Apollo Theater on 125th Street in Harlem was a member of the chain, although that area was still largely a Jewish neighborhood.

TOBA had the biggest names in Black America, and used an occasional white. In the '20s and early '30s, one could see Fats Waller, Ella Fitzgerald, Pigmeat Markham, Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, the Mills Brothers when they first started, and just about any other famous black entertainer. A few of them would get away from TOBA and join the Orpheum Circuit. TOBA didn't come to the West Coast because there were no separate theaters for blacks and whites.

In 1920, the Cotton Club opened on 142nd Street in Harlem and soon became the most famous nightclub in the country. It had an elaborate floor show every night, with a big band, vocalists, comedians, and a chorus line. All the entertainers, waiters and other personnel were black. But the owners didn't allow blacks in as paying customers even if they had thousands of dollars in their pockets.

Jazz music attracted tremendous crowds. Most of the young customers were college students from wealthy families who came uptown "slumming." The chorus girls were beautiful and shapely, and most of them were very fair. That was one of the main ingredients of what jazz was all about. Nightclubs became even more popular and more profitable during Prohibition in the 1920s because many of them continued to serve hard liquor.

LIFE IN HARLEM

By the age of 8, I was already reading newspapers. But except for crime stories, and some outstanding blacks who could hardly be ignored, the daily papers paid slight heed to the black community. If you wanted to find out about black entertainers, writers, athletes, business leaders, black social activities and black church events, you had to read the black press. Without it, black people wouldn't have had any kind of editorial voice at all.

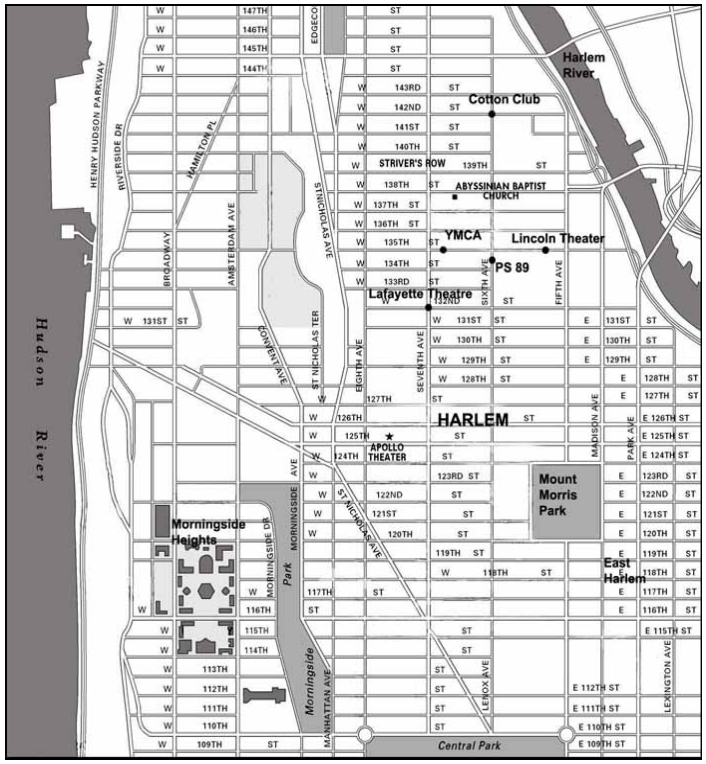
The black press started as an antislavery tool, and ever since, it has led the fight for complete integration. It served as a watchdog: You read about lynchings, discrimination, jobs you could get, hotels you could stay in.

Harlem had a weekly black paper, the *New York Age,* which some kids sold on the streets. Black celebrities got their first publicity there, and if they were very good, the white press picked it up.

There were a lot of poor Italian immigrants in Harlem. They were still arriving in large numbers, along with Jews and others from Eastern Europe, and people from the Caribbean islands. As these groups came in, the middle-class whites started getting out.

Blacks lived primarily on the west side of Harlem, between Lenox Avenue and Seventh Avenue. The Italians dominated the east side of Fifth Avenue in East Harlem. Above us, on Morningside Heights, was a large concentration of Irish. I think most blacks realized they were segregated — not by any law, but because most property owners outside the neighborhood would not rent or sell to them.

For self-protection, you had to be a member of a boys' gang in the block where you lived. It might be just for the kids on your side of the street, and across the street there might be a different gang. If you didn't join, the youths on your block would attack you.



Harlem in 1920, showing places described by Thomas Fleming.

There were two places where you could swim in the summer time — the Harlem River on the east and the

Hudson River on the west. The Harlem River was better, but between us and the swimming hole were the Italians, who didn't want us or the Irish coming through their territory. So we formed an alliance with the Irish gang. We armed ourselves with bottles, sticks and pieces of wood, which the more imaginative members carved in the form of swords, knives, billy clubs or blackjacks.

When we crossed Fifth Avenue, here came all the Italian kids to contest our invasion, armed the same way we were. We'd throw rocks at each other in a running fight all the way to the river. They'd call us nigger, and we'd shout, "Oh you guinea, oh you wop, oh you two-cent lollipop!" The Italian mothers would come out, heaping curses on us in their language and sometimes getting into the fight themselves. At the river, we had to post guards on shore to keep the Italians back. The guards were changed from time to time so that everyone could enjoy a swim. After the temporary truce, the Irish juvenile gangs would pass through our turf, and the same old terms would prevail — that neither of us was to cross one another's territory.

In the summer, we lolled on the rooftops of the tenement buildings, bringing paper bags, a bucket of water and some feces. When a passerby came along, we would shout down below, fill a bag with ammunition and drop it. Sometimes it would hit the intended target, and sometimes it would burst, scattering the contents over the sidewalk.

Italian and Jewish vendors went all through New York City with pushcarts and horse-drawn wagons, shouting out their wares, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods. Some pushcarts had vegetables, some fruit only, some clothing, and in the summer, ice cream or cold drinks.

When a housewife called an order from her window and the peddler went in to deliver it, we would rush out and hit the unattended cart. When the poor man came back, most of his merchandise would be gone. If he started chasing us, we would enter any door in the block and race up to the roof. All of the buildings were a uniform height, so we could run a whole block across the rooftops, then come down.

In the winter we stole potatoes. We'd head for a vacant lot, dig a pit, light some wood or trash on top, then stand around in hungry anticipation until the potatoes were done. Most of the time they were scorched on one side and almost raw on the other, and we didn't have salt or any other seasoning, but never in life have I tasted potatoes that were so good.

That first winter, my old man claimed he was too poor to buy me an overcoat, so he cut down one of his suit jackets to my size. I was the butt of many jokes at school, but I stood up well under the taunting.

We had snowball fights with the Italians. Some boys dipped the snowball in water to harden it, which made it a lethal weapon if one was struck in the head. Occasionally we threw them at traffic cops who were assigned to an intersection. They would take it so long, then come after us. If we were near a subway station, we would run past the gateman, board a train, and ride a few blocks before taking another train home.

In the fall of 1917 I saw the aftermath of a race riot. It began in a white-owned confectionery store on a busy corner across from my school. A young black boy bought a milk soda, then saw what looked like a fly in it. He called it to the attention of the owner, perhaps in a manner

that led to the refusal of a replacement drink. The outraged boy began to use language so strong that the owner slapped him. Several other young blacks in the place ran out to the street, shouting that a white man had beaten a black child so badly that he might die.

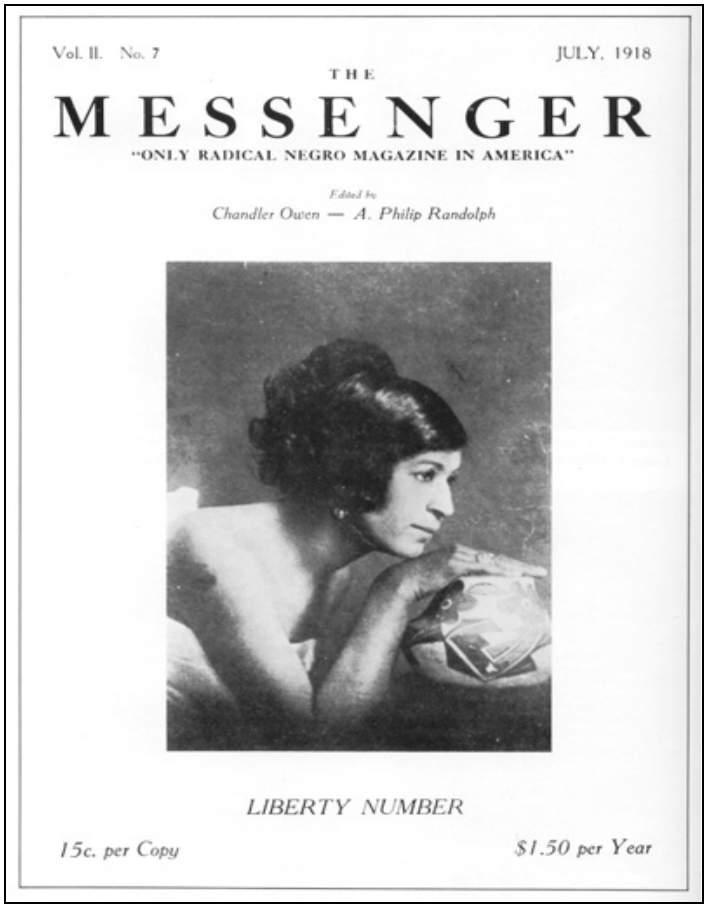
A mob formed, led by adolescent blacks and adult males. The windows were quickly smashed in that place and in surrounding commercial businesses. Then someone started a fire in the first store. The young black males began looting. The word went around, and I joined those who were interested in taking something. But by the time I arrived, the police and the firemen had placed a protective ring around the vandalized buildings. I felt frustrated as some of my friends told me how much loot they had gathered.

Blacks had a foot in the door of Tammany Hall, the political machine that controlled city government. Black votes were just as important as white votes, and my father always voted. He attended a lot of political meetings, including one in which Teddy Roosevelt, the former president, came to Harlem and spoke.

BLACK PROFESSIONALS

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s made Harlem the capital of black America. Blacks all over the country looked toward Harlem because there was such a concentration of highly educated and motivated people, and most of them tested racism.

Blacks were just beginning to break out of the traditional jobs they had held since emancipation from



Cover of *The Messenger*, July 1918. Describing itself as the "only radical Negro magazine in America," it was edited and published in Harlem by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph. In 1925, Randolph would become founder and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and resistance to the union would lead to the magazine's financial collapse in 1928.

slavery. There was at least one black doctor on the staff at Harlem Hospital, and a few black nurses. In a section of Harlem near West 139th Street was a row of town houses called Strivers' Row, where landowners started letting celebrated black entertainers and professionals move in. When blacks could afford that type of residence, it meant they had arrived.

In New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and other cities outside the South with a large black population, you began to see the rise of a black middle class. With the size of Harlem's black population, professionals in many fields could earn a living once they got established. Some of them, particularly young lawyers and dentists who were just starting their practice, went down to Grand Central Station or Penn Station at night and hauled baggage to supplement their income. Black doctors and dentists had to work just as hard as white doctors, but didn't get the same fees.

Most black men in Harlem worked in service jobs — cooks, waiters, janitors, bootblacks. You saw a few black policemen and firemen, but they were so uncommon that everybody knew who they were. I don't remember seeing a single black bus driver, subway worker, street sweeper or garbage collector..

* * *

All over the United States, most black women worked as domestics. They were usually more educated than black men, I think because the girls stayed at home longer and listened to their mothers better. Boys often dropped out of school by the fourth or fifth grade, and some didn't go at

In 1998, Madam C.J. Walker became the first African American woman to be pictured on a U.S. postage stamp.

all. Young boys in Harlem admired the pimps and gamblers because they dressed up sharp and always had money to spend, even though they were frequently arrested.

The most famous black woman in Harlem was Madam C.J. Walker. She developed a method of straightening hair using heated metal combs and an oily substance, and became the first black female millionaire. The combs were manufactured at Walker's plant. She also sold a facial cream that lightened the skin. She had a townhouse and beauty school on 136th Street and a mansion on the Hudson. She gave a lot of big parties for her daughter, who knew nothing except how to spend her mother's money.

Almost every black woman in the United States knew who Madam Walker. Women started opening up beauty parlors all over the country, using her products. Most blacks felt that so-called nappy hair was primitive, like something from Africa. Blacks tried to make themselves look more like whites because they felt being black was a form of degradation.

MARCUS GARVEY

In my neighborhood, there were probably more West Indian than American-born blacks. There was some antagonism between them; the Americans called them "monkey chasers." The West Indians were very industrious, always trying to start small businesses.

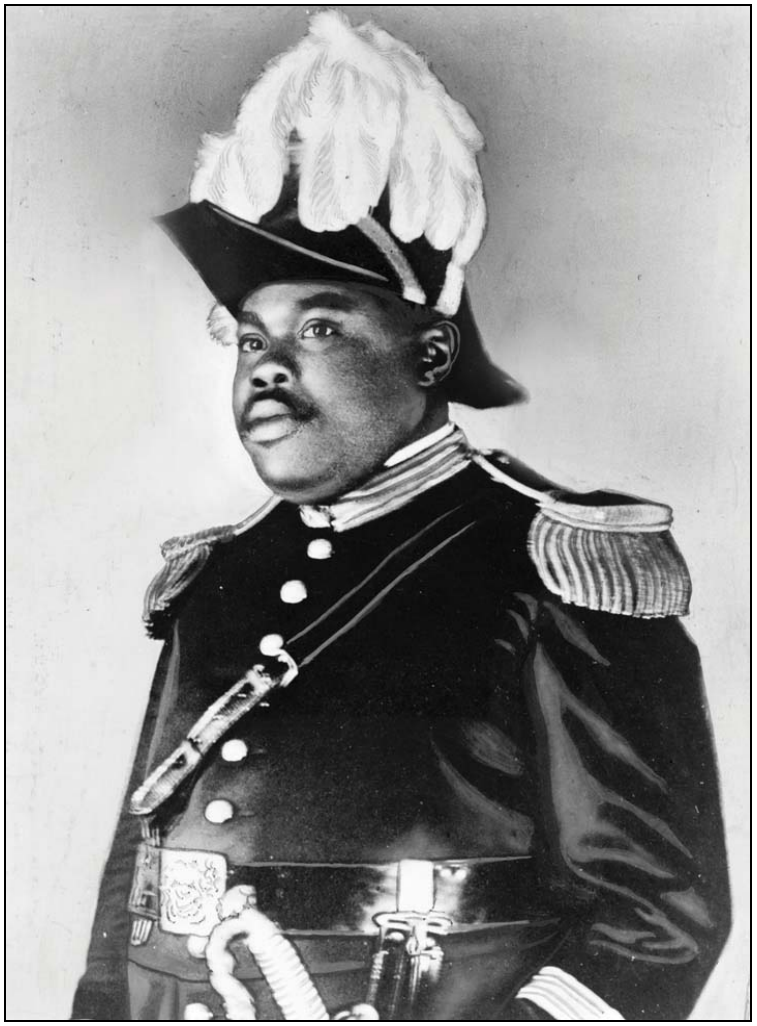
One of them told me that in Jamaica, the houses had outhouses and no gas, electricity or plumbing. Others

would boast, "I'm a subject of the king," and say that in Jamaica they could get jobs that blacks weren't getting here. But the first thing we asked them was: "If you could do all those things, why did you leave?"

The best-known Jamaican was Marcus Garvey, the leader of the Back to Africa movement, who arrived in Harlem the same year I did. Garvey exhorted blacks to contribute money to the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which he headed. Its goal was to establish commercial ties between American blacks and Africa. Many blacks were waiting for a messiah type of leader, and Garvey fit that role with his program of self-help and the raising of funds to start blacks in businesses.

Street orators spoke about Garvey on corners of both Lenox and Seventh Avenue, standing on actual soap boxes. The movement held parades along Seventh Avenue frequently. Garvey stood up in a big open-top car, surrounded by his aides. He dressed like an admiral, with a cockade hat and a long trailing feather at the back. The parades always had a band, with marchers in front and behind carrying banners. Some men were in uniform, and the rest wore their Sunday best suits. The women wore long white dresses. I think it was all part of trying to attract more members. I thought it was just a parade, and didn't realize what the movement meant until years later.

A lot of black women joined; the dues weren't very much. Garvey collected the dimes and quarters of enough blacks so that he was able to form a steamship company, the Black Star Line. His idea was to ship goods and people between the U.S. and some African ports. The first ship, an aged tub, was leaky and unseaworthy, and barely made it out of New York Harbor. He later added two more



Marcus Garvey in uniform, 1923.

ships, but not one of them ever landed in Africa.

Liberia was intended to be the African terminus. In the 1820s, the U.S. had attempted to establish a black nation

there with liberated slaves, and most of the leaders in Liberia had roots in the United States. Garvey wanted to set up a colony of American blacks. The Liberians first went along, but then changed their minds and wouldn't let him in because they were afraid he would take over political power.

Garvey never became an American citizen, although he lived in New York for nine years. The Universal Negro Improvement Association at one time might have had over two million members. But in New York, not many American-born blacks bothered with Garvey.

The U.S. government saw the movement as a threat and wanted to break it up, so the Department of Justice accused him of bilking poor working people and arrested him on several fraud charges. He was tried in federal court and jailed in Atlanta, then later deported to Jamaica. He died in London in 1940.

The National Association for the Improvement of Colored People, NAACP, failed to pay attention to the uneducated blacks, which lost them the leadership of the black masses. Two of Garvey's biggest enemies were W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of the NAACP's magazine *The Crisis,* and A. Philip Randolph, coeditor of *The Messenger*, a socialist monthly magazine, and later cofounder of the Pullman porters union. They thought the Back to Africa movement was a harebrained idea. How was Garvey going to get enough money? And nobody wanted to go to Africa.

But Garvey has a lot of supporters even today. There are still some chapters of the United Negro Improvement Association, and in 1973 the biggest park in Harlem, Mount Morris Park, was renamed Marcus Garvey Park.

THE WORLD WAR

My favorite newspaper was a daily, the *New York American*, because it had good cartoons and sensational headlines about criminal activities. I recall reading about the U.S. declaration of war against Germany in April 1917, and the dirigible balloons — zeppelins — that were bombing London. It caused some concern that they might cross the Atlantic and bomb New York. The mayor, John Hylan, ordered a blackout each night. The streets were left without lights, and citizens were ordered to pull down their window shades after dark so that aircraft would have difficulty seeing where to drop their bombs.

My dad was quite a practical joker. He ran into the building one night and started yelling, "The Germans are over the city!" People poured out of their flats in a state of panic. When they found out he was cracking a joke they wanted to get the old man's scalp. But he got in his apartment and stayed inside.

The U.S. launched a giant campaign to finance the war. Celebrities appeared at marches for Liberty Bonds, which were sold to support the war effort, and people were called on to make sacrifices.

Luvina was very pregnant and wanted to have her baby under the protection of her parents, so she left for Florida. Pop escaped the draft because Luvina and I were both dependents.

In the summer of 1917 he got a job as a cook on small steamship, the S.S. York, which carried guns and ammunition from New Haven, Connecticut to New York City. There its cargo was placed on a ship carrying men and munitions to France. He took me with him on the

Harlem street scene, circa 1920.

steamship, and it became our home for a while. We'd leave New York in the evening and go on through Long Island Sound, and dock in New Haven sometime during the night.

There were rumors about German submarines prowling off New York Harbor to attack vessels carrying troops, arms and goods to Europe. One night while Pop and I were on the York, a Navy patrol boat shot a flare across our bow and ordered the ship to halt. The patrol boat drew alongside, and a seaman speaking through a megaphone told our captain to douse his bow light, as the Navy believed that a German submarine was lurking in the area. The thought that our ship might be attacked was exciting to me, as it would be to any 10-year-old.

That summer my father pointed out the warships to me

in the harbor. A battleship was the biggest, the next largest was the cruiser, then the destroyer, then the submarines, and then submarine chasers and other auxiliary vessels. I learned to recognize them all.

Many passenger liners became troop carriers during the war. Pop showed me the Leviathan docked at Hoboken, New Jersey. At the outbreak of the war she was a German ship, the Vaterland, the biggest passenger ship in the world. She happened to be tied up in New York when the U.S. entered the war, so the government seized her and converted her into a troop ship, and she conveyed thousands of doughboys across the Atlantic. Like most ships, she was repainted a dark, dull gray after hostilities started. Others had splotches of contrasting paint on their side, which was camouflage.

I saw many a convoy form, then slip out of the harbor shepherded by destroyers and other naval escort vessels for the long dangerous journey across the Atlantic. The big fast ocean liners crossed the Atlantic unescorted. Their speed and zigzagging protected them from the much slower subs.

There were two all-black national guard regiments in the United States before the war started, the 8th Illinois and the 15th New York National Guard regiment, which was stationed in Harlem. Colonel William Haywood, the commanding officer of the Harlem regiment, was white, and there was a mixture of black and white officers. Like all national guard units, it was federalized at the outbreak of war. The 15th regiment received a new number, the 369th, of the U.S. Army. In the winter of 1917-1918, when the war was at a stalemate, it was ordered to France.

Before the soldiers left, somebody thought it would be

a good idea to have them march down Seventh Avenue in Harlem so blacks could see them. The great day came, and the avenue was crowded with spectators — mostly women and children — who lined up all along the route to wish the men a safe crossing. We waited expectantly on the sidewalks and along the curb. Suddenly we heard the sound of the band playing in the distance, and we became even more excited. The band came into view, led by Lieutenant James Reese Europe, a black bandleader who became a famous jazz musician in New York after the war.

Following the band was the whole regiment — about 2,000 men, marching smartly in cadence with the colonel at the head. A tremendous cheer went up, and some people rushed to shake hands with soldiers who were friends, relatives, husbands or lovers. Kids on the sidewalk were jumping up and down to show off, and some black juveniles marched a short distance with the regiment.

The men wore a wide-brimmed campaign hat, and carried everything they were issued — a knapsack on their back, a topcoat, and a rifle on their shoulder. The march lasted about an hour, until the soldiers were out of sight. They headed for the piers downtown, where they boarded a ferry for Hoboken, then sailed on one of the giant convoys to France.

The French were shorthanded and needed them badly. They immediately put the regiment up with the French combat troops, and the 369th distinguished themselves. The hordes of new men that the U.S. supplied turned the war around. Germany had no replacements to stem the new offensive that General John Pershing's troops brought to the Allied cause. Germany asked for terms, the kaiser abdicated, and the war came to an end.

Soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment who won the Croix de Guerre for gallantry in action, 1919.

Armistice Day arrived on November 11, 1918. I saw some of the troops come home, marching to the cheers of thousands of spectators. There were detachments of French soldiers called Blue Devils, wearing berets and colorful greatcoats of blue, who looked very crisp in their marching formation. Behind them were the French foot soldiers with their helmets. Then came the contingents of auxiliary personnel — detachments of lumbering trucks, a few early-day tanks, and airplanes flying overhead. There was a wild celebration on the streets of New York City, and, I learned later, all over the U.S. and around the world, for the war had become known as a world war.

WEST TO CALIFORNIA

The winter of 1918-19 brought below-zero temperatures to New York. The scarcity of fuel and other commodities brought on by the war created a gloomy time. Everyone you met spoke about the cold. I was dressed properly to keep warm — always with galoshes or rubbers over my shoes, a topcoat, woolen mittens, and a knitted blue Navy-style cap which I could roll down over my ears.

That was when I first heard the term "Spanish influenza" to describe the heavy flu attack that swept over the nation. People went about the street with handkerchiefs over their faces to ward off the deadly bug. So many were stricken that the city began sending people to Ward's Island in the middle of the East River, where they were treated and held in quarantine. Some came back in a coffin. More people died from the flu epidemic than from all the battles of the war.

I came to school one day with all of the symptoms, and coughed incessantly in class. The teacher felt my forehead, sent me home and made a report to the principal. The next morning the hooky cop came to my home and said that if I was not in school the following day, I would be taken to the island. I got out of bed the next morning, and despite a temperature, dizziness and a headache, I went to school. Fortunately, my coughing had subsided somewhat, which calmed the teacher. I felt much better in the next few days, and never went to a doctor.

I was playing hooky more than I was going to school, and was learning a lot of bad things. It didn't make any difference to my father if I attended school or not. But one

day Aunt Katie came from Detroit to visit, and she wrote to my mother that she had better get me out of New York or I would surely end up in Sing Sing prison.

My mother lived in Chico, California, an agricultural town in the north central part of the state. I had not seen her for seven years, but she continued to write to me almost every week, and I answered her letters. I always felt my mama was somewheres.

Mama wrote the old man and asked: Would he send me back to Jacksonville to Uncle Bud? I think my father was a bit tired of having me around, for he got back in touch with his pals at the Clyde Line. Around February of 1919, I was again taken down to the pier and handed over — a stowaway for the second time. I stayed in Jacksonville for about two months until my mother could buy me a train ticket. She wanted me and my sister Katie to be raised together.

The journey to California was five days out. On the day of my departure, Uncle Bud and Aunt Jane took me to the station and gave me a big wicker basket full of sandwiches. My dad came down from New York to see me off, and he started blubbering, "You're going a long way off. I may not see you again." I didn't know what he was talking about. The first month I got to California, my father wrote me a letter and sent $10. I wrote back to him, but he didn't answer. I never heard from him again until 20 years later.

Uncle Bud pinned my tickets to the lapel of my jacket and asked the conductor to watch me, which he promised to do. The train pulled out and I waved at my father, aunt and uncle until I could no longer see them.

I have always held a strong resentment toward any

state where Jim Crow was a way of life. After the train left, I never set foot in Florida again until 1968, when I covered the Republican National Convention in Miami.

For all railway lines in the South it was company policy to keep the races separate. My ticket was for a chair car in the front of the train, directly behind the baggage cars. Blacks could ride only in those cars, and you couldn't lie down. I had to sleep the best way I could. My feet got very tired, keeping my shoes on the whole time. We could not go into the diner until most of the whites had been served. Then the steward would set aside a few tables for blacks. In the more racist states, like Mississippi, blacks could not go into the dining car at any time. But once the train passed the Mason-Dixon line — the boundary between the northern and southern states — black passengers could eat in the dining car and sit where they wanted.

My sandwiches were very hard by the next day. My old man had given me $5 for the trip, which I promptly spent. Vendors called train butchers went through the cars selling candy, peanuts, soft drinks and magazines, and renting pillows for the night. I slept in snatches, excited to see the land as the train rolled along.

When we got to New Orleans the next morning, the conductor took me into the depot and turned me over to a woman from the Travelers' Aid Society. She conducted me into the huge waiting room and admonished me not to leave except to go to the toilet, which had the word "colored" on the door. She took me to the lunch counter and fed me, and gave me another dollar to spend. I waited all day, and that evening she put me on the Sunset Limited for California.

We came into New Mexico, then Arizona, and reached Los Angeles two mornings later. I left that night on a train called the West Coast. The next morning it arrived in Sacramento, 90 miles south of Chico. I laid over there all day, so Travelers' Aid again took over. They fed me, and the worker asked me what was my mother's name and address. Chico used the same phone directory that Sacramento did, as well as all those other little towns up there. The Travelers' Aid lady found my mother's last name, which was now Mosley. She called her and told her that I would arrive in Chico at 11:30 p.m.

That evening I caught a train on the Sacramento Northern Railway. The last stop was Chico. When the train arrived, the conductor turned to me and said, "Young man, you've come a long way. This is the end of the line." He got my bag for me, and when I reached the door, I saw a woman standing there, and a man with her. She said, "Tommy?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Don't you know me?" I had to say no, because I'd forgotten what she looked like. She grabbed me and started hugging me and crying. I tried to pull away because I wasn't used to that, so she slapped me alongside my head and said, "What's the matter with you? I'm your mother."

I began to feel the warmth and love as she smothered me with kisses. She introduced me to my stepfather, a genial giant named Moses Mosley, who stood about 6 foot 3. We walked from the depot to the first house where I would sleep on the West Coast.

Before Mama left for the depot, she put a lot of water to heat on the stove and placed a galvanized washing tub — very fashionable then — in the middle of the kitchen floor. When we came in, she fed me. Then she poured the

hot water in the tub, added some cold water and tested it with her index finger. When she thought it had reached the proper temperature, she began to undress me.

After five days and nights of travel without changing my clothing or even taking off my shoes, I smelled very gamy. I tried to resist out of bashfulness, and she gave me a gentle slap on the head and told me that she was my mother and that I did not have to be ashamed in front of her. I wore long black stockings and knee pants, which were the vogue for boys then. A boil on one of my feet had burst, and the stocking was stuck to my foot. As my mother was placing me in the tub, she examined the sore, then put both stocking and foot in the water, and finally worked the stocking off. That was perhaps the most exhilarating bath I had taken in my short life. The warm water made me drowsy, and I suddenly felt very tired.

Katie had lain awake waiting to see her older brother, of whom she had heard a lot but had no memories. I guess I had become a sort of myth to her. In Chico, Kate felt left out because she had no other siblings to stand up for her. The black kids there had been together all of their lives, and at times formed a solid wall against her.

Mama took me into the living room and placed me in the bed alongside my sister. I did not think too well of sleeping with her, and she thought likewise. She informed me that it was her bed, and to keep on one side, which I did. After that we got twin beds.

Mama made me feel at ease very quickly, and it seemed like I had been with her all my life. I never felt any anxiety from that moment on. Her children came first with her: That's what she lived for. She was very short but determined, standing at 4 feet 11 inches with high heels.

Mary Jackson Fleming, Thomas Fleming's mother (1887-1945).

She was a very gentle and decent person. She never took anything that didn't belong to her, and she always gave you a straight answer. She would keep her mouth shut

and not say anything, rather than tell a lie. She had the greatest influence on me, to be honest in my relationships with other people in the world.

* * *

THE CHICO YEARS, 1919-1926

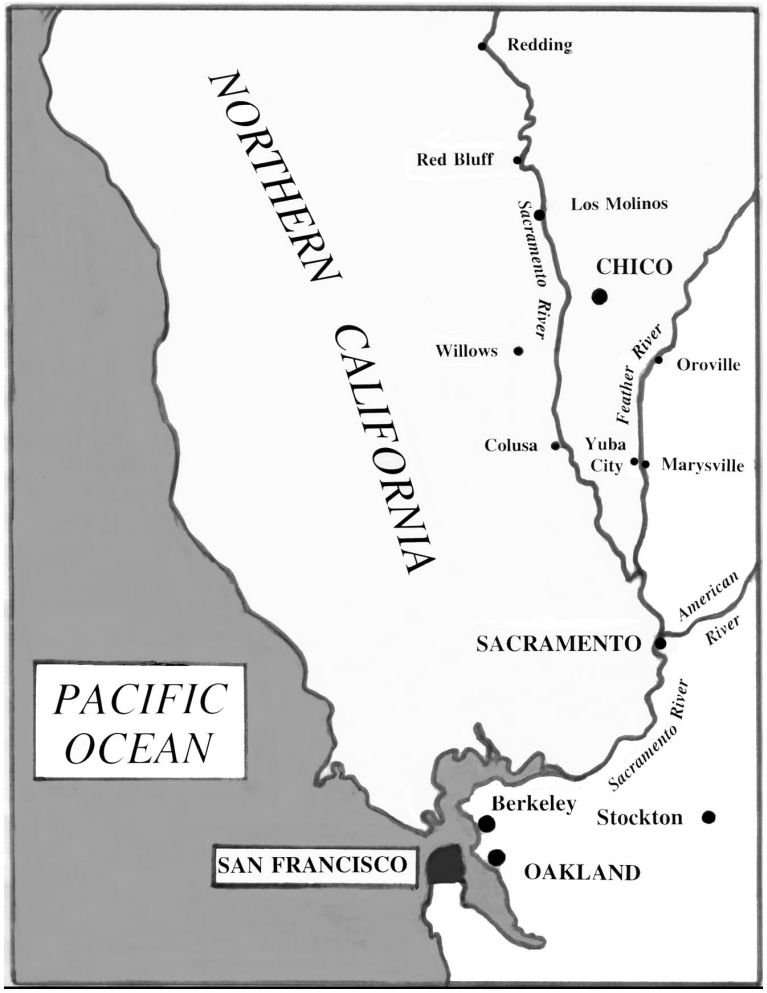
The story of my family's migration from the Deep South to California was a common one. My mother's eldest brother, Thomas Jackson, was living in Alabama when he volunteered for the U.S. Army in the Spanish-American War of 1898, probably as a way to escape the land of Jim Crow. He was shipped to the Philippines, where he fought in an all-black infantry unit.

After the Americans defeated the Spanish forces, the Army remained in the Philippines a few more years for occupation purposes. My uncle was discharged in San Francisco around 1901, and like a number of black soldiers, he decided to stay. This pattern would be repeated on a bigger scale following World War II.

The next to arrive in California was my step-grandmother, Annie Powers. She was my Grandpa Jackson's last wife, and she always regarded us as family even though she wasn't blood kin. She had married my grandfather while my mother was still a little girl, and had brought her up, partially.

When Grandpa Jackson died, Annie became a maid for a wealthy white family in Montgomery, and when they went on a trip to New York, they took her along. She had never been out of the South before. She went with them by train to San Francisco, then to Honolulu. When they returned to San Francisco, Granny met with Uncle Tom, and he prevailed upon her to stay there and not go back to Alabama, because he said going down South was worse than going to prison. So she left the white family and stayed behind.

She went to Sacramento and worked as a cook in the



Sacramento Valley and San Francisco Bay Area.

mansion of the governor of California. Then she met a much older black gentleman named Peter Powers, who was down in the city hunting for a wife. Annie found out that he owned a lot of property in the town of Chico, and

she did not resist his proposals of marriage.

My mother corresponded with Annie all of the time. When Annie learned about my mother's divorce, she urged her to come to Chico, and sent her a train ticket because my mother had no money.

My mother had gone to school to the sixth grade before she had to drop out. But she knew the value of an education because her brother had gone to Alabama State, which was an all-black school then.

My mother worked 10 hours a day, six days a week for a white family in Chico. She kept the house clean, did the laundry and cooked the meals. She had little time for anything except working and taking care of us. She read until late at night, mostly the Bible or literature about her church. She tried very hard to keep her family together and I think she did a good job.

The three of us were very close. She made clothes for herself and my sister, and once she even got a pattern and made a suit for me. My two aunts in Detroit were protective of her, and they sent about $10 a month for each of us. It helped out a lot.

Kate and I had dinner off quite a few leftovers that Mama brought from the white folks' kitchen. It was customary all over the country for black domestics to cook enough food so that they could bring some home for their families. People generally couldn't eat leftovers the next day anyway because refrigerators were just coming into being, and weren't yet popular in homes. The ice man traversed the streets every day; you could hear his bell ringing. Some homes had a contract for him to deliver was down in the city hunting for a wife. Annie found out blocks of ice on given days. Most ice wagons were horse-

drawn until about 1923, when they started to become motorized.

Moses Mosley, my stepfather, came out of rural Alabama. He was a nephew of Granny Powers, and had followed her to California, probably under cajoling from her. He was a widower, and it's possible that Granny promoted a romance between Mama and Moses. By the time I came out, Kate was calling him Papa, because she didn't get to know her real father.

Main Street, Chico, California, circa 1928. Courtesy of Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.

Moses seemed to be genuinely fond of her, but he handled me very gingerly, because I guess he didn't really know what to do about me. Our relationship was always wary; we had a sort of truce between us. I called him Mr.

Mosley, or we both would look directly at one another and just start talking. If he wanted me to do something, he would tell my mother to tell me. We just observed each another like two dogs, the way they sniff around one another. He never tried to bother me any, and I never had a falling out with him.

SMALL TOWN LIFE

Chico had 65 or 70 blacks out of a population of about 10,000. The morning after I arrived, I looked around at the acres and acres of empty land in the neighborhood and told my mother, "I want to go back to New York."

The house we rented was owned by Mrs. Johnson, a middle-aged mulatto widow who lived with us. Although she had been blind for a number of years, she took great pride in the fact that she was very light-skinned, and never failed to ask about pigmentation when she met someone new. She soon began to question me about other people: What was their color and hair texture? She didn't ask me about myself. I answered her questions, but I understood this sort of pathology even then. I felt sorry for her because she depended upon other people to do just about everything for her.

It seemed that every house in Chico had at least one citrus tree — orange, grapefruit or tangerine. My mother, who remained home from work that first day, had a lot of roses and other flowering plants. She helped me identify peach, apricot, orange, almond and fig trees — which dropped their messy fruit on the sidewalk — plus gooseberry vines, raspberries and blackberries, all still green. I

became acquainted with persimmon, quince and loquat.

My grandmother showed us how to cure olives. She had a big oaken barrel, and she'd get maybe a couple of gallons of olives and put them in the barrel with lye water. They stayed in there 14 days, then she'd pour the lye water off, wash them over, and put salt in there. When you wanted to eat an olive you'd take it out of the barrel.

My mother enrolled me in Salem Street School, which was for students from first to fourth grade. My father didn't send any school records out with me, so I was put in the same class with my sister, even though I should have been one or two grades ahead of her.

My teacher's name was Virginia Wright, and we took to one another right off. In geography class I was the only student who could talk of Florida and New York from first-hand experience. She was amused when I told her that in Florida, pine wood was called "fat wood."

The school had an old-style bell in a belfry, and Miss Wright gave me the job of ringing it every morning to call students to their classes. She also arranged for me to beat a drum, so that everyone would form a line in front of the door and march in.

I learned to like living in a little town. The other students — including the white kids — seemed to look upon me for leadership. I began to like Chico better as the time rolled by, and soon forgot to think about any other place.

* * *

I'd never heard about Granny Powers until I came to Chico, but she became very fond of me and would do any-

thing for me. On my first day, she invited some people over to meet the new arrival. That's when I met Henry Herriford, another black boy. Henry and I struck it off right away. We were together every day from then on. He was my chief buddy and my mentor in country life. The only other black boy his age in Chico was Ted Johnson, but Ted's mother thought Henry was too much of a little rowdy, and always kept Ted at home dressed in clean clothes.

Henry was a natural outdoorsman. Swimming, hunting, fishing: He was good in all of it. He didn't care anything about school, but he was a superb student of nature. He knew plant and animal life better than anyone I had ever met, and we formed a tight friendship that lasted until we both left Chico. He took me to the creeks to watch tadpoles develop. He taught me about bluegills — an excellent pan fish — plus carp, suckers and catfish.

When it became warm, Henry and I would go swimming along with some other youths, mostly white. I could not swim at all, but Henry furnished me some water wings and I lost my fear of the water. When I saw him dive in, I dove in right behind him, using the dog paddle style at first, then the overhand stroke, as he did.

In early spring, Henry and I and his two sisters would climb the foothills east of Chico in search of Indian arrowheads, which we usually found. Yellow poppies turned the open space into color as far as the eye could see. We picked wildflowers with the intention of bringing them home, but sometimes got into arguments and attacked one another with our bouquets.

Henry had a terrier dog, and I had several dogs during my life in Chico. They followed us when we went out of

town, scaring up rabbits and chasing squirrels, and running behind when we rode our bicycles. I got my first gun, a .25 caliber single-shot rifle, when I was about 13. Then I got a 16-gauge shotgun. Henry and I hunted mostly for gray squirrels, which made good stew, and jackrabbits. Every other day I'd go out and kill three or four jackrabbits and bring them home, and my mother would dress them and stew them and feed them to the dogs.

When duck season began, we always came home with ducks and geese. We wore wading boots, and dressed warmly in short heavy coats called mackinaws, which lumberjacks wore. But sometimes we were almost stiff from the cold, standing in water in the rice fields.

To trap quail, Henry knocked off the bottom of a wooden box and replaced it with chicken wire. We went to a park where quail hid in the shrubbery, tilted one end of the box, sprinkled grain under it, and rested it on a small branch, to which we tied a string. Soon the birds came out and began pecking the grain. If we thought there were enough of them under the box, we pulled the string, and several quail were trapped. We raised the trap, closely watching the prey, and when we got a hand slightly under, we seized each bird and quickly placed it in a gunny sack.

In the summer we had to be very alert about rattlesnakes because they blended in with the scenery and you could walk up on them suddenly. In the winter they would den up in the trunk of hollow trees, all wrapped together to keep warm. They had an awful odor, and you could tell when you were close to a den. Some people would set the tree on fire and cook them all.

We used to fish in a backwater of the Sacramento River that was named after Sam Childers, a black man

who had lived in the area years before. People called it Big Nigger Sam's Slough. Sometimes two of us would hold a net made out of gunny sacks, and two others would beat on the water with a stick. When the fish swam in, we would pull it out of the water and tie it shut. Then we'd place the bag in water to keep the fish alive until we left.

Henry taught me how to use a three-point snag hook, which was a good way to catch slow-swimming fish like carp. You got on the bank near a deep hole of clear water, dropped the hook and line, and when a fish swam over the spot, you pulled up very fast and tried to hook it in the belly. He showed me how to use a spear to catch salmon when they came upstream to spawn. A few times we went to get them at Feather River in Oroville, about 20 miles south, where men, boys and some women stood in the middle of the rapids where the water was shallow, armed with pitchforks and baseball bats. Most of the salmon we smoked or salted.

When the shad ran in the spring, we'd use a big iron hoop with an inner basket made out of chicken wire attached to a pole about eight feet long. We'd go down at night when the shad were moving the most, and hold the basket facing downstream. When a fish swam in we'd feel a small bump. It couldn't turn and get out. We'd wait and maybe get two or three more, then throw them up on the bank.

Henry showed me a trick he had learned from the Indians in Chico. When he wanted to cook a fish, he covered it with mud, dug a little pit, made a good fire, and put the fish on the live coals. The steam from the mud poached the fish. We always brought a loaf of bread to eat with it.

Henry had a way to guarantee that whenever he went out fishing, he would not come home empty-handed. The first time I witnessed his emergency fishing strategy was a day after three hours of trying, when none of our gang had attracted even a nibble. Henry took a metal can — the kind used for Crisco vegetable oil or Karo syrup — and wrapped bailing wire tightly around it, then attached a piece of heavy metal as a sinker. Inside the can Henry placed some dry carbide, a white powder chemical used in the headlamps of automobiles. He sprinkled a small amount of water on the carbide; it started fizzing, and a mist began to rise. He quickly replaced the top, then dropped the can into the slough. In about five minutes, when the gas had built up, the can exploded. Large numbers of stunned fish floated to the surface, and we rowed out and sacked them up. We got more than our families could use, so we took the rest to Chinatown and sold them; they would always buy fish.

Many of the things we did were illegal, but fishing and hunting licenses were unknown to us, and we never saw a game warden. We looked at it as a means of supplying food for the table.

There were a lot of ranches in the Chico area. Sometimes I would see cowboys on horseback driving herds of cattle down Main Street, or shepherds and their dogs coming through the middle of Chico with whole flocks of sheep.

One of Henry's close friends was a white boy named Tommy Stewart, whose father, Bob Stewart, owned a spread of land outside of town, on which he had built a slaughterhouse. Henry and I frequently went out to their ranch, where we could ride a donkey, horse or goat, or at-

tempt to bulldog calves, as we saw the cowboys do. We always had a meal with Tommy's family and some of the young males who worked for them.

The slaughterhouse was just outside a corral, which was partitioned into separate pens for steers, hogs and sheep. Enclosed within the larger corral was an inclined walkway that ended on a platform about 12 feet above the ground. A steer was forced onto the walkway. When it got up on the platform, we shot it in the head with a .22 caliber rifle. A chute would open, and the animal would fall down. The men below would quickly place a meat hook in each front leg and hoist the steer up against the wall of the death chamber. One of them would cut down the middle of the belly with a very sharp knife. Another man would quickly open up the dying animal and pull out the entrails. The heart, liver, and other edible internal organs were cleaned and placed in a large steel container filled with water. Then the animal was quickly skinned, washed down with a hose, transferred to another meat hook on a metal line, and pulled away.

The hogs were killed with a bullet or a hard blow to the head with a sledgehammer. They received the same dressing treatment as the steers, except that they were scraped with a razor-sharp knife to remove the bristles. To me, the sheep were the dumbest. A goat with a bell on its collar was prodded up the incline, and the sheep followed. The goat passed by the man wielding the hammer, the sheep received the blow, and the goat returned to the corral.

After the livestock was killed, Henry and I hosed down the cement floor and swept all the offal to the hogs in the yard. This experience turned me against eating pork,

for several times a sow was killed in full pregnancy, and I noted that the hogs ate everything, including the fetuses which tumbled out as the sow was gutted.

Jesse Stahl (ca. 1879-1935), a rodeo star who performed all over the country, invented the technique of "hoolihanding" — leaping from a horse onto the back of a 2,000-pound bull, grabbing its horns and forcing it to the ground. In his "suicide rides," he and fellow black cowboy Ty Stokes rode a bucking horse back-to-back. He died in Sacramento, California, and was inducted into Oklahoma City's Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1979, only the second black cowboy to be so honored.

Bob Stewart always paid us a little money for helping out, and we got liver, tripe, kidneys, and sometimes a large piece of beef to take home. Tommy, Henry and I traveled all over the place armed with a .22 caliber rifle. One time Henry jammed the rifle over the front of his shoe and accidentally pulled the trigger. The bullet struck

him in the front of his foot. A man working for Stewart rode a horse out and brought Henry back. Henry began to grin, telling me he would not have to go to school on Monday.

In Red Bluff, a smaller town about 40 miles north, I watched the performance of two magnificent black cowboys, Jesse Stahl and Ty Stokes, who competed at rodeos throughout the West. Stahl was so good that none of the white competitors wanted him to enter any events, and he was paid just to give exhibitions of his skills. Stokes became the comedian of the rodeo.

Like Stahl, he could probably do anything better than the other bronco busters, but he wanted to make sure that he made some money. He would antagonize the bulls, they'd come charging at him, and he would do all sorts of funny flip-flops to get out of the way.

Chico had no blacks in the ranching business, but the Williams family in Red Bluff had about 3,000 acres, most of it in grain and the rest in beef cattle. The founding father of the Williams clan came to California during the Gold Rush days in a covered wagon.

Hadwick Thompson, the first black to grow rice on a large scale in California, lived in Willows, about 20 miles west of Chico. He had attended the University of California's College of Agriculture at Davis, and was a veteran of World War I who had served in France. When he came back from the war, everybody in that little town loved him. He was invited to join the Willows chapter of the American Legion, and they named an athletic field after him. Some white people never let him know that he was black. He owned a lot of acreage up there, and stayed in Willows until he died.

* * *

Chico is located in the middle of the Sacramento Valley, an agricultural region which goes from Sacramento, the state capital, to Redding, about 160 miles north. The farms have rich soil and require a lot of irrigation because it doesn't rain for about seven months out of the year. The valley is fed by the Sacramento River and its tributaries. In 1848, gold was discovered in one of those tributaries, the American River, which set off the California Gold Rush. Some blacks came to California during that time to search for gold. Many towns in the valley, including Chico, have had a black presence dating back to the 1850s.

Chico's large central park, Bidwell Park, was named after General John Bidwell, the founder of Chico. He was a brigadier general in the Civil War, on the Union side. Bidwell built a house called the Bidwell Mansion and gave land to the state of California to build a college, Chico State Normal School. His widow Annie died the year before I arrived. My sister told me they closed the schools so all the kids could march in the funeral parade.

The college played a very low-key role in the affairs of the town. Like the six other state normal schools in California then, it was a two-year college that trained people to become teachers. It had a largely female student body, so its football team used to play against Chico High School. The American Legion in Chico had a football team composed of World War I veterans. Every Armistice Day, November 11, they used to play the state normal school in a game which, it seemed, everyone in town attended.

Main building on the campus of Chico State Normal School. It was destroyed by fire in 1927. Courtesy of Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.

Many townspeople had an attitude of antagonism against the normal school, which became ever more hostile as more men enrolled. The dropouts from Chico High School hung around the poolrooms every day, and they were envious of people seeking to get a better education than they had.

Mears' pool hall and billiard parlor in Chico was a gathering place for local males. Mears did not discriminate against blacks, and I was invited to go in with several white youths who were close friends. We could not engage in pool games because we were too young, but we could stand around and watch the players.

Chico was a quiet town, where nobody locked their doors at night. Serious crimes were so few that you didn't give it much thought. It looked like the biggest activity the police had was arresting the town drunks.

When I first arrived, Chico's three fire engines were horse-drawn. They each had a furnace that created steam to pump the water through the hoses. Whenever there was an alarm, a siren sounded at city hall and the volunteer firemen responded. Half of the kids would jump on their bicycles and race to the fire, then stand around and gape. When forest fires occurred in the nearby foothills, the sheriff could order all males between 18 and 45 to go to the lines and help fight the fires, or face jail.

Our house was real crowded, with just two bedrooms and no bath. But we always managed to have good food. Just about everybody in Chico grew vegetables in their backyard — string beans, tomatoes, lettuce, collard greens and mustard greens. Every year my mother canned apricots and peaches. We had eggs because my stepfather raised chickens; I gathered the manure and put it in the garden as fertilizer. For a while, we had a rabbit hutch and sold rabbits. Then we had a pigeon coop to grow squab and sell them. One time for about a year, we had a milk cow. I fed the animals, cleaned their places out, and watered and mowed the lawn.

The streets were lined with stately black walnut trees. In the fall we gathered them, cracked them and picked out the flesh, then poured a mixture of walnuts and figs in a hand meat grinder and made patties to eat in the winter. We sold some of the walnut meat to confectionery stores that used it in soda mixtures or ice cream.

Summertime brought harvesting, which was four or

five months of very intensive work, going from crop to crop. There were always surplus people around to do it. Some people made enough money in the harvest season to live off the rest of the year, although they'd usually pick up whatever odd jobs they could find.

I had to start working my first summer in Chico. Henry and I got 5 cents for picking a 40-pound lug of peaches. We would go out early and work until we'd earned $2, then knock off and go swimming at Sycamore Hole in Bidwell Park. Some of the white people didn't like our families to go down there: We heard that they called it Nigger Hole.

After the peach season we picked prunes. I was one of the knockers, who went ahead of the pickers. They gave us a long pole and a big piece of canvas which we spread under the tree, then hit the branches with the pole to knock the fruit off. That way it wasn't bruised so much. The pickers came behind us and put the prunes in boxes. Then they put me into the dry shed, where they dumped the prunes in boiling water, then put them on trays and dried them in the sun. I worked in an almond orchard, and two winters I went to Oroville and picked olives. Other times I harvested oranges, picked hops, or worked in the rice fields, loading 100-pound sacks of rice onto a wagon. I gave most of my earnings to my mother.

It was 90 degrees or more every day, from around June until September, and there was no air conditioning. But unlike the South, it cooled off at night, so you could sleep. The favorite soft drink was root beer, which was kept cold in a huge barrel with a spigot on the side. People bought it at root beer stands and drank it on the sidewalk.

The circus came to Chico by train every year. Boxcars

were modified to carry elephants, horses, camels and other large animals, and there was a long line of flatcars to hold the wagons, tents, seats, and caged animals such as lions and tigers. They had Pullman sleeping cars for the big-name performers and chair cars for others.

The coming of the circus was anticipated by all of the small fry. In early morning, when the train pulled into the railroad siding, a goodly number of boys would go down to the tracks to watch the unloading and follow the long procession to the lot where the tents were pitched. There would be a circus parade down the street — led by a band — which was designed to attract customers. The boys from age 10 to early adolescence hoped the roustabout boss would hire them to help erect the huge canvas tent, put up the benches and water the animals. For this, they would be given free tickets to the big show.

If school was in session, the hooky cop would go to the circus grounds to round up those who should have been in school. One time when the circus came, I was unlucky enough to be sick with a fever, and Mama remained at home with me. The doorbell rang and the hooky cop asked, was I at home? Mama said, "Yes, he is sick in bed." The man wanted to make sure, as quite a number of boys played hooky on circus days. But I don't think I was ever absent without leave because school was so much fun — associating with people my age.

* * *

While at Salem Street School, I encountered my first experience of anti-Semitism. The Korn brothers, Jewish twins whose father operated a dry goods store, were super

active and always thinking up pranks. I called them the Katzenjammer Kids after a cartoon strip in the newspaper. Some of the students did not appreciate their humor and would attack them physically, calling them "dirty Jews" and "kikes" in a tone that upset me.

I had seen how the Jews lived in East Harlem; they were just as poor as the blacks. I'd heard people calling them names there, and it had stayed with me; I realized that the name-caller probably felt the same negative way about me because of my color. Neither of the twins was handy with his fists, nor was I, but I would wade into the fight, and whenever they started getting embroiled, they would run towards me. I finally announced that anyone who hit "Korny" — that was what I called them — would have to hit me.

When I was in sixth grade, I used most of my classroom time to lead the cutup brigade, and did not get promoted to seventh grade. My classmates shouted, "Left back! Left back!" so loud that I wished to get as far from my tormenters as possible. It brought a crisis at home. Mama made a trip to the school to meet the teacher, and they acquired a deep respect for one another. The teacher said that I did not seem to do any homework. Whenever Mama asked me if I had any, I said no.

Following that meeting, I did homework every night. Some days the teacher kept me after school until I had a better understanding of a subject I had flubbed in class — all part of the agreement with Mama. I was promoted on trial, and this time I kept up with my classmates. I began to get a dim glimmer that school was something one had to take seriously.

The principal at Oakdale School, where I attended

Salem Street School, Chico, 1901

sixth through eighth grade, was Samuel P. Robbins, a strict disciplinarian. He had an artificial leg, and all the boys called him "Peggy" behind his back. He kept a razor strap in his office, and any student who was sent to him for reprimanding received a strapping. Peggy was a big 6-footer and could swing that belt hard. Most of the boys wore two pairs of overalls. Peggy caught on to that trick, and if he felt a second pair under the first one, he made the culprit remove it before administering the strapping. Some of the bigger male louts attacked him once in his office, and of course they were dismissed from school permanently.

The school used an electric bell to start the school day. One Saturday night, when we were playing near the

school, one of the boys brought some pliers and cut the wire. On Monday morning, 8 o'clock came, and no bell. Kids were standing around looking at one another. One of the teachers came out and said, "Children, children, come inside. Classes are starting." We told her, "We didn't hear no bell, we ain't going in," until Peggy Robbins stumped out and rounded us up, aided by some of the male teachers. We were suspected, but no one could prove that we were the culprits. They got the bell fixed afterwards and we didn't do it again. But we had a lot of fun times like that.

Norma Cohen, a red-haired Jewish girl in my class, annoyed all the other kids by answering every question the teacher asked. She had a condescending manner, and on top of that, she was the class informer of everything that escaped the teacher's eye, including shooting spitballs and holding girls' pigtails in the desk inkwell. When Norma told on me and I got a strapping, I held to thoughts of getting even.

One day during recess, I saw a water snake swimming in the creek. I jumped in, caught it, and held it by the head under the bib of my overalls. When I came back to class, I walked by Norma and dropped the wriggling snake on her desk. She took one look and fainted, and some of the other girls began to scream. The teacher ran down the aisle and almost fainted too. The poor snake was just trying to escape. Finally one of the other boys caught it, and the teacher ordered him to take it to the schoolyard. I ended up getting a strapping, but even Peggy had a sardonic smile when he heard all of the details.

Most professions in California were closed to black people. That was one reason why blacks didn't even

bother to finish grammar school. Very few blacks had even gone to the first year of high school before my time. Quite a few white kids quit school too. Ted Johnson and I were together more in high school, since Henry had dropped out.

Chico High was physically a very beautiful school, with a huge campus including machine shops, a gymnasium, and a building for the music department, which was one class I always attended. At lunch, we'd race to get home first on our bicycles, and I'd be the first one out.

But the school was very unruly. Every time the student body was called to assemblage, the hoodlum element would get to work. We organized boo birds who erupted in mass booing, interrupting every speaker including the principal and our own student body president. I had learned a cackling, which was louder than anything else. I would always stand at the back with my fellow hoodlums, and whenever I heard something I didn't like, I would start my loud cackle. My compatriots would say, "There goes Fleming." Others would join in, and we would end whatever assemblage we chose to.

Some of the more imaginative who were good at chemistry made stink bombs in the labs and discharged them in the assembly room. Others would start shouting, "Phew!," hold their noses, and rush out. The principal knew who was doing it, but we got away with it for a while.

* * *

By the time I got to high school, one seldom saw horse-drawn vehicles in town, although they were still

widely used on the ranches. Automobiles of the early 1920s had isinglass windows and canvas curtains which could fold up, and most had tops which could be rolled back during good weather. They were nice in summer, but few, if any, had heating systems. In wintertime, the driver and the front seat passenger were warmed from the heat of the motor, while the backseat riders had to suffer.

Many of the cars had large headlights that received their energy not from the electric system, but from carbide lamps. To light the lamp, you turned a handle which released water onto the carbide, forming a gas. You lit the gas with a match, and the front lights began to glow. You could adjust the intensity of the light by turning the wick up or down.

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The Southern Pacific Railroad had a roundhouse at Chico — a round garage with a bit of track and a huge electric-powered turntable that could hold one steam locomotive. Every day a train went from Chico to Sterling City, a tiny town about 45 miles northeast, carrying mostly freight and one car for passengers, baggage and mail. On the nights it was laid over in Chico, the hostler, Manuel, oiled the locomotive and kept it in working order. He liked for us kids to come there late and talk to him, and he showed us how to start it up. We'd take it out a little way, then back it into the roundhouse.

The Southern Pacific operated a passenger train, the #14 northbound between Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon. It passed through Chico at 5:10 every afternoon. One day Henry and I were eating some fruit near the

depot when a passenger got off and offered us money for our peaches. We got an idea to become entrepreneurs, so we loaded up baskets with apricots, figs, peaches and apples, and the next time the #14 train arrived, we paraded up and down, exhibiting our wares.

We did this for a couple of weeks or so, and usually sold out. The vendors on the trains didn't have fruit that had just been picked, and they complained to the railroad about our being on their property. A cop arrived at the depot and ordered us away. He remained there every day long enough to discourage us from selling any goods.

The Sacramento Northern Railroad operated about five trains daily between Oakland and Chico, the northern end of the line. The trains were electric, and had a direct fast service. Everyone called San Francisco "The City." It was the only place in California that people from back east recognized as being a real city, even though L.A. was bigger.

Outside the cities, the track had a third rail for the electric power. It was covered by wood, and had warning signs. There were many tales told about the awesome power of the power-conveying rails. Some told of males who urinated on them and received violent electric shocks. There were many variations of this tale, and they always brought loud guffaws of laughter.

* * *

Prohibition, which H.L. Mencken described as the "great experiment," became the law of the land on January 17, 1920, when Congress declared the sale of alcoholic beverages to be illegal. I soon found out the many ways

people could avoid the law.

The only place where you could legally buy hard liquor was at the pharmacies, for medicinal purposes. I don't know what ailments it was supposed to cure. People would get their doctor to write a prescription so they could get all the booze they wanted. Enloe Hospital, founded by Dr. Newton Enloe Sr., was the only hospital in Chico. Dr. Enloe liked to drink, and his son Newt Jr. enjoyed the privilege also.

Enloe Hospital, Chico, California, circa 1925. Courtesy of Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.

Bootleggers were everywhere. Some people in Chico had stills in the hills outside of town, where they distilled whisky from grain. Some sellers opened a commercial front, and others sold liquor from their homes. People gave it all sorts of names; in the Sacramento Valley they called it hooch or jackass, because it was supposed to have a kick like a mule. You could get a pint for 50 cents. I tried

it a few times, and each time I got very woozy and couldn't stand up straight. Some people were buying five-gallon cans of wood alcohol and cutting it with something to flavor it. You were taking a chance on your life with some of that stuff.

A place that sold bad booze was called a blind pig. A lot of sellers were put in jail and their place was closed, but every time, a new place would spring up. Even teenage girls were openly drinking alcohol. Bootlegging was one of the few professions in the 1920s that were open to all races.

* * *

In the 1920s, Chico had two daily papers, the *Record* in the morning and the *Enterprise* in the evening. I had been reading newspapers ever since I'd learned to read, and felt at a loss without them. Even now, I'm very uncomfortable until I get a newspaper in my hand every day.

On August 1, 1923, I read that President Warren G. Harding was visiting the West Coast. His train was coming down from Portland to San Francisco, and would pass through Chico about 1 o'clock in the morning. So I went down to the depot: There must have been a hundred people standing there, hoping the president would show up so they could say they saw him. The train arrived; it slowed down, but it didn't stop. Harding got into San Francisco early the next morning, and he died that evening.

I was home that night, and the next thing I knew, the circulation manager for the *Chico Record*, Charlie Deuel,

was pounding on my door. "Thomas! Do you want to sell some papers? We're putting out an extra! The president died!" I was in my clothes in no time, and ran over to the *Record* office. They had assembled about 20 kids, and as the papers came off, they gave us the bundles. We fanned out all over the town, yelling, "Extra! Extra! President dies! Extra! Extra!" Lights turned on; people ran out to buy a paper. Everybody wanted to see it, because there weren't any radios in the homes then. I went back twice to get more papers, and made about $6 that night.

Harding was a political hack. He was a figurehead for the Republicans, and went along with everything the party's leaders told him. It was Republican country up in Chico, but I didn't see any grief over his death.

Another big news event was the World Series of 1921, when the New York Giants played the New York Yankees. I favored the Giants because my father had taken me to see them play at their home park, the Polo Grounds in Harlem. I was going by the office of the *Chico Enterprise* when I noticed a crowd standing outside. Someone from the newspaper was putting the score up in the window as soon it came over the wire from the Associated Press. The sportswriter described the game so graphically, it was almost like you were there. They posted the report twice per inning — every time a team came up to bat. The people closest to the window read the story and passed the word back. Many people stayed there for the whole nine innings.

* * *

JAZZ IN CHICO

Jazz owes a lot of its popularity to the phonograph, the musical box which brought it to people outside of the areas where jazz musicians played. Mom had a Victor Talking Machine that you wound up like a clock, then you placed a thick, 7-inch, 78 rpm phonograph record on the turntable and the music blared out of the megaphone.

Victor Talking Machine.

Most records sounded very tinny, but the volume could be raised or lowered. When the record was finished, you turned it over, wound the machine again, and played the other side. The first electric phonographs had quite an improvement in the quality of sound.

Some companies, like Victor, Columbia, Brunswick, Vocalion and OKeh, made a lot of records by black musicians and comedians, called race records. Record shops sold them everywhere — not just in black neighborhoods. Decca Records, which started in England, came

to the U.S. in 1934 and featured more black entertainers than the others. They sold for 35 cents.

The music stores had postings of new records every month. You told the clerk your choices and he conducted you to an enclosed booth with a phonograph. You played the records and purchased the ones you liked. The stores also sold sheet music. The fashionable homes in Chico had player pianos, which played a roll that had been recorded by some very good musician.

My first summer in Chico, I saved a total of $105 from harvesting peaches and prunes. I went by a music store in town, and when I saw a silver B-flat soprano saxophone, I asked the manager how much it cost. I had $50 on my person, and said that I would like to take the instrument and pay the rest later. He said, "You're too young to sign a contract. Where do you live?" I told him and he said,"I'll come out to see your mother this evening." So he did. Mom told him that he could keep $25 as down payment, as I needed the rest of my poke to buy clothes and other things for school. She would finish making the payments herself.

I took private lessons for a while, and at Central Junior High School I played in the band. During the graduation ceremony, I left the orchestra pit to receive my diploma, then returned to my position and continued playing.

At Chico High School I engaged in jam sessions with a group of friends several times a week, playing popular tunes that we heard on the records. "Babe" Bowman, who was white, came by my house just about every evening, and we would put a record on the Victor Talking Machine. Lester Price, a trumpet player, joined us; he was already playing with bands at indoor and outdoor dance spas.

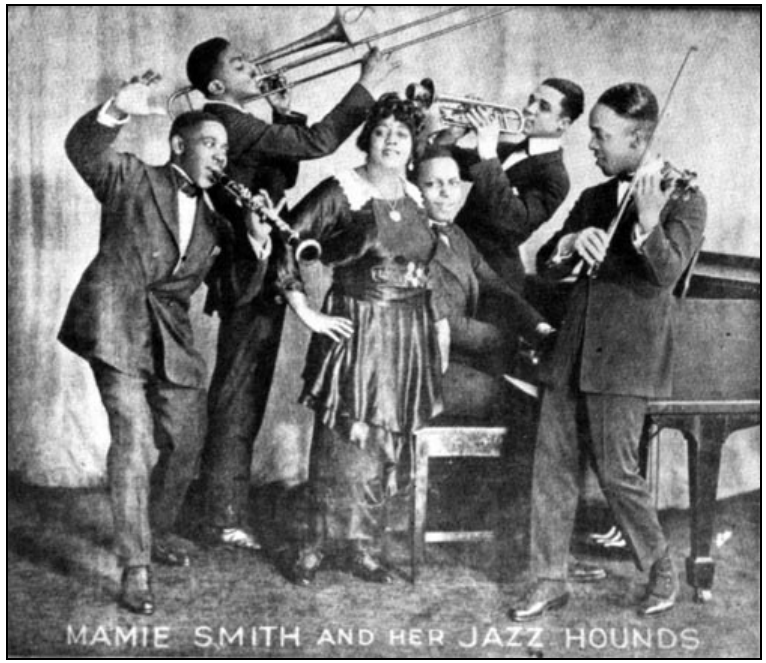
Bowman left Chico right after finishing high school and landed a job at the Mark Hopkins Hotel in San Francisco, playing trombone in the house orchestra with Anson Weeks for years. We, being black, did not get the same opportunity. I'd see him occasionally after I came down here. I once asked him, "Why doesn't the hotel ever bring Duke Ellington in, or any of those guys?" He said, "Tom, the white folks don't know how to dance to that music."

Chico had one theater for stage acts, the Majestic. Sometimes a big-name band would come through, and now and then a black group. Around 1923, *Struttin' Along*, a musical revue that starred Mamie Smith, the great blues singer, had a long run in San Francisco with an all-black cast. After closing, it toured some cities in the Sacramento Valley, including Chico, where it appeared at the Majestic for two nights. I attended both nights, fascinated with a show of that size playing in the hick towns.

The cast included Smith, an orchestra of about eight pieces, a chorus line of about six good-looking girls, and some comedians. One I recall with pleasure was Frisco Nick, who staged a hilarious dance with a broom while he sang "Three O'clock in the Morning," a great waltz hit. Except for Smith and her band, the Jazz Hounds, the entire cast was assembled in California. The chorus girls were chosen from among local girls who auditioned. They would perform with the show as long as it was in town. For some black girls, this was a way to get into show business.

Hadwick Thompson, the black rice farmer from Willows, worked Saturday nights at a place where the

farmhands and their women came to drink and to wrestle on the floor in their type of dancing. They were stuck for a band one time, and Hadwick knew that Henry Herriford, Ted Johnson and I, and sometimes my sister Kate, had been practicing, so we were hired. Each of us received $3.



1920 record cover for Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues."

We were not invited to return, but I later played in a group for the high school's senior dance.

Most of the dance bands played the same style of music as Paul Whiteman, a white musician and band-

leader who was very famous at the time. The white world called him the King of Jazz. At first I thought he was the greatest thing in the world. But he wasn't playing jazz; his music was more like a symphony.

Then I heard Fletcher Henderson, a black composer, arranger, bandleader and pianist, who was more spirited than Whiteman, and I liked him much better. He had the first black big band that became really commercially successful, and some of his band members became future stars: Louis Armstrong and Coleman Hawkins, the great tenor saxophonist, played with him for a while. Hawkins was all we heard about then. He was the first one who took the tenor and made a solo instrument out of it.

Fletcher's band had four or five reeds, three or four trumpets, three trombones, piano, bass, drum and guitar. Before that time, most bands had no more than five to eight pieces because the places where they worked couldn't pay very much. The first big bands had a tuba for the bass line; the string bass replaced it about 1930.

When big bands came along, they not only played for dances and nightclubs, but started appearing in the vaudeville theaters. I listened to all of them, black or white. I never had any bias against white musicians, and bought a lot of their records in high school, but I thought blacks played jazz better because they seemed to have a different emotional approach to music.

Crystal radio sets came in around 1922 or '23. Radio provided another medium for jazz devotees to hear big-name bands from nightclubs and supper clubs in hotels. But most of them played for people to dance by, and their arrangements were sort of stiff.

KRE, a radio station in Berkeley, California, furnished

a seven-day-a-week jazz menu, 24 hours a day. That was the station that first presented the Mills Brothers, a group of four brothers who sounded just like musical instruments: They were a national sensation. Ethel Waters and Fats Waller were frequent, and Louis Armstrong was played on the radio very early in his career. The stations didn't have to depend upon records: Some had live acts, and created their own celebrities.

Count Basie first played piano with the Bennie Moten band in Kansas City, one of the hot spots where jazz was heard nightly over the radio. Another famous black band from that city was Andy Kirk and his 12 Clouds of Joy, with Pha Terrell singing. Earl "Fatha" Hines, the great jazz pianist and bandleader, presided for many years at the Grand Terrace in Chicago. He made it probably the best nightclub in the country except for the Cotton Club. In California, we got Hines several nights a week on the radio, and his broadcast was eagerly awaited.

McKinney's Cotton Pickers was a nationally known, all-black big band which we heard when it was broadcast from the Greystone Ballroom in Detroit. Don Redman wrote all the arrangements and some of the songs. The band's theme was "Chant of the Weed," a Redman composition. We were pretty sure that it was about marijuana.

My family didn't get a radio until 1927, when I had left Chico. I became well acquainted with Red Skelton, Jack Benny, Moran and Mack — the Two Black Crows — and Amos 'n' Andy, who were played by two white men. They mangled the King's English and called it a black form of speech. They even made a Hollywood picture wearing blackface. I imagine you did hear uneducated

people talking like that in some areas of the rural South.

Almost everybody enjoyed the comedy at first, and I laughed just like whites did. Amos and Andy were being much quoted, both in the black and white communities. But then some blacks began to feel ashamed that they were being depicted as buffoons and fools. I took some comfort in the fact that their portrayal was not like any black people I personally knew.

RACE RELATIONS

I think most black people in the Sacramento Valley were quite contented with their lot in life, even if they had to work at jobs that whites did not want. Many of them owned their own homes, and some had successful careers.

Hydie Davies, who had the city contract to collect all of the household trash and debris, was probably the richest black man in Chico. He bought a lot of land and some houses, which he rented. He had two horse-drawn wagons, and many of the things he picked up were still usable. He had the most wonderful collection; he kept a whole shed of it, and sold it too.

One source of pride for blacks was the department store owned and operated by George Martin, a black man in Red Bluff. The whites patronized his store, and his family was listed among the leading families in town.

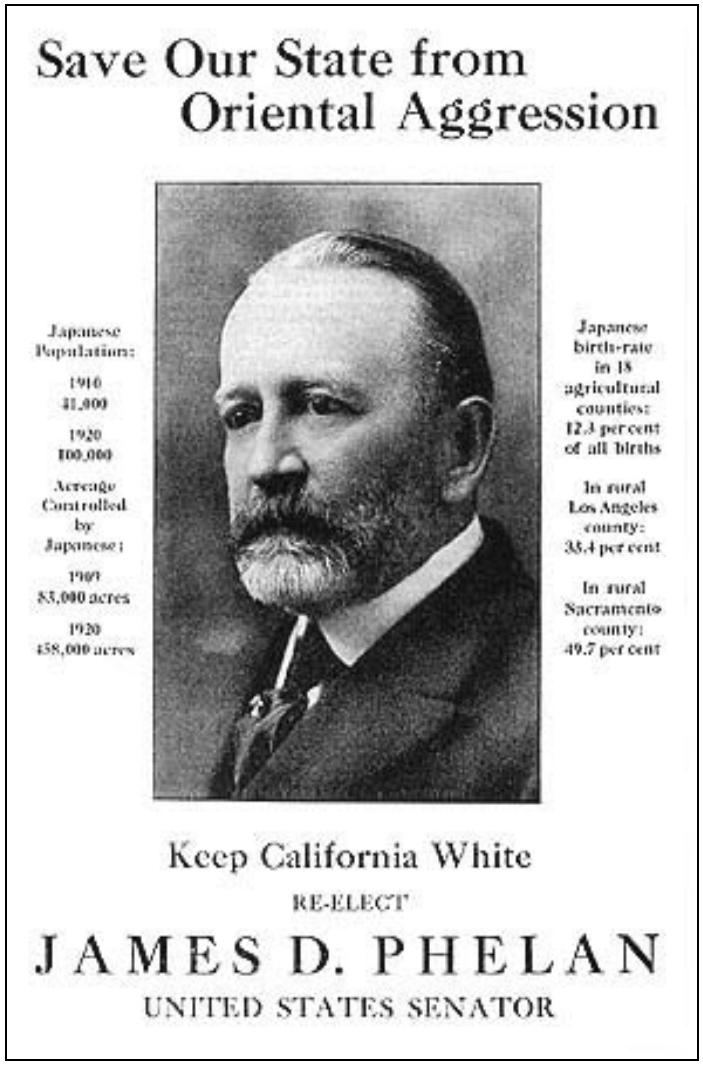
A popular gathering place for white men in Chico was Charlie McClellan's tobacco shop on Broadway. In the back was a card room where poker and blackjack games ran all day and most of the evening. It seemed like all of the leading business and professional men came by, some

to play a fast game, others to shake the leather cup of five dice or play poker all day. It was illegal, but the cops never bothered the operation.

Inside McClellan's shop was a bootblack stand owned by a black man named George Daily. Everybody in town knew me because I would shine shoes on Saturdays at the stand. Daily was a very pompous man who thought he was black society. He bought a home that was better than any other black owned, and he let everyone know it had hardwood floors. That disgusted me, for he was looking for a small tip plus the 25 cents he received for shining the shoes.

Arthur Williams, another bootblack I worked for, was a sort of celebrity, as he was the only Chico-born black who had served in the Army in World War I. Arthur had gone to France with the American Expeditionary Army under General Pershing. The white folks had welcomed him back, and he had attended high school, but the best he could do in employment was a bootblack stand on a street where few people walked. Arthur was very bitter, and used to talk to me about his Army stint, saying that a black man was appreciated far more in France.

My stepfather could do a lot of things, but he never kept a steady job. Mama told me years later that she married him because she had a child to raise and needed help. But he didn't turn out to be very much help. Moses worked on the Phelan Ranch right outside of Chico, a 12,000-acre spread owned by James D. Phelan, a U.S. senator and a onetime mayor of San Francisco. The ranch had cows, steers, horses, mules, goats, turkeys, geese, domesticated ducks and a good-sized herd of sheep. Chickens wandered all over the holdings, and the hired



Campaign poster for Democratic Senator James Phelan, 1920. He was elected in 1914, served one term and lost his reelection bid. Courtesy of Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles.

hands walked about in search of eggs. There were peacocks in residence, and plenty of wild ducks, mud-hens, quail, dove, some deer, plus dogs and cats. There was a bunkhouse for the field hands, and a big house where the foreman, Murphy, lived with his family.

The climate was ideal for growing rice and a multitude of other crops, but they needed water, pumped from the Sacramento River during the six-month dry season. Moses was a master in mixing and laying cement. He had a crew of Mexicans who worked under him building cement irrigation ditches, which snaked through the ranch. Other times he cut firewood from the timber sections of the ranch.

When he wasn't working there, he cleaned houses, washed windows, and did other janitorial work. He could do carpentry, and he knew how to work on motors. But he was totally unsophisticated. He didn't know how to handle money, and could barely read and write.

Moses and Mama had started to purchase a home after their marriage. They probably could have bought one for $600, but Moses always forgot that he had to make the payments, and would default, so he and Mama and Katie had to find new lodgings. Most of the time Mama had to pay for the rent and food. She may as well not have been married, as far as the contributions he was making.

When I got to be 14 or 15, Moses turned some of his window-washing jobs over to me. He began to growl to my mother that I should be working, and said lamely that he had only gone to the first three grades in school. But Mama said, "Thomas is going to finish high school."

* * *

In Florida and New York, I had never had any solid contact with whites outside the classroom. But Chico had no black section, and I mingled with all the boys. There were about seven I ran around with — two whites, two blacks and three Chinese. I did all the things they did — hunting, fishing, and getting into mischief. There were many hot nights when our regular crowd would go to the swimming hole in Bidwell Park and swim in the buff.

I invited white kids to our house for dinner, my mother would feed them, and they in turn would invite me to their house. But the black girls didn't mix with the white girls.

Many whites held to an outdated opinion that all blacks had an intense desire to consume watermelon, fried chicken, pork chops and chitterlings, and that we carried a razor or knife on our person.

I think most whites in the town were quite open-minded about race because you became acquainted with everybody. But sometimes I'd be walking with Henry, my constant companion, and kids would start yelling, "Nigger, nigger, nigger!" Once we chased a boy up to his front porch and his mother came running out and said, "What are you doing to my child?" We said, "He called me nigger." She looked embarrassed and told him, "You shouldn't do that."

On the outskirts of Chico was a little Indian village. The people with Indian mothers and white fathers were not accepted as whites. A few Indians lived in town and associated with non-Indians. But most of them stayed in their village by choice. I had read many stories about cowboys being attacked by Indians, and my sympathy had always been on the side of the white settlers because I

hadn't realized that the stories were all written by whites. But I started to question that literature when I saw the frightful conditions in which Indians lived in their settlement.

Nearly every town in California had a Chinatown. Chico had two, both of them just one block long. The old Chinatown was smaller, with wooden buildings and mostly old men. The newer one, near city hall, had red brick buildings. Chinese could buy houses outside of Chinatown when I lived there, but the ones in Chico seemed to have a desire to live together for cultural reasons.

Both Oroville and Marysville, 45 miles south of Chico, had much larger Chinatowns than Chico because one thing, they were both gold-mining towns. Chinese had once worked in the gold fields, and had furnished supplies to mining camps. The Chinese were kept out of most professions, just like the blacks were. They were targets of even more violent forms of racism in California. After they got through laying rails for the Central Pacific Railroad, they were surplus people, and some of them were lynched.

There were some opium users among the Chinese. Blacks and whites also came to Chinatown to buy the drug. Sometimes we would see people walk by a particular door and drop some money on the sidewalk in front. Then a hand would come out, pick up the money, and drop some gummy-looking dark brown balls on the sidewalk. The addict would walk by again to retrieve the purchase. Sometimes we'd yell, "Hop head, hop head!" and the addict would start running.

The biggest bootlegger in Chico was Mrs. Chong Hai,

who didn't speak much English. She was raided occasionally by the police, but she would pay her fine, get out quickly, and be back in business. The Hai family in Chico had six boys, and Mrs. Hai made so much money she was able to buy her eldest son a brand new Hudson automobile. All the kids hung around him.

Three of the brothers — Hong, Wing and Wong — were part of our gang. One of the boys had a lot of guns. I was with him when he killed a 300-pound black bear. He let me take one shot, but he brought it down.

Their father, Chong Hai, was called the mayor of Chinatown. When he died, the family had a big Chinese funeral. An enlarged picture of the dead man was placed on the hearse, and all the Chinese in Chinatown joined in the procession, beating gongs and burning incense. Most of them were crying. When they reached the cemetery, they scattered pieces of paper with holes punched in them around the grave. The family prepared huge quantities of food to put on the grave for Chong Hai to eat on the way to heaven — chickens, ducks, two whole roasted pigs, noodles and sweetmeats. Then Hong put a $10 bill on there to pay for his father's passage to the other world.

Henry and I hung around, and as soon as Hong got out of sight, we grabbed the money. Some hobos were attracted by the sound of the gongs and observed what was happening. After the family and mourners had left, the hobos came over and ate the food.

On Memorial Day, one of the brothers put money on the grave again. We were waiting. But he put it right back in his pocket to make sure we didn't get it.

* * *

Chico had some Mexicans — we didn't use the word "Latino" then — who worked principally as section hands for the Southern Pacific Railroad, taking care of the tracks. They would go out on a small handcar with handles they pumped up and down to move forward. There was a foreman and probably seven or eight men with tools to replace old worn wooden ties or sections of track. There was also one man with a gasoline-powered small car who worked alone, traveling quite a distance every day to look for spots where work was needed.

To provide housing for their section hands, the Southern Pacific laid old boxcars alongside the tracks, took the wheels off, and converted them into cabins with compartments and windows. Four or five large families would live together in several boxcars. They were part of the landscape outside of many towns in California. The men might have been the only ones who wanted to do the job, because they got the lowest pay of any railroad workers. The Mexicans at my school were kind of meek, and took a lot of abuse from other kids that the black kids wouldn't take.

* * *

My mother, like other blacks who left the South, lost her Southern accent after she came out to California. Blacks tried to change their speech because people would make fun of them.

Some blacks in Chico were the offspring of an interracial liaison, and you couldn't tell whether they were black or white. Most fair-skinned blacks were like our landlady, Mrs. Johnson — frustrated individuals trying to

find themselves in a racist society while looking down on their darker-hued brethren. Many in Chico had that color complex and tried not to get too close to people of my dark color.

Ted Johnson's mother was what you called a high yellow. She was always talking about how black somebody was. I never let it irritate me too much because light-skinned blacks were treated by the white world the same way I was. I think there was some resentment toward Kate and me from some of the blacks in Chico because we were much darker-skinned than they were, but we did better in school and we seemed to be able to think faster than they did.

I didn't date anyone during my four years at Chico High School because there was no one for me to date. There were five black girls in Chico in my age group — all sisters of my friends — but I wasn't looking at them because I saw them too often. I don't know whether there was any taboo against interracial dating at the high school, but it just never happened.

In the 1920s, people from two different racial groups could not get married in California. They had to go up to Washington state, where it was legal. But you saw black and white couples in California, even in some small towns. In Los Molinos, a small town midway between Chico and Red Bluff, there was a black businessman named Ross, who operated one of the early convenience stores, a combination gas station and grocery store. He was well liked, and people in the community did not seem to resent that he was married to a white woman.

California didn't repeal its law against interracial marriages until 1948. In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court

ruled that all such state laws were unconstitutional.

* * *

Mama belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the only black church in Chico, but she sometimes went to the Pentecostal Church — the Holy Rollers — in Oroville. The members went to one another's homes practically every night of the week, and the only time I was forced to attend was when it was in our house. I always looked at the Pentecostals with cynical eyes. When they got to that stuff about speaking in tongues, I'd be laughing out loud.

The A.M.E. Church had a steady membership of 25 or 30. Church was held every other week because the congregation shared a minister with Red Bluff, and he preached there on alternate Sundays. But I let church alone early. I was compelled to go to Sunday school when I was younger, and sometimes the morning services, and I always resented it. One Sunday when I was 16, I told my sister, "I'm not going in." I turned and walked away, and I never went to a religious service again.

I always felt that most of the ministers in the black churches, and particularly the Baptist church, were unsophisticated men. They might finish high school, and then suddenly come out and say they got the message. I thought most of them were scoundrels. In many instances, where there was a sizable black population, they'd set themselves up as the spokesmen for the entire black community. And on Election Day, the powers that be would probably slip them a few dollars for delivering the vote.

Besides the black churches, Chico and other towns had branches of national black fraternal organizations. Blacks throughout the country were not admitted to any of the white-run fraternal orders, such as the Masons, the Elks or the Knights of Pythias. So they formed their own chapters patterned after the white ones. These fraternal orders were an important social force in areas with a small, widely dispersed black population such as the Sacramento Valley. Less than 1 percent of the valley was black, but there were two black-run chapters of the Knights of Pythias — in Chico and in Sacramento.

These organizations planned a lot of social events. Chico had a big dance every year on January 1, Emancipation Day — the day the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, ending slavery in the South. You used to read about it in the national black press, but it's no longer celebrated. Chico would get a band of black musicians from Sacramento, and all the black people would come.

Sacramento was the only place in the Sacramento Valley where you'd find a few hundred blacks living. They had their own barbershops and poolrooms, and at least one restaurant.

But blacks from different towns constantly saw one another because some of them had cars, and they thought nothing of driving from one end of the valley to the other. Sacramento had a black baseball team, and Marysville fielded a black semipro team, the Marysville Giants, which played every Sunday. Marysville was a little smaller than Chico but had triple its black population. Blacks within a radius of about 100 miles would come to the games: They were great social gatherings. Japanese-

American teams in Marysville and Sacramento played against the black teams.

In Chico, Oroville, Marysville, Sacramento, Red Bluff and Redding, black youths competed at track, baseball and basketball. Generally, whatever blacks were doing in high school in any of those towns, you'd hear about it. There were band competitions held annually in the small town of Princeton, which included blacks from throughout the valley.

Just outside of Marysville was the Smith ranch, owned by a prominent black family of that name which had about 40 acres along the Feather River. Every Fourth of July they held a barbecue and picnic on the beach, and blacks from all over Northern California would gather to swim, play games, eat and have a good time. Women still wore the old-style swimming suits that covered the whole body, and men wore trunks and a shirt with the arms open.

Afterwards, there would be a dance in a rented hall in Marysville. If blacks did not have someone to stay with, they were out of luck. The one good white-owned hotel in town would not cater to them. The Japanese operated one inn, which was always clean and served blacks, and both the Japanese and the Chinese operated eating houses where blacks could get good meals.

In the 1920s, most restaurants in California that catered to middle- and upper-class whites would not serve blacks. The best hotel in Chico was the Hotel Oaks, but blacks couldn't rent a room there, and it didn't hire blacks in any capacity. In most cities you'd have to stay in the fleabag hotels for sheepherders and other people with very low income. I visited one when a friend of mine was in Marysville, and saw bedbugs marching up the walls and

across the ceiling. I got out quickly.

Unlike in the South, where the police power of the state was used to enforce discrimination, there was no law in California that upheld it. In some parts of the country it was being tested in the courts, but not in California because the black community was so small. Many places in San Francisco and Oakland refused to serve blacks as late as the 1960s. I learned when I was a little kid: Don't go in places where they don't serve you. But I was against it all the time.

When I talked to the white kids in Chico, I found out about all the things they could enjoy that I couldn't. Chico had a fancy soda fountain called Price's, where all the students went after school. But it didn't let blacks in. If I was with my white friends, they would tell people off and say they weren't going in if I couldn't go too. There was another soda fountain in Chico that looked just as good as Price's, owned by two guys from Greece. Everybody called it Greek's. We could go in there and get the same things. The owners were always nice to us.

It didn't make too much difference if I couldn't stay at the Hotel Oaks or eat at Price's, because I couldn't afford those places anyway. But I just didn't like the idea of being stigmatized. It was a hell of a lousy way to live. I knew Price well — used to talk to him out on the street. Other than his policy, I always found him to be a very pleasant fellow. But I think he was suffering from the same disease as a lot of people who practice discrimination: He thought it was good business.

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BLACK KNIGHTS OF PYTHIAS

The biggest black-sponsored event I saw in Chico was in 1925, when a janitor named Al French and several other black men lobbied successfully for the Black Knights of Pythias to hold their annual state convention there. I was 17 that summer, and working at a bootblack stand.

The Chicoans realized they would have to find housing for the delegates and other people who were attending. The Park Hotel, which did not ordinarily cater to blacks, was persuaded to set aside some rooms for the three-day convention. The organizers also secured the use of a hall owned by whites.

One event on the program was a dance to be held outdoors, in front of the post office. They couldn't find a black band to perform, so they hired a white pickup band — mostly students from Chico State Normal School. On the night of the dance, there might have been 200 blacks who poured into Chico. Hundreds of whites stood around on the street to hear the music and watch the dancers, and some of the bolder ones started dancing. The Charleston was the craze then, and I was pretty good, but Ted Johnson was even better, as people said that all of his brains were in his feet.

When the dance ended at 1 a.m., I made my way to Max's Cafe, which was open 24 hours a day, and was generally conceded to be the best eating place in town. On one side of the restaurant was a dining room with waitresses, white linen table covers, and good silverware and dishes, which served whites. On the other side was a long counter with stools, which served blacks, farmhands and others who were not dressed to go in the dining room;

the cooks served the food directly to the customers. A wall separated the two sides.

Insignia for the Knights of Pythias, a national fraternal organization that had black chapters in California during the 1930s. The letters FCB stand for Friendship, Charity and Benevolence.

When I walked into Max's, I saw several blacks on the counter side. Sitting down there, I put in an order for a hamburger steak. While I was waiting for it to arrive, three male students from the normal school came in. They were very noisy, and apparently they had been drinking. I recognized one of them as the banjo player in the band. When he passed by me, he snarled, "There's another one of them black boys!"

I gave him a hot retort. "What did you say?" he shouted angrily, and I swore at him again. He rushed at me. I jumped off the stool and faced him with my steak knife. He stopped and told me about all he was going to do to me. I said, "If you do, you're going to get hurt too." I was 5 feet 7 and weighed about 135 pounds. My opponent was about 6 feet tall, maybe 180 pounds, and several years older than me. All eyes were focused on the tableau, and I could feel the tension in the room as the black out-of-towners sat eating.

Al French, one of the spokesmen for Chico blacks, happened to be making his nightly rounds of turning out lights and making sure doors of businesses were locked. Passing by the cafe, he overheard the argument. He quickly walked inside, grabbed me by the arm and said, "Thomas, Thomas, we don't want no race riot starting while this convention is here. You come along and go home."

I was very riled by now, and somewhat surprised by his actions, so I said, "I ordered a steak and I'm going to stay here and eat it." French walked away, shaking his head.

At that moment, a bootblack called "Buffalo," a husky 200-pound black man, walked in to eat. Seeing what was happening, he stepped in front of me and confronted the young male adult, challenging him to fight. The bully seemed to sober up quite fast. He told my rescuer that he had no beef with him. Buffalo sat with me at the table, and the bully walked out with his companions. As he as leaving, he growled, "I'll be waiting outside." I snarled back that I would be ready for him, although my knees felt so weak that I almost fell down.

Buffalo and I stayed and ate, and when we came out together, the bully and his friends were gone.

* * *

When I was about 14, I got a chance to visit another area of California for the first time. The minister of the black church in Chico persuaded me to drive with him to a church convention in Santa Barbara, 500 miles south, in his sputtering old Model T Ford coupe. Santa Barbara, a winter colony for wealthy white Easterners, had quite a sizable black community. Most of them worked as cooks, chauffeurs, maids and other servants in the huge mansions. They received good pay, and most were homeowners themselves — some having homes as good as those owned by the upper-class whites in Chico. One enterprising black in Santa Barbara owned a thriving grocery store.

I had heard vaguely about the Ku Klux Klan from the old folks, and suffered from the delusion that they were active only in the Southern states. I was wrong, for while passing through the city of Stockton en route back home, we saw a raggedy gathering of about a dozen sheet-wearing, 100 percent Americans marching in formation down the middle of town. Some people stared as though they were some sort of curiosity, and some ignored them.

About three years later I heard that they were going to march down the main street of Chico. I had no occasion to go downtown that day, and didn't feel I wanted to watch the bastards anyway. My stepfather was so mad that he sat out on the porch with a loaded .30 caliber rifle. I sat beside him with a loaded .25-20, and we both had loaded

shotguns. I don't know whether either of us would have fired if the Klansmen had decided to march on the street where our house was located.

Ku Klux Klan, San Pedro, California, 1924.

A BOXING MATCH

Some light-skinned black kids thought they were upper class. Henry and I referred to ourselves as colored or Negroes, and we always attempted to prove that physically, we were the equals of everybody. The racial insults were plentiful until Henry and I established ourselves as warriors who fought cleanly with a sense of

purpose. Our fights always developed out of someone striking us first, or calling us a derogatory name. If the boy was around our age, we'd knock that nonsense out of his head.

Some older guys would catch us separately and say, "You little nigger," and shake us up, like the chief of police's nephew, Harold Meecham. Everyone at school called him "Blocky" because he had a big head. One day Henry and I saw our tormenter and shouted, "Let's get him!" Blocky saw that he was outnumbered and began to run, but we overtook him. I jumped on his back and Henry tackled him around the legs. We gave him a solid pummeling. He let us alone after that.

Boxing was a popular sport in Chico. The matches were held in a round auditorium called the Hippodrome, which was built as a skating rink. We always tried to find some way to crash the gate because we did not have the tariff charged to the boxing devotees. One night when I was 17, I was standing around the entrance when the boxing promoter, Eddie Mead, came up to me said, "Hey, Thomas, do you want to make some money?" One of the fighters for the opening bout had gotten sick, and Mead was desperate. He had probably seen me fight in the street and thought that I handled my hands pretty well — a view which I shared with him.

He offered me $10 to fight the four-round curtain raiser against Harold Lightfoot, a white boy who attended high school with me. I'd seen Harold a lot, and thought I could whip him. I didn't know that he had been training to be a professional fighter. Henry, who was standing with me and yearning to get in to see the fights, said, "Take it, Thomas. You can lick that guy." I agreed, with the stipu-

lation that Henry would be admitted as my second. Mead hustled us into the dressing room, where he found some dirty trunks and a jockstrap slightly cleaner. I changed my clothes, and Henry and I marched down the aisle to the ring.

Nelson, the referee, was an educator from Oroville who judged fights on the side. He was the brother of a former world lightweight champion, Oscar "Battling" Nelson. He explained the rules to Harold and me, and then the bell rang. I charged him, and was greeted with a number of sharp left jabs as he danced away from me. I tried to land a roundhouse right, but Harold continued to dance, jab and retreat. Soon I found that lack of training was causing me to run out of gas.

In the second round, Harold stopped dancing and went to work. He landed a right in my belly and I went down. Being both arm-weary and heavy of foot, I decided to stay down. Nelson began to count. Leaning over me, he snarled, "Get up! You're not hurt." The crowd was booing and shouting, "Kick that nigger in the shins! Niggers can't take it in the shins! Kill the coon!"

I felt mortified as the crowd continued to shout all the racist remarks that came into their minds. But it didn't surprise me because I had heard it a lot of times. I struggled to my feet, only to meet my tormenter, so I grabbed him and clinched as much as I could. I did manage to throw one roundhouse punch that drew blood from his nose, and I finished the four rounds. It was the last time I ever fought for money.

* * *

By the age of 15, I was well aware of the activities of the NAACP, which has waged the battle for first-class citizenship longer than any other civil rights organization in the country. The Sacramento Valley had branches in Sacramento, Marysville and Redding. I attended some meetings just to listen. Now and then I would run across a stray edition of *The Crisis*, the editorial voice of the NAACP. Robert Bagnall, a field organizer from the headquarters in New York City, came to Marysville each year to give a pep talk to get more members. Sometimes my mother, my sister and I went down to hear him.

Black newspapers were sold in black neighborhoods all over the country at newsstands, barbershops, restaurants and other black-owned enterprises. I never saw one for sale in Chico, but people subscribed by mail. The biggest of the national black papers was the *Chicago Defender*, a crusading weekly founded by Robert Abbott. In its pages we used to read about A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen and other young rebels who were attempting to bring reforms in race relations. The news section was filled with fiery editorials denouncing discrimination, segregation, lynchings and other forms of brutality.

Some blacks bought the *Defender* for its advertisements. A substantial number of them came from the company of Madam C.J. Walker. There were pages of ads for herb doctors and fortune tellers who appealed to the very poorest members of the population, telling how they would someday come into huge sums of money.

The Sacramento Valley had no black newspapers, but there were three in the San Francisco Bay Area, 180 miles to the southwest. The only black paper to carry news of

Chico was the *Western Appeal*, published by George Watkins, who used to come north, soliciting subscriptions all the way up to Redding. He had a correspondent in each of the small towns. I don't think any of the writers were paid. The columns were mostly chitchat about churches, fraternal organizations and parties held by blacks who wished to see their names in print. Apart from that, he printed canned stuff from other news organizations. Watkins, a conservative black, had no editorial page in the strict sense. He got ads from sympathetic white-owned businesses, gained respect as a black spokesman and acquired some property.

Mama bought the *Negro Yearbook*, which was edited by Dr. Monroe Work and published at the Tuskegee Institute, the Alabama school that was first headed by Booker T. Washington. I perused every issue. It came out yearly and furnished a wealth of information about American blacks.

I always found it easy to write. While attending Chico High School, I wrote a few humorous columns in the *Red and Gold*, the school newspaper. My fellow students made comments about it, and it gave me a feeling of importance, but I didn't yet have any serious thoughts about going into journalism

BLACK POLITICIANS

California politics has always been controlled by big money. The Southern Pacific Railroad was the biggest property owner in the state, and at one time it held immense political power. It was said that members of the

state Legislature could be bought like sacks of potatoes.

Black men were always allowed to vote in California. Women got the vote in 1920, and my mother started voting right away.

The California Legislature has two branches — the state Assembly, with 80 members, and the state Senate, with 40 members. The first black politician in California to hold statewide office was Fred Roberts, an assemblyman who represented a mostly black district in Los Angeles. He was elected in 1918 and served until 1934.

Like nearly all black politicians of his time, Roberts was a Republican — the party of Lincoln. He owned a very successful mortuary business, and got involved in civic affairs in Los Angeles before running for office. He was very careful to never differ with the Republicans, who controlled the state and permitted some blacks to share in the spoils — just enough to keep a few black Republicans happy, who in turn would extol the virtues of being a Republican.

Roberts was a symbol of pride to blacks in California, and when the Legislature was not in session, he traveled all over the state, visiting every town of any size where black people lived. He wasn't campaigning, because people couldn't vote for him outside his district: He was going as the sole black in the state Legislature. He came to the upper Sacramento Valley quite often, and spoke at churches or the homes of those who wore the mantle of being the number one black in the community.

I met Roberts on one of his visits to Chico when I was about 13. another time, when he spoke at a black church in Marysville, I went by railway to hear the good man. He

Fred Roberts, the first black politician to hold statewide office in California, served in the state Assembly from 1919 to 1934. Courtesy of Northern California Center for Afro-American History and Life Collection.

made quite an impression on the simple people in the small towns because they could not figure how he had won an election in a world that seemed dominated by white power.

In 1934, during the New Deal reform time of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fred Roberts was unseated by a liberal young black Democrat, Augustus Hawkins. There was a big difference in their style. Roberts played a very low-key role, but Hawkins fought hard for blacks and others who suffered from discrimination.

* * *

By the time I reached high school, most of the white guys in our little gang had drifted away to go with the white crowd. Some stayed with us, but it was different, and we began to realize even more that we lived in a white-dominated world. When I was a child, the discrimination didn't bother me very much because I kept occupied, and didn't have to go out and earn a living. But Chico had its limitations, and I didn't intend to stay after graduation. The prospects were very dim unless you wanted to shine shoes or work as a janitor. Nothing disgraceful about that, but my aspirations went to a higher level.

I never saw a black person in the valley working as a sales clerk, apart from the few who owned their own businesses. The only job a black woman could get in Chico was as a domestic. The exception was Tina Owens, who opened a beauty parlor in her home. Most of her clients were white. Her husband made good money at his

bootblack stand in the leading men's barbershop in Chico, the White Palace, which was white-owned.

The biggest industrial plant in Chico was the Diamond Match Company. It processed lumber that came in by train, and employed several hundred persons. Bud Harris was the only black working there, which made him a man of distinction among Chico blacks.

There was a girl in Chico named Stella Edwards, who was fair-skinned and very pretty. Her mother was a maid in the home of Dr. Daniel Moulton, one of the best-known surgeons in the valley, and the rumor was that he was Stella's father. After Stella was born, Dr. Moulton persuaded a black man in the town, Ed Edwards, to marry Stella's mother and give the daughter a name. Then Edwards left right away. Most people thought he had been paid off.

Both Stella and her mother lived with Stella's grandfather, Cornelius Daily, one of the most respected black men in Chico. He had the only black-owned barbershop in town, and most of his customers were whites — principally farm or ranch hands. Stella was his eldest granddaughter, and she had brains. Cornelius had high hopes for her, and after she graduated from Chico High School, he enrolled her at Heald Business College in Chico, where she took shorthand, typing, and other courses for preparation to be a clerk.

Cornelius heard there was an opening for a clerk typist at the Diamond Match Company. Stella went by herself and applied for the job. Because she had all the qualifications, and looked like she could be a Latin type, she was accepted. Cornelius was so proud of his granddaughter that he accompanied her to work on her

first day. He thanked the company officials for hiring her, and they were shocked to find that Stella was a black. They promptly informed her that they had made a mistake and could not hire her.

Dr. Moulton probably could have helped Stella keep the job because he had a lot of influence in the town. But he left it alone. Stella remained a domestic until she married a young black who held a civil service job with the state of California, then she moved to Sacramento.

* * *

I had heard a lot of talk about working on the railroads, and thought that would be a way out for me. Henry's father was a waiter on a railroad out of Los Angeles. His parents were divorced, but his father sent him a saxophone and a brand new bicycle. I got my own secondhand bicycle for $5 with the little money I made. I didn't care if the bike was new or not, so long as I could go around with the guys who had bicycles. But I felt my father's absence when I was about 12, because all the other guys whose mothers had married again had fathers who kept in touch with them, and sent them gifts and things. I didn't know if my father was living or dead.

Henry and I both began longing to leave Chico, particularly after we started to meet the northbound train that came through every evening. We would position ourselves near the dining cars and wave at the cooks and waiters, who were all black men. They would shout out to us while the train was stopped, which was never more than 10 minutes.

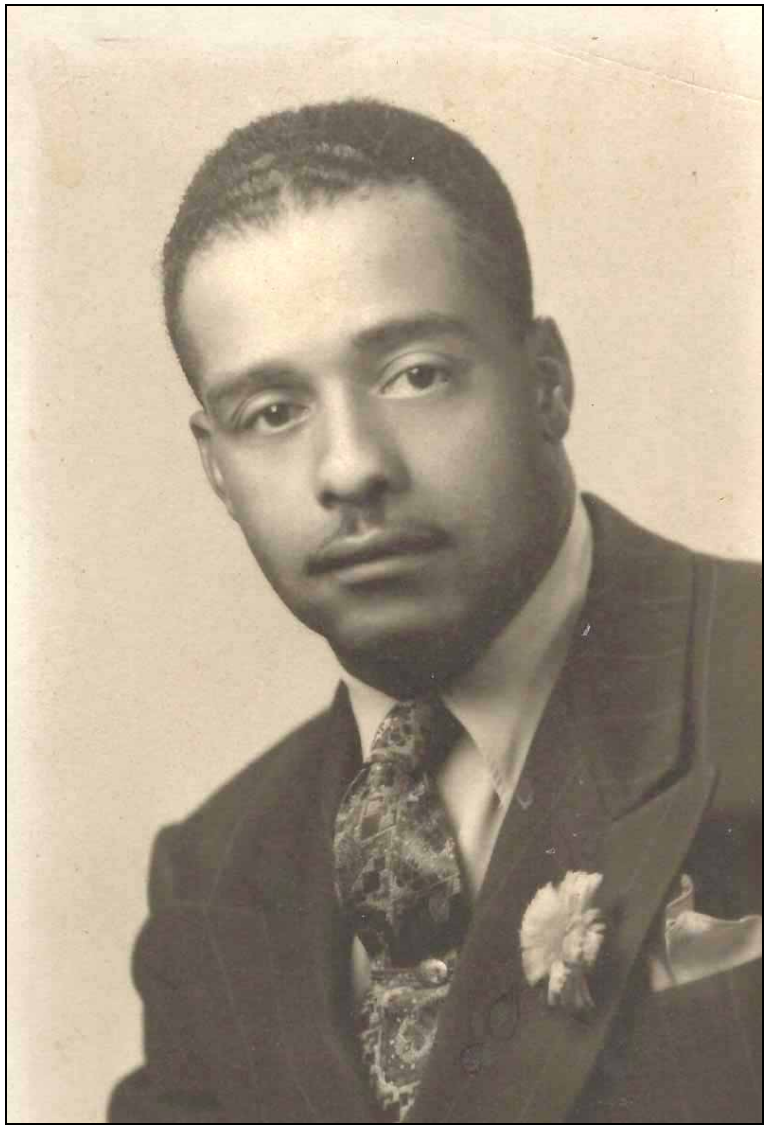
GOODBYE TO CHICO

My stepfather had an obsession for automobiles. He was the first black in Chico to own a car, a secondhand open-top Model T Ford. It was a damn good car for those times because it was simple to operate and would take you anywhere. And you could use it for so many other things. In the small towns they'd jack it up on one side, put a belt on the wheel, and attach it to a power saw.

The first new car Moses bought was a Cleveland sports model with a canvas top and a spare tire on the back — a very nice-looking car. He kept it for about 10 months, then traded it in and bought a new Chandler sedan. The Chandler was up in the league of a Cadillac. The payments were big. That's when Moses got in trouble.

The car cost $2,200, which was a lot of money in 1924. When he bought it, he irritated the white folks he worked for because it was a better car than they had. He started losing his jobs. They never told him the reason why, but a lot of people talked about his big expensive car.

In 1926, the year I graduated from high school, I was awakened early one morning by the sound of Moses shouting, "Kate! Kate! Wake up! This place is on fire!" My sister's bedroom was next to mine. I opened my eyes and saw a red glow on the ceiling. I got out of bed, slipped into my shoes and trousers, and came out through the kitchen. I heard my mother saying, "Where is Tom?" I ran to the front of the house and shouted, "I'm here!" Henry Herriford, who lived across the street, ran up to me and asked if I got my saxophone. I gruffly told him that I didn't have time, as I was more interested in saving my hide.



Henry Herriford as a young man. Courtesy of Olivia Herriford.

The fire burned our house to the ground: We lost everything. Our neighbors took us in that night. Mama found an old house in town and moved us in. We did not have much more than the beds we slept in, a stove, and a table with a few chairs. We did not get another phonograph, and I have often thought of the records we lost — Mamie Smith, Paul Whiteman, the Mound City Blue Blowers and a host of others.

The furniture in our house was insured. My mother and I always suspected that Moses started the fire for the insurance money because he was the first one to wake up. My mother didn't get any of the money. Moses kept his beloved car for several months longer, but inevitably lost it.

It was about this time that we started to talk about moving to Oakland, across the bay from San Francisco. I could possibly get a job for the postal service, or on the railroad as a Pullman porter or cook.

Mama decided she'd had enough of up there. She wasn't concerned about Moses: The marriage had soured by then. She was still in her twenties when she went to Chico, and she never had any reason to become fond of it. My sister was even more anxious to get out. She had always been ostracized by the other black girls, and didn't have any playmates. I had not paid much attention to this, and was very surprised when she informed me of her loneliness.

Mama and Kate left for Oakland in June 1926. I continued working at the shoeshine stand and promised that I'd follow them in about a month, which I did. I didn't realize how much I would miss them. I saved about $50 after they left, and bought one of those white linen suits

which were very popular in the hot summers, and a cheap suitcase for my clothes.

At the time, it was a wise move for all of us to get out of there. But Chico was a very nice little town. I never had any regrets about growing up there. Many times I look back on those happy free years, and think of how it was then.

Kate Fleming (center), circa 1925. Courtesy of Chico High School and Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.

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SHIPS AND RAILROADS, 1926-1932

Mama's older brother, my uncle Thomas Jackson, owned two houses — one in San Francisco, which he rented, and another in Berkeley, where he lived with his wife Ida and their son Tom. Uncle Tom worked as a clerk in the post office, and I think he regarded my family as his poor relatives: He had never visited us in Chico or invited us to visit him. Mama and Kate had last seen him when they had come down to San Francisco for the World's Fair in 1915 and stayed at my uncle's house.

In July 1926, the day finally arrived when I boarded the Sacramento Northern Railroad for Oakland. It was dark when I reached the address in North Oakland where Mama and Kate were renting a room. Mrs. Wall, the landlady, told me that Mama was staying overnight at the place where she worked as a domestic. Kate had gone with some friends to a dance sponsored by a black fraternal organization, and Mrs. Wall told me how to get there on the streetcar.

It was at McFarland's Ballroom. I had never seen so many black people at a dance before in my life. There must have been about 500 people. It was high poppin' to me. After about half an hour I found my sister. She took me in hand and we began a search for my cousin Tom Jackson. When we ran into him, I stuck out my hand and said, "I am glad to meet you." He said, "What do you mean, glad to meet you? We should have known one another all our lives," and gave me a great big bear hug.

Tom, who was about nine months younger than me, very proudly introduced me to some of his friends as we

walked around the ballroom. He seemed to know a lot of people. He asked, when did I get in town, and where was I staying? I told him I had no lodging and he said, "You are coming home with me. That is where you belong."

The dance ended about 1 o'clock in the morning, and one of Tom's friends took us in his car out to the Jackson home. I looked forward to meeting an uncle whom I had heard a great deal about but never seen.

When we arrived, we both went into Tom's bedroom and went to bed. Early the next morning, both my uncle and his wife wanted to see me. They gave me a curious look when I walked into the kitchen. I thought, "These people act like they don't like me too well." Since Ida was light-skinned, my first thought was that I was a little too dark for their tastes. Uncle Tom was a rich mahogany brown like Mama, but cousin Tom was as light as his mother.

They began to question me as to why I had left Chico. I said I had come in search of a job: I wanted to help support my mother and sister, and I thought I could make a lot more money than Mama could. Kate was only 16 or 17 and Mama wanted her to finish high school, but she never did go back. My uncle remarked that I should have remained in Chico. He predicted that I would end up marrying some girl in the Bay Area and never amount to very much.

Ida was a member of the Logan family of Montgomery, Alabama. Her father was a barber who owned his own home, and she thought her family had a higher social standing than the Jacksons. In the later 19th century, Southern blacks had a monopoly of the barbershops, as most whites felt it was below their dignity

to cut hair. Blacks operated some barbershops for white clientele and others for blacks.

Ida had gone to an all-black teachers training school, and on completion of the brief course, she was offered a job to teach in her hometown. Uncle Tom had been courting her before he enlisted in the Army. After he settled in San Francisco, he returned to Montgomery, married her, and brought her back to the West Coast.

In the South, no black person could buy a ticket for a sleeping car. So Uncle Tom bought two tickets before leaving San Francisco, and the railway had to honor them because the sleeping cars were owned by the Pullman Company, not by the railroads. My uncle hated segregation in all forms. When the NAACP formed a branch in the Bay Area in 1915, he was one of the first to join.

He had his family tree traced by a reputable firm and received some papers that showed his ancestry dating back to a well-to-do family in England. He proudly showed off the family coat of arms. I thought such things rather ridiculous, and I wondered whether he had mentioned to the firm that he was black. But I never asked him, as he was a man who seldom smiled: He looked like he was chewing on a sour pickle most of the time.

That first morning, I did not stay to eat breakfast, but went to look for a job right away. I stopped at Mrs. Wall's house to get my bag. She permitted me to take a bath, and I asked her for directions to the railroad yards in West Oakland.

I went to the Pullman porters' hiring hall first, and was told that I was too short. The company said you had to be a minimum of 5 feet 9 because the porters had to make up

upper berths on the cars. I did not believe them, for I saw some men my height dressed in the traditional blue uniform. Next I went to the Southern Pacific Railroad commissary, which hired cooks and waiters for the dining cars, and was told that they were not hiring that day. I came back to the Jacksons that night. Early the next morning, Aunt Ida told me, "We've got friends coming out here from Boston. They're going to stay in the bedroom, because Tom's going to sleep on the divan in the living room." I caught on very quickly that I was not wanted.

After that, Tom used to come by our house sometimes, and I'd see my uncle once in a while. Aunt Ida always referred to my sister and me as her husband's niece and nephew, and we always called her my uncle's wife. There was no love lost between us. My mother thought Ida was older than her brother, and probably talked about her: I think that's where it started.

Tom was their only child, and they put all of their hopes on him. He never had to work until he graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles and got a job as an engineer with McDonnell Douglas down there. Tom died at the age of 36 of a heart attack in his backyard — just toppled over. Uncle Tom stayed in that house in Berkeley and lived to be 100. Ida died at the age of 102.

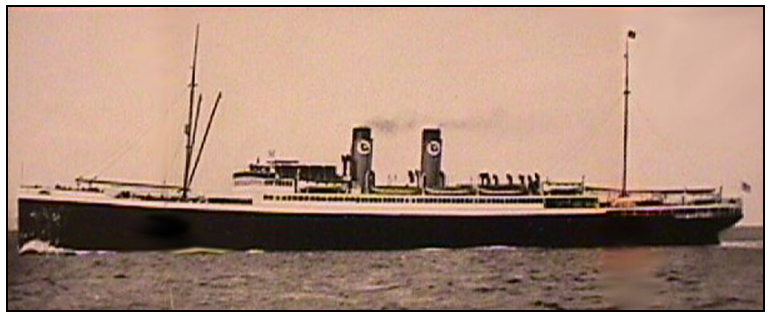
THE ADMIRAL LINE

During the 1920s, the only way you could travel long distances was by water or rail. There were no commercial airlines, no buses going from city to city, and no freeways: Most highways were two lanes. Travel for the general

public was an ever-expanding business on the rail lines, the coastwise passenger ships, the river steamboats, and the ships on the Great Lakes.

San Francisco was the principal port on the West Coast because ships could get out of stormy weather by coming through the Golden Gate. No bridges across the bay had been built, and San Francisco Bay was busy with ferries to carry cars and passengers — paddle wheelers and side wheelers burning oil, coal, or diesel fuel. The trip between San Francisco and Oakland took about 20 minutes. Some ferries and ships went inland, plying the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers.

I had heard that blacks were hired on the Admiral Line, an intercoastal shipping line that docked in San Francisco. So I went to the hiring hall and asked for a job. I learned there was a vacancy for a bellhop on the S.S. Emma Alexander, which would be sailing that day. The man asked, had I ever been to sea before? I told him no, and he didn't say anything.



The 442-foot S.S. Emma Alexander, where Thomas Fleming worked in the summer of 1926.

The ships needed hands: There were always changes in personnel. So I signed on and went straight to the ship. The bell captain gave me a uniform and a locker for my things, and I was on duty right away because the ship was already loading passengers.

The Admiral Line was the leading company for the intercoastal passenger trade on the West Coast. It hauled passengers and some freight between Victoria, Canada and Ensenada, Mexico, with stops at Seattle, Tacoma, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The company had four big passenger ships. H.F. Alexander, the founder, named the largest one after himself. It could go more than 23 knots, and was the fastest ship on the Pacific Coast — the only one which approached the speed of the trains. He named his other ships after three women in his family — Emma Alexander, Ruth Alexander and Dorothy Alexander. He had acquired the Emma and the Dorothy when he bought the old Pacific Steamship Company in 1916. The Ruth was a former German passenger ship that had been interned by the government when World War I broke out.

The line's main rival was the Los Angeles Steamship Company, which operated two fast ships, the Yale and Harvard, between San Francisco and Los Angeles. These ships competed for passengers with the Southern Pacific Railroad's Padre, Lark, Owl and Shasta Limited. The trains had an advantage because they arrived in downtown Los Angeles, about 20 miles inland.

Both the Padre and the Lark were all-Pullman and operated overnight. The Lark was one of the premier passenger trains in the nation, hauling a large, steady number of people between the two cities. Many Hollywood greats used the Lark whenever they came north. People who weren't in a hurry went by ship.

Passenger ships on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, and the Great Lakes, hired hundreds of black and white college students during the summer tourist trade. The white students principally worked as seamen and in the engine room, where the chief engineer was boss, with powers just short of the captain.

The black students worked in the stewards' department as kitchen crew, bellhops and porters. All stewards were black men except for the chief steward and assistant chief steward. Some porters doubled as waiters; others took care of the passengers' cabins, like chambermaids.

The bellhops all wore a blue suit with a white shirt, black bow tie and little round blue cap, and their shoes were always shined. The passengers were pampered: The black crew members patrolled the deck, taking care of every wish of guests who lounged in big steamer chairs. I didn't see a single black passenger.

The bell captain conducted me to various sections of the ship to show me what parts were port, amidship and aft, then to the dining room, where I helped the waiters get ready for the evening meal and answered the telephone at the bell board, a switchboard for the ship. When people called, we went to their cabins and took their orders.

The ship sailed at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on its voyage north to Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, a trip which took about 27 hours. We had just cleared the harbor when the bell captain told me to go to the three decks on the ship, strike the chime — which was sort of like a xylophone — and yell, "Dinner is ready!" I made the circuit several times, and the dining room slowly begin

filling up.

The bellhops worked from 10 to 12 hours a day and got about $45 a month in wages, plus food and lodging. I found myself taking numerous things to the cabins, and the first night I counted out $6 in tips. That was a lot of money: You could ride the streetcar in San Francisco for a nickel, or rent a nice clean room for $2 a week.

We had to stay on watch until 11. Then the bell captain designated at least one of us for the midnight watch, to work until 8 the next morning. It was rotated among us, and we could sleep until the late afternoon.

Colonial Dining Salon on the H.F. Alexander seated 270.

The chief cook and the headwaiter, who were black,

earned about $150 a month. I didn't think the work was very hard, but many of the black crew members would quit without warning when we got to a port. There might have been a woman they wanted to stay with.

The ship had everything you'd get in the best hotels, and we could eat anything we wanted. There was a bakery where all of the bread, pastries and other desserts were made. The ship even made its own ice cream. I often passed through the kitchen, and discovered that I could get a lot of goodies directly from the cooks. There was a large container filled with pure cream, from which the waiters filled their little silver cream pots for coffee. I began to drink whole cups of cream, and before my time ended on the ship, I was quite chunky.

On my second day as a crew member, fog closed in on the ocean and I heard the mournful dirge of foghorns warning ships of danger near the shore. A waiter told me that the foghorn was a baby whale crying and following us because it thought the ship was its mother, and that I should throw crackers into the ocean to feed it. Two other waiters laughed loudly when I walked to the ship's railing and peered into the ocean, searching for the lost baby. I caught on that it was a joke, and felt quite sheepish. I found out that they told that to everyone who first came to work on the ship.

The cooks and bakers had been up since 5 o'clock in the morning, and were busy preparing breakfast. The stewards' crew was called about 6. Some passengers rang for coffee and others paced the decks looking out at sky and water. The ships went far enough out to sea so that the coastline was invisible.

That afternoon a fire drill was called by the captain —

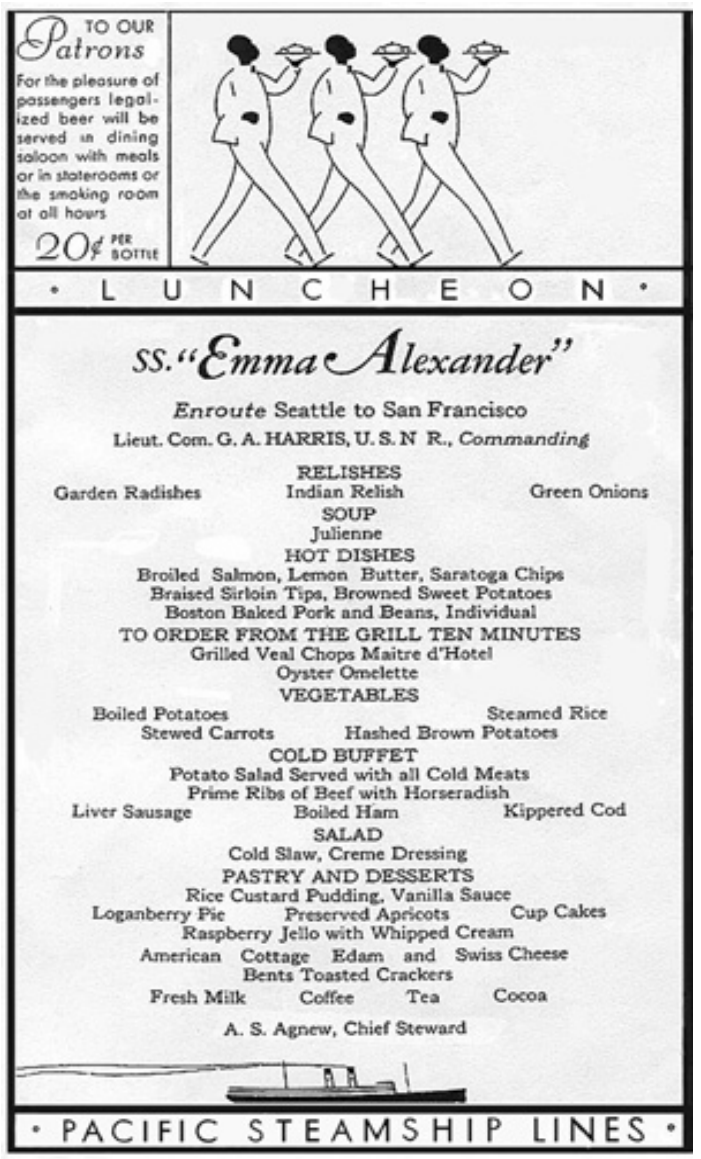
a routine order on passenger ships. The passengers all came out on the deck, and the crew members were told which lifeboat they must rush to when the signal was given.

A bellhop named Rene, who could have passed for white and was stuck on his color, walked up to me and sneered, "It is customary for one of you black boys to jump overboard when a fire drill is held."

I was very sensitive about anyone calling me black. I threw one punch, knocking him up against a lifeboat, and was swarming all over him when the second steward grabbed me and whispered that I would be placed in irons if the captain knew I was fighting. I struggled to get from his bear hold, shouting, "Let me at him! Let me at him!" He cooled me down, and I told Rene I would meet him off the ship when we reached Seattle.

When we reached Victoria, the waiters, bellhops and porters went ashore, after pooling our money to buy whisky, which was legal in Canada. I purchased three bottles for about two and a half dollars each, which I brought back to my locker. I later sold one of the bottles for $25. I could have gotten more, but was not smart enough in that type of business. People on board would ask, "Could you get me a drink?" It seemed like their thirst increased when they went out to sea. I learned at San Francisco that I could bring one bottle ashore past customs if I gave the guard one bottle. My one remaining bottle I brought back to Oakland to give to friends.

My first trip as a bellhop cemented my friendship with a waiter, Bill Narcisse, a student at the University of Southern California. He opened up a new world to me. It was the first time I had gotten close to a black college stu-



TO OUR *Patrons*

For the pleasure of passengers legalized beer will be served in dining saloon with meals or in staterooms or the smoking room at all hours

20¢ PER BOTTLE

• L U N C H E O N •

SS. "Emma Alexander"

Enroute Seattle to San Francisco

Lieut. Com. G. A. HARRIS, U. S. N R., *Commanding*

RELISHES

Garden Radishes Indian Relish Green Onions

SOUP

Julienne

HOT DISHES

Broiled Salmon, Lemon Butter, Saratoga Chips

Braised Sirloin Tips, Browned Sweet Potatoes

Boston Baked Pork and Beans, Individual

TO ORDER FROM THE GRILL TEN MINUTES

Grilled Veal Chops Maitre d'Hotel

Oyster Omelette

VEGETABLES

Boiled Potatoes Steamed Rice

Stewed Carrots Hashed Brown Potatoes

COLD BUFFET

Potato Salad Served with all Cold Meats

Prime Ribs of Beef with Horseradish

Liver Sausage Boiled Ham Kippered Cod

SALAD

Cold Slaw, Creme Dressing

PASTRY AND DESSERTS

Rice Custard Pudding, Vanilla Sauce

Loganberry Pie Preserved Apricots Cup Cakes

Raspberry Jello with Whipped Cream

American Cottage Edam and Swiss Cheese

Bents Toasted Crackers

Fresh Milk Coffee Tea Cocoa

A. S. Agnew, Chief Steward

• PACIFIC STEAMSHIP LINES •

Menu for the S.S. Emma Alexander, circa 1920s.

dent. Most of the other black crew members had not gone past the sixth grade. A lot of them came from the South, and I was better educated than they were.

I got a chance to explore Seattle, the home port of the Admiral Line, and found the racial atmosphere much healthier than in California. I heard that blacks could stay in any hotel in the city and dine at any restaurant. I saw Asians married to blacks, and other mixed couples. We got rid of all the passengers, then went around the sound to Tacoma, where the ship laid overnight. We returned to Seattle the next day, put passengers on and started the return trip back. When we neared San Francisco, the Emma slowed down outside the Golden Gate to pick up a harbor pilot, who stood anchor in a pilot boat. He steered the ship through the channels and currents of the bay. When we approached the dock, two tugboats took over to ease the ship in.

The harbor was filled with huge freighters that sailed to all corners of the world and passenger vessels that were sometimes even bigger. I noted the names of the shipping companies painted on the piers facing the water. The Dollar Line, with its round-the-world ships, was headquartered in San Francisco. The Matson Line, another American company, sailed between San Francisco, Los Angeles and Honolulu. The Union Line from Australia operated large passenger liners. There was a prominent Japanese shipping company with luxury liners, plus passenger ships of the Holland American Line and Scandinavian Line, and the Peninsula and Orient lines, both British.

Despite this traffic of cargo and freight, blacks were very conspicuous by their absence. The Dollar Line and

Matson Line didn't hire blacks, although the companies received considerable subsidies from the government for carrying the U.S. mail. Most of the ships flying foreign flags were staffed by Asians in all departments except for officers.

Black longshoremen were barred from all but two piers in San Francisco — those of the Luckenbach Line and the Panama Pacific, both of which had their headquarters in New York City. The Luckenbach ships were primarily cargo carriers serving ports in South America, with accommodations for about 50 passengers. The Panama Pacific had two large passenger ships, the Pennsylvania and the Virginia, with all-black stewards' crews. They sailed from New York through the Panama Canal, then to Los Angeles, where they discharged passengers and cargo before ending their voyage in San Francisco, the company's Pacific Coast terminal.

The U.S. Army hired blacks for the stewards' crews of its large troop transports, which called at New York and other East Coast ports, then went through the Panama Canal to San Francisco, carrying American service personnel and their families to Army posts in Hawaii, the Philippines and China. These jobs were sought for diligently because the pay was good and the ships touched so many ports.

The Emma stayed in port for more than 24 hours, and I was given time off to visit Mama and Kate. Their good landlady had assured me that I could make their room my home — without sleeping privileges — whenever I came in town.

After returning to the ship, I joined the other bellhops at the gangplank, snatching baggage and leading passen-

gers to their cabins. We cursed under our breath if they gave us a tip of a quarter or less. The loading went on until a half hour before sailing. Then the bell captain designated one of us to go around, clang a gong and shout, "All ashore that's going ashore!" We repeated the call several times. Friends and relatives slowly began drifting off the ship.

When the last visitor had left, the pilot house signaled the engine room and the marine engines started up. A tugboat came alongside, the sailors threw ropes to it, and longshoremen removed the great ropes from the steel capstans on the pier. The huge propellers began to work, and the ship slowly backed into the channel, the hoarse blare of the ship's siren shattering the air. When we were far enough out to clear the pier, the tug turned the ship's prow towards the Golden Gate.

From San Francisco, we sailed south to Wilmington harbor, a port for Los Angeles. We discharged and took on passengers and cargo, then set sail for San Diego. The ship didn't land in Ensenada because there wasn't a good docking facility. Smaller, lighter vessels came out to take passengers ashore, where they bought goods and did sightseeing.

Then the Emma turned north and docked in Wilmington, and I went into Los Angeles for the first time, taking a commuter train operated by the Southern Pacific Railroad. The fast electric trains fanned out to a radius of about 60 miles, going into Riverside, Orange and San Bernardino counties. People could get about much faster in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco than they can today, and it was a big mistake when this type of train was discarded.

Because of its mild winters, Southern California — and particularly Los Angeles — was the magnet for Americans from other states in search of a sort of paradise before they left the planet.

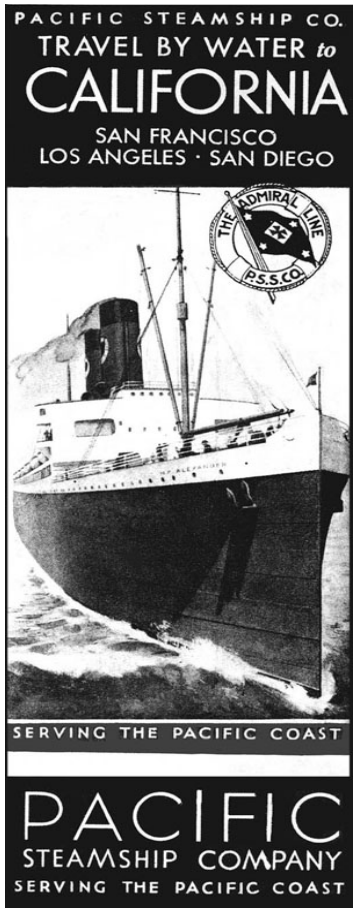
Harrison Otis, who was a brigadier general in the Civil War, took over the *Los Angeles Times* in 1886, just as the city's population was expanding. He bought up a lot of land, then started advertising the glorious climate of Southern California. So many farmers sold their Iowa acres to purchase California orange groves that the joke was to call Southern California the capital of Iowa.

Cotton could be grown successfully in the Imperial Valley, near the Mexican border, and that brought a lot of people into the state too, both blacks and whites.

The City of the Angels then had over a million population, and probably about 25,000 blacks — more than any other city west of Kansas City. I went to see Central Avenue, the main street of black activity: It had black-owned theaters, furniture stores, appliance stores selling mostly radios and phonographs, and other small businesses. Street vendors sold hot dogs, chili and other edibles from pushcarts, on which a fire was kept burning. Their prices were cheap and business was brisk.

Hollywood drew both blacks and whites who were anxious to get a job in the motion picture industry. Not many blacks got into the movies, but they worked as servants or in the technical departments of filmmaking, and some were hired as extras.

One time the Emma loaded a film company of about 60 people headed by Bebe Daniels and Ben Lyon, two Hollywood stars, to film a sea scene for a silent picture; this was before talkies. The company was a rousting



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1920s travel poster for the Pacific Steamship Company, which included the Admiral Line. Shown is the 525-foot H.F. Alexander, then the largest and fastest ship on the West Coast. The rise of automobile travel and the Great Depression killed the intercoastal passenger business, and the last Admiral Liner steamed from Puget Sound for San Francisco Bay in 1936.

bunch with a tremendous thirst that only alcohol could satiate. Our Canadian purchases were still on hand, and some people kept ringing for a bellhop through the night. It was a wild party all the way to San Francisco.

I learned my duties quickly on the Emma, and got tipped well. I was very cocky, particularly since I had encountered no problems in finding a job. But after a couple of months I earned the dislike of the bell captain, a surly little black man — practically a dwarf — of about 40 years of age. I was just 18, and he did not like to see a rank youngster making more than he did. When the ship was on its northbound run, he dressed me down for no reason at all. I told him I would kick his ass when the ship docked. He answered that when we got to Seattle, I would no longer be part of the crew. That took away a bit of my cockiness. It was probably my fault: I looked down on him because he had no education.

I did not fancy being put ashore. So I went to see Harvey Richards, a dishwasher who longed to get out of the galley. I asked if he would trade jobs with me, and he agreed. We sought the headwaiter, who offered no objections, so I changed from my bellhop suit to dish-washers' clothes, and went to work.

The kitchen had electric dishwashers, huge wash sinks and all types of cooking pots, pans and skillets. When meals were in progress, the waiters brought in piles of plates, cups and dishes. Breakfast was the worst: Egg yolk stuck to the plates, and the hot water made it cling harder. I learned why sea gulls follow ships far out to sea: All the leftovers were thrown out of the porthole — huge portions of roast beef, prime rib, chicken, bread, vegetables, sometimes a half turkey.

When the Emma returned to San Francisco, I packed my bag and went back to the hiring hall, and was able to get a spot as a room steward on a smaller ship, the Admiral Dewey. It had a capacity for about 200 passengers, and none of them seemed to be big spenders like on the bigger ships. I kept about 20 cabins clean, changing the linen every day while at sea, then carrying luggage while on shore. I made just one round trip. Since it was now September, the tourist trade slackened sharply, and the ships began laying off crew people. I was not surprised when the steward informed me that I was a victim of reduction in personnel.

I went back to Oakland, where I informed Mama and Kate that I was jobless. I had about $50. Mama was working six days a week as a domestic, and did not earn any more than she had in Chico.

White women could get jobs as secretaries and clerks in department stores, but a lot of them worked as domestics too. Both white and black women were badly underpaid, and domestics have always been the lowest paid of all the workers. Mama was a domestic all of her life: That's all she knew. I don't think she ever earned over $45 a month.

THE RAILROAD FERRY

In the fall of 1926 I decided to return to Chico to stay with my Granny Powers, as I thought I could get enough odd jobs to carry me through the winter.

While attending Chico High School, I used to be awake every night at 11:30 when the last Sacramento

Northern train arrived and laid over for the night. I would often meet with a waiter on the train, Bill Shorey, a happy-go-lucky guy four or five years older than me who was courting a local Chico gal. Bill was the son of Captain William Shorey, a native of the West Indies who had held a master's license and commanded a whaling vessel in San Francisco at the turn of the century. Following Captain Shorey's death, a small street in West Oakland was named after him. He was the first black resident in Oakland to be honored by the city fathers.

Late one night in January 1927, I heard a tapping on the window and Bill's voice calling, "Hey Thomas, you want a job? They need a waiter on the train." I thought about it a little time, then answered yes. He told me to pack a bag with my clothes and be at the depot at 6:30 in the morning. I had a hard time sleeping the rest of the night, as I did not want to miss my chance to start working on the railroad.

I got up at 6. Granny was already up, and when I told her about my good fortune she was full of warnings about my being a good boy and staying out of trouble. I told her that I would be coming in and out of Chico on the train and would see her in a few days. Then I walked out of the door, to not return for a number of years.

The train pulled out promptly at 7. I walked back to the diner and was met by Bill, who introduced me to the cook, then took me into the pantry and gave me a white jacket. After brief stops at many small places and at Sacramento, we began to travel through a marshy area where the track was built on trestles on top of dikes. I could see the water of the upper portion of San Francisco Bay. The train finally stopped on the east side of the bay,

just west of Pittsburg, then slowly pulled onto a railroad ferry, where I got off.

The ferry, the Ramon, had a kitchen crew of three black men — a cook, a steward, and a waiter at the lunch counter. I was to work six days a week, and on the off day, I could leave on a train heading north or south. My pay would be $60 a month, plus the few tips I could squeeze from passengers. But I had a bed and a place to eat, and could save my meager wages.

The ferry was at the Carquinez Strait, which all trains from the north had to cross on their way to Oakland. At that time there wasn't a bridge anywhere on the bay. Each ferry could hold a train of many cars. There might be 10 passengers or 100. The Ramon carried about six trains daily between Chico and Oakland. The lead locomotive pulled a few cars onto the ferry, and switch engineers were stationed on both sides of the bay to uncouple and reassemble the trains.

Our living quarters was a one-room hut on stilts over the water, one of many built for wealthy duck hunters. We went there every night about 8 o'clock after the last train passed through. Amenities were very few. We bathed in a galvanized tub, for which we had to haul hot water from the ferry. The hut was home for swarms of marsh mice. Every night when we went to bed, we had to shake the blankets and sheets, and invariably a mouse or two would be thrown out. They scurried back after we turned out the light, and we had to keep knocking them off the bed, sometimes managing to kill them.

My second day on the ferry, a tall, distinguished-looking brown-skinned man got off the train and walked into the kitchen. He looked me over and asked, did I think

Captain William T. Shorey, circa 1903, with daughters Xenobia (l.) and Victoria, and wife Julia (r.). Like many whaling captains, Shorey took his wife and children on some of his voyages. Shorey's son, William Jr., gave Thomas Fleming his first railroad job in 1926. Courtesy of San Francisco Maritime Museum.

I could stay out there? I realized he was George Dunlap, boss of the food department for the Sacramento Northern. I told him the hut would be all right. Dunlap was a native of Sacramento and perhaps the most important black man in the city. He had at one time been a cook on a private sleeping car for superintendents of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The Ramon, the train ferry where Thomas Fleming worked as a waiter in 1926. Courtesy of Bart Nadeau.

He was awarded the contract from the Sacramento Northern to operate the two dining cars on each train and the lunch counter on the ferries. He furnished the crew and bought all the supplies. He also bid for a concession to operate a cafeteria on the grounds of the California

State Fair, where he fed thousands of visitors every year and employed black college students as waitresses and busboys. Dunlap was the father of two attractive daughters. In later years, when the rail line ceased hauling passengers, Dunlap converted the upper part of his two-story house in Sacramento into an intimate restaurant where he could seat about 60 people. Dunlap was chef, with most of his crew consisting of family members. It was an immediate financial success.

The white crew on the Ramon consisted of a captain and four deck hands whose sleeping quarters were on the ferry. They worked for several days, then another crew took their place. All of them had homes in nearby communities such as Pittsburg, which you could see from the ferry. It was the home port for some commercial fishing boats owned by Italians, and sometimes one of the friendly fishing boats would pull up to the ferry slip and give us a big bass or some other fish, which made a welcome change in our diets.

The steward on the ferry was a strict black nationalist who revered Marcus Garvey as though he were a saint, and argued with us frequently. He berated us because none of us showed any enthusiasm for Garvey. He hated the leaders of the NAACP because they didn't support the Garvey movement.

I was very lonesome most of the time. The monotony was relieved only when crewmen from the passenger trains gave us the daily papers from Sacramento, Oakland and San Francisco. The biggest cause of conversation among us exiles was Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic in May 1927. It was an astounding feat, and we talked about it for days as the newspapers kept their pages

filled with news of Lindy.

In June, when I got my day off, I stayed at home two days instead of one. When I came back, George Dunlap was there. He curtly asked, where did I wish to go, to Chico or Oakland? I told him Oakland, so he paid me off and I left on the next train.

THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC

I was just 19 when I arrived back in Oakland to try to find work on the railroads, but in reality I was the head of the house. My sister Kate had not gone out into the world yet, and I was the chief breadwinner in the family. I gave my mother most of what I earned. We were poor working-class blacks.

By this time Mama had rented an apartment on 8th Street. It had one room, where Mama and Kate slept. I slept on a folding cot in the kitchen. We shared a community bathroom with two other tenants.

In 1927, most passenger trains on the West Coast stopped in Oakland. Except for Los Angeles, Oakland had the biggest black population in the state. Some people said it was because blacks moved there after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, but I always thought it was because of the railroads. The Southern Pacific, Western Pacific and Santa Fe had terminals in Oakland, and all of them hired blacks for their dining car crew, chair car porters and maintenance crews in the yards. The Southern Pacific hired the most because it operated more trains than the other two lines combined.

Besides its electric commuter trains and its passenger

trains pulled by steam locomotives, the Southern Pacific had a fleet of ferries crossing San Francisco Bay, which hired black cooks and waiters for its lunch counters.

The railroad companies owned the chair cars and baggage cars. The Pullman Company owned all the sleeping cars, club cars and observation cars. All the railways did was haul them from place to place. The Pullman company hired its own porters, attendants, maids and barbers, and had a maintenance yard in the nearby city of Richmond to repair and service the cars. Every train with Pullman cars had a white Pullman conductor.

I heard that both the Southern Pacific and the Pullman Company put on extra cars in the summer. A cook could get jobs in other places more quickly than a waiter could, and my father had been a cook, so I decided to try to be one too. I went to the Southern Pacific commissary in West Oakland and asked if there were any openings. The man at the dispatcher's window said no, but told me to stick around, and wrote my name in a pad. There were quite a number of other black men, some of them students, waiting to see if they would be hired.

I stayed until 4 o'clock that day and for two more days. Then the dispatcher came out and asked if I wanted a job as fourth cook on a diner on the San Joaquin Flyer. I answered yes and he signed me up.

The dining car was stocking up in preparation for a trip to Los Angeles the next morning. The chef gave me a white jacket, checkered denim trousers, apron and white cap, then sent me and a waiter to the commissary to get supplies. As I walked through the railroad yard, I saw all the different cars being prepared for departure.

There were hundreds of men and women maintenance

workers, primarily black, hosing the cars down, cleaning them with long-handle brushes, vacuuming the felt-covered seats, and bringing bed linen. The black women did the same work as the men. Some carried coal for the oven ranges in the kitchens. Others iced up the compartments on top of the chair cars which regulated the temperature inside. There was a big steam laundry where the cooks and waiters stocked up on their uniforms, table linen, tablecloths and napkins. It was all very new and exciting.

The commissary was a combination warehouse and kitchen, which supplied the food and beverages for all the trains leaving Oakland. Butchers in the commissary cut up whole steers. The Southern Pacific served everything you would get in a luxury hotel — filet mignon, lamb chops, pork chops, chateaubriand, fresh green vegetables, fresh fish, shrimp, oysters and lobsters. We loaded it all into a big two-wheel hand truck.

The commissary prepared many things in advance. It made pound cake and raisin bread, and packaged mixes for biscuits, shortcake, corn muffins and hotcakes: All you had to do was add milk. For bran muffins, they ground up black figs and added them to the mixture. They gave us dough for pies, but we had to know how to make it ourselves in case we ran out.The chef showed me a large grindstone in the railroad yard and taught me how to sharpen the knives. Most cooks had their personal knives and large kitchen forks. We had to furnish our own shoes: Everything would fall on them, and once you used them on the dining car, you couldn't wear them on the street.

The kitchen had a charcoal broiler, a coal-burning range and a dishwashing machine with an electric motor.

The jobs were sharply defined. The chef was the boss of the kitchen: He was in charge of the supplies and handled the charcoal broiler, on which he broiled steak, poultry and fish. The second cook made the soups, cooked the roasts in the oven and handed out the orders to the waiters. The third cook was fry cook and worked hard, cooking everything that went on top of the range.

The fourth cook was primarily the dishwasher, but you also had to peel spuds, shell peas, clean vegetables, and help with whatever the chef or second cook asked you to do. They'd put you on the frying pan sometimes. You could get promoted to third cook, second cook, and eventually chef.

The only white person in the dining car was the steward, who was nominally the foreman of the crew. He ordered whatever supplies the chef and the pantryman told him were needed, and saw that everything in service was religiously followed by the waiters. When a diner paid for his meal, the waiter turned over the receipt and money to the steward, with the exception of the tip. The steward counted it and checked it against the receipt.

Next in authority was the pantryman. He was a sort of headwaiter, whose duty was to keep the pantry clean, see that the silverware and plates were well stocked, and keep track of supplies like butter, salt and sugar. He also took care of the linen, including bedding for the crew in case we had to sleep on board. The diner had real silver, and the white linen tablecloths were changed for every passenger.

On my first trip, before the train got its load of human beings, the chef started me to shelling a 50-pound sack of green peas. A switch engine sneaked up to the front of the

train and began to push us backwards to the Oakland Mole, a pier extending out into the bay, where ferries brought passengers from the Ferry Building in San Francisco.

Both the mole and the Ferry Building had large crews of black redcap porters. They got their name because of their distinctive headgear, which was usually a cap with a red top. Some made the trip from San Francisco to the mole, pulling big handcarts filled with baggage and assisting passengers all the way to the railroad cars. Many others worked at the 16th Street depot in Oakland, an amazing-looking concrete building of the Grecian model, or the much smaller Southern Pacific depot at Third and Townsend streets in San Francisco, which was the terminus for the Sunset Limited, Daylight, Lark and Padre trains.

Some redcaps were college students who worked at the terminals a few hours a day and made enough to maintain themselves in school, mostly from tips. Some even continued these part-time jobs after graduating from law school or dental school, using the day hours to engage in their professions and working as redcaps at night.

A black lawyer in Oakland, Frank Larch, caught the Lark each night in Oakland and worked on the dining car until it reached Watsonville Junction, about 75 miles south. Then he worked the northbound Lark back to Oakland, preparing breakfast for the passengers and returning in time to practice law during daylight hours. I don't know when he slept. He shared an office with another black attorney, George Vaughan, who had built up a large enough clientele to work at the business full-time.

Our train departed promptly at 8 a.m. The conductor

took out his watch, gave a final look and called, "Board!" The engineer released a blast of steam from the locomotive and eased the brakes. The engine shuddered into motion as the wheels of the great train rolled jerkily, then smoothed out. I felt a thrill as the train really began to roll, and a waiter came into the pantry and shouted his first order through the window.

The first thing we usually made was coffee in huge urns. The waiters, porters, conductors and brakemen were soon ordering the steaming beverage. We made hot chocolate and put it in a crock in the steam table for instant service. Other crocks were filled with hot milk, hot cereal, sliced ham, bacon, and pork sausages.

The crew was kept busy as more and more passengers came in to eat breakfast. We fried potatoes and eggs, and made toast on the charcoal grill. Mothers with infants gave their bottles to the waiters; we filled them with milk and heated them up.

As we served breakfast, we were already making some preparations for lunch. I peeled potatoes, washed dishes and did everything the cooks asked, looking out of the window whenever I got a chance. About 10:30 a.m., breakfast was over and the waiters asked for their meals. Most of them wanted an omelette of some kind, which made the chef mad. I found myself forming a dislike for them because they thought the fourth cook was just a dishwasher, without any status.

At noon we were ready for the "snakes," as our chef called the passengers. We heard a waiter going through the cars, beating on a chimelike instrument and calling out, "First call for lunch!"

The train finally reached Fresno, an important icing

place for the refrigerator cars that hauled perishable agricultural products all over the United States by fast freight. The stopover was long — about 20 minutes — as 110-pound blocks of ice were dropped onto the iceboxes. All of the cars were tested by maintenance workers, and the train was replenished with water, coal for the kitchen range, and chopped ice for the dining car and passenger cars.

For several hours, the train stopped at small towns all through the San Joaquin Valley, a great fertile region in central California. At the end of every stop, after everyone had boarded, the conductor waved to the engineer, who sat in the cab watching for the signal. The rear brakeman returned to the train, and when he reached the last step on the end car, he signaled the engineer by hand. The engineer then gave an answering toot on the whistle, and the iron horse slowly started up, amidst much puffing and groaning, as the train began its next leg of the journey.

There were separate cars for passengers, baggage and mail. The mail clerks were constantly at work sorting and sacking. They dropped off and picked up mail at every town on the route, whether we stopped or not. A mail sack was attached to a pole next to the tracks, and the mail clerk snatched the outgoing sack with a hook and dropped the sack destined for that town. We swept through amidst loud shrieks from the whistle, without reducing speed at all.

The mail clerks were employees of the U.S. Postal Service, and some were black. They earned slightly higher pay than clerks on land. Some people wanted the job because there was no supervisor, and others because they would be out for so many days, then get time off when

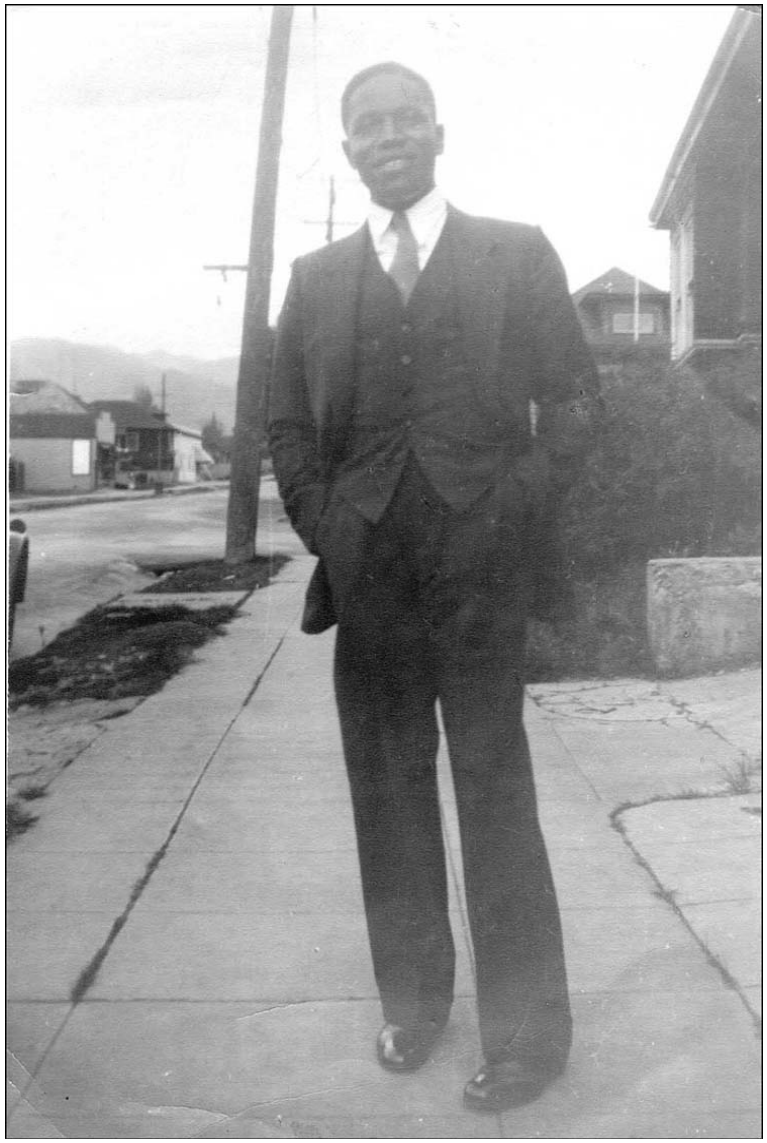
they came back.

When the L.A.-bound and the Oakland-bound trains passed each other, the engineers on both trains would toot their whistle, and other crew members would wave at one another. All trains heading for the Bay Area had odd numbers, and those departing had even numbers. Our train was #52; the other was #51. The dining cars were always placed in the middle of the train, and had a number starting with 10,000.

Midway between Fresno and Los Angeles, the bleak countryside seemed deserted of everything but jackrabbits hopping about and tumbleweed rolling across the hot dry land. The kitchen was like an oven. About 4 o'clock the cooks went back to the kitchen and began to work in earnest.

The train finally slowed down and crawled through a long marshalling yard of tracks and switches. We were in Bakersfield. It wasn't long before a hard shake let us know that a second locomotive had been added, to help pull the train over the ridge not far outside of the city. As we went through tunnels and climbed ever higher, smoke poured through the train, creating a most unpleasant odor. When the train went around a curve, we looked out and saw the two locomotives straining.

The diner filled up, emptied, and filled up twice more before the work began to slow down. We finally stopped at the summit at Mojave, and the helper locomotive was uncoupled and switched to a side track. Belching out steam, it seemed very forlorn sitting there. The stark natural beauty of the California high desert was awe-inspiring. Occasionally I saw coyotes, badgers, or buzzards slowly circling the sky, and once a wildcat.



Thomas Fleming in 1929, at age 21.

The train sped through the night to Glendale and Burbank, the last stops before Los Angeles. The waiters were anxious to get rid of any loiterers who sat in the comfortable dining room. When the last passenger — or "snake two," as our chef described it — had departed, the waiters removed the table covers, polished the silverware and sacked up the linen, including the cooks' clothes.

The dining cars were spiffy, and I never saw any vermin. The kitchen floor had a sheet of copper bolted in place, fitted with wooden slats that covered every inch. I washed and scrubbed the slats until they were almost white, then stood them on their sides while we mopped the copper flooring. We oiled the top of the stove, cleaned the range and grill, polished the coffee urn, and cleaned and put away the crocks on the steam table, so that everything was shining bright.

The waiters who had some place to go — either a woman to see, or some nightclub — changed into their street clothes. I put on my own hat and jacket. When the train reached the immense multi-tracked yards, it slowed down and pulled into the huge depot. Redcap porters swarmed alongside. The crew got off as quickly as the passengers.

The Southern Pacific had a contract with a black man who operated a fleabag hotel across from the depot on Alameda Avenue. It catered only to blacks — mainly to rail workers. The railroad paid for the room, which I shared with another cook. The sheets were clean, but the building had a woebegone appearance, and a musty smell of age pervaded the whole structure. The ground floor had a pool hall, a fast food place and a recreation center. The three upper floors were all bedrooms. The owner had

some whores on the upstairs floors, and supplied bad booze. Some pool sharks made the hotel their headquarters to take advantage of train crew members.

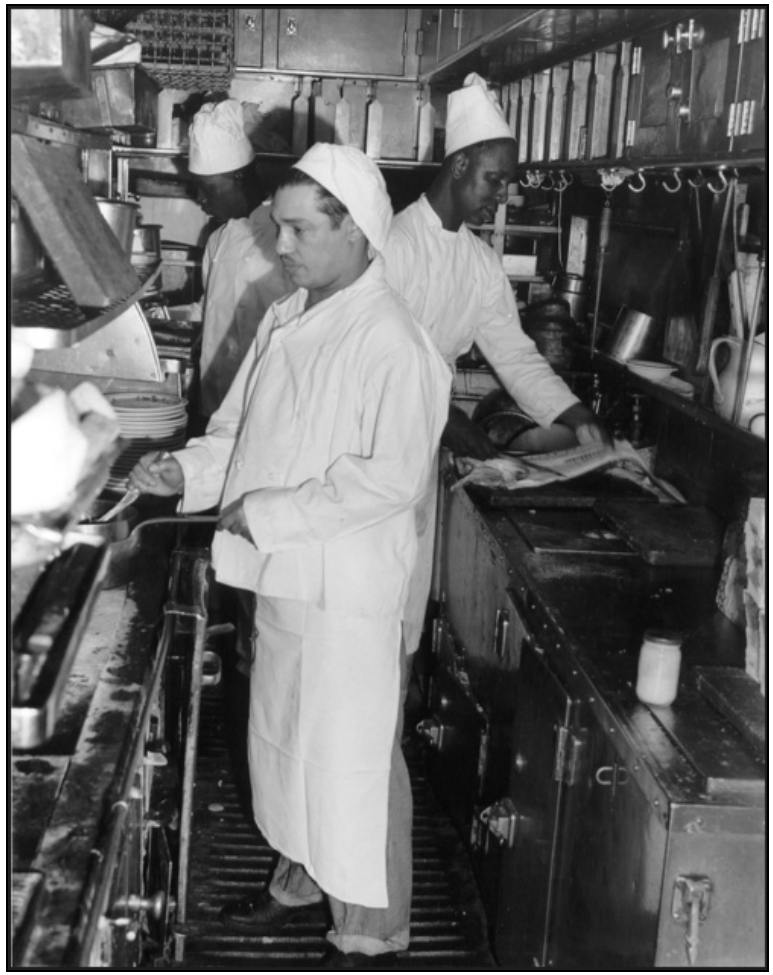
The stewards stayed at a hotel that catered to whites. Some of them were liked and some weren't, but they seemed to look down on the blacks as being beneath them, even though most of them didn't have any more education than the men they supervised.

At 6 a.m. the hotel clerk knocked loudly on our doors. We struggled out of bed, did our brief toilets, then walked down the stairs and crossed the street, where the train was already positioned for our return trip. The scheduled departure time was 8 a.m.

If any of us had a friend among the passengers, we would tell the steward and he would allow the person to get a meal free after the paying guests had left. Once I used my prerogative for two friends who let me know the day before they were traveling. They were provided with a waiter who attended them like paying guests.

I got a view of Los Angeles from the area near the railroad yards, and saw a big sign on a hill near Glendale which read "Forest Lawn." Fred Turner, our chef, explained to me that it was the fancy burial grounds for the well-to-do. He emphasized that no blacks were buried there.

Fred was a onetime professional boxer who said few words to anyone. He was one of three brothers from Salt Lake City who came to San Francisco and now worked for the railroad. They had all tried to be prizefighters when they were young. Joe, the eldest, became a local favorite in the featherweight class. He had a fearsome punch which caused most fighters in his weight class to avoid



Southern Pacific Daylight dining car crew, 1945. (l . to r.): Waiters McKinley Greene, Louis Mickens, Fred Wilson, Fred Thornton, Reeves Johnson; inspector Andrew Bachmat; steward John Henderson; waiters Courtney Reece, William Simkins, Sidney Addison, J.P. Olds, Walter White. Courtesy of David Perata.

him. He often had to fight men as large as middleweights, more than 30 pounds heavier.

The story was told that when Joe was a third cook, the superintendent of the Southern Pacific commissary became so excited during a fight that he shouted from ringside, "Knock the bum out, and I'll make you a chef tomorrow!" Joe knocked him cold. The superintendent kept his promise, for Joe was jumped over the second cook and promoted to chef. Fred followed Joe into the ring, but lost interest early and went to work for the Southern Pacific, where he rose from fourth cook to chef. He never did think his brother Joe was much of a cook, but Joe kept his job until he retired in the 1940s.

On my first trip back home to Oakland from Los Angeles, Fred and the second cook filched some eggs, butter and ham, which they put in their bags along with some of the prepared cornmeal, biscuit and hotcake packages. Then the third cook asked chef Turner if could he take a few things too. Permission was granted. Since I was new, I did not say anything or take anything. I heard that one crew member's son waited alongside the track in East Oakland, and when the train passed through, the man threw off a ham or chicken to him.

The chefs were very professional and had a lot of imagination. Our menus were varied, and the food was always fresh — nothing canned. The hamburger was made with a hand-operated meat grinder. If the main dish was roast pork, I had to peel apples and make stewed applesauce as a condiment. When chickens were boiled for chicken salad or fricassee, the stock was placed in gallon cans and saved for making sauces and gravy.

We made lamb casserole with carrots and baby white

onions, and placed each order in the oven in a separate glazed clay casserole dish with a lid. Before serving, we spooned some peas on top with a bit of chopped parsley. We made lamb curry, roast of prime rib, and corn beef with cabbage. We generally had about three different vegetables for lunch and dinner, plus mashed potatoes, rice, and sometimes candied yams. We prepared all the desserts on the train except the pound cake, and made pies of several varieties every day.

The chefs made real cooks out of us: Afterwards, we were capable of working in any fine restaurant. But most fine restaurants didn't hire black chefs.

The railroad had two black supervisors who made periodic inspections of the dining car crews — Henderson Davis, the traveling chef, and Max Hall, the traveling headwaiter. They rode over the whole Southern Pacific system to see that the kitchen, dining room and pantry were always clean and in order. Davis, who had worked his way up to chef, remained in the kitchen during mealtime to watch very closely how the food was cooked. Hall had performed equally well as a waiter, and both men could recommend whether someone could retain his job if he was not performing according to company rules.

The inspectors did not want anyone to know when they would climb on board, but when we passed a train coming toward us, someone would signal if the inspectors were waiting at the next stop. There would be a frenzy to get things in order, but we never had much to straighten up because the chef and the pantryman saw that everything was clean all the time.

Allan Pollak, general manager of the Southern Pacific's dining car service, frequently left his San Fran-

cisco office and traveled on inspection. I recall one time when Pollak was on the car at the same time as Davis and Hall, and the two black men did what we called a great Uncle Tom act, being very caustic in their comments to the crew. We knew they were just trying to impress their boss.

I served only two or three trips as fourth cook, then was moved up to third cook, and even made a couple of trips as second cook. I was lucky that first year, as I survived the layoffs that usually occurred at the end of the heavy tourist trade in late August. After returning from each trip, I had one night at home.

Several months after I joined the railroad, my earnings made it possible for us to move to a house. Fred Turner's mother-in-law owned a lot of real estate in Berkeley, and he told me that she had a two-bedroom cottage on Russell Street which rented for $25 a month. Fred showed it to my Mom, and she concluded the deal for us to become Berkeley citizens. After that, I took the same "Big Red" electric train home as Fred Turner, and I was at his house every time we were in town. He sort of adopted me, and gave me useful advice that an older man can provide.

There were many redcaps, waiters, porters and chef cooks buying homes in Berkeley and Oakland. Fred was building a lovely stucco house with a wide sweeping lawn, large back and front yards, and a variety of flowering plants. Being a widower, he was pursued hard by husband-seeking females. Fred took great pride in his house, and boasted that he lived as well as the few black professionals in the city. He did not understand that the black lawyers and doctors and dentists lived on a different scale.

Fred's stepdaughter Gertrude, whom he had helped to raise, always had the house full of young people. On one of my layovers, I met two of her guests from Los Angeles, Clyde Thompson and Al Johnson. Both were in and out of college; they'd go for a while and drop out, and were still trying to decide whether to return. The three of us shared many common views, and became very close.

Clyde and Al were suffering with the shorts, and they revealed to me their shoplifting skills when I was in a small neighborhood grocery with them. I was surprised, but they needed to eat, and I could not feed them. After that, the three of us would enter, I would distract the clerk by making a purchase, and they would be able to come out with something — bread, packaged baloney or even milk. I was nervous because I knew I was just as deeply involved as they were.

Two of the biggest football teams in the state were the University of California at Berkeley, or Cal, and the University of Southern California, USC. The week that Cal was playing USC in the Los Angeles Coliseum, Clyde told me he'd like to get back home, and I said, "I'll see what I can do."

I talked with the pantryman, who said, "Tell him to come down here early, and we'll hide him up in the locker where they keep the bedding, and we'll give him some water and a couple of sandwiches, and a can to piss in." There was a mattress and room enough for Clyde to stretch out, which made it a little comfortable. The waiters also knew he was there, but nobody else. When we got to Los Angeles, the chef came walking around the kitchen and said to Clyde: "I saw you in Oakland yesterday boy. How did you get here?" Clyde didn't say anything.

Railroaders called the locomotives "hogs" and the engineers "hogheads." Firemen were "tallow pots." We worked for Aunt Mary: That was the nickname the black workers gave to the Southern Pacific. The company was like our aunt: It gave us jobs, took care of us and provided our living.

Many rail companies got their land in the 19th century in the form of grants. The government wanted to develop the country, so when a company raised enough money, it was granted the right to build a rail line, and got as much as 20 miles of land alongside the track in a checkerboard pattern, on one side at a time so that the company wouldn't have exclusive control over the adjacent land. Railroads were responsible for towns all over the West: They sold the land off, encouraging people to come out and settle.

The Southern Pacific's corporate headquarters was in Louisville, Kentucky, even though its tracks never touched there. But Kentucky had the lowest corporate tax of any state, so the company held its board meetings there. New Orleans was the easternmost and southernmost point for the railroad. It seemed that most blacks in California came from Texas or Louisiana because those states were on the main line of the Southern Pacific. I heard that the company recruited in the South for black workers so they could pay them lower wages.

The Southern Pacific had its own hospital in San Francisco for all employees from the president on down. Everybody had to go there to take a test for syphilis. Anyone who had serious injuries from anywhere in the system was shipped to the hospital.

The main shop for the Southern Pacific was in Sacramento. Locomotives were built there, and if a car

needed some major repair work that couldn't be done locally, it was hooked onto a train going to Sacramento.

The train windows were kept closed because of dust, particularly if people were eating. The cars had no air conditioning, but there was an opening underneath the roof for chopped ice, and the train was quite cool most of the time, except for the kitchen. When you flushed the toilet, everything simply dropped on the track.

I soon found that the well-heeled white passengers did not attempt to learn the names of the porters or waiters, but addressed them simply as "George," after George Pullman. This riled the chefs, who mocked the waiters and porters by calling them "George" in the most disdainful manner.

Pullman observation cars were located on the rear of all fast luxury trains. They had a platform with lounging chairs on each side of the aisle for anyone who wished to have an outside-the-car look at the country as the train sped on. Some of the sleeping cars had roomettes, and others had upper and lower berths through the whole length of the car. Every night the porters took down the seats, converted them into beds, and put up a curtain. The porters arrived in the dining car before the first call for breakfast. Most of them ate only two meals a day.

There were always a few black travelers on the trains, and they could stay in the same sleeping cars as the whites. But in California's four biggest cities — Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and Oakland — blacks were refused service in all of the major hotels. Even big shots in the NAACP had to stay in somebody's home when visiting most cities. One sure place you could stay was the YMCA, or the YWCA for women. There

were YMCAs in black neighborhoods all over the country; the whites put them up and hired black directors for them.

In the fall of 1928, after working for the Southern Pacific for more than a year, I encountered the seniority system, in which those who have been on jobs for the shortest time are the first to be released in periods of decreased economic activity. It is one of the many benefits that the trade union movement has bestowed on American industry. When I went to the commissary to sign the time card, I found I had been scratched by a third cook with more seniority. So I had to leave the crew that I had been with since the beginning. I soon got a place on another dining car.

For most of my first two years, I worked on the San Joaquin Flyer between Oakland and Los Angeles, a distance of almost 400 miles. It left at 8 a.m. and arrived at 11:30 at night. It was put into service because of the success of the Daylight, a Southern Pacific train which had more than 100 miles of track directly along the Pacific Ocean. The Daylight was a scenic delight — one of the most picturesque rail lines in the nation.

The engineer and the conductor had the top jobs — the engineer because he operated the locomotive, and the conductor because he was the boss of the train, with all the powers of a sea captain. If someone became unruly and threatened the health and safety of other travelers, the conductor could call on the brakemen or other workers to assist him in restoring the peace. When the train reached the next stop, he would call the sheriff to come and remove such individuals.

The engineers' apprentices were the firemen. In time,

many of them moved up to become engineers. On the early locomotives, the fireman had to shovel coal into the fire box and keep it up for the whole trip. By the time I was working, the bigger coal-burning locomotives had a mechanical stoker which the fireman operated. But all the Southern Pacific trains I worked on were oil burners. The old reliable steam hog, with its chimney up front, was still the pride of the rail lines. Every time you didn't see a chimney, it meant that it was a diesel or electric train. Diesels did not completely replace steam locomotives until the 1950s.

Most trains had two brakemen. One worked the front part of the train, and the other walked about a city block behind the train whenever we stopped, to hold off any approaching train on the same track. He signalled with a red flag for the engineer to slow down or halt; at night he carried a kerosene lamp with red glass. Both brakemen worked hard to be promoted to conductor.

I didn't learn the names of most of the engineers, firemen, and other white crew because I didn't come into contact with them. One of the few occasions that I spent time with the white crew was when Japanese Emperor Hirohito's younger brother, Prince Takamatsu, went to Yosemite by train while he was on a tour of the United States. The Southern Pacific gave him and his entourage an observation car, a baggage car and a dining car with a crew of two cooks and two waiters. I was one of the cooks, along with a white chef. We cooked steaks, and just served them one meal. I didn't get to meet the prince.

JOINING THE UNION

The rail lines were at one time the biggest employers of blacks in the nation. It was hard, dirty work, and some white males thought the jobs fit only for blacks. Until the early 20th century, there were many black males working in the South as engineers, firemen, brakemen and conductors. This ended when the unions became established on virtually all American railroads. They won a good boost in pay, which made white males anxious to work as railroad men. No blacks were admitted to membership in these unions. After that, blacks were confined to being porters, dining car crew, maintenance workers and redcaps. Up until the mid-1920s in the South, one could find an occasional black fireman or engineer still lingering on branch lines in rural areas.

Fred Turner was one of the founders of the all-black Dining Car Cooks and Waiters Union, which had just gained recognition from the Southern Pacific. He was a rabid union man who took pride in the fact that he did not have to depend on tips to earn a living. But a union didn't mean very much unless it had a charter from the American Federation of Labor, which had a lily-white policy.

The Bartenders Union solved the problem by declaring the black railway employees as an auxiliary of their organization. The blacks paid dues and engaged in limited bargaining with the railroad, but with none of the voting rights that all other trade unions enjoyed.

The cooks and waiters worked 12 to 14 hours a day. Before they unionized, there was no hourly wage scale. Under the union, they got a contract for an eight-hour day and overtime pay, plus a nice retirement pension. The pay

was from $60 a month for the fourth cook to $150 a month for chefs. Waiters probably earned less than $80 a month, but with their tips, they might have made more than the chefs.

We were on our feet all day. If there were passengers in the dining room, the waiters could sit down at a table, but we had to stay back in the kitchen because we were dressed in cooks' clothes.

The Cooks and Waiters Union was largely employees of the Southern Pacific. I quickly saw that it was to my advantage to join. Fred took me by the union office on 7th Street in West Oakland, and I remained a paying member as long as I worked on the railway. William McFarlane was executive director of the union for the San Francisco Bay Area. He had a staff of one, Mattie Thomas, who did all of the clerical work in the tiny office.

Dining car workers did not need to be union members in order to get a job, and many of them did not join, despite the gains made. The union found more resistance among the waiters than the cooks. Turner hated nonunion people. He contemptuously called the waiters "scab niggers" and blasted the Pullman porters who did not join their own union. This did not affect them any, for they received the bulk of their pay in the form of tips, and most of them felt that the union could do nothing for them. In Turner's opinion, such persons were servile, not independent like he was.

On the same block in Oakland as the Cooks and Waiters Union was the local branch of the Pullman porters union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. The office was staffed by C.L. Dellums, a former Pullman porter from Texas. I met him in 1927, and two years later

he became the union's vice president in charge of the West. He made his living from a billiard parlor across the street, which other people ran for him.

Dellums was a very imposing man — handsome and impeccably dressed. He wore homburg hats, his shoes were always polished, and he spoke like a college professor. I'd go in the billiard parlor and stand around talking to him about workers and their problems. He was very good with a cue stick. You didn't see many youngsters my age joining the union, and he admired me for the positions I took. After I moved from Chico to Oakland, my dislike of Jim Crow became an obsession.

The national headquarters of the Pullman porters union was in New York City. Philip Randolph, the president, made a greater impression on me in my early days than any other individual engaged in the fight for equality. He was active in the whole civil rights movement, and his appeal was very broad to blacks all over the nation. He was a great liberal and a champion of workingmen, regardless of color.

Randolph made yearly speaking tours of the nation, and I went to hear him several times when he came to Oakland. C.L. Dellums called him "chief." He was about 6 feet tall, with a tremendous bass voice and a very commanding presence.

He and his principal lieutenants encountered a multitude of obstacles from porters — some from fear of losing their jobs if they joined the union, others out of ignorance. I met many such porters, and they fought Randolph as hard as the Pullman Company did. Many porters felt that they owed their loyalty to the company: They attended the organizing meetings that union leaders

Illustration from 1934, when the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was accepted into the American Federation of Labor. Courtesy of David Perata.

held in various parts of the nation, then informed the company about everything that occurred. Yet these turncoat porters benefitted when the union received its charter. None of them joined the union, but the company let them remain.

Before Randolph emerged as the leader of the sleeping car porters in 1925, conditions were deplorable. The hours were very long, with no overtime and very low wages, and the porters had to depend on the generosity of the traveling public. Randolph and Dellums worked very hard within the NAACP and used the same weapons as it did — protest and agitate, file lawsuits, and work on members of Congress and state legislators to get them to pass legislation. But in the early days, some porters became stool pigeons — attending meetings, then reporting back to the company what had happened.

Randolph was widely heralded for being sent a blank check, signed by the Pullman Company, and being told to write in his own figure and forget about that union nonsense. He made a photographic copy of the check, framed it to put on display, and sent back the original.

The American Federation of Labor did not want blacks in any capacity as members of an international union, and the white union leaders were very antagonistic toward Randolph. He endured all manner of insults from them before he was able to get an international charter in 1934. William Green, the AFL's president, disdained giving aid or comfort to Randolph, and had to persuade the Federation to grant him a charter, against his own wishes.

Because he was a union president, Randolph was on the board of directors of the AFL. But he was treated as a pariah: When he went to executive board meetings, the heads of all the AFL's other internationals would turn their backs to him.

In 1937 the Pullman Company agreed to accept Randolph's union as the official representative for the por-

Bronze statue of Cottrell Lawrence Dellums (1900-1989), union leader and civil rights activist, outside the C.L. Dellums Amtrak Station in Oakland. The station was named for him in 1995, and the statue was erected in 1999. He was the uncle of future Congressman and Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums.

ters. It was the first all-black union to be recognized by a major U.S. corporation. In 1978, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters merged with a larger union, the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks, and ceased to exist as an independent organization. Philip Randolph died in 1979 at the age of 90.

BOJANGLES

C.L. Dellums' billiard parlor in Oakland attracted some luminaries, including Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, a big star at the Cotton Club in Harlem. In his day he was the king of all tap dancers, appearing as a headliner for the Orpheum Circuit. He used to come through the Bay Area every year, and I would go to see him

Every big city on the West Coast had an Orpheum Theater — Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, San Diego, Oakland. San Francisco had two. They put a set of stairs on stage when Bojangles appeared so that he could dance up and down. He was the first one to develop that style.

He would wear tails, or sometimes a tuxedo or a straight suit. He'd carry on a line of patter because he didn't have any voice for singing. I wasn't a big fan, but I felt a lot of racial pride for a black man to be doing well like that.

I went down to see Bojangles play pool once. In person, he was rude and crude. Every other word was m**********. He was very domineering. The police chief in one city made him an honorary police officer and gave him a gold badge and a permit to carry a loaded gun. He'd go into a gambling place and do a lot of big talk, and

Tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, a compulsive gambler and expert pool player whose off-stage persona contrasted sharply with his media image. He portrayed a lovable butler opposite Shirley Temple and Will Rogers in such films as “The Little Colonel” and “In Old Kentucky.”

when he got in an argument, he'd flash the gun on people. Everybody respected that gun. The black middle class admired him as a dancer, but to me, he was a bully and a coward.

TRAVELS

The train crew got their orders from headquarters by telegraph sent to dispatchers at stations along the route. If the train didn't stop, the conductor and engineer would retrieve copies of the message with a hoop.

The trains rolled and leaned slightly, particularly when going around a curve, and they jerked all through the night. Not everybody could sleep, but I never had trouble. The white crew members got off and slept on land, except for the steward.

Train routes were laid out in divisions, and at each division point, the operational crew members were replaced. Their contract was to be on board for only a certain mileage or number of hours. Then they took a break before catching a train in the opposite direction.

At the bigger division points, maintenance workers examined all the wheels and oiled them if necessary to prevent hotboxes, which resulted if the bearings were not lubricated properly. When there was a worn spot — what was called a flat wheel — the workers would take notice of it, and grind it when the train arrived at a repair shop, such as Oakland, Los Angeles or Sacramento.

I picked up newspapers at the cities where we stopped and read them whenever possible. Sometimes I'd try to discuss the news with other members of the dining car

crew, but most of them didn't know much about what was happening.

One night in 1928, while the San Joaquin Flyer was halted briefly in Tracy on the way from Los Angeles to Oakland, the conductor handed some orders to the engineer and the steward. Instead of going home that night, we were to sleep on the train, stock up the next day, and leave for Portland in the afternoon. That meant double out, or overtime.

In the morning, busy little switch engines chuffed about the yard, assembling cars into a single train with six club cars, six observation cars and 12 dining cars, each fully stocked. Finally all of the cars were hooked onto a line locomotive and the train slowly pulled out of the assembly yard.

Heading north, we stopped at Port Costa, where the trains were broken up into sections before crossing the bay on train ferries. We heard that the train would deadhead to Portland with just the crews and no passengers. "Deadhead" means to go directly from one point to another, with no stops except to change the operational crew. When we went through a town at full speed we were "highballing."

We had a day and a half of travel. Meals for the crew usually required just one cook, so we walked through the cars exchanging gossip. I spent most of the afternoon sitting on the platform of the last observation car, reading newspapers and watching the scenery. In one dining car, a big crap game took place among the crew members, including several stewards.

The altitude gradually became higher. At Gerber, about 200 miles north of Oakland, a helper hog was added

and the train moved for Mt. Shasta City at the base of Mt. Shasta. This was a regular stop of the Southern Pacific, where passengers could get off and drink the clear, ice cold, naturally carbonated water from the springs. The kitchen crew always scooped up a gallon or so in storage cans and added sugar, making a delicious cream soda.

When we reached Portland the next afternoon, new trains were made up, with sleeping cars, dining cars, and an observation car and a club car in each one. A dining car waiter asked me to go with him to one of the Fox West Coast theaters. We paid our fares and started in. I headed for a seat downstairs and the female usher told me, "There's lots of seats upstairs." I said, "It looks to me there's a lot of vacant seats downstairs too." She said, "Your kind can't sit downstairs." I asked her, "Do I have a choice?" She said, "I guess you do." So I said, "I'm going to sit downstairs or I want my money back."

She got the manager and he said that's the way it was up in Oregon. So I got a refund and went back to the car. That was the only movie theater I ever encountered on the West Coast where blacks had to sit separately from whites. My friend stayed because he'd been there before and he didn't mind. But I voiced my opposition to it constantly.

At Portland there were more white redcaps than black, perhaps because the city had such a small black population. The trains filled up with Shriners, who were holding their national convention in Los Angeles that year. It was a four-day event, and some people remained on the trains because of a hotel shortage.

The 1920s were the glory days of travel, an age of opulence when fast luxury trains guaranteed the same amenities as any fine hotel — barbershop, library and on-

board secretary. The club cars had leather-stuffed chairs and a lounge where men could smoke their fat cigars and order drinks, and a little section where maids took care of the beauty needs of women passengers. The observation cars had an attendant who sold cigarettes, candy and soft drinks.

Steam locomotives hauled passenger trains such as the Broadway Limited, operated by the Pennsylvania Railroad, and the rival Twentieth Century Limited of the New York Central Railroad. There were no finer trains anywhere than those two. Both were overnights between Chicago and New York City, a route which hauled more passengers than any other in the United States. Neither had chair cars: They were made for the wealthy.

There was a steady contest of speed among the carriers. A lot of businessmen traveled at night; you could leave New York and get to Chicago in about 16 hours. In the late 1930s, when the new streamliners were introduced, the Southern Pacific, Union Pacific and Santa Fe all shouted that their fast trains took 39 hours to get from California to Chicago. For every hour past the slated time, passengers would be reimbursed one dollar.

Several competing lines operated luxurious trains from New York City to Florida. They did their big volume of business in the wintertime. I knew guys who went back East every winter to work on them. Some ultra-rich folks bought exquisite private cars and hired their own crew.

One of the chefs I worked for was Ollie McClelland, a striking 6-foot 4-inch black man, the father of four sons. Like the majority of blacks on the railroads, he had little education. I discovered his illiteracy when I saw him holding a newspaper upside down and acting as though he

were reading it. He'd say, "I don't see too well, Tom. Could you read something to me?", and I would. Ollie recognized his own limitations, so he pushed his kids to attend school. One son, Ollie Jr., graduated from the University of California and became a high school principal in Los Angeles, then the superintendent of a school district. Another son, Alden, earned a law degree and practiced in the Bay Area.

I don't think color made any difference to the Southern Pacific for the kitchen crew, as long as you were qualified. I never saw a white waiter, but I did work with one white chef. He was a hell of a nice old man, and a very good cook. He belonged to the Cooks and Waiters Union — the only member I ever met who wasn't black.

Many of the rail workers made heavy use of the bottle. A waiter named George Watson, who told everyone to call him "Papa George," was boozed every time he came to work, and always brought a pint with him. How he managed to walk down the aisle of a swaying dining car with a trayload of food always puzzled me, since it appeared that he was always staggering. One chef, Jerry Wright, consumed large quantities of awful homemade stuff. He was a troubled man who argued constantly with the steward. He could lift french fries out of the frying pan with his bare hands.

A TRIP TO CHICAGO

In January 1930 I made the first of about four trips as a cook on the Overland Limited, a luxury passenger train which ran between Oakland and Chicago. It was three

nights out, each way. The train left Oakland on Southern Pacific tracks as far as Ogden, Utah. Then the Union Pacific took over the train until Omaha, Nebraska. There the Chicago and North Western Railway picked it up and took it to Chicago.

Each of the three lines had its own white operational crew, and they didn't really seem to work hard. The dining car crew worked all the way through to Chicago, and we couldn't take a bath or shower until the end of the run. One-third of the car was a dormitory, with bunks for the dining car crew. Other times, on trains with no sleeping quarters, we took tables from the dining car, laid them across four chairs, and put mattresses on them. We were provided with sheets, blankets and pillows. At about 11:30 p.m. we wended our way to our bunks and dropped off to sleep. The watch cook got up at six and called the rest of us out of bed.

As we rolled across Nevada the next day, I scanned the landscape and saw endless miles of empty land. Late the next afternoon the train crossed into Utah, which appeared even more desolate than Nevada.

The train pulled onto the Southern Pacific trestle that went across the Great Salt Lake. The chef told me the salt was so dense that nothing would sink in there. I tossed out a good-sized lump of coal, and sure enough, it did not simply disappear. There were plenty of sea birds whirling about. The train finally rolled off the lake and travelled the short distance to Ogden. There the diner received a huge cargo of fresh mountain trout.

During the night, the train passed through Green River, Wyoming, which bore quite a reputation because of a black man called "Cat Eyes" who operated a rooming

Advertisement for the Overland Limited, which ran between Chicago and Oakland. Thomas Fleming made several trips on this train as a cook in the early 1930s. Despite the ad's claim, it was far from the "most luxurious train in the world." *Cosmopolitan* magazine, 1902.

house and bar to serve the train crews. One could eat a meal, gamble, or, if in the mood, purchase romance in the person of a number of females.

The train finally reached Cheyenne, Wyoming. After the usual crew change, the Overland rolled through a small portion of Colorado, then back into Wyoming before crossing into Nebraska. At some of the small towns, farmers came to the depot to sell chickens, eggs and other produce. Train crew members bought, since all produce was fresh. Some waiters and cooks gave it to their lady friends.

On the third day out, when the last passengers were in the final phase of their dinner, the train pulled into Omaha, the biggest city we had reached since leaving Oakland. There the Union Pacific gave up operation of the train: The Overland Limited and the Golden State Limited from Los Angeles were consolidated into one train, which was taken over by the Chicago and North Western, a line which had huge passenger locomotives with deep hoarse horns. They were fondly called 400s; I was told it was because they took 400 minutes to haul their crack trains from Chicago to Minneapolis.

All through the night, the train rolled through Iowa "hollering," with few stops. When I woke up the next morning we were in Illinois. We arrived at the Chicago and North Western Station at about 9 a.m. Some guys had two homes — a wife in California and a girlfriend they kept in Chicago. One chef — whose name I shall refrain from using — was caught by the railway police when he was getting off the train in Chicago with a bag full of food to take to his girlfriend's house. The Southern Pacific ordered him to work his way back to California, and fired

him.

Chicago was the hub of the rail system in the United States. Nearly all passengers going between California and the Atlantic coast had to change trains there, and all the lines offered jobs to blacks. It was also the headquarters of the Pullman Company, where the company manufactured its cars.

Blacks had more observable political muscle in Chicago than anywhere else in the nation. Some were hired as policemen and firemen. It was a beacon for the blacks of Tennessee and Kentucky. It seemed that the farther away from the Atlantic coast blacks lived, the more likely they were to go to Chicago instead of New York.

Our layover in Chicago was two days and one night. The Southern Pacific leased a large two-story rooming house for its black crew members. It was on the South Side, where the bulk of the black population lived. We had to get our own meals.

One waiter who knew the Windy City showed me around the South Side. It seemed like a black city. One large department store was owned by the Jones brothers, who were black. Along State Street, one found the usual small, black-operated commercial enterprises and white-owned shops for dry goods and furniture, but all of them had black staffers.

We went by the multistoried building for Supreme Life Insurance, one of the largest black-owned insurance companies in the country. My guide had been by several times, so he introduced me to the manager and some staff members. I noted the attractive young ladies working as secretaries and clerks. Most customers were old-style people looking for burial insurance. The company could

have charged them 50 cents a month for a life policy of $250 to $500 and still made money off them.

Duke Ellington during his years at the Cotton Club in Harlem, circa 1930.

In Chicago I bought a newspaper in the depot as usual, and discovered that Duke Ellington's band was appearing on the stage of the Oriental Theater downtown. We in the West had been listening to Ellington's broadcasts from the Cotton Club, where he gained an international reputation. We'd gather at one another's homes to hear the broadcast because the radios were too large to take around with you. He played the Cotton Club from 1927 and 1931, and would leave at periods to go on tour.

The stage show in Chicago included dancers, vocalists

and the band. So I decided: this I must see. The landlady gave me directions for the streetcar downtown. There was snow on the ground and I had on my light California clothes, but I sat through three shows, listening to the music and watching the contortions of Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker, whose body looked like it was made out of rubber. Ellington led the group from the piano. After that, I went to see him many times when he came to Oakland or San Francisco.

AN INCIDENT IN RENO

I didn't generally get off the trains between terminals, but on one of my trips back from Chicago, I had a chance to visit Reno, Nevada. It was the biggest town in the state, probably because it was near Lake Tahoe, a primary resort area. Las Vegas was still unheard of. Gambling clubs existed then, but not on the scale that one finds now.

Gamblers of Chinese descent operated a few clubs across the railroad tracks. Their clients were largely blacks and other nonwhites. The big attraction was the Chinese lottery, found in Chinese places of business in just about every town of any size in California. You could play from a nickel up. The tickets had Chinese characters on them, and you marked one of those with a pencil. Runners came by and picked up the money and the tickets. There were drawings all through the day. I never played, but you'd see the tickets on the sidewalks everyplace. It was similar to the numbers in New York. In some cities they called it policy, I guess because it was like an insurance policy.

At Sparks, a suburb of Reno, the dining car was de-

detached, and we had about five hours of layover, so I caught a bus into town with Ken Levy, one of the waiters. Ken and I knew about the Jim Crow reputation of Reno, but we wanted to look the town over. We got off near the depot and began to walk around the neon-lit street, gawking like any other tourists. We traveled about three blocks and came to a solid block of the two-room shacks known as cribs, which prostitutes occupied.

A police cruiser rolled up and stopped. One of the cops got out, walked over to us and asked, why were we in that part of town? I still had on my cook's pants and jacket, and my other jacket over that. We explained that we worked on the train, and were simply sightseeing. He said, "Your kind of people stay down there around the depot. You don't come to this part of town." He ordered us back to the slum area, where the blacks, Chinese, Mexicans and Indians lived.

I was surprised: We were just walking the street, not bothering anyone. I had heard about that kind of stuff in Nevada, but when I experienced it, I made my mind up that I wasn't going to ever go there for a damn thing from then on. After that, I just went through the state. I've kept that vow, and have yet to visit it since Las Vegas became one of the major tourist attractions in the nation, where, I hope, blacks are accepted like others.

THE DEPRESSION BEGINS

When the stock market crashed in 1929, few thought that the nation and the world were on the verge of the Great Depression, which would bring many profound

changes, politically, socially and economically.

I could put together what was happening. Newspapers spread stories about industrial plants and coal mines closing up. Trade unions fought hard to survive as more and more workers were laid off. Farmers ruined the crops that they couldn't sell; in Chico they poured their milk down the drain.

I began to realize just how big the Depression was during my first trip to Chicago. Every freight train we passed was full of people — men and women, blacks and whites, sometimes entire families with babies in their arms, wandering in search of jobs that simply did not exist. The families always stayed inside the cars; some men rode on top. People were on the move all over the nation. More were riding the freights than the passenger trains. Some people would go down in the train yards and try all the sliding doors. If they found an unlocked one on an empty car, they would climb in.

All railways had their own security police, which the public called railroad bulls. The Santa Fe Railroad had a reputation for hiring the toughest ones. I heard that at a junction in the Mojave Desert, they would watch people board a freight train, and when it started rolling, the bulls would get on and throw the freeloaders off.

I saw trains in the depot in Los Angeles with 10 or more cars filled with Mexicans headed south across the border, with bars on the windows so they couldn't get out. The immigration service had picked them up. Most of them came right back.

My mother and sister were now both working full-time as domestics, but I was paying most of the rent on their house because I made more than both of them to-

together. Mom was tied up with her church, which Kate had joined.

The passenger business went down, so some Pullman sleeping cars were replaced with chair cars and some routes were canceled. If your seniority was less than 10 years, your chances of working every day were not good.

I was bumped around from one dining car to another, and began to suffer my first apprehensions about life. I would spend the day down at the board, hoping for a vacancy, but I had no luck. Before 1931 ended, work had become so infrequent that for long periods I did not go near the commissary. I worked maybe one trip every three weeks. By 1932, the railroad no longer had a place for me. I didn't quit my job; I just stopped going down there.

If the Depression had not created a situation in which I could no longer work steadily, I might have remained a rail worker. No doubt I would have been a chef cook, since I was next in line to be promoted to second cook when I left.

Even today, I'd much rather ride a train or a bus than an airplane. I've always been interested in geography, and when you're down on the ground, you can watch the countryside and see the changes. The last time I took a long train ride was in 1980, when I traveled across the country. The food was much better when I worked there. Now they serve you a hamburger and a Coke. I call them hamburger cars.

I did all my own cooking until I was 98 years old, and almost everything I cooked, I learned on the railroad. But I didn't make french fries. I used to work my tail off to get those potatoes peeled and shaped and cooked, and I hated the sight of them.

The railroads never did recover after the Depression, but they continued to haul a lot of people until the 1950s. Then the freeways and commercial airlines took off because people wanted to get wherever they were going in a hurry.

The railroads started to eliminate the passenger business, and in 1972, nearly all long-distance passenger lines in the country were taken over by Amtrak, which is run by the federal government. There are no private passenger trains anymore. The people who ride Amtrak: You can't drag them on a plane.

I didn't think the Southern Pacific would ever be sold, as big as it was. But Union Pacific bought it out in 1996, and there's no Southern Pacific any longer. The merged company hauls only freight.

* * *

THE DEPRESSION, 1932-1940

HOOVER AND ROOSEVELT

In the presidential election of 1928, when I was old enough to vote for the first time, I registered as a Socialist so I could vote for Norman Thomas. When I told my udncle Thomas Jackson, I thought he was going to have a stroke. He said, "You young damn fools! What the hell did you do that for?" I never asked him who he voted for, but he was a very conservative, diehard Republican. Some blacks thought that Democrats had horns.

That election was won by the Republican candidate, Herbert Hoover. He grew up as a poor boy in Iowa, graduated from Stanford University, and made a lot of money as a civil engineer in Australia and China. When he became a millionaire, he started doing public service. After World War I, he headed the U.S. mission to provide relief to the war refugees in Europe.

The media built him up as a great organizer. But I didn't care for Hoover at all, because one of the planks in his platform was that the Republican Party should be for whites only, and he upheld all Jim Crow practices to get white support in the South. Hoover's plan worked, for the Republican Party became lily-white in the South, and remains so today.

In 1930, Hoover nominated John J. Parker, an ultra-conservative from North Carolina, to the U.S. Supreme Court. Parker had been very antiblack in his rulings while serving as a federal judge, and the NAACP protested all over the United States, writing letters to senators and congressmen and holding demonstrations in some cities.

The American Civil Liberties Union joined with them, other white liberals opposed Parker, and the Senate rejected the nomination.

Until 1928, all political power in the South was held by the Democratic Party. It was organized like a private club that banned all but whites. They campaigned on a platform designed to forever prevent blacks from voting. All of the devices that could be legally used — such as the poll tax and ability to read portions of the Constitution — were employed, along with outright force. Any black who had the temerity to challenge the system and register to vote might end up being jailed, or in some extreme cases, pay with his life.

Almost all black voters in the nation were Republicans. During Reconstruction, several states elected former slaves to Congress — Republicans who had the protection of the Union Army, which assured blacks the right to vote. Those heady days ended when the last of the federal troops were withdrawn from the South in 1877.

Blacks held no public offices in the South in the 1920s, but in some Southern cities, black Republican leaders could fix a traffic ticket or stop a gambling raid. They didn't have any real influence, but it was better than what the Democrats did for blacks.

Many of the black spokesmen for Republicanism outside the Deep South, I later discovered, were just Uncle Toms who received a small sum of money during election times, which their white masters assumed bought the black vote.

Most Southern congressional members were segregationists who used the floor of Congress to spew out their blatant racism. Theodore "The Man" Bilbo, one of the

most devoted supporters of white supremacy ever to sit in Congress, served in the House and then the Senate for Mississippi. He used only one term when campaigning for election — "I'm agin' niggers" — which brought whoops of joy from his all-white mob of rabble-rousing followers.

Then there was Tom Heflin, the loudmouth senator from Alabama who was given the name of "Tom-Tom" by his adoring constituents, because he repeated himself like he was banging a drum. Alabama enjoyed the status of being a state where ignorance was held a virtue, and where blacks were viewed as being some form of working animal in the same manner as mules and horses — beasts of burden who should never be accepted as human beings.

Both of these sterling examples of Southern politicians were residents of rural areas. White farmers who scratched out a miserable existence felt they were better than blacks, and any real or fancied crime that blacks might commit could lead to the hapless suspect facing a lynch mob. Most times the sheriff and his staff took part themselves.

Ed Crump was boss of the Democratic Party in Tennessee and parts of Mississippi, which are separated by the mighty Mississippi River. Every Election Day he sent his henchmen across the river to round up blacks who could not vote in their home state, loaded them on wagons, and ferried them across the river to polling places in Memphis, to vote as they were told by Crump's people. They would be given $1 and a half pint of whisky, then driven back to their homes in Mississippi.

From Reconstruction days up until the late 1940s, the sole ambition of congressional and Senate members from the Southern states was to prove to the electorate that blacks had no rights as citizens. Shrewd politicians real-

ized that the only way they could survive was to use the most virulent forms of demagoguery to keep the wool-hat boys holding onto their fear that black people might just be human like themselves.

They were political hustlers. Politics has always been a lucrative field for some who are unable to find a job — better than gambling, pimping, or other means used by people of limited skills who prefer not to work like those who daily earn money to take care of the needs of themselves and their families.

* * *

Nineteen thirty-two was one of the low points of the Depression. The government had promised a bonus of $500 to most veterans of World War I, but it was not supposed to be paid until 1945. When the Depression came, the men wanted the bonus right away. A call went out, and in June they descended on Washington in jalopies, on freight trains — any way they could get there. I knew some black guys in California who went. The marchers camped out in the city and scared the hell out of Hoover. The so-called "Great Engineer" seemed paralyzed with fear to even leave the White House. He ordered the War Department to clear the veterans out of the streets. Douglas MacArthur was the Army chief of staff then — the head general in the Army. He used tear gas, and even brought out a couple of tanks as a means of intimidation. A lot of the marchers were badly beaten. They finally dispersed and went home. I was outraged: I didn't see the necessity to treat them in this manner.

That fall, workers were putting in a new sewage

system near the Oakland Auditorium. The cement pipes were laying there on their side, before they were connected, and they were high enough that you could stand up in them. Quite a few people slept in them at night. They were shelter, and people didn't have anyplace else to sleep. It lasted until the new piping was put in the ground the next year.

In the election of 1932, Hoover repeated his slogan of lily-whiteism. More and more whites in the Deep South became Republicans. Blacks did not become a part of the Democratic Party until that year, which elevated Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency. Democrats under Roosevelt openly sought registration of blacks as members of the party. I switched from Socialist to Democrat in that election. Since then, I've always voted Democrat.

Quickly after taking office, Roosevelt ended the noble experiment of banning booze to the public. He kept Congress in constant session, submitting more and more bills. When he made his fireside chats over the air, he sounded so cozy, like he was in your own home. When I heard his voice, I felt that he was a friend.

The New Deal brought a new period in the political activities of blacks. Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady, went all over the country and spoke to blacks in their churches and other places. When Franklin Roosevelt supported the suffrage of all Americans — although his support was very modest — whites began their desertion of the Democratic Party.

Blacks in Chicago had more observable political muscle than anywhere else in the nation. A number of blacks from the South Side were elected as aldermen, which was equivalent to the city council. The majority of

blacks were a part of the political machine run by Republican Mayor "Big Bill" Thompson. Roosevelt's election changed the political complexion of Chicago, as the Democratic Party replaced the Republicans.

The New Deal improved things for black Americans. Not as much as many of us hoped, but Roosevelt appointed more blacks to high posts than any other president had; they were called the Black Cabinet. They weren't Cabinet rank, but served an advisory role. They included William Henry Hastie, Walter White, Robert C. Weaver, and Mary McLeod Bethune, who was a close confidante of Eleanor Roosevelt. Felix Frankfurter, the Supreme Court justice, recommended some of those blacks because they had gone to Harvard Law School, where he had been a distinguished professor. They were called "Frankfurter hot dogs."

Weaver was perhaps the best educated of the Black Cabinet. He held a doctorate from Harvard in economics. His theme to other black persons was to "fight hard and legally and don't blow your top." Although he never did become as well known as Bethune, Phillip Randolph, or W.E.B. Du Bois, he deserves a place in black history as one of the leading fighters to end racial discrimination in the United States.

The Black Cabinet went out over the country to talk about the war effort. I saw William Hastie when he came out to California. He and Weaver could get to Roosevelt probably quicker than any other black, except for Ma Bethune, who founded Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona, Florida. The call went out to all of black America that people with a problem that could be addressed only by Washington should see Bethune.

Eleanor had a newspaper column, "My Day," which appeared in the Scripps-Howard papers. I used to read it every day in the *San Francisco News*. She was traveling all the time: She went overseas to visit our boys, to the Pacific and Europe both. She might have been a little more liberal than her husband, because she didn't have the responsibility of being president, and she got out and confronted situations on the streets. A lot of people didn't think the president's wife should be getting into the many things she did, but you could see by her actions that she believed black people were people like anybody else.

SURVIVING THE DEPRESSION

The Depression was rough as hell. Blacks probably suffered worse than whites because they were at the lowest step of the ladder anyway. They had a depression before the Depression started.

My mother and sister had jobs as domestics all through the Depression, but the pay was almost nothing. There was a white wage level that blacks never enjoyed. The only job market where blacks enjoyed parity with nonblacks was in the area of government. Some people were fortunate enough to hold civil service jobs, in whatever positions the government permitted a few token blacks to slip or slide into. People who held such jobs all had the same pay, in each rank in which they enjoyed tenure.

The federal government seemed to hire more blacks than the city or state. These jobs were said to be for life. The post office had a long history of hiring blacks;

they worked as postal clerks and mail carriers all over the country, including the Deep South. Many of us can recall when the San Francisco post office was staffed predominantly by blacks. You'd find a lot of them with some college exposure, because they couldn't get jobs in other areas. Others worked for the customs service, under the Department of the Treasury. Oakland had maybe five or 10 black postal workers, whereas San Francisco might have had 100; many of them lived in Oakland or Berkeley and commuted every day.

The homeless did not flock to the inner areas of the cities, as they do now. But their presence was just as vivid — hundreds living in shacks built of cardboard and wood on the outskirts of the cities, near the railroad tracks. In San Francisco, some homeless people would go into the Hall of Justice on Kearny Street and fall asleep in the corridors. Most of the time, the cops would take them upstairs and put them in cells.

At one time, California had a poor farm system in the rural counties. There was one in Butte County, in the Sacramento Valley. It was around for a long time before the Depression. From the material I could gather, it was a damn sad place to put people. The poor farms could only handle a certain number of people, and in the Depression, there were so many people who were made jobless that the government had to get rid of the system.

I never had any bad problems during the Depression. I ate every day. I always enjoyed cooking for myself after I worked on the dining car, as long as we could keep the gas on. I had very little money, but it looked like everybody was in the same situation. My family never applied for relief.

I went to the unemployment office — everybody did that — but there were no jobs. When you're in that kind of situation, your wits sharpen. I had some friends in Oakland and Berkeley I knew real well, who still had jobs. I'd go by about 5:30 in the afternoon, and naturally when they sat down to eat, they'd ask me, would I have dinner? I never refused. I had a schedule worked out for a while.

When the Depression started, I owned two suits, half a dozen shirts, and two good pairs of shoes, so I could always look nice when I came out of the house, if I wanted. I used to wash my own clothes and iron my shirts. I never did want very much — just a roof over my head and a bed to sleep in. I never had aspirations to acquire property or anything.

A black churchman who named himself Father Divine was very active then. His congregation started in New York and spread to Philadelphia, Washington, and then Chicago. It was a phenomenon. He appealed to wealthy whites: They gave him most of the money he got. After his first wife died, he married a young white woman, who was called Mother Divine.

When the Depression came, he had churches all over the country, including Los Angeles, Oakland and San Francisco. Almost as many whites joined as blacks. They opened up dining halls where you could get all you could eat for 25 cents. If you didn't have 25 cents, they would still feed you.

I went into the place on 8th Street in Oakland — more out of curiosity than anything else, because I had heard about the meals. The food was very good. The main entree could have been chicken or beef stew or lamb stew, and they served vegetables, rice and potatoes, dessert, and

small bowl of salad. They could probably seat 100 at one time at those long tables. People were dressed in their Sunday best, because lots of them attended the religious service before the mealtime.

Father Divine with Mother Divine.

If you had the quarter, you'd put it in and say, "Thank you Father." And if you didn't have money, you would say it anyway. Of course they would try to convert you, to

become a Christian, but they didn't bother you too much. I went down there about three times for Sunday dinner. I never attended their meetings, because it was still a church to me, and I didn't go to church.

The Father Divine movement was so big that the national press had to pay attention to it. He got as much publicity as any well-known person, black or white. The dining hall in Oakland closed when World War II broke on the scene. But Father Divine continued to have a large following until he died in 1965. Mother Divine is still living, and heads the organization today, which is based in Philadelphia and known as the International Peace Mission Movement.

FURTHERING MY EDUCATION

In 1928, a black man named Oscar McFarlane opened a combination newsstand, confectionery and stationery store on 7th Street in West Oakland. It was the first black-owned store in Oakland to sell hardcover books by black authors. McFarlane also sold black newspapers from all the large cities in the country.

McFarlane's store was about three blocks from the railroad commissary where I reported for work, and I used to stop quite often to pick up magazines. McFarlane and I developed a warm relationship. I was an avid reader of cowboy stories until McFarlane said, "You've got a good mind. What are you reading that trash for?"

He asked if I had ever thought of reading other types of magazines. He turned my attention to *The Messenger*, edited by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, a

periodical that was regarded by conservative blacks as being too radical. While still at the newspaper, Randolph had become president of the Pullman porters union, and his financial troubles forced *The Messenger* to close down in 1928.

McFarlane also pointed out *The Crisis*, the monthly magazine of the NAACP. That led to my reading *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League, plus the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender,* the best-known of the national black weekly papers. The *Defender* had the largest circulation; a little later, the *Courier* put on a mass drive and became even bigger. McFarlane also had the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Kansas City Call*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*.

The *Defender* gave strong support to Oscar De Priest, the Republican who was first elected alderman in Chicago In 1915, then congressman in 1928. He represented the


THE MOUTHPIECE OF
14 MILLION PEOPLE
Carries More Live News of Racial Interest Than Any Ten Weeklies
THE
Chicago Defender
Twenty Pages of Reading Matter Compiled by Experts

The *Chicago Defender*, founded in 1905, attracted a national readership and became the most influential black newspaper in the country.

district that included the South Side, which was populated by more than 200,000 blacks. He was the first black elected to Congress since Reconstruction. That made interesting reading for black America, and was one reason why the *Defender* enjoyed its large national circulation. DePriest served three terms, until he was defeated in 1934 by Arthur W. Mitchell, a black Democrat. The Democrats have held that seat ever since.

A few black reporters wrote for the white press, such as Eugene Gordon, a young staff man on the *Boston Globe*, and George Schuyler, a columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier* who also wrote for the *American Mercury*, H.L. Mencken's magazine. A lot of blacks didn't like Schuyler because of the acidity of his pen. He criticized all human behavior, in the style of Mencken. They admired one another very much.

In 1931 George Schuyler wrote a hilarious book titled *Black No More*, which sold like pancakes. It was a satire about a guy who discovered a formula in his laboratory that could turn black people white, and showed all the confusion that would result. Some blacks read it and rolled with laughter. Some were sensitive about it. But I thought it was funny as hell.

Mencken was my idol. He called Herbert Hoover "Dr. Hoover." I used to laugh out loud reading him. The *American Mercury* changed my way of thinking an awful lot, and I later adopted a lot of things I thought he would have done. He could really write it down.

Plain Talk, edited by George Seldes, was just a step behind the *Mercury*. Its contents always included serious presentations of social problems, and it was bitterly opposed to that act of national lunacy, Prohibition.

McFarlane got me buying *Harper's*, *The Nation,* the *New Republic*, *Colliers* and *The Atlantic*, all of which had a large intellectual following. After that, I started spending what little money I had on these magazines. This changed my views about society a great deal, for before this period, although I hated racial discrimination, I could not articulate my views about it, or on the social problems that confronted all of us.

In 1931, my mother and sister and I had started buying the home we lived in. It was a five-room house on Dohr Street in Berkeley: two bedrooms, a dining room, kitchen and bath. All the landlord asked was $2,000, for which we made a monthly payment of $25. Then the Depression came along and knocked me out of a job. In 1932 we closed the house up and my mother and sister rented a smaller place. We never lived together again.

I had a friend named Robinson Baker, and since I was a frequent visitor at his home in West Oakland, I accepted his mother's invitation to move in. She and her husband Moses had three lively sons. The others were Charles and Edwin. Mrs. Baker was a sort of surrogate mother to students who came to Berkeley in search of an education. She fed so many people every day, and made everybody welcome. She had a heart as big as that house.

The Baker family's best-known member was Moses' brother Charles Baker, one of the two black morticians doing business in Oakland. The other company, Hudson and Butler, had been here longer, so they got whole families because people knew them. Butler got the "society blacks" and Baker the working-class blacks.

Uncle Charlie tried to make a mortician out of all of us. He used to send Robinson, his eldest nephew, and me

out on the wagon when somebody died in their home. We'd get the bodies and throw them up on the slab and hose them down. I didn't last very long because I couldn't stand the odor of that embalming fluid; it looked like it would tear out all your nose. Edwin, the youngest, was the only one who stuck with it. He took over the business after Uncle Charlie died.

I don't care much for the funeral business. I've only attended a few funerals in my life. I like to remember people how they were when they were alive.

In Berkeley I became acquainted with "Ma" Francis, whose son, Robert Coleman Francis, was possibly the first black ever to earn a Ph.D. at the University of California at Berkeley. He had been an all-city football player at Polytechnic High in San Francisco, and everybody called him "Smoke" Francis. Joe Francis, Ma's late husband, had been the editor of the *Pacific Outlook*, one of the few black weekly newspapers published in California just after the turn of the century. It was founded in Los Angeles in 1906, and continued until World War I or later.

After I met Ma, I stopped by quite frequently when I passed their home. I also met John Bussey, who had been at UC Berkeley with Smoke Francis. On his graduation, Bussey attended Harvard University School of Law. Many years later he was appointed by Governor Goodwin Knight as the first black judge in Northern California. But he was even more famous for starting a coaching school for law school graduates, the Bussey Law Review Course, to train them to take the California bar exam. It was more than successful. There were a lot of lawyers here in town — almost all white — who said they owed their passing the bar to John Bussey.

Smoke Francis went on to teach at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, a state-supported segregated school. He married one of those women who was black and didn't want to be black, and she didn't speak to his mother or his sister. Smoke followed that direction. He came back to San Francisco with his wife and son after seven or eight years, and became a heavy alcoholic. I would see him down at the Transbay terminal, hustling small change off people who knew him when he was an all-star athlete. It was a disgrace what he did to himself.

There was always a lively bunch gathered at Ma's house. On one such occasion, she said, "You've got a good head on you. Why don't you go back to school?" I said, "Well I don't have any money." She said, "There's a four-year school in Chico. Why don't you go there?"

I said, that's where my Grandma's still living." I told her I hadn't given it a thought: My mother and sister needed my support. Ma asked me about it every time, but I always answered that I did not know how I could do it without some source of income.

California's state colleges had not been defined as universities then, although they offered some graduate courses. When I attended high school in the 1920s, there were eight of those schools located in the state. They were then two-year teacher training colleges, called normal schools. In 1930, they were made into four-year liberal arts schools, but remained heavily oriented towards teacher training. Chico State Normal School became Chico State College.

Charles Baker, the mortician's nephew, had just graduated from high school in Oakland. I mentioned to him the idea of attending Chico State, which interested

him, as well as my friend Ken Levy, who had made a trip to Reno with me as a waiter on the Southern Pacific, and had attended UCLA for a year. I convinced both Charles and Ken that we would have a bed to sleep in, since my grandmother would be glad to see me come back. Our only problem would be how we could feed ourselves, since Granny was in her seventies and received a very meager assistance from the state.

In July 1932, Charles, Ken and I made the trip up north to the small town where I had spent a happy childhood, to scout the layout before registering for classes. We got a big welcome from Granny. We didn't have to pay her any rent because she owned her own place. She was overjoyed that I was going to college, because I don't think she had gone past the third grade.

Chico State was the only four-year school in the Sacramento Valley then. There was no cafeteria, and only one dormitory, at the Bidwell Mansion, which housed about a dozen female students. I enrolled and took 12 units, majoring in political science. Tuition was $10 a semester, and an additional $2 a semester for student body fees, which admitted you to athletic events and other social activities. I didn't join the student body because I had to do everything I could to find work.

The first black student to attend Chico State was a girl from Red Bluff named Irma Williams, who enrolled in 1921, when it was still called a normal school. She stayed till she graduated. I never heard of any other blacks there until I attended myself. Besides Charles, Ken and me, there was only one other black student on campus, Maude Watson from Oroville, out of a student population of about 1,400.

I had one advantage in my favor: A lot of folks knew me, which helped me in securing odd jobs, like washing windows, polishing hardwood floors and working in yards. We took everything we could get. If somebody said they wanted their car washed, the three of us would go there and do it together.

The manager of a chain of supermarkets through the Sacramento Valley stopped me one day and congratulated me on my return. He told me that when a big supply truck arrived with the produce, he would give me a job unloading. The next day he called me. I brought Ken and Charles with me, and we got about four hours of work, because the truck was as long as a freight boxcar. We did that a number of times. He paid us each 50 cents an hour.

That was a lot, with the price of food being down. Ribs were 20 cents a pound, a loaf of bread 12 cents, a pound of red beans 10 cents. The beans became a very steady diet. That first fall, we bought 50 pounds of red beans and about 30 pounds of rice, and I fixed beans every way you could think of for about a month. For a long time after that I wouldn't look a red bean in the eye. On Sundays I made bread pudding out of raisins and bread. There were always fresh vegetables, some donated by people who had gardens at home, and some from my friend at the supermarket — frayed, but still unspoiled and edible.

Some middle-class families came to the students' employment office looking for help. That's how I met Harold Staples, a professional photographer who had a studio on Broadway. He learned I had been a cook on the railroad diner, and asked me, could I fix hot lunch for his two small boys, Stan and Boyd, at noon every day when

they came home from grammar school? My last class in the morning was about 11 o'clock and the Staples home was right off campus, so I answered yes. Then he asked, could I prepare dinner for the family? I agreed.

I thought maybe they had some doubt about what I could do in the kitchen, so I made a lemon cream pie. That sold them. I'd also come over on Saturdays to clean up the studio, wash the floor and windows, and take care of the lawn. And for that I got the magnificent sum of $5 a week. The job lasted for one semester.

Gradually word got around that I was back in town to go to school. When I was riding a bicycle near the home of Virginia Wright, my first teacher in Chico, she came running out of the house and said, "Thomas, I'm so proud of you." I stood there and talked to her quite a while.

It always struck me as odd that when I became the first black male from Chico to go to college, the white people appeared more delighted than the blacks. There were two black families who resented me. I think they were a little bit envious. They had a lot of white blood in them and bragged about it, and they didn't think anybody my color could do that well. But I didn't let it discourage me: I'd been in the outside world. To me, they were provincials and I was a cosmopolite.

Mrs. Johnson, the mother of my old classmate Ted Johnson, told me to my face, "You can't make it." I said, "I'm going to show you that I can make it." And I thought that was a hell of a way to receive me. She'd known me since I was a kid. She always thought her son Teddy was a little god, and that Henry Herriford and I were too rough for him. When he was about 19, he left home and tried to become a pimp in Los Angeles, while Henry and I sought

lawful occupations. He didn't do too well there so he eventually came back home. He did many things to humiliate his mother, and was a source of real sorrow for her.

One person who gave me a warm welcome back was Mrs. Boyd, a white woman who lived across the street from Henry's grandmother. The Boyd family never engaged in condescending conversation toward me. Mrs. Boyd was a stout, white-haired woman and the mother of four sons. "Red," the eldest, had been one of my teachers at Oakdale School. Another son, George, was a graduate student from Berkeley, and I started going over to his house so that he could help me with my classes. I think George had turned his back on society, because all he did was to stay in his mother's house and read. He loved for me to visit him, and he'd go over everything with me every night. He was the greatest help to me, showing me what techniques I could follow to study better. I was a C student.

Moses Mosley, my stepfather, was still up there. He was then managing a hog farm on about 30 or 40 acres in the nearby town of Paradise, owned by a Cadillac dealer named Sanford. He had four or five hundred hogs on that place. When I came back, he was so glad to see me and to hear what I was doing.

In the winter of 1932-33, you couldn't get 5 cents a pound for hogs. So Moses killed some, and Sanford smoked the hams for him. Moses drove down to Chico every Friday, and Ken, Charles and I would go up to Paradise with him, and he'd bring us back Monday morning for classes. We got so sick of eating pork. Moses liked to have our company, because he didn't even have

any electricity, just lanterns that burned coal oil. The outhouse was quite a distance from the house, and when you went out there at night, you had to take a lantern and a shotgun, because there were so many rattlesnakes. They didn't go into the pig pen because the hogs would eat them. Moses stayed up there until he died.

Most of the white kids at Chico State were very friendly, and more so when they found out I grew up there. If there was any prejudice, it was very limited. I mixed pretty well, but I was almost 25 years old when I enrolled, and I was always conscious that they were much younger than me.

I'd run across an occasional faculty person who seemed to be surprised that I was able to get into the college. When I took a class in Western European history, not one of my blue books was under a B, and the professor gave me a goddamn C. I went to him and challenged him. And he said, "You couldn't do the maps very well that you traced." I said, "Well, I showed my knowledge of history. Is tracing maps more important than the subject?" He wouldn't look me in the face: He hadn't expected me to perform that well. That son of a bitch let the C stand. They've got a building named after him now.

Everyone who entered college had to write an essay to show whether they could compose a coherent description of any given subject. Those who failed had to take English A. In the student world it was known as English X, or Dumbbell English.

My composition was very poor. In the six years since I had been out of school, I had retained only a vague memory of how to use a noun, verb and adjective. In the class, all you did was write a composition every week, and

the teacher pointed out your mistakes. I got a B in that class.

One night in November 1932, when we had a break from school, Charles, Ken and I caught a freight in Oakland that was hauling refrigerator cars full of perishable products. We got up on top and lay down flat. The brakeman came along, walking on the catwalk on top, and he said, "You guys are going to have a cold night tonight." He didn't try to throw us off.

We each wore a couple of sweatshirts, a mackinaw and extra socks, and lined our clothing with newspapers. The wind beat the hell out of us all the way to Sacramento, 80 miles away. We arrived the next morning, and when the train slowed down, we jumped off and ran. My hands were so numb from the cold that I almost fell off.

We waited alongside the tracks in the hobo jungle. Some men had a big blazing fire going, and told us to get up close. They gave us hot cups of coffee and some stew they were cooking in a five-gallon can. Then we hopped on a Western Pacific freight going east, dropped off at Marysville, and took a chance of hitchhiking. The train fare from Oakland to Chico was only about $2, but we didn't have anything.

Ken and Charles only stayed at the college for one semester. Charles' brother Robinson then came instead. We washed a lot of cars together, and had a pretty good little thing going. Then he and I fell out. He moved out of Granny's after that.

Around September of 1933, I was coming back to Chico on a freight train with about a hundred other people. The growers did not harvest the peaches that year

in the Sacramento Valley because they weren't getting anything for them. In Yuba City near Marysville, there was a mile or so of peach trees all along the track. When the train reached there, the conductor signaled the engineer to stop. Everybody got off, ate all the peaches they could, and stuffed their pockets. If they had containers, they put more peaches in them. When everybody had finished, they got back on board. The conductor signalled the engineer, who gave an answering toot on the whistle, and the train started north again.

I became friendly with my economics instructor, John Howard Angell, because his wife had attended Chico High School when I was there. When I came back in the fall of 1933, I had not been successful in finding work that summer, and had absolutely no money. The first person I saw when I came back was Angell. I informed him that I did not even have tuition, and he promptly loaned me the fees.

I wrote a few humor columns for the *Wildcat*, the student newspaper. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do. Sometimes I thought I might want to go into law, but it cost more money than I had to even go to college.

An event occurred in November 1933, when "Sunny Jim" Rolph was governor of California. Rolph was a good-time Charlie. He was always well dressed, with a boutonniere, a white handkerchief neatly folded in his jacket pocket, cowboy-style boots which were brightly shined, and on occasion a Prince Albert-style coat, with a top hat perched on his head.

In San Jose, Brooke Hart, the son of a wealthy department store owner, was seized by two kidnappers, who demanded a heavy ransom. Before the distraught

family could pay it, the young man's body was found. The suspects were arrested and placed in the San Jose County Jail. But the brutality of the crime inflamed the so-called law-abiding people in the city. Vigilantes stormed the jail, took the prisoners out and hanged them. Governor Rolph gave a public speech in which he said that California should be proud. Of course I was shocked, along with many others, because this appeared to be an encouragement to hoodlums to take whatever action they deemed necessary.

As I walked to school that morning, I read of the incident in the big bold black headlines of the Chico morning paper. Although the kidnappers were white, I was aware that this type of mob rule was common in some Southern states, where the victim was always black. Most of the lynchings in California were against either Asians or whites.

By the time I reached the campus, I was very angry. Groups of students, primarily males, were standing around in knots discussing the lynching. I pushed myself into the center of the biggest group, stating very loudly, "It's a good thing I wasn't sheriff down there last night, because the first son of a bitch that had crossed that doorstep, I would have shot and killed his ass."

Some started booing and jeering me. I kept saying I hated lawlessness no matter who committed the acts, and that those two men would have been tried in court anyway and probably convicted. Only Glenn Smith, a big, burly fullback on the varsity football team, stepped to my side and said, "Fleming is right."

I was very much surprised, since he was a junior and still taking Dumbbell English, which he had failed every


LYNCHING EDITION

The Bakersfield Californian

EXTRA

LYNCHING EDITION

HART KIDNAPERS LYNCHED BY MOB

Story of Vengeance Told by Eyewitness

5000 PERSONS TORTURE AND HANG 2 MISCREANTS

ANGRY MOB IS DETERMINED

Holmes Father Believes Son Innocent of Crime

LEADERS MAY ESCAPE LAW

Newspaper describing the lynching in San Jose, California in November 1933.

year. I thought he was attending college simply to play football and didn't have any philosophy at all. We used to laugh at guys who majored in physical education, because we figured they didn't know anything else. Of course that was incorrect.

Glenn and I started shouting back at the crowd, when Dr. Taylor, who was head of the geography department, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Young man, I think you'd better come inside. You might get in some trouble like this." I looked at him and said, "Aren't you ashamed that you're white?" I just had to let it out of me. He said, "Well I'd have to say that I am." I left with Taylor, who shook his head in disbelief that a lynching had taken place downtown in a large California city.

I dropped out of Chico State after one and a half years, in the spring of 1934. I guess I got tired of it all — scheming how I was going to get enough money to feed myself and pay my bills. A job I had there ran out, and I was well disgusted with myself. There were other things: the social activities were very limited for me. Except for a couple of faculty members, I didn't get near to anybody I could say anything to. There were so many things I had done in the San Francisco Bay Area that I missed. I never sought to become involved in socializing with whites per se, and with nothing to do but study, I didn't want to be bothered with it any more.

I should have stayed up there and graduated. No need of crying over it now, because it probably wouldn't have made any difference with my career. But Chico State was all good for me, as far as I could see. I have not been back there too often since I left, but a lot of Chico will always stay with me.

BLACKS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

The labor movement reached its height in the 1930s,

when the Depression seemed to bring American industry to a halt. San Francisco has always been a strong union town, whereas Los Angeles was what you'd call an open city, where you didn't have to belong to a union to work. But most unions excluded black workers. Up until the late 1800s, blacks worked as cooks and waiters in some of San Francisco's best restaurants. Then the restaurants began to unionize, and they wouldn't accept blacks as members, so the black workers were replaced by whites.

In order to be recognized by company owners, a union had to be a member of the American Federation of Labor. The biggest and most powerful unit in the AFL, then and now, was the Teamsters Union, which operated all commercial vehicles, including the ones on the docks. The union was plagued with leaders out of the underworld, and ruled by thugs and hoodlums. The truckers have enormous power, and are the only trade union that could call a national shutdown of everything, if they ever took such a course.

They were called teamsters because at one time they drove wagons pulled by teams of draft horses. When I first came to San Francisco in 1926, workhorses were still being used on the waterfront to pull drays, which had an open seat and reins, although they were rapidly being replaced by trucks.

In 1934, probably the biggest industry in San Francisco was shipping. The system on the docks was called the shape-up, in which the bosses on all piers selected whom they wished to hire on a daily basis. No one had a guarantee of a daily job, unless he paid a sum of his daily earning, or was a pet of the dock boss. The longshoremen had no real union on either the West or East

Coast. Blacks could work on only two piers in San Francisco, for the Luckenbach Line and the Panama Pacific Line. If you went to any other pier, you might get beaten up.

That year Harry Bridges, an Australian who had migrated to the United States and worked on the waterfront, emerged as one of the great labor leaders of the century. He was a liberal and a champion of working men, regardless of color.

Until this time, I clung to views that the trade union movement was just formed to continue racial discrimination. But Bridges and John L. Lewis, the head of the United Mine Workers, felt that by keeping the unions lily-white, there would be a steady reservoir of black, potential strikebreakers, which would weaken the unions when negotiations broke down.

The longshoremen were only getting about 50 cents an hour. They asked for a dollar, and demanded their own hiring hall, operated by the union. The company refused, so they walked out. They were regarded by many conservatives as being Communists, or at least a Communist front organization. The strike began on May 9, 1934. Every port on the West Coast and Hawaii was locked up.

The strike culminated in a big demonstration on the waterfront on July 5, "Bloody Thursday," in which the cops shot and killed two strikers in the melee. The mayor asked the governor, Frank Merriam, to declare martial law. Merriam sent the National Guard to the California port cities. The Guard set up camp on the San Francisco waterfront along the Embarcadero, where they took the place of the beleaguered cops. They kept all the strikers on one side of the street. On the other side were the piers,

where the ships were tied up: They didn't let anybody but scabs walk there.

Striking dockworkers battle police in San Francisco on "Bloody Thursday," July 5, 1934. Courtesy of San Francisco Public Library.

On July 16, Bridges and his council called a general strike in San Francisco and Oakland. The Teamsters and other unions went out with them in sympathy. It was one of the few times a general strike has been called in a major American city. The only reason the Teamsters would cross the picket lines was to bring supplies to the hospitals.

Everything stopped. Streetcars weren't running in San Francisco, Oakland or Berkeley. This lasted for four days. The Key System, which operated all the streetcars in the

East Bay, halted its ferry service across the bay. But the Southern Pacific ferries carried mail, which exempted them, because that was government. The unions never did mess with the federal government, because if necessary, troops would be brought in to do the work.

Many blacks took the opportunity to work, despite the strong picket lines. Bridges saw this, so he went to black churches on both sides of the bay and asked the ministers if he could say a few words during the Sunday services. They agreed. Bridges begged the congregations to join the strikers on the picket line, and promised that when the strike ended, blacks would work on every dock on the West Coast.

Both black and white students worked as scabs, unloading the ships. A dormitory ship was tied up at one of the docks, where they slept and ate. They met at Alameda to wait for a launch that carried them across the bay, so they didn't have to enter the pier by land. They could work as many hours as they wanted because ships were stacked up in the bay, and couldn't unload their cargoes.

One of my enterprising friends, a black man named John L. Burton, brought a pair of friendly dice to the dormitory ship. He never did go out and work, but started a crap game on board. He was running the game, so naturally he made a lot of money.

The students didn't care anything about unions: they wanted money to go to school. They scabs were getting paid about 75 cents an hour, and you could work as many hours as you wanted. At that time the tuition at Berkeley was $26 a semester. And if you joined the student body it was $10. Then you had to get books and get a place to live. The time I was a student over there, I was paying

$2.50 a week and getting two meals out of it. So that money seemed pretty good.

I heard there was a truck picking up people who wanted to be scabs. It was supposed to arrive at 35th Street and San Pablo Avenue in Oakland. So I went down there one evening with a couple of students I knew real well. There were about 12 of us waiting, all black guys. I felt a little bad about it, but shame leaves you when you've been out of work a long time, and you'll take anything where you aren't breaking any laws.

A truck came up there all right, but it was the wrong truck. To our surprise, a bunch of longshoremen jumped out carrying baseball bats, which they started swinging as soon as they got off. I ran all the way back to Berkeley. I didn't see if anybody got hit, because I was running for my life. I didn't try any more after that. I saw that it was wrong.

The dock strike lasted more than six weeks, and ended on July 31 when the International Longshoremen's Association, ILA, was recognized by the shipowners. Bridges kept his word: blacks went to work on every pier on the waterfront, and some of them later became union officers. As part of the agreement, the ILA got its own hiring hall, which it controlled, and the dockworkers got a minimum 30-hour week and a raise to $1 an hour. It was one of the greatest contracts of any union in the nation, which set a standard for workers in other industries as a model of fairness in pay.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service decided that since Bridges was an alien and possibly a Communist, he should be deported. He went on trial four times, but was never found guilty. Later he was convicted of perjury

and sentenced to prison, but he only served three weeks before the conviction was reversed.

In the late 1930s, the ILA expanded to include workers in other trades, and changed its name to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, ILWU. Harry Bridges was its president for almost half a century. He retired voluntarily and died in San Francisco in 1990 at the age of 88.

I thought he was the greatest labor leader this country has ever produced. He couldn't be bought, for one thing. He was strictly honest with the men. All the other presidents of internationals got big expense accounts besides big salaries. He never earned more than the dockworkers themselves.

* * *

In Chico I had come into contact with the agricultural workers' union, which was trying to organize farm-workers in California's two great valleys, the Sacramento and San Joaquin. Some organizers were former members of the International Workers of the World, the Wobblies. Mostly the workers were whites.

The union failed. It was received by the growers with intense hostility. The American Legion, formed by veterans of World War I, made it their duty to see that there were no unions in the agricultural fields, and attacked the union organizers as Communists. In some instances, the Legion rode them to the outside of town and said, "Get moving and don't come back." There were clashes in Chico, but not on a scale that you found in other places. A lot of agricultural workers were living in shacks

made of cardboard boxes. There was a sort of mean spirit about welfare in those days.

The growers in California had an organization called the Associated Farmers. That was the funny part, because none of those men were farmers: they were millionaires who owned agricultural land. They were all Republicans, and the organization was formed to elect ultraconservative Republican candidates to office.

When Upton Sinclair, the famous socialist writer, got the Democratic nomination for governor in 1934, the Associated Farmers spent a lot of money to defeat him. Sinclair came up with a program called EPIC, End Poverty in California. There were several million people who had no jobs here, plus everybody who was pouring in. EPIC appealed to them, because a lot of the newcomers had been here long enough — the one year that the law prescribed — to register to vote.

Sinclair scared the bejeebers out of the Republicans in California. The campaign was bitter and hard fought, but Sinclair lost because the Republicans controlled the press, and they weren't about to let anything like that happen. Billboards against Sinclair went up all over the state. A lot of jobless people didn't vote. But the Republicans always voted, because they were voting to protect their property.

* * *

The United Mine Workers, which held a charter from the AFL, was one of the few trade unions that was truly integrated from its infancy. Its president, John L. Lewis, early perceived the need for blacks to work alongside white workers. Like Harry Bridges, Lewis recognized that

if blacks were left out, they would be used by owners whenever strikes were called, so the owners would not be compelled to sign any sort of labor contract with the union. Lewis had to persuade the rank and file to bring blacks in: It was a matter of self-preservation.

American industry in the 1930s was largely steam-operated, as electricity was still in the experimental stage as a power source. Coal had to be used in the steel mills, which were mostly concentrated in states from the Atlantic coast to Illinois. There were a lot of blacks living in the coal-mining areas of Kentucky and West Virginia. The only way for the union to survive was to make it all-inclusive.

In the automobile industry, Henry Ford did not discriminate as much racially as General Motors, which then was separate companies: Chevrolet, Cadillac and Buick. Ford enjoyed some industrial peace initially, for he was the first of the big car makers to start paying $5 a day, and he got some stool pigeons to form what they call a company union in the Ford plant. It didn't belong to the AFL.

When the Depression came, the auto workers union began to take shape under the able leadership of Walter Reuther, with stiff opposition by the owners. Reuther received moral support only from John L. Lewis. I'd put Reuther and Lewis in the same category as Bridges. All of them welcomed black membership, and I think all were devoted to the cause of the working man.

There were more strikes during the Depression than ever before. In the early 1930s, the sit-ins started in the Ford Motor plant and other big industrial plants. They closed whole auto factories in Detroit. The companies

didn't meet the demands of the workers about raising wages and the number of hours to work, so most of the workers went inside the plants and sat down, and stayed in there for days.

Henry Ford controlled his workers with the aid of Harry Bennett, the head of security for the Ford empire. Bennett hired his own private police, got them permits and gave them guns. He made exclusive use of "Chowder Head" Cohen, an infamous strikebreaker who scoured the gutters and alleys of big cities to recruit men noted for their brutality and sadism.

The National Labor Relations Act, also called the Wagner Act, was passed by Congress in 1935 to try to bring some labor peace. Until then, there was no such thing as collective bargaining. If you went out on strike, the owners could keep you locked out, and didn't have to bargain with you. The Wagner Act straightened a lot of that out, working to bring an agreement between employer and employees.

At this time, some union leaders, including Lewis, Reuther, and Sidney Hillman, head of the garment workers union, had become disgusted with the almost lily-white practices of the AFL. In 1935, Lewis and other unions withdrew and formed the Committee for Industrial Organization, or CIO. Later it changed its name to Congress of Industrial Organizations. The CIO never discriminated, and it had almost as large a membership as the AFL.

William Green, president of the AFL, believed, as did most of the lunatic fringe, that Reuther's budding union was part of a Communist plot to take over the nation. I don't know whether Green was racist himself. It was the

membership that didn't want blacks in, and the leaders had to do what the rank and file wanted. In 1955 the AFL and the CIO merged into a single organization again, the AFL-CIO.

BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

In the 1920s, the California colleges with the most black students were the University of California at Los Angeles, UCLA; the University of Southern California, USC; and UC Berkeley, or Cal. All the black students knew practically all the others on the three campuses.

Quite a number of blacks were attending Sacramento Junior College, a two-year school. Either they did not have good enough grades from high school, or they felt the four-year schools were too big and they needed to go somewhere they could become adjusted to college-level work.

The number of blacks going to white colleges was very small nationally but growing, as black alumni worked on the administration to bring in more black athletes. I never heard of any college on the West Coast or the Northeast that excluded blacks. The only thing that barred them was a lack of money.

Many from California attended black colleges in the Deep South because their parents came from there. Blacks there were segregated by state law, from kindergarten to the college level. So every state government in the South had to fund a black state college — either that, or open up their existing school to blacks. Separate but equal: that's what the white Southern politicians called it. But they

didn't spend the same amount of money. They didn't have the graduate departments that the white schools had. They weren't equipped like the white schools were.

Most of the Historic Black Colleges were in the South. In the North, there was Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce University in Ohio. None were located on the West Coast. Some were founded by blacks, and others by whites.

The teaching at the state-operated black colleges was possibly as good as it was at the white colleges, because to get a job there, you had to have a graduate degree, which came from a white university outside of the South.

With a degree from a Historic Black College, you could get admitted into most graduate departments at white universities. But I don't think the black schools measured up to the white schools, with the exception of Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Howard was named after Oliver Otis Howard, a Civil War major general who commanded one wing of General William Sherman's army that marched through Georgia in 1864. After the war he was made the head of the Freedmen's Bureau in Washington. The government set up Howard University for the freed slaves who wanted to go to school.

Howard was the only one of the Historic Black Colleges that I would call a complete university. It had a school of dentistry, a school of medicine, a school of nursing and an engineering school. In the others, all you could get was a liberal arts education.

The most important social organizations for black college students were the fraternities and sororities. At Howard, they formed the first sorority on campus, Alpha

Kappa Alpha, in 1908. But they wouldn't pledge any brown-skinned or blacker girls. Most of my life I've noticed that it's been particularly hard for darker females.

UC Berkeley was the only school in Northern California with black fraternities and sororities, so students from other colleges and junior colleges — in San Francisco, Sacramento and other places — were pledged by the Berkeley chapter.

Insignia for Alpha Phi Alpha, the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity established in the U.S. for black men. Founded at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York in December 1906, it gave rise to many other national black fraternities and sororities in the first quarter of the century.

Berkeley had two black fraternities, Alpha Phi Alpha

and Omega Psi Phi. Alpha was founded in 1906, and was the oldest black fraternity. It also had two black sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta. Besides holding dances, parties and meetings, they made contributions to the black community.

I felt that the only reason some blacks wanted to go to college was so they could join a frat. The Alphas at Berkeley pledged me when I was a student at Chico State College. At the meetings, the brothers carried big paddles around, and they'd tell you to assume the position, and whack you. I thought they were being ridiculous, and gave them back that pledge pin. There were no black frat houses on the West Coast then, because the students didn't have the money that the white students had.

The members of black fraternities and sororities were brothers and sisters for life: They were just as active after they graduated as they were when students. The membership consisted of the elite of black society: doctors, lawyers, dentists. The fraternity and sorority soirees were the most prestigious social affairs in the black world.

None of the undergraduates could be elected president. It was the graduates who were running the thing and keeping it going. Now they've got both graduate chapters and undergraduate chapters, but in those days, there was just one chapter of each in any area.

From my observation, there were always slightly more black women going to college than black males, even though their job opportunities were more limited. Most women graduates went into teaching or nursing. A smattering became doctors or dentists. There weren't any jobs then for black secretaries in private industry.

DISCRIMINATION IN SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco liked to enjoy the reputation of being one of the most liberal cities in the United States. But it wasn't. Before World War II it practiced segregation better than most cities in the nation. All of the big-name cafes and restaurants downtown refused service to black people, and to Asian people. Same thing in Oakland. Blacks and other nonwhites were barred from renting rooms in the big hotels and most of the smaller ones; Chinatown was the best hope for a black tourist to find a room.

In the 1930s, only one black person worked in City Hall: Walter Sanford Sr., the mailman who held the joint position of receptionist in the outer office of the mayor. There was one other black on the city payroll, a woman named Floyd Green, who was a psychiatric social worker at San Francisco General Hospital. The city did not even hire black janitors.

Firemen and police officers did not hire any blacks, and it was not until the manpower shortage became acute during World War II that the city appointed a few blacks as cops along with some whites that the draft did not get. A few of the whites remained after the war, but blacks were released, until a few passed the civil service examination and were appointed to the uniformed ranks of police officers.

The honor of serving as the first black firefighter went to Earl Gage in 1955. A majority of the white firemen opposed the idea. One reason was that fire stations serve as dormitories between emergency calls, and some white personnel believed that blacks and whites should not live together on an equal basis. It was not until the 1960s that

demonstrations in cities all over the land forced public safety departments to include nonwhites and women.

In the 1930s, only two places in California hired black teachers for the public schools. One was the Imperial Valley on the Mexican border. The other was Los Angeles, where probably more than half the black population of California lived. It had black teachers, black principals, black cops, black firemen and black city council members before anywhere else in the state.

It was common for blacks to graduate from college in California, then go to the South to work in segregated schools. The only black teacher in public schools in the Bay Area was Ida Louise Jackson, who was already teaching grade school in West Oakland when I arrived there in 1926.

San Francisco's only black teacher was Josephine Foreman Cole. She graduated from the University of California in the late 1920s, and was unable to procure a job as a public school teacher in San Francisco, where she was born. The Catholic school system hired her then. She finally transferred to the public schools when the district began hiring black teachers in 1944.

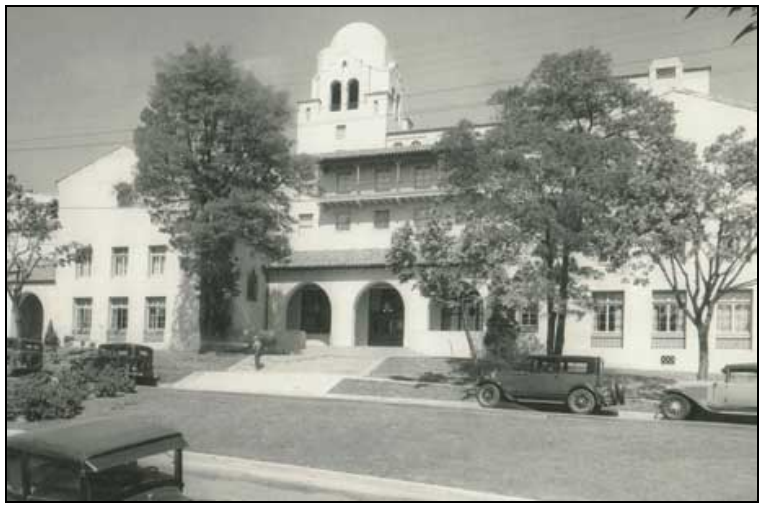
Josephine's father, Joseph Foreman, was the doorman at Shreve's jewelry store, and was a living legend in town. All he did was admit people into that fancy store downtown, and out of that he sent two daughters to college and bought a nice home.

* * *

After returning from Chico State College in 1934, I rented a room in a private house for $2 a week. I used to

hang around the campus at UC Berkeley to use the library, although I wasn't a regular student.

Students could live at International House, located next to Memorial Stadium, for about $85 a month, which included three meals a day. It's a big place — eight stories high. It was intended for students of diverse ethnic and cultural groups to live together — sort of a League of Nations idea. Students waited on you, and everybody ate the same meals.



International House, Berkeley, California, in 1930, the year it opened. There was considerable local resistance due to several reasons: men and women living under one roof; foreigners; and the integrated setting in which whites would live with nonwhites as equals. Courtesy of International House Berkeley.

The Rockefellers donated the money to set up International House. They also established one at Columbia University in New York, another at the University of Chicago, and a fourth one in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa.

I spent a lot of time at I-House in the mid-1930s. Among the residents were three students from the Gold Coast, as Ghana was called then. It was a British colony, and the British government paid the students' tuition and gave them spending money. The British were training the native people in their overseas empire, so they could serve as civil service workers to administer the colonies. They did the same thing in India.

The Africans were eager to learn something about U.S. blacks and the American way of living, and I became their tutor. One of them, Andrew, bought me a ticket to get two free meals a day in the big dining room. He once asked me, could I get some alcohol for him? He gave me about $20, and I brought up two quarts of whisky, and got everybody drunk on that floor. He could have bought it himself, but he didn't know where to go.

There came the time when two of the African male students — Andy Deheer and a man named Chimba — informed me that there was something they wished to ask me. Both appeared to be somewhat embarrassed. I blurted out, "What do you want, a woman?"

One said, "You know those women who sell sex?" I didn't personally know any, but I did know that there were a number of such houses in West Oakland, and I knew some men in that area who were hustlers. The three of us boarded a streetcar, disembarked on Wood Street, and walked over to 7th Street, where I eventually met a character who earned his living by his wits, for I never

knew him to have a job.

Willie — that is the name I shall give him now — walked over to my two companions and asked, did they wish to see a woman? Chimba berated me for letting Willie know why they were there. He left.

Willie took Andy and me over to a house on Willow Street, where I talked with a woman named Jenny. I told her that Andy was a graduate student at Berkeley, and a gentleman who was in search of relaxation, and I did not wish her to rob him in any fashion. If she did so, I would see that she got in trouble. The deal was cut. Willie and I waited in the parlor while Jenny accompanied her client to a bedroom. We waited until Andy had enjoyed himself. Then Andy and I stopped at a liquor store before boarding a streetcar for the return to I-House. I learned that later on, he took Chimba there without me.

There wasn't as much racial tolerance at I-House as some students would have liked, because everybody tended to stay together with whatever racial identity they had. Naturally, when students first entered, they looked for people who spoke their language. The black Africans didn't mingle with whites socially in their own country; we might have done a bit more here than they did there.

The director of International House was a white man named Allen Blaisdell. He never looked relaxed, and seemed very provincial for someone who worked for such a diverse group. Whenever Blaisdell saw a black male engaged in conversation with a white female, he would come over to the pair and start asking questions of nothing in particular, even though he well knew that most of the people at I-House were student residents. He knew the Africans, and he would go by our table, greeting the stu-

dents. I was annoyed by the way he tried to talk down to us. Blacks all agreed that the job was too big for him.

Once he looked at me and asked if I was an African student also. I answered that no, I was a native of a U.S. possession. He asked where. I answered, "Florida." He said, "What do you mean?" I followed up with, "You see, I'm not recognized as a citizen down there, even though I was born in this country. Neither my parents nor any other blacks have enjoyed their citizenship there because of Jim Crow." Blaisdell turned red in the face, which gave me a peculiar sort of satisfaction.

BLACK ATHLETES

When I worked for the railroad, I was down in Los Angeles every week, and became very close to some black college students there. On one trip I went to a football game, played by teams made up of former high school and college players, at Jefferson High School in L.A. There were four of these teams in the city, and they had a league of sorts that played on weekends. I met Paul Bryant, the manager of one team, and he asked if I could arrange for them to come north and play. When I got back to Oakland, I found Mitch Walker, who had been a star at Technical High School; he knew who to contact to assemble a team. Then I wrote Bryant and gave him Walker's home address.

In November that year, the black players from Southern California came up in three cars and played at McClymonds High School in West Oakland. I was the messenger boy between the two teams. The game did not receive anything more than word of mouth in Oakland and Berkeley, and as a result only a few spectators attended. A

collection was taken up, and together with the money Walker and the others had solicited days before the game, about $150 was raised, which was handed over to Bryant. Gasoline was less than 20 cents a gallon, and the Los Angeles players were housed in private homes.

After I left the railroad, I met many young male and female students from Los Angeles who came up to Northern California for various reasons. Some were attending Cal. Others simply followed the college games. UCLA, USC and UC Berkeley all had blacks on their teams in the '20s. UCLA had the most blacks of any campus, and recruited more black athletes than any other school.

There was an intense rivalry among the schools, particularly between Cal and USC. For some reason, UC Berkeley had a lot of contempt for USC. Berkeley always prided itself on being a very intellectual school. They always said, "We want to recruit scholars, not athletes." USC was winning the national title in track and field quite often.

Every time USC played Cal in Berkeley, all the black students from UCLA and USC came up in droves to spend the weekend. They mostly belonged to the same fraternities and sororities, and visited one another's homes. When Cal played in Southern California, they'd all go down there. The white students did the same thing. The railroads ran extra trains to bring the rooters.

Every year after the game, the Alphas — we called them the Apes — rented the ballroom in Stevens Union at UC Berkeley and held a formal dance. The dues-paying members could invite other people. I went to every one of the parties in Berkeley, and to some in Los Angeles, be-

cause they were the best affairs that I knew I could attend. I owned a tuxedo, which I had bought when I worked for the railroads.

One year, around 1936 or 1937, the Alphas weren't going to do anything, so my friend Carlton Goodlett and I promoted the black students to have a dance in Oakland on the big game night. We rented a small auditorium, got tickets printed, hired a six-piece black band, bought a lot of noisemakers and confetti, and sent out about 500 invitations. We charged about a dollar a head. It turned out nice: We broke even.

We always thought of UCLA as being the little brother. Cal dominated West Coast football through most of the '20s and the early '30s. UCLA didn't start beating Cal until Jackie Robinson, Kenny Washington and Woody Strode played on the team together in the late 1930s. They tortured Cal rooters at Memorial Stadium with their great play. I was wishing somebody would break their legs.

In basketball season, the Alphas and Omegas fielded teams composed of players from junior college and the University of California, and some very good high school players. Games were played once a week at the National Armory in Oakland and were well attended. The Los Angeles chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi — another black fraternity — was composed of men from USC and UCLA, who came up once a year to play the Alphas. The intercity games played to large crowds. Three of the L.A. Kappas played on the varsity at USC. Those games, which took place on Saturday, were a big social event. They were always followed up with a dance, with music furnished by a local trio or quartet.

In 1935 the National Collegiate Athletic Association

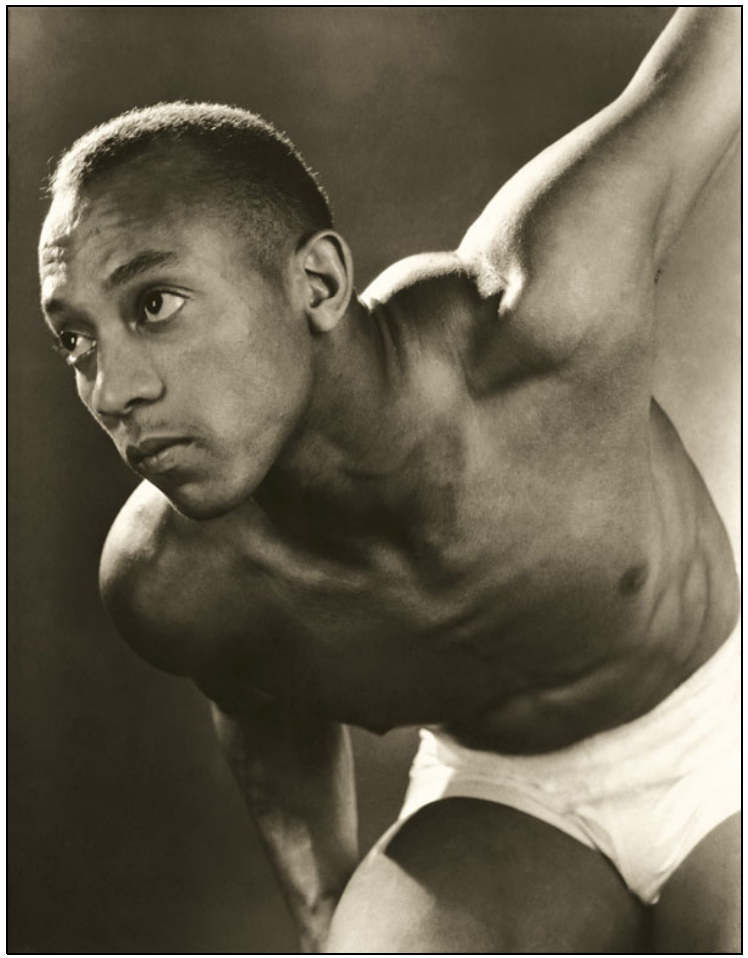
(NCAA) track meet was held at UC Berkeley for the first time. It was the first year that so many black athletes competed in an intercollegiate track meet. There were about 10 of them, and they all came from big white universities.

Jesse Owens was the stellar attraction. During his senior year in high school in Cleveland, he had tied the world record in the 100-yard dash. Then he had been induced to attend Ohio State University in Columbus, which always had a lot of blacks enrolled. In one track meet in 1935 he set three world records in a single day: in the 220-yard dash, the broad jump, and the 220-yard low hurdles.

Ohio State sent to the meet only three men besides Owens: Mel Walker and Dave Albritton — both black high jumpers — and a white pole vaulter, John Wonsowicz. Other blacks at the meet were Claude Walton, a discus thrower from the University of Colorado; Albert Threadgill, a high jumper from Temple University; Owens' great rival Eulace Peacock, also from Temple, who had beaten him that year in the sprints and the broad jump; Ben Johnson, a sprinter from Columbia University; and John Woodruff, the huge middle-distance runner from the University of Pittsburgh, who was unbeatable. The next year he would win the 800 meters in the Olympics.

Of course, many people in the Bay Area's black community — mostly males — attended the two-day event. I went on campus to look at the guys when they were working out, and met them. When I was walking up Bancroft Avenue with a group of them, several white people stared at us, and we overheard one matron state that she guessed all of us were athletes participating in the

events. Of course, I stuck my own chest out a bit more than usual.



Jesse Owens in 1936.

Jesse Owens took four first places and almost won the whole meet by himself. But the Trojans from USC had a big team and got a lot of second and third places, so they had enough points to win.

I arranged a social event for all the athletes after the event. I knew a family in Berkeley named Gibson that had three attractive daughters: Lois, Thelma and Audrey. Lois was a podiatrist who had an office in the Monterey Peninsula, Thelma was a registered nurse, and Audrey was still a college student. Their father, Charlie Gibson, was a redcap for the Southern Pacific at the Oakland Mole.

Audrey knew I had met the athletes, so she asked if I could persuade some of them to come to the Gibson home. I got busy, and Audrey invited some other young ladies over to meet the visitors. About six of the track stars, including Jesse Owens, Johnny Woodruff and Claude Walton attended. We had a great party. Jesse mixed with everybody, and seemed to be a very modest guy, although he was famous already.

The tryouts for the 1936 Olympics were held in Los Angeles. The American track team had 12 blacks, which was the most there had been until then. Their exploits were constantly written about in the media. After Jesse came up with four gold medals in the Berlin Olympics, he dropped out of college with one year to go. I guess he needed the money badly, because he was married and his wife had started having babies. When he came back home, nobody offered him a job, so he finally let old "Bojangles" Robinson, the black tap dancer, talk him into racing a racehorse. It drew a lot of curious people. We all got disgusted because we thought Robinson wanted to take advantage of the immense popularity Jesse had gained.

Had Jesse graduated from Ohio State, I think he would have eventually become a track coach there.

Track stars then were truly amateurs. College athletes didn't get full scholarships; they were given jobs, so they could work for their tuition. And the United States government didn't give them anything. But as these sports began drawing big crowds, the manufacturers of sporting goods started slipping these guys money at the back door. And the U.S. authorities looked at the way some European teams were putting their athletes on regular salaries, and letting them make a career out of it. So the Amateur Athletic Union finally had to change. Track stars today make a lot of money.

One person we felt pretty sure was going to make the Olympic team was Archie Williams, a black man who had graduated from University High School in Oakland and was a senior that year at Cal. We used to run around together. He was breaking records in the 400 meters. Archie went to Berlin and won a gold medal in the event. While going to Cal, he was taking flying lessons. When the war broke out, he went into the Army Air Force and they sent him to Tuskegee, Alabama to teach blacks how to fly. He came out of the Army as a full colonel.

No blacks had ever flown a plane in the military until President Roosevelt, acting from the pressure of need, ordered the entry of blacks into the Air Force, and Tuskegee Institute was selected as a base for the training of black pilots — just enough to make a black squadron.

After the war, Archie started teaching at a high school in Southern California. And a guy named Chet, who was on the school board in Marin County, was down there visiting one day when he ran into Archie. They had both

been athletes at Cal at the same time, and knew one another well. Archie told Chet how much he'd like to come back to Northern California, so Chet said, "I'm going to see you get a job teaching in Marin." He did just what he said: Archie became a teacher at a high school in Marin County. He had a sailboat that he built. He, Carlton Goodlett and I used to go down to Carmel together, and sail in Monterey Bay. Archie was a hell of a nice guy. He died over in Marin.

* * *

I met Jackie Robinson in the late 1930s when he was on the football team for UCLA. Jackie's wife, Rachel Isum, attended the School of Nursing at UC Medical School in San Francisco. She grew up in Bakersfield, where she was a close friend of the Hall family. I knew the Halls very well after they moved to Berkeley. Rachel spent as much time as she could at their house, and that's where I met her.

Jackie Robinson quickly became a baseball great. He was well rounded, because he could carry on a good conversation with you. People used to throw eggs at him and call him nigger, but he was determined to keep his cool. So I'd have to give him a solid nod of greatness for that, as a person, because he persevered.

BLACK COMMUNISTS AND THE NAACP

In the 1930s there were four daily newspapers published in San Francisco: the *Chronicle* and *Examiner*, both morning papers, and the *Daily News* and *Call Bulletin*, both afternoon papers. Oakland had two papers: the *Post Enquirer* and the *Oakland Tribune*. But none of them hired black reporters. The only paper that did was the *Daily People's World*, a Communist paper that started during the Great Depression and always had a racially mixed staff.

Black reporters also worked at the other two Communist papers in the United States, the *Daily Worker* in New York and the *Midwest Daily Record* in Chicago. They all came out about five days a week, but they weren't commercial papers. You only saw them in a few newsstands. They weren't dependent upon circulation like the others. Who would advertise in them?

The socialist system has always had a strong appeal to people who feel they are oppressed, and the Communists worked hard to enlist blacks, thinking it would be a very fertile field for them. Some black intellectuals joined because they were frustrated that they couldn't move ahead in the big society, and the Communists were fighting some of the same things they were.

Communists worked in the trade union movement and tried to convert the members to be Communists too. I felt they were friends, and I was amazed that more blacks didn't join the party. But the majority did not seem to understand what socialism meant. Black ministers were anticommunist all the way.

I went to about four of their meetings, but I never felt the necessity of joining. John Pittman did. I met John about 1929, when he first came to California and enrolled as a graduate student at UC Berkeley. John roomed at Mama Williams' rooming house on the corner of Harper and Russell streets in Berkeley, where several black male

students lived every year. She accepted only males, and any student who attempted to sneak in a female companion did not stay long if caught. I knew Mama Williams, and used to come by there a lot. I later lived there. I think she charged $3 a week, and you got two meals.

John was more liberal than anyone I had met before. He and I became very close friends, and he met some left-wing people who gave him a hand in starting a weekly paper in San Francisco in 1931, the *San Francisco Spokesman*. It was about eight pages long, with columns, news, John's editorials, and cartoons if he could get a cartoonist. It was called by reactionary black and white readers the "*Little People's World*."

John wasn't able to pay anyone because the only advertising he got was in the nature of a courtesy. The Hibernia Bank, Pacific Gas & Electric and maybe some other big firms would give us a small ad. I guess they did it because the person selling ads pestered them so much that they wanted to get rid of him, or maybe it made them feel good that they were doing something for blacks.

The office was a storefront at the corner of Baker and Sutter streets. I had always been interested in writing, so I started coming over to San Francisco quite often to see John. We had a Linotype machine, and set our own type. Then we put the paper together and took it to the printer's. Three other people who worked in the office with John were Gladys Wysinger Crawford, Mason Roberson and Lawrence "Nick" Nixon. Nobody was getting any money but John. He and Gladys were living together. She wrote a column called "I Have Eyes." ny little gossip, whether it was dirty or clean, she would put in the column. It was a

good seller for the *Spokesman*: a lot of people bought the paper to see whether their name was in it, and some became very unhappy about items that appeared.

Mason was a San Francisco-produced intellectual who had dropped out of Cal because he became disgusted with the social system as it existed. He was a descendant of Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson's slave. He and I became close friends. Mason had two brothers, one being Bill, who did what so many blacks have done: he left the black world and lived as a white man.

Emily, John's only sister, graduated from San Francisco State Normal School, which was later called San Francisco State College and then became San Francisco State University. She was unable to procure a job as a teacher in the Bay Area, so she went to the only school district in the state that was segregated, El Centro in the Imperial Valley, across from the Mexican border. That was primarily to set Mexican students apart. And because blacks have dark skins, they were automatically placed in that school, which also employed a few black teachers.

Nick was the son of a prominent black physician in El Paso, Texas, a pioneer who had filed a lawsuit to challenge the Texas voting laws that prevented blacks from voting in the Democratic primary. He sent his son to attend Cal. Nick was living in the rooming house when John Pittman was there. Nick was more scholarly than the others, and never had very much to say.

We got stories of lynchings over the wire, and we'd always rewrite and print them. John asked me, would I write a few things for them? I did, once in a while, and Gladys had to do them all over.

John came out of what you'd call a black middle-class family in Atlanta, and he went to Morehouse College there. His mother was a schoolteacher. John was an unabashed Marxist, and never tried to hide that fact.

The *Spokesman* supported the waterfront strike of 1934, which drew the ire of some right-wing people. There were vigilante groups patrolling the Bay Area, clashing with the pickets. They came by one night and broke out our plate glass windows. They got inside, smashed the keyboard on the Linotype machine, and pasted up a note: "You niggers go back to Africa."

They didn't do too much damage that a good mechanic couldn't take care of. The police came out and looked at it. We thought maybe they put somebody up to do it, because we were always on them for cases of police brutality. We survived the attack, but John ran out of money and the *Spokesman* went under in 1935.

Another of the young rebels was Ishmael Flory. He graduated from UC Berkeley, then returned as a graduate student in the early 1930s after his expulsion from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee for leading a student demonstration at the school. A young black man was hanged by white folks half a block from the campus and the faculty was supposed to issue a report about it, but didn't. Ishmael also protested against racism in the theater there. The administration said he was a damn Red.

After he arrived back in Berkeley, Ish became active right away. He worked with C.L. Dellums, vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and he corresponded with leftists, both white and black, all over the nation. He had a great sense of social responsibility. Ishmael was the host of "Negroes in the News" on KWB

Radio in Oakland, the first non-music show where blacks appeared on the air in the Bay Area. WB stood for Warner Brothers, which had the biggest electrical appliance store in Oakland, emphasizing radios and electric phonographs. The company got a license for a radio station.

Ishmael had no money, so he solicited advertisements to pay for his time on the air. He managed to bring in enough for him to do a 15-minute broadcast every Sunday morning. All were from white merchants. The program covered everything about blacks in the United States.

Ishmael and I were frequent visitors to the home of Tarea Hall Pittman, one of the first civil rights leaders in Northern California to become well known outside the Bay Area. Ty, as everyone called her, lived with her husband Bill on Grove Street in Berkeley. Ty's two younger sisters, Faricita and June Hall, lived with them. They were the daughters of a pioneer black family that came to California in the days of the covered wagon.

Ty was a native of Bakersfield, and their father had purchased the Berkeley house when the family moved north. She was articulate and well-informed, and always in the middle of fights that legitimately sought equality of opportunity. Tarea was selected to be the NAACP's regional director for the West Coast.

Ishmael performed his radio program until one Friday, he came by Tarea's house when I happened to be there, and informed me that I would have to take over the show because he was leaving for Chicago in the morning. I said, "Man, I never even took speech or anything at school. I don't think I can handle it." He said, "I don't have anyone else." So Saturday I went out and bought the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Baltimore*

Afro-American, and started clipping out things, making up my program. When I went on the air I didn't know how to pace myself, and I was still talking when the time was up.

A lot of my friends said afterwards, "We were surprised to hear your voice on the radio." I did the program about three times before I finally informed Tarea that I could no longer do it. I knew there wasn't going to be any pay, and I even had to buy the papers. So Tarea got a girl named Olga Jane Lewis, who was very ambitious to do a thing like that. She did it for about four weeks, then she gave it up and Tarea took it over, and had it for several years.

Ishmael was a party to the formation of the National Negro Congress, which was founded at Howard University in 1935 and issued a historic call to blacks all over the nation to meet in Chicago in February 1936. The organizers were two black Communists: the editor and intellectual John P. Davis, who taught at West Virginia State College, and Ben Davis Jr., whose father was the black Republican leader of Atlanta. Ben Davis Sr. handled whatever patronage the blacks got there, and became very wealthy. If blacks got in trouble, they'd run to him and he'd get it fixed. He had ties at City Hall and perhaps at the state capitol. He probably bought police protection for blacks who operated gambling establishments and other forms of vice.

Ben Junior didn't go for that. His father sent him to Harvard, where he became a lawyer and an outspoken leader of the Communist Party. He never went back down South to live. I often wondered how he was accepted when he paid a visit home.

Ishmael and I joined the organization right away, and

Tarea Hall Pittman (1903-1991), civil rights leader and radio host. In 2015, the South Branch Library in Berkeley, California was renamed in her honor.

talked Reverend Henry Johnson Sr. and some others to form a chapter in the East Bay. Blacks responded in the same manner they did when the million men were called to Washington in October 1995.

Reverend Johnson, who had a Baptist church in West Oakland, was the only black minister who would let us have public meetings in his church. He said he didn't care if they called him a Communist or not. But we did all of our strategy in Tarea's kitchen.

The Chicago meeting lasted a few days, and more than 800 attended. Ishmael could not go because of his other activities, but at least three blacks did go from the Bay Area: C.L. Dellums; Louise Thompson Patterson, the radical who was married to the well-known black Communist William L. Patterson; and Frances Albrier. Nobody had any money, but Frances' husband was a Pullman porter, so she could get a free pass and go by train.

Anytime there was a demonstration on race relations, the Communists had somebody there. They raised a lot of money for the Scottsboro Boys, and got into the case very heavily. The NAACP did also. It became an international event: all the blacks in the country knew about it, and even workers in Europe were demonstrating against it.

The Scottsboro Boys were nine young black men — the youngest was 13 — who were accused of raping two white women on a freight train in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931. The women got into the car where the black men were, and when the train stopped, they started hollering that the "niggers" had raped them. Those women told a damn lie, it was proved later on. They were hobos who would sell themselves to anybody who had money. The men were arrested and all convicted, and sentenced to

death.

None were executed, but they didn't get out of jail for years. One of their supporters, a young black guy named Angelo Herndon, was arrested for tried to organize a demonstration for them in Atlanta. He was sentenced to 20 years but was released after four. The Communists trotted him all over the country. Later, when I was working for the *Sun-Reporter* newspaper, he used to come by the office. I didn't think he was very bright, but I never felt that he or the others were being used by the Communist Party.

Some blacks rose up to be national spokesmen for the party, like Bill Patterson, a lawyer who graduated from UC Berkeley, then Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. He lived for several years in Moscow in the early 1920s, then returned to the United States and stayed in New York. When he and his wife Louise got older, they came back to California, but he never did try to practice law again here. He and I liked one another very much.

The movement started by the National Negro Congress didn't last very long because so many blacks felt like Tarea: when she found out that most of the leaders were Communists, she got a little afraid of it. Only the real radicals remained, and of course they didn't have too much influence in those days. I never asked people if they were Communist or not. If they wanted to tell me, that was all right. I don't think it bothered anybody except the FBI.

When I first met Tarea in 1931, she was already married to Dr. William Pittman, a graduate of Cal who received a degree in dentistry from Meharry Medical Col-

lege in Nashville, a black school. Blacks had difficulty in gaining admission to the white dental and medical schools.

Tarea and Bill were a little older than me, but we mixed as equals. They didn't have any children, but they took a great deal of interest in all blacks who were going to Cal or any other school. There were always a lot of people over at their house, and they had parties just about every weekend. Tarea had a razor-sharp mind and was a tough opponent in debate. Bill was one of those black professionals who held out the helping hand to young blacks who were interested in furthering themselves.

Bill was a practical joker. He always had booze on hand, but refrained from imbibing himself. When a party was in progress, he would pour liberally, then have a glass of water for himself. When the subject showed the effects, Bill would heckle him, shouting, "That cat can't take it!" and laugh like hell.

Tarea never ran for office: no black person had even tried to be elected to any office in the Bay Area then. But she had quite a big following, and I think she relished what she was doing. She worked with labor unions and with all the liberal organizations of both sexes in the Bay Area. She saw social problems and tried to do something about them. Tarea became more and more active in the NAACP. She attended several national conventions, where she became well acquainted with the leaders of both that group and the National Urban League.

The NAACP, the daddy of all the civil rights organizations in the country, had been carrying the ball for a long time. It was founded in New York City in 1909. In the beginning, it didn't have any money. It never would

have come into existence, had it not been for whites financing it. Wealthy Jews from New York and Chicago put up a lot of the money. It didn't try to get legislation passed, but depended on the courts. It had a tremendous belief in the Constitution.

When the NAACP started, it had a rivalry with Booker T. Washington, the president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Washington went to white businessmen primarily, to get money. The NAACP was more liberal in its early years, when W.E.B. Du Bois was head of it. Du Bois was from Massachusetts, and Booker T. Washington was born in Virginia. There's a difference. Washington didn't have the mind that Du Bois had, but I think he performed something that had to be done at the time. At least he had blacks learning to read and write, and there's always hope if they can do that. There weren't many going to school before he came on the scene, and he had to use the techniques that he used to get the funds. But Du Bois went a little bit further.

The NAACP later became more conservative, which is one of the reasons it got rid of Du Bois in 1934. At that time, Communists were joining the NAACP and trying to develop policy. Du Bois wasn't a Communist then. He just wanted to break down all the barriers.

For years, the NAACP's membership was $1 a year, but even when the fees were that low, it didn't have a national membership exceeding half a million. I thought that was terrible, when you consider the work it did.

The NAACP met once a month during the 1930s at Third Baptist Church in Oakland, which was then the biggest black church in the Bay Area. I used to go to some of the meetings with my buddies from the *Spokesman*. We

thought the local leadership under Walter Gordon was moving too slow, and we were disruptive, jumping up and questioning what they were doing. They called us Communists because of the way we acted. It was as common for blacks to practice Red-baiting as it was for white conservatives.

We challenged Gordon's presidency one year. Of course, with all those solid churchgoing people, we didn't have enough numbers to win. We thought they were afraid to challenge the establishment. I think even they recognized that they weren't doing much but beating their gums up and down in useless chatter. But they wanted to hang onto that. It did give them a certain amount of prestige in the community. Everybody who wanted to express themselves had to be a member of the NAACP. In the 1940s and the 1960s I served as press chief for the San Francisco chapter.

There was the time when blacks protested the use of a book written by a white author titled *Little Black Sambo*, which was aimed at readers in elementary school. It was castigated by the NAACP, which had to wage a hard fight for decades before the odious tome was withdrawn from the schools.

The nationally known forces of the NAACP traveled all over the country every year and spoke in the large cities. I met two of the national leaders, Walter White and Roy Wilkins, when they came to Berkeley in the 1930s. I admired both of them. Walter White had blue eyes and was very fair. He grew up in a small town in Georgia, and people from there knew what he was. But he could go where they didn't know him, and stay in the best hotels. One reason the NAACP started using him so much was

that he could go in places, ask a lot of questions and investigate things, and no one could identify him as being black. It was said that he was the black kin of the Callaway family, one of the richest families in Georgia. Some of the wealthy white planters had two families: one by their white, legal wife, and one by their black concubine.

After the *Spokesman* closed, John Pittman went to work for the *People's World*. It was able to pay its workers, although not the wages the daily papers did. Mason Roberson got a job there too, typing on the Linotype machine. He married a white woman, Doris Walker, a very good lawyer who worked in a big law firm that handled cases for radical causes. Mason never attended anything that black society did. He went with the liberal crowd, and they didn't recognize color.

John later moved to New York, and from there he went to Prague, Czechoslovakia, where he lived for many years as a foreign correspondent for the *Daily Worker*. He died in 1993. Ishmael Flory went to live in Chicago in the late 1930s and stayed there. He became a real estate broker, but never lost his liberalism. He was still very noisy, speaking out against social conditions that he felt needed improving. He died there in 2004 at age 96.

BLACK PROFESSIONALS AND CALIFORNIA POLITICS

In the 1930s I was part of the "drugstore cabinet," a group of young black men who gathered at Montgomery's Pharmacy on Sacramento Street in Berkeley. William

Montgomery was a black man from Washington, D.C. who came to Berkeley around 1931 and opened up the city's first pharmacy owned and operated by a black. Byron Rumford, a young pharmacist whom I had known since he was a student, worked there every evening, and a lot of guys who were going to college would hang out in the back after Byron closed up.

Most of the guys in our drugstore cabinet had gone to Cal, like George Marion Johnson. He had finished Boalt Hall, the law school at UC Berkeley, and was one of the lead attorneys for the State Board of Equalization. He wrote most of California's tax legislation, which the Board presented to the state Legislature every year. We called him "Mastermind."

Before the outbreak of World War II, George got a call to go to Howard University and became dean of their law school. After Nigeria got its independence in 1960, he was asked to help establish a law school there. He accepted the offer, and stayed for several years. He spent his last days in Hawaii.

D.G. Gibson, a Pullman porter, also came into the pharmacy frequently. He worked on the Overland Limited between Oakland and Chicago, and would bring home a few copies of the *Chicago Defender*. Then he started distributing black papers from all over the country, which led him into selling some black manufacturers' cosmetics, magazines and other things related to black people. His business became so big that he left the Pullman Company to devote all of his time to his own operations. He didn't have his own store; he was a wholesaler, and he made a good living off of it.

Rumford, Johnson and Gibson were all active in pub-

lic affairs, and I liked to be around people like that. I didn't spend time with people if I felt that I couldn't learn anything from them. I think that's one reason those men talked to me: They felt I was pretty well informed also.

When Roosevelt nominated Senator Hugo Black of Alabama to be an associate justice of the Supreme Court, a fiery debate occurred in the confirmation hearing on the floor of the Senate because Black had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan when a young man. But George Johnson said, "This guy might turn out to be the most liberal justice sitting on the court." Damned if he didn't! It seems that Black was forced to join the Klan if he wanted to enter politics. But on the Supreme Court, he knew he wouldn't have to run for office again.

Byron thought like I did on everything. He came from a very liberal family background. His uncle Clarence Johnson was the head man of the Dining Car Cooks and Waiters Union for the Los Angeles area.

After William Montgomery died, Byron eventually bought the business and changed its name to Rumford's Pharmacy. I knew that his desire was strong to go far. In 1948 he was elected to the state Assembly, becoming the first black person in Northern California to be elected to statewide office. He stayed for 18 years. His district included parts of Berkeley, Oakland, and some portions of Contra Costa County. He was a bull Democrat — a leader in the party. In 1963, Assemblyman Rumford authored the state's first law prohibiting racial discrimination in housing, known as the Rumford Act. The post office in the federal building in Oakland is named after him.

We always looked one another up. If he came over to San Francisco, we'd go out and have lunch together. He

finally decided to run for state Senate, and lost. After that, he took a job in Washington, but kept the pharmacy in Berkeley. Then he came home and went back to running the pharmacy. After a while he let other people run it. But he always remained busy with city and county government.

In 1926 there was one black doctor in San Francisco, Stuart Davison. His father had gone up to the Yukon in the great Klondike Gold Rush of 1898, where he struck it wild, then came back and settled in San Francisco. Stuart was the first black to graduate from the University of California Medical School in San Francisco, and the first black to intern at San Francisco General Hospital. There was a long hiatus before they accepted any others. He opened up a private office in North Beach, the Italian neighborhood of San Francisco.

George Johnson's younger brother Ken went to a medical school in Loma Linda, California that was operated by the Seventh Day Adventists. They didn't discriminate. Ken had to go East to intern because no hospital here would take on blacks. He spent his professional career in Sacramento; he was the first black to open up a medical office there, and he did very well. His older brother Bill was a physician in Kansas City.

* * *

During the Depression, Leonard Richardson was the most successful black attorney in Northern California. Most of his practice was nonblack; he had many white clients, and a lot of people from Portugal, plus other Latinos. His office was on the second floor of the American Trust Bank in Oakland.

Len grew up in Oakland, the son of a barber from Indianapolis. He was a graduate of UC Berkeley who was commissioned as an officer in World War I. He went to officers' training and came out a lieutenant, then was sent to France with one of the black outfits that served there. When the war was over, he went to Hastings Law School in San Francisco, and after graduating, opened an office in Oakland.

Len was like an older brother to me. He had a very good home on Derby Street in Berkeley, where pingpong tournaments were held on weekends, and I was a member of the Richardson team. Whist was another pastime, and bridge when it became popular. I played a hand when Charles Houston, the dean of Howard University Law School and one of Thurgood Marshall's teachers, came to the Richardson home. Houston was also the chief lawyer for the NAACP, and spent some time traveling about the nation on NAACP business. He was taking those, you could say, affirmative action cases and going to court with them. Marshall, the future Supreme Court justice, was beginning to evolve as a central figure in the fight to attain the legal rights of blacks to vote.

Another visitor I met over bridge was Ralph Bunche, who was then a graduate student at UCLA. His side won, of course. I had heard about Bunche in the summer of 1926, when we both worked for the Admiral Line, he as a waiter and I as a bellhop. We were on different ships and I never came across him then, but the fellows talked about his scholastic brilliance.

Everybody in Berkeley knew Ralph from his student days at UCLA, because he came here occasionally. I

found him to be a very proud young man with an easy personality. Little did I know how famous he would become. After receiving his doctorate, he got a teaching job at Howard University and later joined the U.S. State Department. He ended up at the United Nations, where he became the U.N. mediator in Palestine. In 1950, for his work in bringing about a truce between Arabs and Jews in the new nation state of Israel, he became the first black person to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Bunche, Houston, and other prominent blacks who visited the Bay Area always came by the home of either Richardson or Walter Gordon, the head of the NAACP branch in the East Bay. Walter was an attorney and one of the best-known blacks in the city. In 1918, he had been the first All-American football player from UC Berkeley. He was also the first black police officer ever to be hired in Berkeley. He started working on the night beat while an undergraduate, and continued while in law school. He had a wife and two small children, and needed to work his way through school.

When he had a law office, he also became an assistant coach and chief scout for the Cal football team. He probably made more money from his connections with the university than he did in the practice of law, until Earl Warren was elected governor in 1942.

Gordon and Warren were lifelong friends, who had both graduated from UC Berkeley and Boalt Hall Law School. Warren started his political career in 1925 as the district attorney of Alameda County — which includes Berkeley, Oakland, and the city of Alameda. He was a tough law enforcement man, a crusader against vice of all sorts. He led raids on suspected gambling dens and houses

of prostitution in a very spectacular manner, breaking down the door with an axe. He raided the Chinese gambling places too. This brought him wide press coverage, and he was the darling of the powerful Knowland family, who owned the *Oakland Tribune.*

His racket-busting, crime-fighting record brought enough attention so that in 1938 he was elected attorney general of California. He followed this up by being twice elected governor in a landslide, which brought him to the national attention of the Republican Party. We thought he was very conservative.

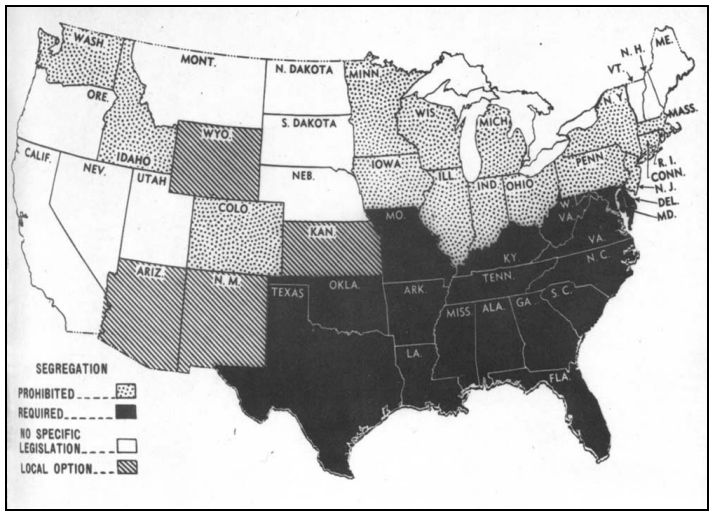
After Warren became governor, he appointed Walter Gordon chairman of the California State Parole Board. No other black had ever held such a high appointment in the state government. This left Walt with some time to practice civil law. He and his wife Sis were the parents of two sons and a daughter. Walter Jr. was appointed to the same post his father had held on the parole board. Edwin, the other son, graduated from dental school, married, and opened an office in the same building where his father had had his office. In World War II, Walter Jr. was drafted and sent to a training camp in Mississippi, and started complaining to his father about how black troops were treated. Gordon was very indignant about that.

When Earl Warren was appointed by President Dwight Eisenhower as chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1953, it was a blessing for the civil rights movement. The following year, the Warren-led court ruled that it was illegal for schools to segregate because of color. Warren surprised Ike and most others when he handed down the decision.

The first school given the order was Central High

School in Little Rock, Arkansas. When the black students attempted to enter, the white mob intercepted, defying the court order, which brought Eisenhower into the fray when he ordered the federalization of the Arkansas National Guard to enforce his orders to halt mob action.

Nobody knew that Warren would turn out to be the type of guy he did. His activities as a strict constitutionalist astonished Eisenhower. I think Ike deplored the fact that he made him chief justice. He never would have given him the appointment, had he known how liberal he really was.



Public school segregation in the U.S., 1954. That year, in Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren ruled raced-based segregation in public schools to be illegal. The decision became the cornerstone of the civil rights movement in the South.

Warren offered the name of Walter Gordon to Eisenhower as governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands. The president took the advice, and the Senate confirmed the nomination. Gordon stayed there long enough to become a U.S. district court judge before he came back to the mainland. Under Warren, the Court began a period of maintaining the legality of the Constitution, which paved the way for Lyndon Johnson's affirmative action decree of 1967.

SENATOR BILLY KNOWLAND

Around 1930, my mother and my sister Kate both started working for the family of William F. Knowland in Alameda. Bill was the youngest son of Joseph Knowland, the publisher of the *Oakland Tribune* and one of the three newspaper moguls in the state. The other two were Harry Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times* and George Cameron of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. They were the undisputed rulers of the California Republican Party, and the saying was that no Republican could get elected to office without their endorsement.

Always on election nights, Cameron would hold an open house that was supplied with beverages of all kinds and food from the finest restaurants in San Francisco. They were great affairs that began with Uncle George, as he was affectionately called, walking through the editorial department until the fatal hour arrived when he learned that Democrats had again carried San Francisco.

"Old Joe" Knowland had served six terms in Congress before losing a race for the U.S. Senate in 1914, which ended his political career. The next year, he got control of

the *Tribune*, and his family owned it for more than 60 years.

Bill Knowland was seven months younger than me. Everybody called him Billy. I used to see him at Cal when he was a student there. He had a big booming voice, and when he talked in a conversation, he'd always yell it out like it was a speech. You'd hear him all over campus.

My mother was his cook and Kate was his maid. They lived in his home, in a room with twin beds, right off the kitchen. He paid both of them a total of $45 a month. Billy and his wife Helen had two small children then — Joey and Emelyn — but they were always out and never saw them. My mother and sister did everything for the kids. Joey was still wearing diapers, and it looked like he was abandoned by both parents because Kate couldn't get rid of him most of the time. When I went there, he would be hanging hard on me to pick him up. Emelyn was aged 5 and a real brat. Kate used to warm her tail every once in a while to keep her straight.

The Knowlands kept a well-stocked cabinet after the repeal of Prohibition, and I used to go out there and drink some of their liquor and get a meal too. I didn't eat when they were around; I just visited my sister in the kitchen and didn't go to any other parts of the house. Kate stayed there for three or four years.

I used to see Billy there sometimes. I don't think he had any color bias at all: he met people real nice. A typical politician: He knew how to give you a glad hand, and that great big grin.

When he found out that I would be attending Chico State College, he was delighted. I told him I'd like to be a newspaperman, and he stated that I should not major in

journalism, but in one of the social sciences or literature. He said the mechanics of journalism could be learned very quickly, but social science would teach one how to look at things, and then interpret what one had read or seen.

Billy worked at the *Tribune* with his father, but he wanted to go into politics. Old Joe advised him: "Stay out of it. They're just going to dig into your family history." But Bill was determined; his skin was harder than Joe's. He ran for the state Assembly in 1932 as a Republican and won. Then he was elected to the state Senate.

Billy didn't have an air of superiority because he was a political animal, and he couldn't afford to act that way. The Knowlands showed a sort of benign paternalism toward Oakland's black community. I think that's why Old Joe broke ranks in the early 1920s and gave a job to a black woman named Delilah Beasley to write a column for the *Tribune*. In 1919, Beasley had published a book, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, which was probably the first black history book about the state. Her column, "Activities Among Negroes," came out every Sunday. It wasn't much, but she was the only black person to write for a white-owned daily paper west of Chicago.

Everybody knew Delilah; Oakland was like a small town. I used to see her, but I never read her column; all she wrote about was churches, social events and women's clubs — no hard news.

Delilah died in 1934, and there was a flock of black women seeking her job. But none of them had been to school like I had. The column was vacant for a while. That same year, I worked for Billy in his candidacy for state Senate, so I persuaded him to give me the column. It was the first time I ever got any pay for writing. I received

a week, which was pretty good for a Depression year.

But the black women continued to besiege the Knowlands that the post belonged to another woman. They harassed Billy so much that after about three months, he decided to discontinue the column and not be bothered with that yap yap. No black writers worked for the *Tribune* again until other papers in the Bay Area started hiring blacks in the 1960s. Of course, all of them hired blacks as janitors, which perhaps eased their conscience some.

Governor Earl Warren was a protege of Joe Knowland. So in 1945, when Senator Hiram Johnson died, Warren appointed Billy Knowland to fill Johnson's seat in the U.S. Senate. Billy was then serving in the Army. He won election to a full term in 1946, and was reelected in 1952. The labor forces in the country called him the senator from Formosa, because he was the strongest voice in Congress for Chiang Kai-Shek, and was bitterly opposed to the Chinese Communists. He was the great Red fighter.

He became the Senate majority leader, and could have been reelected easily in 1958. But he had aspirations to run for president, so he decided to seek the governorship that year: he thought it would be a better launching platform to get the presidential nomination in 1960.

His Democratic opponent for governor was Pat Brown, the attorney general of California. Billy thought Pat was a pushover, and probably the greatest amazement he ever received in his life was when this bumbling guy defeated him. It wasn't even close. After that, Billy quit elective politics and devoted all of his time to the newspaper.

William F. Knowland, U.S. senator for California, 1945 to 1959. *Time* magazine cover, Jan. 14, 1957.

He never did forget who I was; I saw him and Helen at the Republican National Convention in 1952. When he

was running the *Tribune*, if I wanted assistance for our newspaper, like photographs or newsprint, I could call him, and they would give it to us. I liked him as a person, but we were poles apart in our social views. He was a conservative down to the bottom of his feet. I never voted for him or any other Republican.

My sister Kate had gotten a good job at the Heinz cannery in Berkeley during World War II, and was a staunch member of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, receiving the same hourly pay as the longshoremen. Around the mid-1950s, business at Heinz got bad and she was laid off for a short while. She went to the unemployment office to see if there was a job down there, and mentioned that she had done domestic work for the Knowlands. The interviewer said, "Well that's funny, Mrs. Knowland is looking for someone now."

Kate went out to see Helen and they interviewed one another, and Kate said she would work for her until the ILWU called her back. She told Helen what she earned and said, "I don't work for $45 a month now." Mrs. Knowland said, "Well, I can pay you $150 a month anyway."

Bill came home a few days later, and Helen said, "Bill, guess who's here? Go in the kitchen and look." When he saw my sister he said, "Katherine!" He grabbed her and kissed her and told her how glad he was to see her. Then he said, "Katherine, how do you vote?"

She said, "Senator Knowland, when I went to work for you, the Republicans controlled the country, and you paid me $25 a month and my mother $25 a month. We had to stay on the place. You gave each of us a day off. Since then, I got a job in private industry and started earning over $200 a month. That all came under the Democrats. And that's the reason I always vote Democratic."

Kate said he turned beet red. But I doubt if it struck him real hard. Kate only worked for the Knowlands about two weeks that time, then she was called back to her union job.

Billy and Helen were high school sweethearts. He stayed with her much longer than I thought he would, because she played around on him a lot. She had nothing to do all day but think of different types of mischief. She'd bring men into the house while he was at the office; my sister saw that. Helen probably felt that the reason he married her was because he had to. She always had a glass in her hand; she wanted to be a flapper still. Bill didn't drink or smoke, and I imagine after all those years she annoyed him.

The *Tribune* started having financial reverses when he took over; he let it slip away from him. Billy divorced Helen in 1972 and married a much younger woman. His second marriage was a failure, and I think it did some things to his mind. I heard that she was always putting pressure on him for money. In 1974, at his family's resort on the Russian River north of San Francisco, Billy took his own life.

BLACK SOCIETY IN THE 1930S

Social classes have long existed among blacks, just as they have among whites. It began during slavery days, when blacks were either house servants or field hands.

Owners very cleverly divided them in this manner. The house servants worked in the big house where the master and his family resided. They were generally the master's offspring, since the master and the foreman — who was always a white male — used the bodies of the black females liberally to satisfy their own sexual needs. Babies born out of this situation were often more white in appearance than black. Many times, the slave woman would have a black mate, as they married in ceremonies that the master approved of. That created a system where some children of the same woman had very different shades of pigmentation.

The people of my color were the field hands, who picked the cotton and did all the work outside the house. The master quickly created the social distinction, and it continued after slavery. Light-skinned babies were constantly reminded of their color. The house servants always thought that in the social structure, they were above the field hands.

After emancipation, the light-skinned onetime house slaves aped their former owners in clumsy attempts to speak like whites. They lived in the manner they thought whites lived, and practiced the same type of snobbery that they had closely observed in their masters' families.

Black entertainers of the early 20th century, such as the comedy team of Miller and Lyles, turned the color complex into a subject of humor. When I saw them on vaudeville in New York around 1917, they conducted a ridiculous dialogue on the subject that was designed for black audiences.

Blacks joke about the variety of colors of people whom whites do not accept as being anything else but

black. Who could have been any whiter than Walter White, longtime executive secretary of the NAACP? Who can recall that film, *Imitation of Life*, where the beautiful half-black woman had the screen name Peola, which the hipsters on the street used freely in describing all females who were not white?

In California in the 1930s, as in the rest of the United States, there was a white society and a black society. The black women's movement of clubs was in full force. They did the same things that white middle-class people enjoyed: dances, picnics in summer and fall, and big annual affairs, partly to raise money, but mostly to show off that they were a part of the socially inclined.

The black women's social clubs engaged in activities that tried to make the community a better place. That's what their main purpose was; fashion shows were incidental. Just about everyone who suffered from the disease of social recognition found some organization which suited their needs. A single person with an invitation to a women's club party seldom had a problem finding a guest of the opposite sex. I'd go if I were invited, but I regarded all of them as hen parties.

In the 1930s, most black females still worked as domestics, and a large number of such jobs demanded that the woman live in, with one day off each week. Thursday was their traditional day off, nationwide. The men called it Kitchen Mechanics Day; it was said in a tone of jesting. Some promoters saw that all these single women were off on the same day, so they started holding a dance in West Oakland every Thursday night. And of course there were always males in attendance who were in search of a woman with a job. Admission to the dance seldom ex-

ceeded 50 cents, and the music was furnished by local bands.

The white middle class had private clubs that owned their own clubhouses, bought from dues. Their country club set had swimming pools, tennis courts and golf courses. There were even bigger organizations in the cities, such as the Olympic Club in San Francisco and the Athens Club in Oakland, where white males had large buildings with dormitories.

Of course, there was no chance for black males to join such clubs. The best answer that black men had was their national fraternal organizations. Some, like the Black Elks, owned their own buildings, but they were never more than about a third the size of buildings owned by white fraternal groups.

I had heard for years that North Oakland was a place where the more polite blacks lived, and that Berkeley was on a higher level still. The North Oakland young males suffered with a tremendous inferiority complex versus the ones in Berkeley. West Oakland, or Deep West, as residents of the area called it, which was populated by the hustlers and the rough-class blacks.

Although I lived in Berkeley, I became a part of the North Oakland young blacks. We formed a club called the North Oakland Boys, which we shortened to Nobs. We paid dues every month, and when we got enough money, we gave a dance, sending out invitations to all of those people who, in our misguided state, we thought were the upper-class blacks.

Blacks from Louisiana held a large Mardi Gras ball in Oakland every year, at the same time the celebration was held in New Orleans. Many blacks in Oakland defined

themselves as Creoles. All they had going for them was a light complexion, which they put as the most important item in their lives. But a lot of the women married any black man who had a good job and could support them decently.

Most of the upper-class black men worked on the railroads. Some were bootblacks who saved their money and, along with their working wives, bought homes with lawns and gardens, which looked just like the homes of middle-class white families.

Some black male clubs were organized, it seemed, solely for the purpose of holding social events, which were by invitation only. Members invited a select number of guests, and there was a lot of interest to be among the chosen to attend such soirees. The Sanobar in Oakland was one of those organizations. It held dances several times a year, plus a big annual affair, generally during the Christmas season.

A club in San Francisco, the Cosmos, appeared to be more elitist than the Sanobar. It always held its annual formal dance at the St. Francis, one of the city's most prestigious hotels. That was their reason for being alive: for the women to buy expensive gowns, and the men to rent tails and white ties. I wasn't high enough socially to be invited to that, but I used to wonder why they spent a large sum to rent a ballroom in a place that would not rent them a hotel room, serve them a meal, or permit them to attend entertainment in its supper clubs.

* * *

BLACK ENTERTAINERS

The first black entertainer to get on a radio show in San Francisco was Henry Starr, who was born in Oakland, then worked in Los Angeles and on the East Coast as a piano player. He was hired in the late 1920s for the *Edna Fischer Show*, a variety show broadcast every morning on KFRC in San Francisco. Starr sang and accompanied himself on the piano. Rumors were that he was paid $100 every week. I knew him and his family well because his brothers worked as waiters for the Southern Pacific when I was a cook there.

When my family lived in Chico, my mother's minister in Oroville was Bishop Judge King. One of his sons, Saunders King, sang and played the guitar in that church. I met him when we were in grammar school, and his family moved down to the Bay Area about the same time we did. Saunders was a member of the quartet of black singers who appeared every morning on Crosscuts, a radio show that went on the air in San Francisco around 1928. They sang mostly spirituals.

Jack's Tavern on Sutter Street opened in 1938. It was the premier jazz club in San Francisco. It was black-owned, and all it ever had was black musicians. I was surprised when Saunders formed the first band to play there. He was playing in a different beat than what he did at church. I started going there from the beginning. It became a mecca for jazz aficionados. There were more whites coming out there than blacks, and all through the war it was the same way. One of King's recordings, "S.K. Blues," swept the country and was played by a lot of the famous bands. But apart from that, he wasn't well known

outside of San Francisco, because he stayed there all of his professional career.

* * *

During the Depression, the vaudeville theaters were still drawing heavy. You could see a show for 35 cents. I liked vaudeville better than movies because I felt I was relating to the performers. If they did something particularly good, the applause was so great, and you got caught in the spirit of that. They'd come out to talk to people after.

The West Coast had the Pantages Theatre Circuit, which started in Seattle, and the Fanchon & Marco chain, founded by a brother and sister dance act in the 1920s. They were at their height in the 1930s. Fanchon and Marco had a contract to supply their extravagant stage acts for the Fox Film Corporation, which owned the Fox West Coast, a chain of vaudeville theaters all along the coast.

I went to the T&D Theater, the number one movie house in Oakland, more than any other. Occasionally I'd go over to San Francisco to see a show at the Warfield or the Paramount, or the Fox Theatre on Market Street. I came over from Oakland the day the Fox opened in 1929. It seated almost 5,000 patrons and was the biggest theater in the country outside of New York City.

The Fox hired Henry Le Bel, a black man from Seattle, to work the keys of the mighty Wurlitzer organ. Le Bel was one of the premier organists in the nation, and he was very fair. He never did bother with any blacks when he came down here. Some light-skinned blacks probably felt that if they socialized with blacks too much,

they might lose their jobs.

Vaudeville phased out when TV became popular. A lot of the acts started appearing on television, and the audiences decreased at the theaters. The Orpheum Circuit is now the RKO Theaters.

LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles was a fairyland that drew religious mullahs from everywhere. I thought they congregated down there so they could get in films. Some were sincere in their beliefs, and some were simply quacks, swamis and goofy people who started their own religions, and flocked to the rich pickings to be found in the area.

Not many blacks worked in Hollywood, but they still aspired to get into the movies — either on the screen, in the studios, or in any other capacity. Black parents had ambitions like white parents, because they saw Sunshine Sammy and others in the early days. He was a little black kid who appeared in the *Our Gang* comedies.

No studio thought blacks would sell except when they were portrayed as entertainers doing their specialty. I guess that's why so many blacks didn't take dramatic training: they knew they weren't going to get any jobs. Hollywood made an occasional black movie, but often it was just taken from a musical, and all they had to do was film it, like *Cabin in the Sky* in 1943.

In 1928, Dr. John Somerville, a black dentist, opened the Hotel Somerville on Central Avenue, and it became one of the most popular places in black Los Angeles. It had more than 100 rooms, and the ground floor contained

a restaurant, a barbershop, and a nightclub with good jazz for dancing every night.

The nightclub was a gathering place for black railroad workers. It served meals and whatever booze each customer was able to purchase on his own, since Prohibition was still in effect, although one could buy the brew called near beer. The first night I went there, George Dewey Washington was the featured vocalist. He began his career in San Francisco before leaving for the more lucrative Los Angeles and New York City areas by way of vaudeville and nightclubs.

The small house band at the Somerville was headed by Curtis Mosby. His drummer was Lionel Hampton, before Hamp left for the Les Hite band at Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club in Culver City, just outside of L.A. It was a smaller, West Coast version of the original club in Harlem. It wasn't even a bad copy of the nightclub it was named after because the shows weren't nearly as lavish. It had maybe one big-name singer on the bill and a tap dancer or two, like Sam and Sam, a great team made up of Sammy Marmillion and Sammy Montgomery. Lawrence Brown, the trombonist who would later play for Duke Ellington, sat in the Hite band at that time.

Cab Calloway, who had been a headliner at the Cotton Club in Harlem, was at Culver City one New Year's Eve when he began singing his theme song, "Minnie the Moocher," and scatting the national anthem. He was promptly shut off the air.

We diligently stayed up late to hear radio shows from there. The Hite band would come north when the Cotton Club closed for short periods, playing one-night stands in Oakland and some towns in Oregon and Washington.

The Lincoln Theater was the big house on Central Avenue in Los Angeles, presenting both motion pictures and stage acts of top black entertainers who would appear when they came out to make movies. It was the only movie palace on the West Coast that hired blacks for ushers, projectionists, or any other jobs except for entertainers.

Every weekend they had a big stage show called the Midnight Ramble. It was mostly a black audience. In the late 1920s, when I was working as a railroad cook, as soon as I got into my clothes I was gone to the Lincoln Theater to watch that show. I saw all the famous black comedians that worked the theaters back in Chicago and New York, like Pigmeat Markham, Dusty Fletcher and Sandy Burns. And then you heard a lot of good jazz. It was kind of like the shows you'd see at the Apollo Theater in Harlem.

The Lincoln didn't get many of the big-name bands from the East, but there were some good local black musicians like Kid Ory, a trombone player from New Orleans who was already a national jazz legend, Curtis Mosby and his Blue Blowers, and Lionel Hampton when he was just starting his career.

I met Lionel in the early 1930s. From then until he died in 2002, he was a major figure in the jazz world. He came out to California in 1928 and soon made his reputation as a great showy drummer. He used to excite everybody along Central Avenue by walking down the street with two drumsticks: he'd beat on the walls, then lean over and beat on the sidewalk to keep the rhythm up.

I was surprised when Lionel joined Benny Goodman's band in 1936 and started playing the vibes, because he

was better known as a drummer. I don't recall any white bandleader who integrated his band before Goodman. I think he did it for commercial reasons, to try to get the true feeling of jazz. He got Teddy Wilson, a famous piano player, and formed a small group out of his big band called the Benny Goodman Trio, with Wilson on piano, Gene Krupa on drums, and Benny playing clarinet. They made a lot of records together. When he got Lionel Hampton to join them, they really were jumping.

In 1938, Goodman went after Cootie Williams out of Duke Ellington's band. Cootie was a growl trumpet player who used a plunger to make that sound; he was the best at that. To get the black sound of jazz, Goodman hired Fletcher Henderson to arrange full-time for his band. I guess Fletcher wasn't working enough to keep his payroll going. He didn't have a band of his own after that; all he did was write arrangements.

Goodman was the most popular of all the white bands. He was named the King of Swing by the white media, but the musicians knew better, and he knew it too. He was well trained — a thorough musician — but he didn't understand how to improvise. Almost any black band outswung him. Black musicians would say about some players: "That cat's really swinging," or "swinging like a gate." That's why they called it swing music. You don't know how crazy the white kids got about swing music in the 1930s. It was something new to them, and Goodman's band stood out.

Many of the black musicians couldn't appear in the places where Benny could, and he got on radio before they did, so the white kids never heard of them. Benny used to come on every Saturday night, broadcasting

nationwide over NBC on a program called *Let's Dance*. I used to listen to the show because I like that type of music. I could tolerate him.

During World War II, Lionel Hampton was drafted into military service as a member of the St. Mary's Preflight Band at St. Mary's College in Moraga, California, where they were training Navy flyers. It was about a 20-piece band; they were all professional musicians in civilian life. And man could they swing! The Navy wanted them as a showpiece band, and they played wherever the Navy wanted them to. They were stationed on the base all through the war. Out of that group was the nucleus of the big band that Lionel Hampton formed when the war was over.

One of those men was Wilton Johnson, an alto saxophone player from Sacramento, who was my sister Kate's boyfriend. Wilton used to come by Kate's house in Oakland, and sometimes Lionel would come with him because he liked the way Kate made lemon cream pie. They were both in uniform. I used to talk to Lionel, and he always remembered I was Kate's brother.

Lionel was very versatile. He would be drumming, then switch to the mallets to play the vibes, then drop the mallets, jump up on the piano and start playing two-fingered style, like he did on the vibes. Two fingers! His musicians would come off the stage and go down the aisle of the theater, all tooting, then back up to the stage.

Lionel's wife Gladys had been a showgirl in a chorus line in Los Angeles. They never had any kids. Lionel made Gladys handle all the money: That's what made him well off. When they played one-night stands for dances, all over the country, Gladys would stand in the box office

and watch the money as it came in, and help to count it to make sure the band got theirs. She put that money away very carefully. She invested in real estate deals in Harlem, because she had the business sense. He didn't: He was just a musician.

Lionel Hampton playing the vibes.

At the end of his life, Lionel moved around stiffly and wore a wig; I noticed because it was always slipping down. I wanted to get close enough to ask him, "Man, why don't you take that goddamn rug off your head?" I knew him well enough that I could go up and talk to him like that.

* * *

DUKE ELLINGTON

Wilton Johnson said Duke Ellington was the greatest thing he had ever heard. I listened, because Wilton played professionally himself. I quickly shared his opinion, and after that, I bought only Ellington's records. He first recorded for the Brunswick label, under the name of the Jungle Band. He was in great demand from other recording companies, and later signed contracts with Vocalion, Victor, Columbia, and Decca.

Ellington would leave the Cotton Club in New York City at periods during the five years he was playing there, and go on tour. He would broadcast from wherever he was playing. He went into the big hotels more than any other black. Sometimes he'd come on the radio once a week, and sometimes three or four successive nights. I watched the schedule every day in the newspaper.

Starting around 1920, the big bands began playing one-night stands in Oakland. None came to San Francisco, with the exception of Ellington, who played at the Orpheum Theater on Market Street about 1931. The ads read: "Duke Ellington and His Aristocrats of Modern Music." The reviews in the newspapers were glowing in their praise. He was supposed to play for a week, but the crowds were so immense that they held him over a second week. That's the first time they had done anything like that. I went both weeks to see him.

Ellington first played Oakland on that same trip, performing for whites at Sweet's Ballroom, and the next night for blacks at the Oakland Auditorium, which was owned by the city; it could seat 6,500 or 7,000 people, but they did well if they got a thousand in there that night to

see him. This was before Bill Sweet, owner and operator of the ballroom, decided he would have a two-night session for black entertainers who came to Oakland. The first night would be allocated for whites only, and the second night for blacks. That went on until after World War II. The policy was only for black bands; I don't think any blacks wanted to hear the white bands because they didn't play hot enough.

Bill Sweet used John L. Burton, a black man who was a one-man publicity hound, to encourage blacks to come out. He was the same man who ran a crooked crap game with the scabs during the 1934 strike. To catch attention, he spelled his name Bur-ton, with a hyphen, and stressed the second syllable. Burton was one of the most colorful persons in Oakland, and he got the news out whenever some big entertainer came to town.

Sweet's was the mecca for jazz devotees in Oakland. It was the only place where the famous big bands played, such as Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Jimmie Lunceford, Andy Kirk, Earl Hines and some white bands. Fats Waller came once alone, and used a local drummer and a few others to accompany him. Sweet's wasn't a nightclub: it just had dances, no floor shows. When these bands played the clubs in Los Angeles, they stayed anywhere from a week to maybe four weeks.

Ellington came back to Oakland every year for about a decade, then not quite so often during World War II. After the war, he never played another Oakland engagement, but always in San Francisco, as clubs here began to sign him and other big bands for dance dates.

I went to hear him on his first visit to Oakland, and after the show, at the 16th Street depot, I was introduced

to him by a man I knew, Tex Allen. We were all waiting for the train; the band was going to its next engagement. Every time Ellington came after that, I'd go up and talk to him. I called him maestro, and he was always very gracious; he spoke well and met people very easily. He had that manner about him. The Duke was a sharp dresser. He was almost as well known for that as for his music. That's how he got his nickname, from the other students when he was at high school in Washington, D.C.

I talked to just about everybody in the band: Barney Bigard, Lawrence Brown, Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, Cootie Williams, and later Ben Webster. My father told me that when Cootie was 16 years old, just after Cootie had left his native Mobile with his trumpet, he had played in one of the old man's groups in Florida. I once asked Cootie about that and he said, "Yeah, I remember Fleming."

Some members of the Ellington band developed around the Bay Area. I knew Lawrence Brown, his trombonist, because he lived in Oakland and had gone to Technical High School there. Ellington stole him from the Les Hite band. Ivie Anderson, his first woman vocalist, was born in California and lived around the bay when she was young. She sang in San Francisco before moving to Los Angeles, where Ellington picked her out of the Culver City Cotton Club and put her in his band. She stayed with him for about a dozen years.

Barney Bigard, his clarinetist, had some relatives in Berkeley, and he always stayed with them when the band came here. That's how I got to know him so well. He was from New Orleans, and spoke French fluently; he talked with that accent that the French-speaking blacks had. His

cousin Eddie Aubert, my best friend at the time, never paid to go in when Barney played at Sweet's Ballroom, and I went in with him.

Ellington was a star before he ever visited Oakland, and had already made a couple of films in Hollywood. He was such a big hit at the Cotton Club that they put him in the Ziegfeld Follies. And the rest of the nation followed suit, because whatever New York did in those days, everybody else wanted to do it.

The next time Ellington came through Oakland he had his father with him, and I got to meet him. He called his father Uncle Ed, and so did everybody in the band. The old man seemed all excited, and didn't know what to make of it. I guess Ellington wanted his father to see the United States, which I thought was wonderful. Then about 1937 or 1938, when they were playing one-night stands all over the country, he brought his son Mercer, who was only about 18. Later I met Mercer's son, Edward Kennedy Ellington II, in a nightclub here. Eddy played guitar. He said he hoped to play in his father's band.

Duke remained close to his family all of his life. After he became successful, he moved them from Washington, D.C. to New York: his mother, father, and younger sister Ruth.

All musicians wanted to play with him, regardless of their color, because everything he did was far more sophisticated than what other bands were doing. He composed most of the band's music, and never played his pieces the same way. His compositions and arrangements were so unusual, and he let the guys in his band express themselves freely. He knew the kind of people he wanted in his band, and he got them. I could tell that these men

were better than anybody I had ever heard, together.

Another thing that made him great was that the men stayed with him longer than with any other bands. He paid better salaries than most bands, and had the greatest bunch of soloists ever assembled. Every trumpet player and every saxophone player could take a solo.

There weren't any white musicians in his band at first. He had some later on, about the time the white bands started taking in some blacks. He had a white drummer, bass player and a trumpet player at one time. A lot of the white bands paid more because they could play in the big hotels, like the Plaza in Boston and the Shannon in Chicago. He was the first black band to get in those.

All the musicians were handled by big booking agencies in New York or Hollywood, and naturally these agencies were only going to deal with the well-known clubs. That's where the money was. The nightclubs where Duke and all the top black musicians played were mostly segregated. A lot of them resented it, but there was little they could do if they wanted to work steady.

Duke was always traveling because he wanted to keep his band working. Some of his most popular hits he composed on the road. The tune would come to his mind, and when he'd get somewhere that had a piano, he'd work it out. Irving Mills, Duke's manager, put his own name as the co-writer on a lot of pieces that Ellington composed. But he didn't write note one. Duke accepted it because he wanted to move on.

If Duke played down South, he went in a Pullman sleeping car. When the band got through playing, they'd come back and sleep in the car. They didn't bother with that crap in the hotels. That didn't change until the civil

rights movement in the 1960s.

You could talk to him at the clubs. People would rush up when he left the piano. He signed autographs. He once asked me for my business card, but I didn't have any with me that night. People said, "He'll send you a Christmas card."

I met Ben Webster, the great tenor saxophonist, when he was in Ellington's band in the early 1940s. One time when I was visiting Barney Bigard in Berkeley, Barney said, "We've got a tenor man who's better than Coleman Hawkins. You're going to hear him tonight." And I agreed with him: Webster was more exciting. Ben had a cousin named Byron Barker who was living in San Francisco, so I saw Ben even more then.

Ben used to drink heavy on the bandstand, and he was very unruly when he got drunk: Nobody could do anything with him. He hit Duke up alongside the head one time. He was with the band for three or four years. Duke hired everybody back but Ben, because Ben would fight anybody. He later moved to Copenhagen, Denmark, where he died in 1973.

One night, when Duke came through San Francisco, he stopped at Jack's Tavern and saw a local bass player, Junior Raglin, playing in a group. Duke hired him for his band. I was there the first night he got up and played bass with Duke, at Sweet's Ballroom. Raglin stayed with Duke for three or four years.

I went to see Duke every time he came to Oakland. I never had enough money to take a date, and I very seldom danced. I tried to get as close to the bandstand as I could, and stood there all through the two and a half hours they played, watching those wonderful musicians. About half

of the people who came did the same thing. There were a lot of women, and I imagine most of them paid their own way too.

Duke Ellington, *Time* magazine cover, August 20, 1956.

When Duke played at the nightclubs in San Francisco, he'd be here maybe a whole week, and there were generally three or four shows every night, so I'd see him more than one time. In some of the places, those tables were so packed that there wasn't space to dance. People mostly came to hear, anyway. There never was any color bar when he played in San Francisco.

I think Duke's band of the early 1940s was the best, the Blanton-Webster band, with Jimmy Blanton on bass and Ben Webster on sax. The last time Blanton came through here, tuberculosis had him pretty bad. Duke took care of him until he died — paid all his bills.

I didn't see any period where Duke's band declined, because I was buying their records steadily. Of course I could have been blinded because I didn't think there was anybody like him. The last time I saw him was at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco in 1973. Some of his original musicians were still with him. They said he would be back again next year, but he didn't come back, because cancer caught up with him in New York. He died in 1974.

JAZZ IN THE BAY AREA

After Ellington made his first appearance in the Bay Area, other black jazz bands came. Jimmie Lunceford, in my opinion, was second only to Ellington as the best of all the bands, and Count Basie third. But I had already separated Duke from the rest of the field.

Basie came to Oakland with what we called his "Jump Band" and the blues-shouting Jimmy Rushing. Basie's sig-

nature song was "One O'clock Jump." He played jump music — fast most of the time, and always with a tremendous beat. The phrase came from Fats Waller's song "The Joint is Jumpin'." It depicted a house rent party, which they had in big cities. You'd come to a party and they would charge admission so they could pay the rent. They'd cook a big pot of beans or whatever, and have some bad liquor. A lot of guys who were waiters on the train attended them when we went to Chicago.

I saw Basie at Sweet's Ballroom in the 1930s, and later met him at a nightclub in San Francisco. I used to see his ex-wife, because she was living over in Berkeley. She was a good-looking gal, and I knew a lot of the same people that she did. So when I met Basie, I said, "I met your former wife." He said, "Who?" I said, "Vivian."

"I don't want to hear nothing about that shit," he said. That was the end of the conversation. I never tried to approach him any more.

San Francisco had so little work for black musicians that some of them took jobs at the post office. Although there were dance halls in the city, they used only local bands, which played "hot" or jazz music just occasionally. No blacks were admitted to the supper clubs at the Mark Hopkins, St. Francis and Palace hotels.

When black artists such as Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Roland Hayes, the great tenor, came to town, it was the whites who brought them, and they sang in concert halls, not just for blacks. Of course there was always the old devil racism, which plagued so many blacks gifted with great talents. They could not rent a room in a big hotel, any more than any other black traveler. Even in Chinatown, they would not be served in

any of the big fine eating places along Grant Avenue. The Chinese practiced discrimination because they were keeping up with what the whites were doing.

LANGSTON HUGHES COMES WEST

Langston Hughes was one of the leading figures to emerge out of the Black Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. The movement was centered in Harlem, where most of the writers and other artists lived. After all, the majority of the big publishing houses were located along the East Coast, primarily in New York City. All of the big monthly and weekly periodicals had their editorial offices in the Big Apple, and of course the American theater was and still is centered there.

I met Hughes about 1934, at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland. I came to hear the Jimmie Lunceford band, which had replaced Cab Calloway as the house band at the Cotton Club in New York City. At the dance, I encountered Mason Roberson, my friend from the *Spokesman*. He was with a short, slightly built, brown-skinned man wearing a suit and a tie. Mason asked me, had I met Lang yet? Then he explained that the man with him was Langston Hughes.

I shook hands with him and joined in the conversation. He was very friendly and outgoing — one of easiest persons to meet. I knew Hughes as a poet and a playwright, from reading about him in the black press. Nobody at the dance recognized him. Mason was taking him around because Langston was staying in San Francisco.

Two years earlier, Hughes had been one of a party of 22 black intellectuals who made a trip to the Soviet Union. Their fares and hotel accommodations were paid for by the Soviets. Two blacks from the Bay Area were part of the group, both lifelong socialists: Louise Thompson, a graduate of UC Berkeley, and Matt Crawford, a chiropractor who also worked for an insurance company.

The group left the Soviet Union after a few months, but Hughes stayed for over a year. He took the famed Trans-Siberian train from Moscow to Vladivostok, and from there a ship to Japan. But the Japanese forced him to leave, suspecting him of being a Communist spy, so he took a ship to Shanghai, then another ship back home.

I felt drawn to Langston immediately, for neither of us felt any restraints in talking about the problem. When I say the problem, I mean race relations in the United States. I used to see him quite often after that because I was friends with Mason and Roy Blackburn, and those were the two people Hughes was closest to, along with Matt Crawford.

Roy Blackburn was Langston's personal secretary, who worked with him in San Francisco and in Carmel, California. But I don't think any money ever changed hands. Roy wanted to be identified with him because he was a celebrity. Crawford and his wife held affairs for Hughes in their Berkeley home.

Langston had a very thorough knowledge of people with no visible source of income. He was a survivalist, which he later displayed so graphically in the hip cat character Simple, in his column in the *Chicago Defender*. Simple was a black man who virtually lived by what is

termed his wits — that is, being very sharp in the world of the streets of a big city.

I saw right away how he could create such a character, because he mingled with everybody and kept his ears open all the time. Simple had a sort of street logic, and was always trying to figure out ways to take care of any matter that demanded the use of money. I think Langston was writing about himself, because he was always short in cash. He was a sort of vagabond because he didn't really have any roots anywhere.

He must have stopped at pool halls a lot, because he certainly was familiar with those people. And because of his literary skills, he was invited to homes of what we'd call the black bourgeoisie. He didn't write about the big blacks, but the little blacks, because they were far more numerous.

Hughes' father lived in Mexico, and Langston had gone down there to visit him. He said the Mexicans looked at what you had in your pocket: They didn't discriminate as long as you could pay your way. And they didn't prohibit intermarriage, because so many of them were dark-skinned.

Hughes was staying in San Francisco at the luxurious home of Noel Sullivan, a white man who was a patron of the arts. Sullivan had the urge to be a concert singer, but had an indifferent voice of no recognizable pitch or tone. All people could do was shake their heads. I think he realized his limitations, but he liked to be around artists, and had money enough to attract those who shared his interests.

Sullivan knew of the humiliation black artists faced, so he opened up his home to the internationally known

ones who came through San Francisco. Hughes, Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson and others found the welcome mat at the Sullivan mansion on Russian Hill.

Sullivan and his sister were the sole heirs of their uncle James Phelan, a millionaire who was a Democrat — a real rarity in San Francisco then. Phelan died in 1930, and had never married. He had served as mayor of San Francisco, and later U.S. senator from California. He had owned the Phelan Building, a large office building in downtown San Francisco which still bears his name; the 12,000-acre Phelan Ranch outside of Chico, where my stepfather had worked when I was growing up; a second large ranch 20 miles away, outside of Gridley; and a house in Carmel, right off the ocean, where Langston Hughes would go to write.

Hughes was very close to Sullivan. He had a suite of rooms in the mansion and a well-trained staff of housekeepers to serve him. He stayed around San Francisco for three or four months. He had several parties while in residence at the Sullivan home, and I got invited.

When I arrived at the place, it was full of blacks. Sullivan had all black servants and an interracial guest list of the literary and artistic world. I met Sullivan that night. He was dressed in very severe black, and was a sort of odd-looking guy. I told him that I had fished and hunted on the Phelan Ranch in Chico, and knew his foreman Murphy very well. He seemed pleased that I was aware of his properties outside of the city.

Hughes depended on wealthy people for occasional handouts, since there were not too many black writers making a lot of money — that is, not like Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, or even Carl Van Vechten, the white

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) on postage stamp, 2002.

writer who earned national fame for his best-selling novel about the Harlem Renaissance, *Nigger Heaven*. Van Vechten used to go to house parties where blacks and whites mixed. He was writing about black intellectuals. The title alone would make people want to read that book. I think it was exploitation.

Langston knew a white woman in New York who used to send him money. He would write to her to get a loan when he needed it, and it looked like that was most of the time because he led a carefree life, and didn't worry too much about what tomorrow would bring. But he always had an obligation to help his mother out. She depended on him, and if he had anything, he would send it to her. Langston never married. He and the writer Zora Neale Hurston had a sort of engagement, but he never explained it clearly, and Zora never said anything at all.

There was a voice of protest through Langston's poetry and plays. He wrote in a subtle manner about the differences in the races, and the stark realism of racism in the country. Seems like it will continue to be the number one topic of discussion for a long time.

SARGENT JOHNSON AND THE BOHEMIAN LIFE

In 1930, there were only about 2,500 blacks living in San Francisco, out of a population of about 700,000. You could walk up and down Market Street all day, and the only black face you'd see was by looking in the plate glass windows and seeing your own reflection.

For the most part, blacks were barred from the nightlife entertainment and the "first-class" restaurants, if I

can use that term. Some places had the gall to put up a sign: "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." Blacks knew what they meant and did not enter them.

Once during the 1930s, I was in Chinatown with another black guy, and we took a chance by going into a bar called the Pagoda. While we were sitting there, some white tourists walked in. They saw us and said to the Chinese bartender, "There's niggers in here. We ain't coming in." We didn't say anything back because they weren't talking to us. The bartender said, "I serve anybody that comes in."

The neighborhood next to Chinatown was North Beach, which was primarily inhabited by people from Italy and their American-born children. That was the one place in the city where blacks were most welcome. You could eat in almost all the restaurants, and could go into most places where there was live entertainment. Some of the entertainers were black also.

North Beach has always been the bohemian part of San Francisco because it's where the Barbary Coast was located. It was an area known for its brothels, bars and entertainment, and was very international and very cosmopolitan. The government persuaded the city to close down the Barbary Coast during World War I because it was afraid the servicemen would get infectious diseases from those women.

A lot of artists lived over there. One attraction was that food and drink were cheap. I'd come over from Berkeley to eat at the Iron Pot on Kearny Street, where you could get a hell of a meal for 45 cents. I used to order a bowl of minestrone, then put in a lot of grated cheese and get some Italian bread, and you had a meal.

There was a famed barkeep in North Beach named Izzy Gomez, a Portuguese, who operated a pub on Pacific Avenue, even through Prohibition. He always saw that you got a drink or a bowl of soup, whether you had money or not. Top artists from all over the United States went to Izzy's. Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, the Mexican muralists, used to hang out there, which attracted the literary people and the working press.

One of Izzy's best customers was Sargent Claude Johnson, the black sculptor and painter. When I met him in the late 1920s, he had already gained an international reputation. He preferred to be called Claude. He had a small cottage in the backyard of his Berkeley home, which he converted into a studio. His work was exhibited in New York and other parts of the country. But like Rivera, he lived a sort of hand-to-mouth existence.

I lived in Berkeley too then. John Pittman, Ishmael Flory and I all knew Claude, and we would often come around his house on Dohr Street late at night with a gallon jug of wine. We spent many an evening at the studio, staying up to 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning discussing the plight of the world, and particularly of blacks, and the need for social changes.

On a few occasions, while we were waging our plans for creating a different world, Claude's wife Pearl stormed into the room, clad in her robe, and asked each of us, did we not have a home where we could go, as the hour was early morning, and time for all decent persons to be at home asleep? She was very bourgeois, and would have been much more interested had Claude been a social figure and making a lot of money. But he didn't give a damn about that.

The Singing Saints by Sargent Claude Johnson, 1940.

If Claude had a burst of inspiration, he'd stay in Berkeley and work in his studio. But he spent most of his time at Izzy Gomez's with fellow artists. He'd go there and stay for days, chasing younger women. He lived a very lusty life. I don't think Izzy's ever closed. Maybe Claude

would go home with somebody, but not to his wife and daughter.

Claude was very amusing but intense. I wasn't interested in art that much; he was just another guy to me, and this was the way he made his living. We called each other "Horse." We never did talk about art. We were always either drinking booze or cracking wise at one another. He liked to have somebody around to talk to. And he was an ultraliberal, as a lot of talented people in that day were, particularly in the art world.

The last time I saw him, I ran into him in San Francisco and he said that he and his wife had separated. He told me he had moved down to the Yucatán Peninsula. He said, "You can get girls down there 12 years old. You old son of a bitch, why don't you come down there with me?"

I said, "Well, what the hell do you want with that?" He said, "That's the life, Horse, come on down with me." I said, "No, I don't want to come. One thing, I don't speak the language."

Claude died in 1967, but his artworks still appear in museums and can be seen in buildings throughout San Francisco.

WORKING FOR THE WPA

The Depression had the entire industrialized world bogged down in a state of economic doubt. Millions of people left their homes when the plant where they worked closed down, and farmers who were unable to sell their produce sought jobs in other industries. Both local and

state government discovered that they were unable to cope with what was a national problem.

California was hit hardest by the flood of jobless people, because of the mild climate and the series of great droughts and dust storms that occurred in the Middle West in 1934 and '35, particularly areas in Oklahoma and Arkansas. That is the period when people from those states earned the derisive name of "Okie" or "Arkie." They got into their jalopies and poured into California. So many of them headed for Los Angeles that in 1936, the city sent members of the L.A. Police Department to the state line at Arizona, Nevada and Oregon. When people tried to enter, they'd ask how much money they had. And if they didn't have $10, the policemen would say, "You can't come into California." That continued for several years, until the governor finally stopped it.

The government had to do something to restore confidence. Out of this period of massive homelessness came relief funds from Washington. Nobody wanted relief work, because we thought of it as welfare. But when Roosevelt started the Works Progress Administration, WPA, it was a lifesaver to me and many others I knew then.

The government started the WPA to put money in people's pockets. It had to do so, or there would have been revolution in the streets. And I accepted it that way. I thought it was the duty of the state to provide ways and means for people to survive.

The arts section of the WPA put life into the American theater. Broadway was suffering too because of the Depression. I think the most outstanding things that came out of the whole WPA program were the Federal Theater

Project and the Federal Music Project. They presented plays and musicals on Broadway, and afterwards they traveled all over the United States.

Out of that period came the Broadway musicals *The Green Pastures* and *The Swing Mikado*. I saw *The Green Pastures* when it came to San Francisco. Its theme was taken from black spirituals, and it had an all-black cast. It ran here for several months, but it didn't impress me a great deal. Like most of the big musicals with black casts, it was written by a white man, Marc Connelly, in collaboration with blacks who wrote the music.

In 1935 I made my way to the local WPA office in Oakland and asked for an application. They told me they needed laborers to work on a project near Lake Merritt, which included the present courthouse for the Superior Court. I took what they offered, not informing them of what I had done before. They put me out with a pick and shovel, and I dug ditches for one or two days, along with other black male laborers.

A lot of WPA money was spent doing research work at colleges. When they found out I had college background and had just left the *Oakland Tribune*, they said, "You don't belong out here." They sent me to the Federal Writers Project at Bancroft Library on the campus of UC Berkeley. It paid $94 a month. That was the top pay they gave you on WPA; the unskilled workers got about $60 a month.

With apartment rents being no more than $2.50 a week in the Bay Area, this salary was most attractive. One could rent a five-room house for $18 monthly, and for about $10 more, a large two-story house. Houses in San Francisco sold for $5,000 or $6,000. You could go into

just about any restaurant, and wouldn't have to pay over 50 cents for a meal. A top sirloin steak cost 18 to 20 cents a pound. You could get a quart of milk for about 12 cents and a pound of stewing beef for 8 cents.

There were roughly 30 people in the writers' group, all very talented, and all liberals. A couple of them had Ph.D.s. Most had worked on small newspapers or trade papers. We did research work on the history of California, because the library had the greatest collection of California history books in the state. We were all working on our own, but we got assignments, so we knew what to do. I did a lot of reading about the early days of California. We scattered at lunch. I went to Stevens Union. They had nice sandwiches, and you could sit on the veranda outside.

I was the only black person in the group, and they accepted me as a colleague. We took notes for eight hours every day, writing them by hand, then typing them later. Or we just sent our notebooks in. I don't know what they ever did with that stuff.

It was a very unruly group. One of the first things they did was to form a union, which I joined. We had the audacity to threaten to strike if we didn't get higher wages. And this was welfare money: That's what seemed so amusing to me. The Federal Writers Project was the most rebellious unit in the WPA, and got in disfavor all over the country.

My job only lasted about six months, and the writers became so fractious that the unit was closed down. Then I got another WPA post on the campus, at a laboratory in the hothouse on Oxford Street, where plants were cultivated for study by the biology department. We

watered the plants and conducted experiments as assistants to the Ph.D.s. I wasn't interested in plant life: it was just a job to me. I knew it wasn't something I could make a career in.

While working for the biology department, I made a deal with the professor in charge to let me take a class in political science at the extension department on campus. Also during this period, I took classes in botany, philosophy, anthropology and Western literature. After that I started taking the ferry every day to attend San Francisco State College. I went for three semesters, commuting to class, then rushing back to my job on the Berkeley campus. My professor friend let me work on Saturdays to make sure I put in enough time on the job.

I had bad grades because so many things were bothering me. How was I going to pay my rent? How would I get across the bay? I never got a degree, but that didn't bother me: I was trying to make it. Several times I thought about taking the postal examination. My uncle was urging me to do that, since he had been working there for more than 30 years.

I kept the biology department job until about 1940, when Roosevelt started his national preparedness program. I switched then, taking training as a machinist and hoping to keep out of the Army.

CARLTON B. GOODLETT

Carlton Benjamin Goodlett, teacher, physician and publisher, was a native of Chipley, a small town in South Florida, of which I had never heard until I met Carlton

shortly after his arrival at UC Berkeley in 1935, when he was 21 years old. He and I had a very close association for more than 50 years, first as a friend, then as both a friend and a business associate.

His parents left Florida when he was very small and traveled to Omaha, Nebraska, where he grew up. His mother worked in a laundry. His father worked in a slaughterhouse and was the secretary general of the meatcutters union in Omaha. A lot of blacks worked in the packing houses, but there was strong opposition to them joining the union.

The schools in Omaha weren't segregated, and Carlton's mother encouraged him to get an education. He thought more highly of her than he did of his father, who was quite a womanizer. But Carlton turned out to be the same damn thing. He came to Berkeley as a graduate student, with the intention of studying for a master's degree. After he got out here, he took the comprehensive exam for a Ph.D. in child psychology and passed it. So he studied for that degree instead.

I first met Goodlett off campus, at a cleaning and pressing shop on Ashby Avenue in Berkeley owned by Lawrence Macklin, who had lived in Omaha. Mack had a Coleman stove in the back of the place, and we were heating up some cans of Italian American spaghetti. Goodlett came in and started strolling around, very cocky. He had just received a B.S. degree in psychology from Howard University, where he had served as president of the student body in his senior year. I said to myself, "Who in the heck is this cat, and who in the hell does he think he is? He's asking a lot of questions." When I saw him, I had *The Nation* and the *New Republic* in my pocket. He said,

"Oh, you do good reading."

He asked, "How long have you lived around here?" I told him about eight years. We talked for a while. Then he asked if I'd ever gone to a black school. I said no. He said, "Well you sure bullshit like those cats do back there." He was on his way to Macklin's house. Mac had a bunch of single guys renting a house together in Berkeley; they called it Tomcat's Inn. Goodlett didn't like to go there because, he said, "All these guys do is party, drink booze and play poker all night. I want to meet some nice people. Do you know any good people here?"

I told him I did, and the next day I took him to the home of Leonard Richardson, the black attorney. I never rang the bell. Carlton followed me straight on through into the kitchen. Harriet, Len's wife, was getting ready to go out and she just had a slip on. She started screaming, and Carlton said, "What the hell you screaming about? You ain't the first woman I've seen dressed in a slip only."

I had never met anyone like Carlton B. Goodlett. I was over at Len's every day, and he came there all the time, looking for me. There was an understanding that we'd meet somewhere, every day. Len and Harriet let us have parties at their house. We brought our girls there; I would cook dinner for them and they'd let us use their kitchen and their dining room. That was our headquarters from then on.

Carlton had a leadership role in the black students' association at UC Berkeley when they protested that the barbers in the student union wouldn't cut black students' hair. The barbers said they didn't know how. So he got the black students together and they protested to much, the university made a change and started cutting black students' hair on campus. Not right away, but they did.

I knew of only one black on the faculty of UC Berkeley during the 1930s, Joe Gier. He graduated from the school of engineering and got a job in the same department, but only stayed for a short time because he was offered a better job at UCLA.

Goodlett went to some of the black alumni who had made a good mark in the world after graduation, such as Leonard Richardson, George Johnson and Walter Gordon, and tried to persuade them to seek the appointment of E. Franklin Frazier, who headed Howard University's Department of Sociology. Frazier, who conducted some lectures on the Berkeley campus during summer session, was one of the most influential teachers at Howard, and was well known for his writings.

Frazier thought that the black middle class was self-satisfied with its position, because a lot of black bougies, as he called them, had a country-club mentality, instead of trying to work full-scale to improve all society. These people, who were primarily light-skinned, tried to set up a separate group based on pigmentation. He thought they weren't living in a very real world: They couldn't have complete separation because they still had relatives who were dark. He later put these ideas in his blockbuster of a book, *Black Bourgeoisie*, which was widely read by the black intelligentsia.

But Goodlett found only indifference on the part of the alumni. Perhaps it was because he was pushing too hard in the campaign, which was a part of his personality for all of his life.

UC Berkeley had close to 20,000 students each year throughout the 1930s. The highest number of blacks it

reached was 105, in 1935. That didn't increase until after World War II. We thought it was a big number, because usually it was around 40, and some of those were graduate students who had attended college somewhere else.

Goodlett was a good musician who had paid his way through college largely as a member of the Howard Collegians, a big band that played for dances. It was particularly busy in summer, when it went on the road and played one-night stands all over. Trummy Young, the trombonist who became famous later on with Jimmie Lunceford, played with the Collegians, as did Billy Eckstine before he left for Chicago to play and sing with the Earl Hines band.

It looked like Goodlett knew everybody back on the East Coast: entertainers, faculty members, some of the foremost black scholars in the country. He knew Charles S. Johnson well, a noted sociologist who later became the first black president of Fisk University. He knew Dr. Ernest Just, the distinguished black biologist, and Charles Houston, the great legal scholar.

In his second year at Berkeley, Carlton moved into International House, and I spent more time with him. He was a member of the graduate student council that worked with the I-House director. Goodlett was the only black man I knew who had a white girlfriend. She was also a graduate student in the psychology department. He brought her everywhere, and she always looked like she was comfortable. There might have been some eyebrow-lifting, but I don't think anybody on campus paid much attention. He always went out with more white girls than he did black girls.

Carlton was always scheming how to earn some

money while he was going to school. He got some from home, and I think he had some scholarships too. In 1936 he bought a brand new Chevrolet, which he did not tell his parents about. He said if his old man knew he was doing that well, he'd quit working in the slaughterhouse in Omaha and come out to go to school too.

Goodlett and I read in a local black paper, the *California Voice*, that a young black doctor, Legrande Coleman, had just established a medical practice in West Oakland. He had attended medical school at Howard while Goodlett was an undergraduate there, so we went down and introduced ourselves. After that, he started running around with us in the evenings. He was single like we were, and on top of that, we knew all the young women. He didn't.

Carlton drove himself hard, and he already had an ulcer. He walked fast and he was always in a hurry. Always. Legrande asked me, "What's he hurrying so for? Where's he going?" I said, "Damned if I know. Only he knows that."

Carlton never changed. I never met anyone who studied the way he did. I used to go with him sometimes to the Institute of Child Psychology, where Boalt Hall is now. I'd bring my books and study along with him until about 12:30, 1 o'clock in the morning. Then I'd say, "Horse, I can't stay with you all night all the time." And he kept working, trying to get that thesis completed. It looked like he had set a schedule for himself.

After three years of hectic preparations, Goodlett's thesis was accepted by the board, and he received his doctorate in child psychology in May 1938, when he was 23 years old. He sent for his mother to attend commence-

ment, and wanted me to go with him to meet her train in Oakland. Apparently he had been telling her a great deal about me, because she informed me that she felt she had known me all of my life. She said, "You're the best friend Sonny's ever had. Just stick with him." From that day on, she always called me her second son.

They held the graduation ceremonies in Memorial Stadium, the football stadium at the Berkeley campus. I was sitting there with his mother. When they called Goodlett's name out, he ran across the stadium to get his diploma. I said, "That cat's still in a hurry."

That September, Carlton left Berkeley and got a job teaching at the all-black West Virginia State College. It was a segregated school then. Of course he got in some problems there because he was only 24, and he could mingle very freely with the students. He stayed there for a year, and then they got rid of him. That's when he decided he'd go to med school and get into pediatrics.

I didn't think I'd ever hear from him again, because he always found fault with California and missed the activities among blacks in Washington, D.C. He promised to write, and I was surprised when he did — in fact, we wrote to one another every week for the seven years he was gone. He admonished me to go back to class and seek a degree in education, saying that I would not have a hard time finding a teaching job in West Virginia or some other Southern state. But I wasn't interested in residing anywhere where segregation was much stronger than we faced in California.

He entered Meharry Medical College in Nashville that fall. Charles S. Johnson, the black sociologist, led him to a source where he could get some financial aid. Goodlett

always saved his money, and found some ways to make enough to stay in med school.

Carlton Goodlett. Photo by Clarence Gatson, courtesy of Alice Keaton.

After his first year at Meharry, he wrote to me: "I've met a chick I think I'm going to marry. She knows how to prepare the food to take care of my ulcer. What's your opinion?" I wrote back: "You're going to live with her." That's all I said, because it wasn't any of my business.

I discussed the situation with Legrande Coleman, and he answered that if Goodlett had been with us, we could have saved him. Legrande avoided marriage as well as I did — well, not quite, for he had been married once before. But he didn't tell either of us then. He was as busy pursuing chicks as we were.

OAKLAND IN THE '30S

In the 1930s, Oakland was the hub of black activity in Northern California. Oakland had one segregated company of black firemen, whose firehouse was in North Oakland, and one black policeman, Hop Sanderson, who worked as a plainclothes detective. He was very fair, but was married to a brown-skinned woman. In the daytime when on the job, he was white. But then he came home to his black family every night. One also found black deputy sheriffs and black janitors at Oakland City Hall.

During the general strike in 1934, the Oakland Police Department hired about 10 blacks as temporary cops because the police were working 24 hours a day and needed some help. The city didn't hire any more permanent black cops until World War II.

West Oakland, the older part of the city, was the biggest black community, and had quite a number of black homeowners. The yards of both the Southern Pacific and

the Western Pacific were there, and the famous "Big Red" electric ferry trains roared down 7th Street, the main drag for black-owned businesses. There were barbershops, pool halls, hairdressing parlors, a few restaurants, and a branch of Golden State Mutual Life Insurance, a black-owned company founded in Los Angeles.

The only black-owned clothing store was Hubert Hilton's little haberdashery where he sold men's underwear, socks, shirts and pajamas. But Hubert's main occupation was loaning money to rail workers at an interest of 19 cents on the dollar. He owned a lot of real estate in Oakland, including a large apartment building where he lived.

Charles "Raincoat" Jones owned two square blocks of houses and commercial edifices in West Oakland around Willow and Wood streets, between 7th and 8th streets. I think he had more actual cash money than any other black person in the Bay Area. "Coat," a gentle guy who wore an all-weather coat every day of the year, was a veteran of the Spanish-American War of 1898, when he had served in a black infantry regiment sent to Cuba. After the war, he mustered out and made his way to the Klondike to dig for gold. He did little digging, but operated a gambling club in a tent and loaned money at interest, making far more than the diggers.

When he came back to the States, he landed in Oakland and remained for the rest of his life. He had the most successful gambling club in West Oakland. Those clubs weren't bars; all that people did in there was play poker, blackjack and craps. He opened a pawnshop on 7th Street, around the corner from the gambling room, where some losers went to pawn whatever was pawnable so they

could return to the gaming operations in an attempt to retrieve their losses.

Coat was one of the solid citizens of West Oakland. He was an unusual person, always looking for opportunities to help out young blacks who were going into business. He had good relations with the Oakland Police Department because he paid protection money so they wouldn't raid him. I know this, for every Friday, he brought a brown manila envelope by Leonard Richardson's law office. Len would give the envelope to me, and I would take it down to the Oakland City Hall, where police headquarters were then, and give it to a captain. I never knew the amount, but I knew it was money.

A black man named Sid Lomax, who made a lot of money running gambling clubs in Oakland, wanted to buy a home in the white neighborhood of Piedmont. So he paid a white real estate broker to buy it for him. The man then transferred the deed to Sid, much to the consternation of the white owners. That was fairly common; Chinese did it too. Sid was the first black person to buy a home in Piedmont, and all the blacks marveled at it. He didn't live there very long because he moved to Los Angeles and sold the house.

Blacks weren't welcome in San Leandro, the town next to Oakland. Nobody would sell to you. There was a lot of hostility directed against blacks by the largely Portuguese community there. I think it was based more on language than color, because many of the Portuguese speakers came from the Cape Verde Islands and were brown-skinned or black themselves.

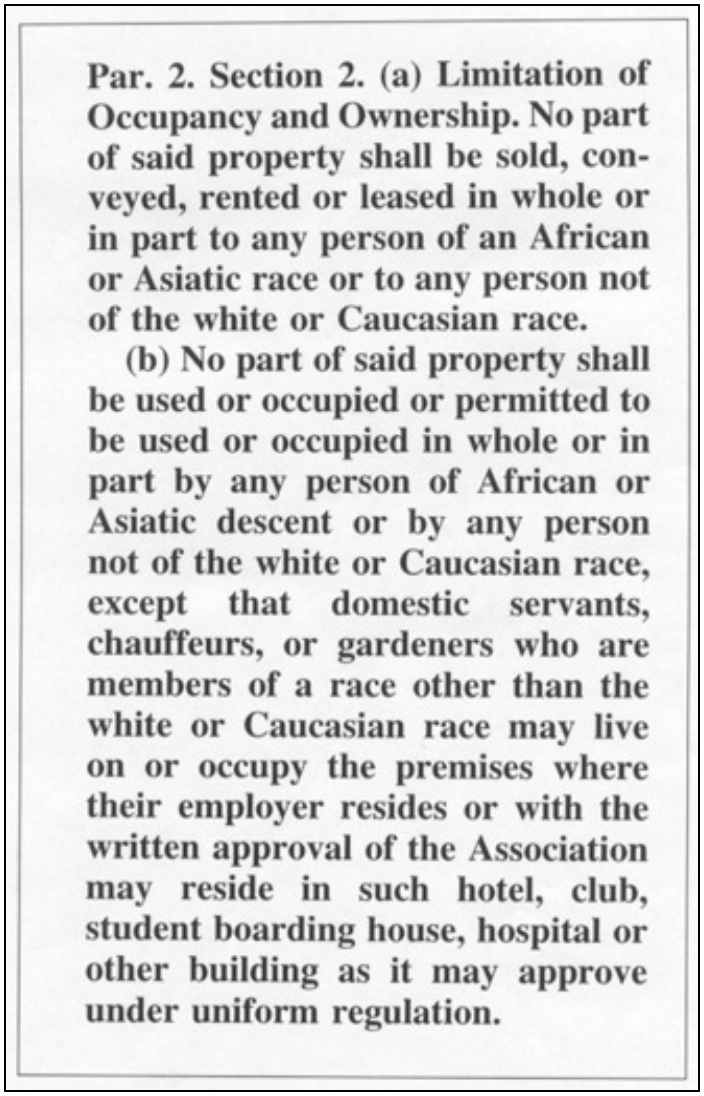
In some parts of Oakland, San Francisco, and other

cities nationwide, well-to-do white owners banded together in given areas and signed an agreement that they wouldn't sell to anyone who wasn't white. It was called a restrictive covenant, and was used against Asians too. Blacks and Asians who were servants of the owners could live on the premises, but if they owned the house, it would mean that they had money enough to have servants themselves, and were equal to the people who signed these covenants. It was challenged in the courts, but in 1919 the California Supreme Court ruled that restrictive covenants were legal.

The YMCA had a small facility in North Oakland for blacks and a two-story building in downtown Oakland for whites, with a swimming pool in the basement where everybody swam together. They weren't segregated: if you belonged to the Y, you could go to either one. The North Oakland Y served as a sort of community center for the black community. I'd go by at night; we'd sit around and play checkers and talk, and we formed a club called the Renaissance.

Streetcar fare was 7 cents in Oakland and a nickel in San Francisco. You could cross the bay by ferry for 21 cents. The Southern Pacific owned most of the ferries, which also carried trains, trucks and automobiles. The Key System had a few ferries, which hauled only people: I rode them most of the time because they were faster and newer than the SP boats. But I didn't always have that 21 cents.

In November 1936 I witnessed the opening of the Bay Bridge that connected San Francisco with Oakland. No black workers were hired for the construction because they couldn't belong to the steelworkers union. There was



Par. 2. Section 2. (a) Limitation of Occupancy and Ownership. No part of said property shall be sold, conveyed, rented or leased in whole or in part to any person of an African or Asiatic race or to any person not of the white or Caucasian race.

(b) No part of said property shall be used or occupied or permitted to be used or occupied in whole or in part by any person of African or Asiatic descent or by any person not of the white or Caucasian race, except that domestic servants, chauffeurs, or gardeners who are members of a race other than the white or Caucasian race may live on or occupy the premises where their employer resides or with the written approval of the Association may reside in such hotel, club, student boarding house, hospital or other building as it may approve under uniform regulation.

Restrictive covenant from St. Francis Wood, an exclusive neighborhood in San Francisco, early 1900s.

a ceremony, and everyone waited for President Roosevelt to push a button in Washington, which would signal them to cut the ribbon. Carlton Goodlett and I were in the long line of cars poised to cross the bridge on the day it opened so that we could brag about it later. We crossed to San Francisco, turned around, and went right back to Oakland.

Historically, San Francisco was California's financial and commercial center on the West Coast. But when airplanes began to replace rails and shipping, Oakland, with greater vision, began dredging the estuary and building the piers that used to be in San Francisco.

World War II brought huge changes to Oakland, and the black population became visibly much larger. Blacks began to vote, and in 1976 they elected their first black mayor, Lionel Wilson. After serving three terms, he was defeated by another black man, Elihu Harris.

MY FATHER RETURNS

I hadn't seen my father since 1919, when he put me on a train from Florida to California. But in 1939 he showed up in Oakland and found my sister Kate's phone number in the book, and took a chance that it might be his daughter. The hunch proved to be correct. He decided to stay out here, and opened his own cleaning and pressing shop on Steiner Street in San Francisco. Katie never did warm up to him, but I used to go by there quite often.

He told Katie and me about "your sister" back in New York. He and my stepmother Luvina had a daughter named Thelma, who was born in 1920. He brought her out here right after he rediscovered his older children. I saw

her for the first time when she was 18. Kate didn't like her. I guess she felt jealous because Thelma wanted to be close to me and called our mother "Mum." After about three months, Thelma returned to New York. But I stayed in touch with her.

Later, Thelma moved back to San Francisco with her husband, Johnny Jones, and their two sons. They stayed for a few years, and Johnny worked with my father at the clothes-cleaning business. Then there was tension between them, so Thelma and Johnny went back to New York. Johnny started his own cleaner there and was very successful. They bought a two-story house in Queens. I didn't see Thelma again until 1968, when I attended a newspaper publishers convention in New York City. Johnny came to the hotel and drove me out to the house. Thelma wanted to have me all to herself during that trip. I never saw her again; she died about three years later of leukemia.

My dad got religious late in life and became a steady churchgoer. I never took that too seriously about him, because I felt he was a hypocrite to say he'd become a Christian after ignoring his first two children the way he did. He was getting old and maybe was afraid he was going to die. He stayed in San Francisco for the rest of his life, and I became very friendly with his third wife, whom he married here. He died in 1955.

* * *

WORLD WAR II

EUROPE GOES TO WAR

In 1935, Benito Mussolini, the Fascist dictator, decided that Ethiopia was ripe for plucking and declared war. Italy had invaded once before, in 1895. At the Battle of Adowa, armed with spears and crude flint guns, the Ethiopians had humiliated a modern European army.

This time the League of Nations ordered Mussolini to desist, but he paid no heed. Both Britain and France maintained Mediterranean fleets, but neither made the slightest attempt to intervene with the Italian troop-carrying armada. Some countries, including League members, sold Italy oil and other needed supplies, which Hitler quickly noted.

The Italian army had a difficult time. Despite their awesome arsenal, which included tanks, heavy artillery and an air force, Italy used poison gas against the valiant Ethiopians. It was a black nation, so who was going to say anything? I think opposition to the war was universal among blacks throughout the United States. The white press was yelling for sanctions also.

In Europe, the next move of the Fascist hordes came in 1936 when Francisco Franco, who had been brooding in North Africa in exile, brought his army across the Straits of Gibraltar to overthrow the republican government of Spain. Italy and Germany openly supported the Spanish rebels with arms, men and money. The Soviet Union provided warplanes and munitions to the legitimate government, while France and Great Britain

stood by.

Many Americans, including some blacks, left for Spain, where they formed the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to fight the Fascists. They weren't segregated; this wasn't the United States Army. Spain controlled part of Morocco, so when Franco entered Spain, he brought some African troops with him, who fought against the black American volunteers. I was hoping they would get Franco and cut his throat.

I knew a white man from the Bay Area who joined: Don Thayer. It was considered illegal to go, but I don't think the U.S. government bothered those who went. Of course, J. Edgar Hoover called all of them Communists. But the Soviet Union was the only place where the Spanish government could get any assistance.

The black press didn't write much about the Nazis because they thought it was a white folks' problem. I never saw any pro-Nazi rallies in California. But we had our own version of the Nazis: the Ku Klux Klan. I can recall one occasion when the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan held a meeting in a Nob Hill hotel in San Francisco. Many of their opponents massed around the place to let them know that they disapproved.

When Hitler started his moves, I was amazed at the way Britain and France yielded. I said, "All they're doing is digging a grave for themselves, because he has an insatiable appetite. He wants to make Germany the greatest empire in the world." When he reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936, I thought they would stop him. But they didn't; they pulled aside and let the storm troopers in.

The international situation was worsening every day. The League of Nations, which was dominated by Great

Britain and France, yielded to all of Hitler's demands, permitting him to rearm Germany and seize Austria, and later on, Czechoslovakia. I said, "This cat ain't ever going to be satisfied."

The United States was still in the Great Depression. Roosevelt was speaking out more frequently to Congress on the need for the U.S. to be prepared for any eventuality, and he started asking for more money for national defense. He was also looking at the possibility that Japan, which supported the Hitler-Mussolini combination, would join them an attempt to conquer the world.

In September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. France and her unwilling ally Great Britain finally declared war on Germany. By 1940, France had collapsed and the British had been driven off the continent of Europe. But most of America, it seemed like, didn't want any part of that war over there.

A THREATENED MARCH

In 1940, the war industries in the U.S. were just beginning to show signs of revival. The shipyards started opening up when the first national defense program was passed under Roosevelt. California was the center of the war industry: The climate was good, there was a lot of space available near rail and water, and California had less than 7 million people.

Even before the war, most of the airplanes in the United States were built in California. The Pacific fleet had its base in San Diego and other naval installations in Long Beach. The headquarters of the 12th Naval District

was on Yerba Buena Island, the natural island midway between San Francisco and Oakland. It was connected to Treasure Island, built for the 1939 World's Fair, which based some smaller vessels, including destroyers and sub chasers.

There was a lot of shipbuilding in the Bay Area. The oldest Navy yard on the West Coast was the U.S. Naval Shipyard at Mare Island in Vallejo, which dated back to 1854. It was also a submarine base, used for the building and maintenance of subs. It had hired a lot of blacks during World War I, so they knew they could get jobs up there.

As the war industries expanded, blacks were being left out of the good jobs. Moore Dry Dock on the estuary in West Oakland, along with other shipyards, began hiring blacks, but only as laborers. Blacks were up in arms about the hiring practices. If you applied for a skilled job, they'd say, "We have a contract with the union. Are you a member of the union?" You'd say no. So they'd tell you to go and get your membership card from the union. When you went to the union they'd ask, "Do you have a job?" You'd have to say no, and then you were told that you had to have a job if you wished to become a member of the union. So you'd come in as a laborer.

Before America got into the war, everything was segregated in the armed forces. Most blacks in the Army were in the quartermaster corps, which supplied weapons and other necessities for the infantry, but it did have black officers. The Navy and the Marine Corps were the worst of the services. The only way blacks got onto Navy ships was as mess boys, and Marines didn't take blacks at all. But many blacks were eager to serve in segregated units.

Poster for threatened march on Washington, June 1941.

Philip Randolph, the head of the Pullman porters union, conducted a campaign to get the government to change those policies. In June 1941, Randolph and Bayard Rustin, who worked with the Quakers, threatened that if the discrimination did not end, they would bring 100,000 blacks to Washington from all over the nation to parade

down Pennsylvania Avenue, informing the world that the U.S. might preach democracy, but it did not practice it at home. It was in all the media. I think that frightened President Roosevelt a little bit, because there could have been riots on the streets, and it would have been bad propaganda. I think the whole strategy was to impress the president that we had some power.

That resulted in Roosevelt issuing an order to create the Fair Employment Practices Committee, FEPC, a government agency that would guarantee there wouldn't be any job discrimination based upon race, creed, color or national origin. It opened the doors closed to blacks in all phases of social life. This was the victory we achieved. Blacks started getting jobs, because any companies that didn't comply with the FEPC wouldn't get any government contracts. We felt it was a new day a-coming, although deep within ourselves we knew we still had a long way to go yet.

California had never been one of the great industrial states in the nation. That honor always went to the east of Chicago until World War II, when California was the scene of one of the greatest expansions of population seen in the nation since the days of the Gold Rush. California became a mecca for building ships and aircraft used in war — not only in the Bay Area, but in San Diego and the Los Angeles area. People flocked to the state to work in the great shipbuilding plants needed to transfer men and materiel to the battlefields in the Pacific. Millions of military people passed through California to halt the mad ambitious plans of the Tokyo warlords to dominate the Far East.

There is no doubt that the climate proved to be attractive

A. Philip Randolph on U.S. postage stamp, 1989.

tive to many of the newcomers. As a consequence, the state's population increased greatly, and by 1970, California had supplanted New York as the most populous state in the union.

JAPANESE AMERICANS

California had the largest Asian population out of all of the states. In the 1920s, the Hearst chain of newspapers filled its editorial pages with warnings about the "yellow peril," which inflamed the lower-class whites.

Those editorials were aimed at the Japanese immigrants, who were so successful that they earned the reputation of being the gardeners of the state. Some sent for their wives in Japan. Everybody got out in the fields and worked, from the little ones to the mama and papa. They began to buy land — but according to law, only in the names of their children, who had been born in the United States and were American citizens. They couldn't become naturalized themselves.

Filipinos, like Latinos, were brought here mostly as agricultural workers. The Philippines was an American colony, so they didn't have as much difficulty getting here as the Japanese and Chinese. But most Filipinos were accorded worse treatment than livestock.

Japanese immigrants might have been treated better, since Japan had proved to be a powerful military state after defeating Russia in war in 1905. And unlike China, Japan had never suffered the humiliation of having some of its land taken over by Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and even such minor states as Portugal.

The Asian presence was very prominent in San Francisco, and most of it was centered on Grant Avenue, the main street of Chinatown. The Japanese were businesspeople, and naturally they floated to where the Chinese were. There were almost as many Japanese as Chinese businesses there. The Japanese had better-looking shops than the Chinese, with better-made goods. They also ran a couple of hotels in Chinatown — clean places, where blacks could rent a room.

Most Chinese did not like the Japanese very much, since Japan had taken over large chunks of real estate in China, as the white man had done. Most Japanese lived around Post and Sutter streets, where Japantown is today. It wasn't called Japantown then, but was residential, with just a few commercial places.

I remember the morning of December 7, 1941 when I was on my way to visit my mother's house in Oakland. As soon as I walked in, my sister said, "Pearl Harbor was just bombed." I said, "What?" She said, "It's been bombed." I looked over at my mother, and thought I saw a shadow go over her face. She might have been thinking that I'd have to go in the Army.

The next night, the government called a blackout in San Francisco because of rumors that the Japanese had sent an aircraft carrier over to bomb the city. They warned that everybody had to have the shades pulled down after dark, with no light showing. It was kind of eery for a while, driving around in the dark. So I saw two blackouts on two cities on each coast in my lifetime, and during two world wars.

I went into the Naval recruitment office and tried to enlist. They said, "We're not taking anybody now," and

didn't even write down my name. I knew they were taking whites in. They just didn't want blacks. I was hoping they wouldn't take me; I knew how the armed forces felt about blacks, but I just wanted to prove a point to myself.

Both the Army and the Navy changed considerably in World War II, when it appeared that the Nazis might win, and there was a tremendous need of fighting men. Someone persuaded President Roosevelt that it would be a good idea to take advantage of the large reservoir of black men, who, of course, were just as capable as any other persons to become combat troops, instead of simply servants to whites. Many did fight, but the units remained segregated throughout the war.

It was worst in the Navy. It seemed that some people suffered from a myopia that blacks could never learn how to shoot guns, and that they would wilt and run in the face of gunfire. Blacks were placed in the position of becoming beggars for the opportunity to fly military aircraft and perform other skilled duties of fighting men.

In February 1942, President Roosevelt issued his Japanese removal order, which resulted in one of the most inhumane acts committed in the war: the roundup of all persons of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast. Most of them were American-born.

The Japanese owned a lot of agricultural land in the Sacramento Valley. They were the greatest truck garden farmers you've ever seen. They really knew how to bring plants out of the earth. They weren't into orchards and things: it was vegetables that they grew. People stole their farms when they went into the concentration camps.

The Tanforan horse racetrack in San Bruno, just south of San Francisco, was the main assembly point for the

Japanese Americans in Northern California. They lived in tents until removal on trains staffed by Army troops, headed for hastily constructed barracks, where they would be detained under the supervision of armed sentinels. Many of them sold their real estate property in exchange for whatever they could get — far below the market or real value, even when it was in their kids' names. Some gave their property to their white friends, but most had their property stolen.

I personally resented the government's action, as did many other blacks in the state. I never saw any reason to force them to live in concentration camps, as the Nazis did the Jews and other peoples not regarded as supermen.

JOSEPH JAMES AND THE BOILERMAKERS UNION

The community known as Hunters Point is a relatively new residential community of San Francisco. Until World War II, the neighborhood bore the name of Butchertown, because of several slaughterhouses in the area. The livestock was generally delivered down Third Street from San Mateo County. It was strictly a working-class neighborhood, and that quality still lingers.

In 1941, the U.S. Navy seized the land, which was next to the bay, and opened the Hunters Point Navy Yard. It had a good harbor, and the Navy built dry docks for the big warships — aircraft carriers, battleships and heavy cruisers — to come for overhauls and repair jobs. Before World War II, Mare Island was the only naval installation in the Bay Area, and the channel was so narrow that it

could only handle submarines.

After Roosevelt created the FEPC, it was still hard for blacks to be hired for good jobs in shipyards and the growing airplane industry, even if they had credentials to be a plumber, electrician, or some other skilled position. The NAACP pursued complaints of job discrimination at Hunters Point and at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyard in San Francisco, which expanded when war broke out. The biggest target of complaint was the Boilermakers International Union, which controlled most of the jobs in shipbuilding. It was an umbrella group that covered just about every working craft in the shipyards, with the exception of the machinists, who had their own union.

Blacks were excluded from full and equal membership in the Boilermakers Union. In some crafts they were hired as helpers, which meant they got entry-level pay, lower than the journeyman union members. The Boilermakers Union had come upon the unique device of founding an auxiliary union that blacks and Mexicans could join. The auxiliary had one office in Oakland and one in San Francisco. They put a black in charge of it, and you had to get clearance from him before you could work.

Blacks paid the same dues as union members, but couldn't attend the union's regular meetings, and had no voting voice. I detested the blacks who took those jobs: I thought they were selling us out. But workers were fired if they refused to join the union. The Boilermakers said the firings were justified, since they had a closed-shop agreement with the shipyards.

This got the attention of Joseph James, a black man who, with his wife Alberta, had come to San Francisco with the touring company of *The Green Pastures*, the

Broadway musical. He had a superb voice. The show played in San Francisco for months, and after it closed, many of the cast went back to the Big Apple, and some went to Los Angeles to look for jobs in the film industry. Joe and Alberta, both very socially conscious people, liked the atmosphere they found in San Francisco and stayed. When the war broke out, James procured a job at Marinship in Sausalito, after becoming a member of the auxiliary union.

Joe joined the San Francisco NAACP, worked very hard with the organization, and was finally elected president in 1943, hoping to make it more liberal. He got embroiled in the beef with the Boilermakers and, securing the legal services of a team of liberal white lawyers, filed a lawsuit on behalf of some fired black workers, charging the big international with discrimination. His lawsuit was supported by the national headquarters of the NAACP.

The case attracted a lot of attention. In late 1943, I sat in the front row at the hearing in Federal District Court Judge Michael Roche's courtroom. It was jammed with blacks, who were standing out in the hallways. Judge Roche let black spectators sit in the jury box and the press bench. He didn't make a final decision that day, but said that the discharged black workers had to be rehired pending a hearing. The case ended up in the California Supreme Court, which ruled in January 1945 that the Boilermakers could no longer discriminate. By this time, the war was almost over. Not long after that, the Boilermakers ended the auxiliary and accepted all races for full membership in the union.

Most of Joe's close associates were extreme white liberals such as Harry Bridges, the head of the Interna-

tional Longshore and Warehouse Union. Many of the old-line conservative black members of the NAACP began to

Joseph James singing at a Marinship launching, ca. 1943.

mutter that the Commies were attempting to take over the branch. In the monthly meetings, it seemed at times that blows might be exchanged.

Joe was ousted as branch president in 1946 by Berlinda Davison Mabson, a strange person, extremely bright, who was the sister of Stuart Davison, the black physician. She was very conservative, and only lasted one term as president.

BLACK MIGRATION AND HOUSING

Franklin D. Roosevelt's social revolution of the 1930s produced one change in government policy that was hailed at the time as a noble experiment: the government-funded construction of low-income housing. It was a welcome relief for those in dire need of homes equipped with such rudimentary comforts as running water and electricity.

Throughout the country, black war workers were moving into the inner cities, taking over old, crumbling buildings in areas where they found some blacks already residing. Quite a few came directly after Pearl Harbor. The great black migration met the huge need for workers, skilled and unskilled, to man the shipyards all up and down the West Coast.

San Francisco had a severe manpower shortage because most males of draft age were scooped up by the armed forces. The city hired some black males as temporary police. None of them took the civil service examination, and they knew that they would not be permanent. With the exception of one white male, all were dismissed

at the end of the war.

The largest black population in San Francisco before the war was near the train depot at 3rd and Townsend streets because a lot of Pullman porters and other rail workers lived around there. The Japanese section in the Western Addition, also called the Fillmore district, always had a few black businesses too; there was Butler's mortuary on Sutter Street, and a dentist, Howard Davis.

When the Japanese were evacuated, blacks moved into their vacant houses, and bought some of them. Jewish people had a lot of small kosher restaurants in the Fillmore district, and they moved out when the blacks started moving in. Housing was very dear, and landlords whose property was run down, with plaster falling off the walls, were renting those places out for $200 a month. Real estate agents tried to channel all blacks to one part of town. Then they went to the whites and asked them, "Do you want to sell? Because blacks are moving in all around you." They did that all over the country.

The Western Addition turned into a black area. It seemed that people never went to bed during the war years, because there was a constant mob of people walking along the streets. It was like night turned into day. Most people worked for the shipyards, and they had three shifts. I heard of some enterprising landlords who rented one room to three people: one for each shift. Hunters Point, which had a lot of available land, became the largest black neighborhood in the city when the government was forced to build war housing for the workers and their families. And blacks started buying homes in the Ingleside district.

More and more blacks poured into areas of Califor-

Party in San Francisco's Western Addition, 1940s. Seated 2nd from right: jazz great Louis Armstrong. Courtesy of www.newfillmore.com.

nia where they had been very seldom seen. Most members of the Army, Navy, and Air Force left from either San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles or Seattle. Young black men from around the country liked what they saw, and after their service was completed and they were discharged at these ports, many stayed.

I had never seen a cockroach in California until the war came, and I wonder if all those workers — black and white — brought them in their luggage. I started to feel a lot of resentment aimed against blacks as their numbers started increasing. San Francisco Mayor Angelo Rossi was quoted as being concerned with what some whites classified as the black invasion.

When the Marinship shipyard was built in Sausalito,

across the Golden Gate Bridge, it was the first time there were more than a dozen blacks living in Marin County. The government constructed housing for the war workers in Marin City, a new town just north of Sausalito. It was a sort of reservation hastily erected to house them. Tenants were rented units on a first-come, first-served basis, and at first it was integrated. But the whites generally had better jobs and more opportunities for housing, and they moved out, making Marin City a black enclave. Many of the blacks remained after the war.

The 1940 census gave the black population of San Francisco as less than 5,000. Even Berkeley had more blacks. The East Bay was better prepared for the horde of newcomers: Oakland had a black population of about 8,500, second to Los Angeles on the Pacific Coast.

The Federal Housing Administration began the building of the war housing that grew and grew in Oakland. In the 1950 census, San Francisco's black population had risen to 43,000 and Oakland's to 48,000.

Public housing in the United States had started during the Depression. Some of it was built by the WPA. The rents were low, and many blacks — not necessarily those on welfare — lived in them. Nobody thought about public housing the way they do now.

The first public housing in the East Bay was in West Oakland, and some of my friends moved in, like Bernie Anderson and his wife. He was the son of Garland Anderson, the black playwright. One of his plays, *Appearances*, was the first written by a black to be produced on Broadway.

In the Western Addition, a large housing project bounded by Sutter, Scott, Broderick and Post streets

opened shortly before Pearl Harbor. It was one of the first housing projects in the city to be inhabited primarily by blacks. Sunnydale, the giant public housing complex located in the southern end of the city, opened about the same time. These projects, and others built then, housed thousands of war workers.

After the war, as middle-class blacks climbed up the economic ladder, they gradually moved out and the down-and-outers came in. Their main concern was mere survival. Many turned to crime in order to supplement the pittance that welfare provided. Those who happened to witness criminal activities were afraid to step forward when the police apprehended a suspect.

Some of us had yearned for a larger black population in California, and there was a tremendous migration of blacks from the South in search of jobs. The number of blacks from Texas was considerable, because of the intense segregation found in the state. There was a lot of hostility here among white people about all these newcomers.

Most blacks in San Francisco were happy to see the sudden explosion of black immigrants. Every once in a while I heard grumbling about the country people from the rural South. They would say, "These people coming in here, they have different lifestyles than we have." But I always reminded such unsophisticated critics that the greater the black population, the more political muscle and jobs that blacks would have in the city.

Henry J. Kaiser, the owner of a small aluminum plant in Southern California, was one of the industrialists who became well known in the course of the war. He got a contract to build a shipyard in Richmond, California, and

before the war ended, he had four more shipyards there, plus three others in Oregon and Washington state. He was launching a ship every day.

As soon as the FEPC order was issued, Kaiser started sending labor contractors to the South and other parts of the country to get workers for the shipyards. Kaiser set a record for building Liberty Ships — cargo carriers which sent food all over the world from California. Then he built troop-carrying ships, followed by jeep carriers — smaller escort vessels that were of great use against German and Japanese submarines. Kaiser hired everybody who came there. He did a lot of good public service things afterwards, contributing money for cultural activities in Oakland.

To me, the biggest thing he did was the Kaiser Health Plan. He opened up his first hospital in Richmond, and the next ones in Oakland and Vallejo. It was beneficial to all low-income people. I don't think he was looking to make any money from it.

Even if it was unintentional, this enabled the government to warehouse low-income people in the same manner as it did prior to the New Deal, in county poor farms for dependent children and adults who could not fend for themselves. The poor farms were overloaded, just like the housing projects of today. In many cities they have been declared unfit for human habitation, then closed and torn down.

Here in San Francisco, we witnessed such an event. A huge project in the Western Addition, the Pink Palace, reached such a state of physical decay that the tenants were evacuated and the wrecker ball demolished the concrete complex. The need for low-income housing is as

great if not greater than it was during the Roosevelt administration.

EASING OF DISCRIMINATION

San Francisco enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most race-free cities in the United States. But it wasn't. The racism was covert. In the South, at least they were honest about it. Covert racism to me is worse than open racism because you feel like the ground has been cut from underneath you. I'd much rather somebody tell me "you can't come in here" than grin in your face, then go behind your back and conspire with others not to let you in.

There never were any jobs advertised for whites only: They just told you there were no jobs. You knew the places where you weren't welcome, and if you didn't, you were a complete jackass.

The big hotels started admitting blacks during the war years because there were so many black officers passing through en route to the Pacific. They couldn't refuse Negroes with bars on their shoulders. Some newspapers sent black correspondents, such as Ted Poston, the reporter for the *New York Post*, who came here before shipping out, and Charlie Loeb, an editor for the *Cleveland Call and Post*, a big black weekly paper. I knew Charlie. He stayed at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. That was about 1944. The hotels changed their policy very quietly because they didn't want that kind of publicity. But they didn't hire black workers until picketing started in the 1960s.

The San Francisco Municipal Railway, or Muni, didn't hire any black employees until 1941. There were also two

privately owned transit systems in San Francisco then — the Market Street Railway and the California Street Cable Railway — but the Muni employees were civil service workers.

Audley Cole, the husband of Josephine Foreman Cole, the city's first black schoolteacher, took the Muni's civil service examination and physical exam in the spring of 1941 for a job as a motorman on the streetcars. He weighed about 135 pounds, and had to lift a sack of sand that weighed over 100 pounds. He told the business manager that he was black, although he was light-skinned and looked like he could have been an Indian or a Mexican. He was hired and reported for work the day after Christmas.

At first nobody said anything. Audley was trained for about a week, then maybe the white operators realized he was black, because they refused to go on any more training runs with him. This went on for about two weeks until a white man named Spencer Rogers offered to break him in.

Rogers paid a tremendous price for his audacity: Nobody would speak to him after that. He was heckled and spat upon, and after four days was beaten so badly by the other motormen that he ended up in the hospital. The physical and psychological abuse against Rogers drove him away from Muni and turned him into a hopeless drunk. After we started the *Reporter* he used to come by there almost every day, and he was a wreck.

Audley's job became a political issue, and he finally got enough training to learn it well. He joined the union, and became as good a motorman as anyone on the line. After about six months, another black man was hired, and

Josephine Foreman Cole and Audley Cole, 1942.

then many other blacks as motormen and conductors, including black women, as the draft took away more of the young white males. Later the Market Street Railway hired blacks too.

Audley remained a motorman for a little over a year, until he saw that Muni had hired a sufficient number of blacks, and then he decided to become a longshoreman. Soon after that he was drafted into the Army for three years. When he came back, he had the ambition to train for something better, so he enrolled at San Francisco State College and graduated with a degree in social welfare. He spent the rest of his career as a social worker, until his retirement.

THE BLACK PRESS IN THE 1940S

The oldest black newspaper on the West Coast still published today is the *California Voice*, founded in Oakland in 1919. A black man named E.A. Daly acquired it in the 1920s, and his wife put it together. In the 1930s and '40s the Dalys did not seem to care much about anything outside of Oakland; they were more interested in their small print shop. Mrs. Daly, who had attended a black school where printing was offered, operated the Linotype machine that set the type for papers. The Dalys had a flatbed press which they used for small printing jobs and another press that could do an eight-page standard-size paper. I don't think old man Daly knew how to operate any of the machinery.

When I came to Oakland in 1926, there was another paper called the *Western American*, owned by a black real estate broker, George Martin. It lasted about as long as it takes for me to say the name. Other black publishers would put out two or three issues, then fold. I've seen a lot of them come and go.

The *California Voice* had a small classified section, plus news about the black churches and the black women's social clubs, and a heavy dose of illustrated church ads. E.A. Daly didn't want anything else in there. I don't think it ever had an editorial opinion, because he couldn't write at all. Most of the editorials were canned, prewritten pieces that were supplied to small papers by corporations like Pacific Gas & Electric and Bank of America. And of course the papers were paid a small sum for printing them.

The *Voice* did improve some when Louis Campbell, a nephew of Mrs. Daly, came out to California and took

over the printing. He brought in his friend Ken Freeman, who wrote a gossip column, which proved to be popular with some young people. Both John Pittman and I went to Daly and told him we would like to write for the paper for nothing. I said that if the *Voice* presented more news, we could build the circulation up. But he always demurred: He thought we were too radical. He had a lot of small commercial jobs, and didn't want to change anything.

Los Angeles had two black papers: the *Sentinel* and the *California Eagle*. The *Eagle* was published by Charlotta Bass — we all called her Mama Bass — and was then the oldest black paper on the West Coast. It was founded in 1879 and ceased publication in 1964. The *Sentinel* opened in 1934, and was owned by Leon Washington. I met Leon when he first started; he was out hawking the papers on the streets himself, sometimes giving it away just so that it would be distributed. He came to California from Kansas with a brilliant civil rights lawyer, Loren Miller. They started the paper together. Loren used to write articles for *The Nation* and other magazines, and later became a judge in Los Angeles.

Leon came up to San Francisco quite often, and tried to get me to go down there in the 1940s and write his editorials for him. But I never wanted to live in Los Angeles. He was more energetic than Mrs. Bass. He joined the California Newspaper Publishers Association, attended their state conventions, and went all over the state to gather what stories he could about black activities outside of Los Angeles.

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Chicago Defender*, *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American* were the largest national black papers during the 1930s and

'40s. They were at their peak, and circulated all over the country. Black papers didn't have a wire service then. Pittsburgh had a good-sized black community, but not on the order of many other cities. I marvelled at the *Courier*, attracting the attention that it did outside of Pittsburgh. The front page was in color, which I think helped to sell it. Then it presented more about entertainers than any other black paper in the country.

In the *Courier* I read Billy Rowe, George Schuyler, and the cartoons — not the news stories very much. Billy had a gossip column about celebrities and nightlife in New York. He wrote with all the idioms that black people used among each other, like "Darktown," and sepia for black. It looked like he patterned his style after Walter Winchell, who was an example of the keyhole school of journalism. Schuyler had a following all over the United States. He was part of that acidic school of journalism that was very critical about everything, and gave the left as much hell as the right.

The national black press lost a lot of its readership after World War II because local black papers started improving. They were able to cover events in their own communities better and get the news out quicker, and they cut into the national circulation that the big papers had enjoyed for so long.

A WAR WORKER

About 1940, when the government announced a program for workers to learn the skills needed to produce war materiel, I took classes on the campus of Technical

High School in Oakland. I learned how to operate a lathe, drill press, shaper, and other machines. I got a job as a chipper in Kaiser's second shipyard in Richmond. Metal gets a lot of scales on it as it deteriorates, and I was put inside a big boiler to clean its surface. It was rough, dirty work, and I said, this ain't what I took shop for.

I stayed about two days, then I heard that Mare Island Navy Yard was hiring people, so I went there and started working in the machine shop. I operated a large radial drill press, taller than a person, drilling holes through armor that was going on the deck. Armor is hardened steel, and it took a long time to go through that: You had to drill real slow. That's all I did, all day long. Some guys were real machinists who could work anywhere. I knew I wasn't very good. But you could get by, because they'd put you on one machine, and you'd learn how to operate that, and that's all you did in there anyway.I didn't look at it as drudgery. It was indoors, it was better than being a chipper, the pay wasn't bad, and it was keeping my ass out of the Army.

Roosevelt came out to Mare Island when I was there, and drove through the machine shop in his open-top car. The shop was about the size of a city block, and maybe a thousand people worked there. They didn't tell us that FDR was coming. His car rolled through very slowly, barely moving, so he could see the workers. There were Marines with rifles preceding the car and the Secret Service walking on each side, so that nobody could get up close. He smiled and waved, and we gave him a hell of a big cheer.

After about eight months, when I had achieved a promotion, I began to dislike going that far up to work every

day, so I switched to the Todd Shipyard in Alameda, which was much nearer to home. I did the same kind of thing: operating power tools. I was called a machinist third class. After that I came over to San Francisco and worked at the Bethlehem shipyard. Then someone told me that machinists were needed at the Army supply base in Oakland, and I made my last move working in war industries. Everybody there suffered from the delusion that the volume of work would continue after the war, because it was civil service. But I knew it wasn't what I wanted to do for a career.

STARTING THE *REPORTER*

While working at the Army base, I started coming into San Francisco quite often because Jack's Tavern was in full operation on Sutter Street, where Saunders King and his group were the star attraction.

One night in the spring of 1944, around the corner from Jack's, I ran into a black man I'd met before named Albert White, who had worked on black papers in Texas and Oklahoma. He told me that he and Frank Logan, a young black man whom he'd known in Texas, were going to start a weekly black paper in the city, as there were none then. White would be the editor.

Frank Logan operated two clubs and was making a lot of money, mostly from gambling. He had strong desires to get into something more legal, where he wouldn't be raided. I told White that I had written a column in the Chico High paper and the paper at Chico State College, plus the *Oakland Tribune*. I thought I would like to be a

newspaperman.

He asked, would I be interested in joining him and Logan, who was financing the whole deal? White said that he needed editorial support more than any other thing. I expressed interest. White took me right in and introduced me to Logan at his club on Buchanan Street.

Logan couldn't pay me anything. I said it didn't matter, because I knew that I would have to continue my work at the machine shop, although the commute would be tough since I lived in Berkeley. I was anxious, and hoping the paper would last past the war years.

White, Logan and I decided to give the name *Reporter* to our paper, and set a publishing date of every Wednesday. Hannibal T. Shepherd, a real estate broker on Post Street who also managed some emergency war housing, contributed to the birth of the *Reporter* by providing us space in his large office for a very low fee. He might have been the first black in the city with a realtor license who had an office. He leased a lot of the houses that had been evacuated when the Japanese were removed, and rented them out at high rates.

We had two desks and a phone installed, and we were in business. White went out and tried to sell advertising. Logan didn't do anything except put up the money. Shepherd brought in a high school girl named Gloria Housen who was searching for a summer job. We hired her to man the telephone and do some typing.

Gloria had one of the desks and I had the other. The editorial staff was me. Among all those connected to the paper, I was the only person who knew how to write. However, I had almost no experience in layout and pasteup. Logan, a recent migrant to California, knew

nothing about newspapers, but he had a sense of civic responsibility, and was very articulate about racial matters.

I went on swing shift at the Army base so that I could come in to San Francisco every morning and spend about four hours at the paper. Then I'd take the train back to Oakland and head for the shipyard. I'd work from 3 to 11 p.m., get home between 12 and 12:30, and sleep till about 7 o'clock. I could handle that for a while. I worked six days a week. Sunday was my mother's day mostly, particularly because we got paid then, and I'd be sure to go by to give Mama her share of what I was earning.

The first issue of the *Reporter* was published in June 1944. The office was centrally located, and almost immediately, people began to come by — from the churches primarily, and others to make complaints about things they felt should be publicized. The *Reporter* became a place where every black professional person came, and I met them all.

White and Logan fell out over matters of pay after the first issue, and White left. Logan asked if I wished to become editor. I accepted. I had to do more things, which caused me to miss more days than I should have at the Army base. I didn't have a typewriter at home. Frank only stayed with us for about six weeks because he didn't realize how much money had to be paid every week to the printer. We were barely earning enough to pay the salary for one office clerk and the rent.

After that, H.T. Shepherd, with the help of a black businessman named Merle Gadles, and two others whose names I have lost in time, subsidized us for about five months. All of the money the paper received was from advertising. Because I received no pay, I was rewarded

with a quarter ownership, as was our advertising manager, who was paid a 10 percent commission for every ad he sold.

Jefferson Beaver, who had cultivated Shepherd very closely, talked him and the others into giving him a job as managing editor. He was a graduate of UC Berkeley, who had a wife and child and was working for the United Service Organizations. But he didn't know any more about a newspaper than they did. These men thought it was something that would just grow through some form of osmosis.

Beaver was a real disaster. After I wrote an editorial that the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce was racist, some members of the Chamber wrote a letter to the editor. Beaver then apologetically editorialized that I was wrong. You don't do that when you work on the staff of the same paper. He didn't last very long. I was the only constant one there.

The Shepherd group thought they were going into something that would make money. When they saw what it was, Bill Hambrick, a black businessman whom I knew very well, bought out three of the four shares of the *Reporter* and came into the picture as publisher. I refused to sell at that time. I stayed on, writing the editorials and other stories, and gambling on a future in which I might start receiving some financial rewards. Each time the paper changed hands, I showed my notarized papers indicating that I was one of the owners.

Bill was a good person, filled with civic pride. He was a partner in the ownership of a pool hall in the Western Addition, and he derived an excellent living from the black war workers. But in his innocence, like Logan and

the H.T. Shepherd group, he didn't know quite what he was getting into in publishing a newspaper. They had never studied how most papers of general circulation derived sufficient sums of money in order to meet production costs and pay a staff, nor how they could pay the printer — always difficult if one does not own a press. Nearly all publications in the world have to depend on advertising. Without that, it's got to come out of your pockets, and they didn't have pockets that deep. We could get out an eight-page paper, 2,000 copies, for about $150 an issue.

We at the *Reporter* were kept busy watching for cases of racial discrimination in housing, employment, and other areas. Some people were being badly exploited in housing. One man from Iowa came by who had taken over a leaky basement flat with his wife and three children. The wallpaper was torn off, and rats were running all through the place. Of course the landlord was charging him like crazy. I got somebody to go and take some pictures, and put a piece in the paper. That family remained grateful to me, because after the article appeared, they were able to get into public housing.

We didn't have a Linotype machine, so I took the copy to a shop that set the type and did the printing. I had to proofread it, supervise the layout, and stay until the first edition rolled off the press. I wasn't able to do many stories except for an opinion column, the Weekly Report.

I got on the armed forces right away. I was indignant about the removal of the Japanese Americans, and wrote editorials saying that the only reason they were rounded up was because they weren't white. I mentioned that no move was made against people of German or Italian

ancestry. An elderly Jewish man named Max Korn, who had been a newspaperman in New York, was very much interested in our efforts. He used to come over and help us out a lot about makeup and other things. We became very close friends.

A deputy district attorney told me, "I don't see why you write those columns. They're so gloomy." I said, "I'm trying to tell our social conditions out here, that's all." He said, "Well black people won't like to read it." I said, "You read it, don't you?"

Soon our staff included a woman named Connie Del Gatto, who wrote a gossip column, Jay Gould, who wrote about horseracing, and George Porter, who covered sports. They didn't ask for pay because they had other sources of income, and just wanted their name out.

Porter, a native of St. Louis, had grown up with Archie Moore, the rugged middleweight and light heavyweight boxing champion. Gould, a veteran newspaper columnist with the *Chicago Defender*, was way up in his seventies when he came to town. He couldn't type, and could barely see. He persuaded Hambrick to let him write a weekly column about sporting figures and the black entertainers who came to town. He wrote each article by hand, went to a man's house, and paid a man 50 cents to type it.

Gould was a great racetrack tout: that's a guy who's supposed to have the inside track to who's going to win, and takes bets from people. He made money at Bay Meadows and Albany, the local racehorse tracks. He went to the Kentucky Derby every year and all the big social events back there, then wrote about them. He was known all over the country.

Not long after this, a remarkable man appeared on the

scene, another refugee from the East Coast, Edgar Buckner, who was just about as old as Gould. He had sold advertising for several of the large black weekly papers. Edgar had, in his long and distinguished career, visited many of the advertising houses located on Madison Avenue in the Big Apple, and he knew the techniques the *Courier* used to get some of the big national firms. He told us that he could improve our advertising situation, and asked for a percentage of what he sold. He proceeded to get Safeway for us. We were the first black paper in the nation to get an ad from the supermarket chain.

Just like at the *Spokesman*, we paid a lot of attention to stories about crime, because we thought that would sell. We didn't have any reporters: We filled the paper the best we could. That's how black papers were operated all over the United States.

I used to ride around with Legrande Coleman in the evening while he was making house calls. We'd turn on the radio in his car and listen to what was happening in Europe, particularly a broadcaster in New York named Gabriel Heatter, who always opened his program with the salutation: "Good news tonight! Good news tonight!" When our troop ships first landed in Australia, I told Legrande, "If our ships can cross the Pacific that easily and not get sunk, the Japanese have lost the war already." We talked about the war and our chances of avoiding military service.

The Navy was using black recruits on the docks at Port Chicago, near Martinez in upper San Francisco Bay, to load the live ammunition that came in on trains from factories and was transferred to ships. Vessels at the port carried everything used by the fighting men in the Pacific

theater. You had black kids 18, 19, 20 years old who weren't properly trained, loading the ships 24 hours around. I don't think the government should have had those inexperienced young kids down there, who didn't know how to handle the lethal cargo. On July 17, 1944, a munitions ship exploded accidentally, killing 320 men, including more than 200 blacks.

I was shocked. I wanted to go, but I had no way to get up there. The talk around the area, and perhaps in all of black America, was why the Navy did not use professional longshoremen in loading those cargo ships, as they did for ships that were docked in San Francisco. I wrote editorials on the Port Chicago incident, after studying the stories and talking with a lot of people, especially young sailors from Mare Island.

After the incident, when some of the black sailors refused to go back to work under the same conditions, they were court-martialed, charged with mutiny, and sent to jail. Their records were never cleared. But when you go into the armed forces, you're supposed to face danger, and you have to do whatever the officers tell you, or you can expect to be punished.

At the *Reporter*, we were fighting to end segregation in the armed forces. There were four black regiments in the regular Army at the time war broke out: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry. They were assigned to drive trucks and buses. Those units were left over from the remnants of the blacks who were first brought into the Army during the Civil War.

In 1944 I became involved in a protest against the Key System in Oakland because it would not hire black bus drivers or streetcar operators. It operated the streetcars and

the buses across the bay, and ferries in competition with the Southern Pacific. San Francisco had broken down and hired blacks already: That's what enraged me so much.

People began demonstrating in front of the Key System office on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, carrying placards denouncing Jim Crow practices in hiring. I started writing editorials saying that if blacks could drive those big Army rigs, they could drive buses on the street too. The company eventually did hire blacks after the war.

But my career was about to receive some delay. Apparently somebody with the Key saw our paper, because the first thing I knew, I received "greetings" from my draft board in Emeryville.

GREETINGS

In December 1944, I got my unwanted invitation to become a part of the U.S. armed forces. The letter started: "Greetings from Uncle Sam." I was ordered to report to the induction ceremony on February 14, 1945, St. Valentine's Day. It was far from the type of card most people receive on that day.

I had always viewed the military as being composed largely of individuals who feared to compete for a regular job, and wanted somebody to take care of them. Now it appeared that I would possibly be forced to join a group that was compelled by custom to be the servants of the armed forces, with slight chance of ever becoming even a minor part of the command structure.

I'd had a deferment from the armed forces because I was working in a shipyard. But I had been absent too much, trying to get the paper started, which might have been a reason why my draft board took another look at me. I was 37 years old, and I'd heard that persons with flat feet — which I had — were found unacceptable. I had declared myself as being my mother's sole support because she had stopped working then. So I felt I was pretty safe. I never gave a thought to being a conscientious objector because I thought I could beat it.

Armed with that type of thinking, I made a trip to my draft board. The clerk stated that I had been reclassified because the selective service law had been changed. Then she said, "They don't like those editorials you've been writing. They think you're a troublemaker. You've got black people picketing the Key System." I didn't know anybody read the *Reporter* but blacks.

The next morning, I went to the induction center on Market Street in downtown San Francisco. I felt sure that I would be permitted to return home for at least one more day, and hopeful that I would be reclassified 4F. But I came out clean, and along with many others, I was sworn in by a lieutenant. and told that I could not go home. I called Mama and said, "You'll hear from me when I get wherever they're going to send me to." Then I called Bill Hambrick at the *Reporter*.

The long wait began for further orders. Late in the afternoon, a sergeant called out to the draftees to board the string of buses standing in front of the building. The caravan headed for Camp Beale, a reception center where draftees were dumped to go through the entry process into the Army. It was located in Marysville, where I had spent many a day in past years, and had known all of the black families.

It was dark when we arrived. The sergeants shouted, "Form up, get in line!" and "forward march!" As we started walking, they began the cadence of counting "one, two, three, four," then shouting "sound off!" as we marched in front of a row of barracks. A group who had arrived before my contingent began to sing to the new inductees: "You'll be sorry, you'll be sorry."

This mournful sound followed us until we arrived in front of a building where we were lined up to receive clothes and other essential equipment: a dress uniform, dress shoes, two pairs of combat boots, overcoat, raincoat, underwear, garrison-style cap plus dress cap, toothbrushes, razor, bath towels, and a duffel bag. Shoe size was chancy for a proper fit. We all got a metal identification tag containing our name and serial number. It had a hole punched in one side, in which a string was inserted. The draftees were informed to place it around their necks, and never to be without it, except when taking a bath.

After this ceremony, we were ordered to undress of all civilian clothes, to be sent back to our homes. Then we were taken to a barrack with 40 or more beds on each side of the room. The sergeant, a black man who was in command, slept there too. White officers stayed in cottages outside the barrack. We quickly went to bed and slept. Early the next morning our house mother, the sergeant, walked through shouting, "On your feet!" We had to be dressed and outside in five minutes. It was quite a frenzy.

After breakfast the new arrivals were marched off to a big room, told to undress, and lined up. Two medics on each side were armed with the biggest needles and syringes I had ever seen. While the draftees moved forward, each was stabbed in the buttocks. Then a dental examination was made. The dentist held me and made preparations to make an extraction, as he discovered a cavity. I informed him that I had not ordered any tooth removed, but he countered that I was in the Army now.

Next came a session with a psychologist, who said I was good officer material and should seek to enter the course offered to people with college experience. I told him that all I wanted was a discharge, which did not impress him. I soon discovered that many officers did not like being pulled from their professions in civilian life.

Most of the other draftees ranged from 18 to their late 20s. When they discovered that I was a decade or more older than many of them, they began to call me "Pop." We wore fatigues or work clothes at Beale until the morning of my fourth day, when we were told to change to our dress uniforms. We took a bus to the train depot in Sacramento. My friend Eddie Aubert came to bid me bon voyage, and when he sighted me in my ill-fitting uniform he laughed out loud.

The government had secured the use of tourist-type train cars to carry military personnel from one point to another. Around 10 o'clock at night, the eastbound Challenger rolled into the station, bound for Chicago. The draftees were shepherded to the rear and assigned berths. Eddie walked with me to the platform, wished me well, and stood by watching as the train pulled out.

I was woken by the waiter announcing first call for breakfast. While we were in the diner, a porter took down the beds and curtains and restored the seats.

One of the articles presented to us was a money belt,

so that we would awaken if anyone attempted to rob us while we were asleep. The train arrived in Denver the next day around noon, and the sergeant told the draftees that we would be free to go sightseeing, as our next train would arrive in about three hours. The train loaded some new inductees and civilian passengers also.

At Springfield, Missouri, we saw a long line of huge Army trucks parked near the depot, with canvas tops and a row of benches against the sides. We boarded them with our gear and headed for Fort Leonard Wood, a huge permanent Army facility in the Ozark Mountains of southern Missouri — the worst place in the world to send anyone. It was evening when the convoy rolled through the gate and came to a stop on a street of barracks where incoming troops were housed. Our sergeant gave each of us a bed and showed us how to make it up the Army way. They were very strict about this bed-making.

It seemed that it was not too long before the sergeant was turning on the lights and shouting everyone up. The first men out of bed made a rush for the bathroom. Others got up very slowly. After roll call, the sergeant saluted a white lieutenant of about 22 and barked out, "All personnel present!" The lieutenant shouted, "Dismissed!" There was a mad race to the mess hall.

After breakfast, the sergeant ordered all of us to follow him into a building where we undressed to be given what the military called a short arm test, to find out if we had any venereal disease.

The black soldiers were housed apart from the white soldiers. We were to be their support troops. We were drilled in the use of all the same weapons as the white combat units — rifles, machine guns, mortars, carbines,

hand grenades and bayonets — because you didn't know what was going to happen on the battlefield. We had to do everything that they did, but we were not permitted to enjoy the same amenities as the whites when not fighting.

The whole company was black, including the corporals and sergeants, who were enlisted men. The only white man was the commanding officer, a second lieutenant. The first three days of the inductees' stay were spent in marching, listening to talks from the officers, and learning formations. The lieutenant began to lecture that the United States was engaged in the war to save democracy.

I broke in and asked why he was making such a statement, when the nation did not practice democracy at home. How could he call it democracy when there was segregation based on color throughout the military? I said that I was a second-class citizen in an organization in which I might lose my life to help its preservation. He looked embarrassed, and began to stammer some sort of nonsense.

From then on, whenever he was present before the group, I would be the first to ask him questions. When my subscription to *The Nation*, the weekly liberal periodical, caught up with me, I would stand up in the front and conspicuously read it.

Every time a formation was called out to march, the lieutenant would tell the stragglers to "fall out and follow at your best speed." I was always the first to step out. The corporal muttered, "I don't see why in the hell they brought an old man like you in here." I bypassed some other activities, like climbing up a rope to reach the top of a wall about 20 feet above the ground, as the sergeant

agreed that it would be very difficult for me.

After about two weeks, we were given M1 .30 caliber rifles and marched to the firing range, where we were instructed how to load and unload weapons before being handed bullets. The target was about a hundred feet away, and was held up high by officers standing in a trench. We were ordered to fire from a standing position, a sitting position, and lying on the stomach. I was familiar with the use of both rifles and shotguns, but I had made up my mind to fake as though firing a gun was all new to me.

It was winter, and there was a lot of snow on the ground. One trick I discovered to avoid the daily drills was to volunteer to take care of the furnaces for the barracks and the mess hall. The sergeant told me that I could sleep in the day, but my good fortune soon evaporated when a lieutenant on an inspection tour woke me and asked why I was not with the company. I told him, and he ordered me to join the troops in their training, saying that the Army had inducted me to be a soldier, not a fireman.

There was an obstacle course which we went through a maze like rats in a laboratory. Afterward, the officer directed the company to a trench dug in a field. Every one of us — about 60 men — got into the trench, which was full of mud because heavy rains had fallen all night, and there were still intermittent showers. We all had our raincoats on. They were made of rubber, and came down almost to the ankle. They were the best raincoats I have ever seen, and I would like to have one now.

The lieutenant shouted to us to keep our heads down because .30 caliber machine guns were firing at the trench. Pebbles and other material began to shower down

onto us. It was live ammunition: If you jumped up you would have been dead.

After every man had entered the trench, a whistle was blown and the guns ceased to fire. The lieutenant then ordered us to get out, fall on our bellies and start crawling. The field was surrounded by barbed wire, and when we reached it, we were to turn on our backs, lift the wire up with one hand, hold the rifle with the other, and keep going. The last thing the lieutenant shouted was to "keep your butts down and do not attempt to crawl on your knees" because the machine guns would start firing.

The mud in the field was soupy and deep, and the guns began to chatter. I got about three-fourths of the way across and stopped to rest for a while. Everybody else crossed over, and a whistle brought the guns silent. A lieutenant, noting me lying on the field, shouted, "Soldier, what are you doing out there?" I said, "I'm tired." He said, "Get up on your feet! Fix your bayonet and charge the dummy!"

After being in the Army for about two weeks and eating every meal offered, I became aware that my bowels were not functioning. I went on sick call. A doctor asked me what I took in civilian life to bring regularity. I informed him of some medicine that I had learned about from Legrande Coleman. He said, "We don't furnish that in the Army." I said that I had long suffered from piles, and thought that I should have surgery. He conducted an examination, informed me that I did not need surgery, and sent me back to duty.

Fort Leonard Wood had a little club with a pool table, a soda fountain and two telephone booths for all the blacks in the camp. The whites had a PX with banks of

telephones all along the walls. One night I tried to get into the PX to make a phone call. The girl, a civilian clerk, said, "You can't come in here." I said, "Why can't I? I'm wearing the uniform of the United States Army." She said, "Well your kind of people don't come in here." So I said, "I'm coming in here and I'm using the damn phone too. I want to call my mother in California. They're preparing me so I can go and fight. They're probably going to send me over to face the Germans or the Japanese and I might get shot, to save your butt."

Black recruits at Fort Leonard Wood.

She called the military police, and they came and threw me out. Another thing that infuriated me was that they brought in some Italian and German prisoners of war who were captured in North Africa. And they could go into the PX — of course under guard — but we couldn't.

So I was really determined that I wasn't going to cooperate with the Army.

One man in my barrack, who was 29, had a wife and two children back in Pasadena. He was a mental wreck, and worked hard in a campaign to get out, in which he eliminated body waste in his bed every night. The Army understood, and was patient with him for six weeks or more. Then he was offered a discharge that was less than honorable. But he wanted it so badly that he accepted. I noted that many black soldiers quickly snapped up such a discharge, even if it classified them as being nutty or having social behavior problems. I pointed out to them that it would surely create difficulties in their future search for jobs, but none heeded my warnings.

I had written to about 15 people I felt would like to hear from me. Augusta James, a public school teacher in Charleston, West Virginia, was the first to respond. I had met and dated her that summer when she was visiting her relatives, the Collins family, in San Francisco. Gussie had composed a letter every day, and she had five bundled up. Well, I was flattered. I replied the same day to her, and that went on, a letter from each of us every day. She kept my spirits up.

I began to call her every Sunday; she'd be waiting by the phone. That was the only time I spent money, aside from a few personal things and some dinners at the service club, where the meals were always better than in the mess. She wanted to get out of West Virginia, and said she was going to join the WACs. I said, "You must be losing your mind. I've got to go in here and you don't."

In April 1945, all of the draftees inducted in February had finished basic training and were awaiting assignment

to some other branch of the Army. We were taken to Springfield, Missouri by truck, and there placed on boxcars that had been converted to troop-carrying cars. Windows were cut on both sides of the car and rows of berths installed.

Two days and one night later, the train pulled into Cheyenne, Wyoming. All hands were ordered off and marched to Army trucks, which rumbled through the gates of Fort Francis Warren several miles outside town. It was one of the oldest Army encampments in the service; it came into being during the fading days when Indians were forced to surrender their lives and culture to white settlers.

At Fort Warren, it snowed at least once each month in May, June, July and August. The wind was so strong that you could hear pebbles striking the windows. We were trained as quartermasters, or service troops. Some left after training and went to Europe to become part of the legendary Red Ball Express, a convoy of trucks that furnished supplies for the field army in France, Italy and Germany. Others repaired the trucks and built roads, but they had the same equipment as the combat soldiers.

There was a black sergeant in the training regiment at Fort Warren who always wore a .45 caliber handgun on his side. He was perhaps the most brutal noncommissioned officer I met in the Army. He was afraid of the men, many of whom wished to get a piece of him, and he was quick to draw his gun if he got into an argument. He and a white captain worked together to rob the enlisted men of the few dollars Uncle Sam paid to them. Each payday, they brought a number of whores out from Cheyenne and placed them for sale in a couple of unused barracks. They also brought in cases of rotgut

booze and set up a bar, while soldiers shot craps or played blackjack. Many of the youthful draftees were soon shorn of their pay. Then the sergeant would loan them money at inflated interest rates. The brass caught on to the pair, and the Army removed these two worthies from Fort Warren.

I never felt at ease like the younger draftees, who were always looking forward to the weekend, when they could get passes and go to Denver or Cheyenne. I began my drive to get out without a dishonorable discharge or a Section Eight, which identifies one as a very bad neurotic. I was able to convince someone that piles was a very serious physical problem that should receive the attention of a doctor. I stayed in the hospital for more than three weeks, and learned from a sergeant medic that I might be going home soon.

A major, a black man who was a psychiatrist, interviewed me and said, "There's nothing wrong with you, Fleming. You just want to get out of the Army." I promptly asked him, didn't he wish to get out? He said yes, but that he did not use my tactics. I answered, "Each to his own, Major, each to his own."

Carlton Goodlett wasn't drafted because he had asthma and his sinuses bothered him. He had stayed in touch with both me and Legrande Coleman ever since 1938, but he hadn't liked California when he was a student there, and didn't have any intention of coming back. He complained that it was the last frontier because of the small number of blacks. But Legrande wrote to him that blacks were pouring in by the thousands, and that he was making more money than he knew what to do with. I said, "Man, this is the place to come."

In June 1945, following his graduation from medical

school, an internship in St. Louis, Missouri and a year of medical practice in Columbia, Tennessee, Carlton answered the urging from us. He wrote that he was about to drive from his parents' house in Omaha back to the Bay Area to practice medicine, and that he would stop over at Fort Warren early Tuesday en route to the coast. He would be traveling with his wife Willette, whom I had not met.

The day before Carlton was to arrive, I went to the hospital to eat, since they fed you much better there than in the mess hall. I hung out there all day, shooting the breeze with the patients. At about 5 o'clock I went back to the company area to find out if I had received any mail. On the way, I noticed a grey Chevrolet approaching, and the driver shaking his fist in my direction. When the car stopped, who should pop his head out but Carlton Goodlett? "Why in the hell don't you stay where people can find you?" he shouted.

I said, "You told me you were coming here tomorrow." He said, "I changed my mind." He and Willette had arrived around 8 a.m. and had spent the day searching for me. He said, "Come over here man and shake hands. I ain't seen you in seven years."

The chaplain assisted them in finding lodging in a guest barrack where civilians could stay overnight. The three of us went to the segregated area of the PX for dinner. Carl had brought some vodka, and we sat up late, drinking and talking. That was the first time I got drunk while I was in the Army.

We talked until 3 o'clock in the morning. Willette drifted off to sleep. She must have been wondering just who in the hell was Tom Fleming, that would cause her husband to lay over there all day long. I felt that she was

giving me a speculative eye.

I told Carlton that I was slated for discharge, but had no idea when that would take place. I said it would be stupid to change tactics in my discharge battle of wills, since the armed forces are very patient.

I asked Carl to stop and take a look at Mama when he got to the East Bay, as I had learned from Kate that she was sick. I think she took to bed right after I went in the Army because she thought I was going to go overseas. Carl promised to look in on her. When the Goodletts left early the next morning, I felt very lonely again.

In late July, orders came through for me to get ready to depart the post. About a week later, a convoy of trucks picked up me and about 50 other men, and took us to the Union Pacific train station in Cheyenne, where we boarded the westbound Challenger, headed for Sacramento. There, all men slated for discharge were unloaded and put on a bus for Camp Beale.

As we went through the preparations, one sergeant looked at my record and angrily told me that no one got out of the Army with only six months' service. He took it upon himself to try to delay my discharge. I told the lieutenant. He chewed that sergeant out, saying, "This isn't your business. This is Army business." Then I was marched out for physical and psychological testing. My stay at Camp Beale finally ended on August 14, the day after Japan threw in the towel and asked for peace.

On the final day, all who had gone through the process of discharge were told to assemble in full dress uniform with their duffel bags containing their belongings. We took seats in a chapel, at which the chaplain made a short speech. Then the base commander, a one-star general,

took the podium and expressed the thanks of the government to each one of us. A lieutenant began to call out names while handing the discharges to the general. When each name was called, the person walked up, saluted the general, received the discharge, then turned about face and marched outside. The discharges displayed all sorts of emotions, some yelling and leaping up and down.

* * *

THE POSTWAR YEARS

COMING HOME

On the bus back to Oakland, I looked through the window, drinking in the sight of buildings and intersections that I knew well. At the Greyhound bus station, I hailed a cab to go to the apartment where Kate and Mama lived. I was worried about my mother because I hadn't heard anything from Kate for quite a while. When I arrived, Carlton was there, attending my mother. Every evening when he closed his office, he came by to see her.

Kate was out. The first thing I asked my mother was: "Where are my clothes?" She said they were in the closet. I immediately took a bath and changed into my civilian clothes. When Kate came home, after the hug and kiss she began to wail for me to put on my uniform again so she could see me dressed as a soldier. I said, "If you didn't see me when I came in, you ain't gonna see me with that suit on any more." But I kept those combat boots, and used them to go out in the hunting fields sometimes.

I received $300 along with my discharge, and I already had $200 in the money belt. I went to the bargain basement in the Emporium in San Francisco and bought a suit for $45. Bill Hambrick had kept the *Reporter* alive, and had hired a white man to take my place as editor when Uncle Sam grabbed me.

I spent some time getting myself together, and shared some time with Mama during the day while Kate worked at her union job. Mama was not in good health, and her physical condition did not improve after my return.

On a day in September 1945, while I was at the Ken

Levy home, Kate called there searching for me — she knew my route well — to inform me that she had to call an ambulance to take Mama to Highland Hospital. I left right away, taking a bus to Kate's home. Then we took a cab to the hospital. Kate told me that she had notified Uncle Tom.

As soon as we walked in the hospital room, Mama uttered, "Tommy, Tommy," then closed her eyes and went into a coma. I shoved Kate up in front of me and said, "Mama, Mama, here is Kate." But she never gave any signs that she heard a word. Kate started crying out loud, and I choked back the tears and walked out of the room, bumping into my uncle and his wife, who entered the ward and started consoling my sister.

Mama never regained consciousness, but lingered on for a couple of hours or more. Never have I felt so despondent in my life as I did then, for she was not only Mama, but the best friend that Kate and I had. Her life was very limited, but she never complained. I never heard her use one swear word, or any vulgarity of any form. She did the best she could and accepted her lot. And she had to work practically all her life, without any support, to bring us up, which I never forgot.

The next day we went down to see Charles Baker about funeral arrangements. Mama had a small life insurance policy. Charlie asked, how much money did I have? I showed him the check from Uncle Sam. He took that and said that would be all, along with the policy.

Kate and I decided that we would hold the funeral at the church Mama had attended in West Oakland. It was filled with people for the service. This was when I finally realized that I would never see her again. Kate of course

cried a great deal. My uncle and his wife remained stoic, all deep in their own thoughts. I stayed over at Kate's that night, sleeping on a divan.

Two days later I came to the *Reporter* office and informed Bill Hambrick, in front of my substitute, that all draftees were legally restored to their jobs. Poor Bill was such a decent guy that he had trouble informing the man that I was replacing him, but he did. Bill paid me about $35 a week to be the editor. The war industries started shutting down after Japan surrendered, and I never went back to the machine shop.

When my mother died, I said, "I may as well move to San Francisco instead of commuting every day." And so I did. I've been living on this side of the bay ever since then, always in the Fillmore district.

During my enforced stay as a dependent of Uncle Sam, another black paper, the *Sun*, had been founded in San Francisco by Frank Laurent, a white man whose father owned the Packard automobile agency in the city. Frank, or "Lucky" as he was called, was quite a businessman himself. He had loaned money to Wesley Johnson, a black man who gained fame and wealth as the owner of the Texas Playhouse nightclub on Fillmore Street, and Ples Scaggs, who bought an apartment house and converted it into the city's only black-owned hotel for black travelers, the Scaggs Hotel.

Laurent went to Los Angeles and brought two blacks up here for his *Sun* staff. Wendell Green was the editor and Abie Robinson wrote entertainment. They were first-class craftsmen who had worked with the *Los Angeles Sentinel* in the early days.

Frank didn't write anything himself; he might have

been in search of a political outlet, but I don't think he had a bit of racial prejudice. He spent most of his social hours with the emerging black upper- and middle-class population. He was particularly fascinated that most of these people were far better educated than he was. He said he had never met "any colored guys like you all." I think he was sincere.

COLLINS AND GOODLETT

One organization that specialized in opening doors to employment that had been closed to blacks was the National Urban League. I first encountered it in the 1920s, when my job on the railroad brought me into Los Angeles every week. By then I had been reading their house organ, *Opportunity*, for some time. I met Floyd Covington, the director of the Los Angeles branch, and was impressed with their program.

The NAACP was always better known because it got all the publicity by going to court. The Urban League was lower-key, using persuasion methods with the heads of corporations and saying, "Black people can do these things also." Most of the people who were hired this way had a high school education at least, and many were college level. The Urban League didn't set any quotas because they thought if they got one person in, more would be added later. White people supplied most of the money for the organization to operate. There were probably as many white members as there were blacks.

I hold that Daniel Collins was the father of the Urban League office in Northern California. He saw that many

things he had encountered in New York City and the East Coast were not happening here, so he started negotiating with the national office in New York to bring the League to San Francisco. Los Angeles had the only office on the West Coast.

Dan came to California from South Carolina with his wife and their two small boys in 1942, when he was offered a research fellowship at the University of California Dental School. His work there permitted him to open his own dental office on Fillmore Street at Bush. He and Carlton Goodlett had attended Meharry Medical College at the same time. Carl told him, "Look Tom Fleming up when you get out there. He's my buddy." I met Dan a few days after we started the *Reporter*, and we saw one another almost daily after that.

In 1944 Lester Granger, the national director of the Urban League, came to the city. He showed Dan how to get an interracial committee to bring a branch here.

When Goodlett returned to the Bay Area, Collins' office was the first stop he made. It was a former apartment with a big front room, several other rooms, and closets down the long hallway. Dan had a receptionist, a lab assistant and a technician who did all of the dental plate work. He offered Goodlett space to open his medical practice, and the arrangement found Goodlett with a consulting room, two examining rooms and a small room used by a medical technician, Katherine Bryant, who had known both men at Meharry. Goodlett had always talked about becoming a pediatrician, but I don't think the black population was sophisticated enough to support a doctor just for their children, so he went into general practice.

Both Goodlett and Collins had a great sense of social

Dr. Daniel Collins (1916-2007), civil rights activist and dentist.

responsibility that went far beyond their professional lives. The office of Collins and Goodlett became the headquarters for gatherings of all sorts, aside from health care, and it was interrupted frequently during the day. Collins and Goodlett remained ready liberals, working quietly with the political and business leadership in the city. Goodlett liked to make a lot of noise, and was a little more radical than Collins.

Around 1946, the Collins-Goodlett combination organized the Fillmore Democratic Club, the Democratic Party's first black club in the city. The club had men and women members. They thought that somebody should run for supervisor that year. Goodlett and Collins talked the Reverend Frederick D. Haynes, pastor of Third Baptist Church, into running. He didn't know anything about politics. He was very naive and unsophisticated outside of his church. Other Democratic clubs and Philip Burton persuaded the County Democratic Party to pledge financial support to the Haynes campaign. He did not win, but Goodlett's efforts made Haynes the most powerful black Democrat in San Francisco, and his fame became statewide as he plunged deeper into politics.

After the election, Bill Malone, who had been state chairman of the Democratic Party and was now the Democratic Party boss in San Francisco, ignored Goodlett's request for repayment of his loan. Edward Heller, an immensely wealthy banker, heard of the promise of the Democrats to repay Goodlett. Carlton and I went to Malone's office and Heller was there also. Heller said he would pay the sum to Dr. Goodlett. From then on until his death, Heller and Goodlett were close allies. Of course they cursed one another out from time to time, as did

Goodlett and Phil Burton.

Carlton and Willette Goodlett first lived in Berkeley. Willette spent days searching for a residence in the city because commuting across the bay every day was tough — especially for Carlton, who, like other doctors of that period, made house calls to patients at all hours of the day. H.T. Shepherd finally found a place for the Goodletts in a onetime commercial building which the government had gutted out and turned into one- and two-bedroom apartments. They had a fox terrier, Skippy, who always visited me at the *Reporter* office, as he knew I would have some ground beef to feed him.

Dan's activities with the Urban League were proceeding very nicely, and around 1948 it opened a branch in the city, on Divisadero Street. Seaton Manning, a Bostonian with a master's degree from Harvard, was the first executive director. Seaton served for several years, then left to become a professor at San Francisco State College when it began to add blacks to its faculty. The Urban League later moved its office to Oakland.

Seaton and I liked one another right off. He said the YWCA downtown was about to add a black female to the staff — the first in its history — and asked if I knew someone with a college degree who would like to apply. I immediately thought of Gussie James, the sister of Dan Collins' wife. All of this time, I had continued to write to her, and she was anxious to leave West Virginia. I told Seaton about her, and he said I should call the local YMCA director. I did. After Gussie sent in the application, she was offered the job. She came to San Francisco about three months after I got out of the Army.

Goodlett started making money right away as a physician. Shortly after he arrived, he and Dan started lending me money to keep the paper alive. Meanwhile, Bill Hambrick had bought a Linotype machine on credit, but could no longer afford the payments. So he negotiated with Goodlett and Collins, who worked out a financial deal in 1946 for them to take over the paper.

With his acquisition of a newspaper, Goodlett launched a steady assault on racism in whatever form it took. His political activities grew ever larger. He succeeded Berlinda Davison Mabson as president of the San Francisco NAACP, serving from 1947-49. His name became identified as a solver of social problems.

THE *SUN-REPORTER*

Frank Laurent, the publisher of the *Sun*, was quite charmed when he finally met Dan Collins and Carlton Goodlett. They'd have poker games at Goodlett's house and stay up all night long. Carlton and Dan liked him, but they didn't like the idea of a white publisher controlling a black editorial opinion. One night around 1948, Frank got in the hole with Goodlett for $4,500, so Frank said, "I'll tell you what I'll do, Carl. You give me $1,500 and you can have the *Sun*." Carlton agreed. We decided to merge the two papers and name it the *Sun-Reporter*.

The *Sun-Reporter* has always been a watchdog for injustice based on racism. It's been a struggle. We've had bomb threats and other types of persecution, but we never complained because we wanted an opportunity to write. We figured the only way we were going to do anything in this country was to persuade blacks to vote so that we

could become part of the power structure. Cause if you don't do that, they're not going to give anything to you.

I used to go down to the pressroom in the Hall of Justice to see if I could pick up some news for the *Sun-Reporter*. Sometimes a call would come in, and a reporter for a daily paper would say right in front of me: "Oh, that's just a nigger story," and wouldn't send it in to the desk. That's why I say we need a paper of our own with a regular editorial opinion about what black people are thinking.

Goodlett and Collins supplied the money that made them joint publishers of the struggling paper, with me retaining my post as editor. In the early 1950s, Dan got out because he had two sons to raise, and Carlton didn't have anyone except his wife. So Goodlett became the sole publisher. I couldn't match the money he was putting in, so I just told him he could have my 25 percent ownership.

Goodlett thought like I did editorially. He wrote most of the editorials and I wrote the opinion column. Now and then I would write an editorial. Goodlett was an able and very articulate person, and everybody looked to him because he led the fight in everything. The little people worshiped him in this town. His waiting room was always full because people would come in and complain about things besides health care, and he would take some time to talk to them. They'd even come to ask how to make out their income tax. Dorcas Taylor, his nurse, used to get mad as hell.

One thing that Goodlett fought was the discrimination which had barred black newspapers from the San Francisco Press Club. Goodlett always felt that since the *Sun-Reporter* was a newspaper, it must be allowed to join. He

went after the Press Club, charging racism so hard that they voted him in. Later they named me to the board of directors.

One day I met Gussie James downtown and invited her out to eat. Legrande Coleman had told me about a fancy place on Bush Street called the Russian Tea Room. Apparently they had served him for some reason; maybe he had come with a group of white doctors.

When we went in, the maitre d' came up and said, "Do you have reservations?" I said, "No. How do you make them?" He said by telephone or in person. So I said, "Well, we'd like to get a reservation now." He said, "I'm sorry, we don't serve your people in here." So I told Gussie, "We'll go in there and sit down. I'm not going to take this crap." But she had come from West Virginia, and was afraid.

I told Carlton about it that night, and he voiced surprise and indignation. He said, "We're going to go down there." We went a few days later, at about 7:30 in the evening. The same maitre d' came up and asked, "Do you have reservations?" "No." Then he said, "My kitchen is closed." I said, "It don't look like it's closed to me." He continued to debate with Goodlett. So I said, "Man, let's go in there and sit down. We're going to eat in this damn place tonight."

The Tea Room had a black male attendant in the men's restroom who knew who Goodlett was. He told the maitre d' that he was a doctor and the president of the NAACP here too. "What's the NAACP?" asked the maitre d'. The attendant said, "You don't know now. You're going to find out soon."

The maitre d's demeanor changed completely. He

probably started thinking about litigation and courts. He said: "Gentlemen, we have a table right here."

I think Gussie was looking for marriage, but I always skillfully avoided talking about it. She got her California teaching credential and stayed out here, and did very well. I just stopped dating her. She married and had a little girl. One day I encountered her on Fillmore Street with her daughter, and she told her, "This is the man who should have been your father."

I think the biggest mistake I ever made was when I listened to Carlton and didn't marry Gussie. He had met her family before I did, and said, "They're nothing but merchants." Carlton was something of a snob. But I never felt any strong urge to marry anybody. I liked the way I was living too well.

RACIAL PROGRESS

The immediate post-World War II period in San Francisco gave the newspaper a lot of material on which we could focus our attention. The old-timers suffered from the same problem as the newcomers: Blacks had no influence at City Hall or any branch of state or federal government.

There was plenty of talk being tossed around as to whether the newcomers of color would stay after the shipyards and other war industries closed shop. I recall attending a press conference in City Hall around 1947, when Roger Lapham was mayor of San Francisco. He was from a wealthy shipping family in New York. I had made myself very prominent in City Hall, and the *Sun-Reporter*

was notified along with the daily papers.

When I met Lapham, he said, "Mr. Fleming, how long do you think these colored people are going to be in San Francisco?" I looked him dead in the eye and said, "Mr. Mayor, do you know how permanent the Golden Gate is?" He looked sort of surprised, and said that he didn't know. I said, "Well, the black population is just as permanent, because we are American citizens like you and we don't need no passport to come here." I said, "They're here to stay, and the city fathers may as well make up their minds to find housing and jobs for these people, because they ain't going back down to the Jim Crow South. They can make more money on welfare out here than they can pickin' cotton down there."

He turned red in the face. But he had asked me for an answer, and I told him the way I saw it. That was the only exchange of words we ever had.

By 1950 there was a new black colony in the city, upwards of 40,000. The black population growth brought with it black professional people. There were about half a dozen black lawyers, perhaps about the same number of dentists, and about eight physicians.

One of the first problems black physicians encountered here was their inability to practice in any of the local hospitals. They could send their patients there, but lost them at the hospital door: Black doctors were barred from following through with their treatment. White staff doctors took over, and the black physicians could only visit their patients.

In order to practice in a hospital, black doctors had to be members of the county medical society. The fight to gain admittance was led by Dr. Goodlett. He finally be-

came a member, and Mt. Zion was the first big hospital to grant him and other black physicians entry, as well as adding other blacks to its staff.

* * *

In 1947, the Coro Foundation was giving scholarships to veterans right out of the Army. Seaton Manning, the secretary of the Urban League here, told me about it, so I went down and was interviewed. I was accepted, and became an intern in the Coro Foundation's very first class.

One of my jobs was in the office of San Francisco District Attorney Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Sr. When my internship finished, Brown told me to keep in touch, so I used to stop by his office. The paper still wasn't making enough money to pay me, and Pat Brown was kind enough to give me a job in the DA's office in 1948.

I came to work at 5 every night and got off at 8 the next morning. San Francisco was the only county in the state where the district attorney took bail. In every other county, the courts took it. My first night, one of the bail bondsmen came by and gave me ten dollars. I said to myself, "What's this?"

Every time somebody got arrested and their friends or relatives wanted to get them out, the cops would tell them, "Go down to the district attorney's office on Kearny Street." We'd tell them what the charges were. For all misdemeanors, the bail was standard. If it was a felony, the judge had to set the amount of bail.

I remember many a night, if a felony was named, I'd call up the judge and say, "The people say the man's got a good job, judge. I don't think he's going to run." He'd say,

"How much do you think it should be?" I'd tell him the amount. It was never over $5000. The bail bondsman's fee was $500. They gave $50, to me or whoever was working then. Even the deputy district attorney was taking the money.

Another thing I found out was fixing traffic tickets. I was the only black down there who had that entree, so I started fixing tickets for people I knew. I'd take them to old Judge Matt Brady — he was generally drunk — and he would ask, "Do you know these people Tom?" I'd say, "Sure I know them. They got good jobs." He'd write SS, suspended sentence, or DS, discharge. Then he'd sign his name and it was all over with.

I really liked that job, because I was averaging probably about $300 a month off that bail, and the city was only paying 275. But the court took over the office and made it like the other counties in the state. That's when I left the DA's office and came to work for the paper full-time. Because at least by then I could earn about $50 a week. Many of the reporters on the daily papers of that time only earned about $65 a week.

A black attorney named Cecil Poole came to town and set up office on Fillmore Street near the Collins-Goodlett medical office. He had a law degree from the University of Michigan and a master's degree from Harvard Law School. Collins, Goodlett and I met Poole shortly after he arrived in San Francisco. We quickly appraised that he had excellent abilities.

One Sunday evening in 1947, Goodlett was driving out Geary Boulevard in San Francisco when he was pulled over by a motorcycle police officer. The cop said, "You ran through a stop sign about 10 blocks back." So

Goodlett said, "Why didn't you stop me then?" The cop said, "I just followed you to see if you were going to do it again."

The cop got his name and said, "Well Carlton, get out of the car." Goodlett said, "Listen, Mr. Officer, I don't know your name but my name is Dr. Goodlett to you and everyone else." That made the cop a little mad. Goodlett wouldn't get out, so the officer grabbed him and pulled him out, and charged him with resisting arrest.

I was working for the district attorney's office, so I called a judge and went to his house to get an order where he would release Carl without bail. Cecil Poole wasn't getting too many cases then because he hadn't been here long and nobody knew him. So we got Cecil to represent Carl.

I was in attendance the next morning when Goodlett appeared in traffic court. The courtroom was jammed with a large number of blacks. The arresting officer must have found out who Goodlett was because he failed to appear, so the charges were dropped. Goodlett walked out and the cops avoided him from then on.

Poole appeared before Judge Matt Brady, and was so professional that Thomas Lynch, the chief assistant district attorney, asked me, "Who is that guy?" I informed him who Cecil was, and gave him a brief picture of his qualifications. Lynch answered, "We could use that man."

After that, I bugged Lynch and District Attorney Pat Brown until Brown sent for Poole for an interview. In 1949, Brown appointed Poole as the first black deputy district attorney in the city and county.

When Brown was elected governor in 1958, he took Judge Poole to Sacramento and appointed him to a state

California Governor Pat Brown swears in Cecil F. Poole as U.S. attorney for the Northern District of California, June 1961. Poole was the first black U.S. attorney in the continental United States.

cabinet post. Then followed an appointment to U.S. attorney for Northern California, a first, and his subsequent appointment to U.S. District Court judge, also a first in Northern California. In 1980 he was appointed to

the U.S. District Court of Appeals, a post which he held until his death in 1997. Judge Poole's career was always a source of pride to the *Sun-Reporter.*

* * *

Goodlett felt that he could say whatever he wanted to, and he didn't give a damn what people thought. He wanted to be part of the decisionmakers, not only in San Francisco but in the whole state of California and back as far as Washington.

When George Christopher was running for mayor of San Francisco in 1955, he made a lot of promises about what he was going to do for blacks. Well, when he got in he forgot us. Goodlett went down to his office in City Hall and got into the inner sanctum. I was with him. Right in front of the mayor's desk, all he said was: "George Christopher, you're a horse's ass." Christopher pressed a button to call a policeman and Goodlett said, "You don't need to call no goddamn cops. I walked in here, and I know how to walk out." He didn't have any more to do with Christopher from then on.

Goodlett became very troublesome to a lot of people in San Francisco. He never sought elective office except in 1966, when he ran in the Democratic primary for governor. He only got about 95,000 votes, but I thought that was pretty good, being a black man at that time.

He always stated that he didn't need another job, as he made a good living practicing medicine. He didn't take any nonsense off anybody, and subsidized the paper heavily. He probably spent probably over a million dollars out of his own pocket, keeping that paper going. Willette

used to curse me out, saying I was responsible for her husband spending all that money. Well, nobody asked Carl. He was very active politically and he wanted a voice.

Candidates for mayor, governor and United States senator would come by the *Sun-Reporter* office to talk to us, and hope to get the endorsement of the paper. Eventually the President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, came by.

Goodlett and Mervyn Dymally, along with Gus Hawkins, Byron Rumford, and Leon Washington, the publisher of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, were a formidable group of black leaders who not only were good in their professions, but also leaders in the field of politics.

I met Willie Brown one night at a liquor store at the corner of Fillmore and California. It was a town gossip place that closed up late. The clerks would let some of the people they knew well to come in, and we'd open a bottle in the back. Two of the clerks were going to San Francisco State College with Willie at the time, so they brought him over and I met him. His uncle Itsy Collins was a professional gambler. He brought him out to San Francisco when Willie finished high school down in Texas.

Both John Burton and Willie Brown will go down in the history of liberal politics in the city as being two of San Francisco's most outstanding elected public officials. They both owed their political success to John's elder brother Phillip Burton and Goodlett, who helped raise funds and persuaded the County Democratic Party Central Committee to endorse both the younger Burton and Willie Brown for the California Assembly. We got behind Willie

when he ran the first time in 1962. We not only gave him publicity and endorsed him, but Goodlett put money in his campaign. Willie lost that time.

The joint partnership of Goodlett, Collins and Phil Burton became a political powerhouse in San Francisco. Carlton and Phil worked very closely together, and that early alliance resulted in the election of Willie Brown to the state Assembly in 1964, and later to his selection as a twice-elected mayor of San Francisco. I think Willie is one of the smartest politicians who ever occupied that seat.

Goodlett and Phil Burton became good friends when they met at the Young Democrats in the late 1940s. Phil was the undisputed bull Democrat in San Francisco, which became even more the case when he was first elected to the state Assembly in 1956.

John Burton had met Willie Brown when both were students at San Francisco State. They were quite a foursome, all working hard for progressive legislation. They all attended the Democratic club conventions that were held yearly; they would be in the north one year, the south the next year, and sometimes in the central area of California. In 1964, Phil Burton won election to Congress, and both John Burton and Willie Brown won seats to the Assembly. The brother pair worked in tandem with Phil's wife Sala Burton. Some said that Sala worked one side of the street in campaigns and Phil worked the other side.

Carlton Goodlett remained in close touch almost every day while Phil served in Sacramento, and later in Washington, where Phil became one of the powerhouses in the House of Representatives. He remained in the House until his death in 1983. Whenever Goodlett and I

wanted to make a long-distance call we'd go down to the congressman's office in the federal building and call over their trunk line so we didn't have to pay for it.

Campaign flyer for Willie Brown and John Burton, 1960s.

Willie Brown was the first black from San Francisco to be elected to the state Assembly. He and the Burtons became a powerful trio, and imaginative press people labeled them and their associates in the city, which included Goodlett, the "Burton Machine."

* * *

When I worked in the district attorney's office in 1948, the pressroom was right down the hall from me, and two of the daily papers kept a reporter there 24 hours. A lot of

times I'd sit and talk with them. The *Sun-Reporter* wasn't able to pay me any money at all, and I worked at night so that I could be at the paper in the daytime. I got many stories from the police reports and the pressroom, and I heard from many old-time police officers about how city government worked.

Then mostly Irish and a few Italians served on the police force, plus a scattering of Latinos. Goodlett, Dr. Thomas Burbridge, attorney Terry Francois, U.S. District Court Judge Cecil Poole, this writer and the NAACP waged a constant battle to end the policy of racial discrimination by the San Francisco Police Department.

We worked hard to persuade the police department to create an office to investigate cases of police brutality and other forms of misbehavior by officers. We were one of the first to encourage the attempts of Richard Hongisto to form the Officers for Justice in 1968. It was a black organization like the Police Officers Association, which was for white officers.

This paper went to Police Chief Thomas Cahill in 1966 following a racial disturbance at Hunters Point, and asked him when he was going to appoint a race relations unit in the department. He had promised to do so, so we felt now was the time. The unit was named the Community Relations Detail, and was commanded by Lieutenant Dante Andreotti, a fiery liberal. He was despised by police brass because of his unorthodox manner of demanding certain steps to improve the bias created by the department.

Earl Sanders, who joined the police department in 1964, became San Francisco's first black police chief in 2002.

* * *

The *San Francisco Chronicle* considered itself to be the most liberal daily paper in town, and some of my white friends who had read my articles urged me to apply for a job there. I knew Larry Fanning, who was the managing editor. So in the early 1950s I went there and Larry interviewed me. Then he said, "Tom, I'd like to hire you. I think you'd do very well. But we wouldn't be able to pay you."

I said, "Hell, what are you talking about? A paper as big as this and you say you couldn't pay me? All I want is the same pay as the other reporters." He said, "We couldn't pay you." That was a way of putting me off. We understood one another very well. I said, "I know what it's all about, Larry. Thanks anyway. We won't fall out." He was a good liberal guy, but he had to follow company policy.

In the early 1960s, Gale Cook, the city editor of the *San Francisco Examiner*, called our office and asked me which of two black applicants should the *Examiner* hire. I quickly said Ben Williams and he asked me why. I simply said I thought him to be a good writer, as he had contributed some things to the *Sun-Reporter*.

I was pleased that he accepted my recommendation. Ben was hired as the first black reporter on a daily newspaper in San Francisco, and he was later the first black hired as an anchor at a TV station in the Bay Area.

Among the people I met as a working member of the press was Pierre Salinger, a reporter for the *Chronicle*. He was called "Frenchy" by many members of the local press and was a superb writer and newspaperman. He had com-

mitted a minor crime in San Joaquin County for the purpose of getting thrown in jail and reporting on the experience. He was found guilty and served time. Afterward he wrote a series of newspaper articles that described life in a California jail.

Salinger became press secretary for President John F. Kennedy in 1961, and he selected a former employee of the *Sun-Reporter*, Andrew Hatcher, as vice secretary, which made us feel good. In August 1964 Salinger was named U.S. senator to fill a vacancy from California after the death of Senator Clair Engle. He served until he was defeated in the election that November by George Murphy.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND THE RIGHT TO VOTE

When President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, blacks found themselves free from being chattel slaves, but that was all. The proclamation did not say whether freedmen were citizens or just homeless people living without citizenship.

Congress passed three amendments to the Constitution from 1865 to 1870, namely the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, which state very clearly that no person born or naturalized in the United States is to be denied equal rights, regardless of his former status.

The 13th Amendment abolished slavery, the 14th Amendment granted citizenship to former slaves, and the 15th Amendment gave them the right to vote.

Ever since that time, some elements of the white population have attempted to fight those three amendments. I must express a lingering sorrow that some citizens, because of an accident of birth, can justify the denial of first-class citizenship to others because of such superficial qualities as pigmentation. The whole picture of black-white relations in the nation has been of blacks' legal attempts to gain their long-denied citizenship and end the discrimination imposed on them in every activity of society.

Logo of the NAACP.

The 14th Amendment never was regarded by most whites as part of the Constitution. They consistently ignored the amendment with all manner of illegal evasions, and the judicial system long refused to support its enforcement.

The NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union are known as the two premier organizations to litigate against acts which infringe on the citizenship rights promised by the 14th Amendment. One of the reasons that the NAACP was formed by black intellectuals in the early years of the 20th century was to force white America to know that all people born in the United States were legal citizens. Since the beginning, it has conducted a running battle through the courts to affirm the constitutional rights of blacks, which have been so stoutly blocked by a well-entrenched white society through legal and pseudo-legal methods. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the federal affirmative action program were very weak attempts to enforce the 14th Amendment to the Constitution.

President Lyndon Johnson made the very courageous move of issuing the now-historic Executive Order 11246 in 1965, which mandated affirmative action for federal contractors. It was a form of friendly persuasion that sought to bring equality of opportunity.

If there had not been civil rights organizations and a black press — small but very insistent — affirmative action would not have come into being. The only reason it became a part of public policy was because discrimination based on race and gender was the unofficial policy. Civil libertarians have stated that the essence of affirmative action was an attempt to make the Constitution a living

document, not just empty phrases which were constantly ignored.

To this writer, affirmative action was a first step to righting a great wrong. It brought needed changes in the field of college education, and even greater changes in lower education programs — that is, for a short while, because large numbers of white parents pulled their children out of the public schools, and others registered their children in schools located in white neighborhoods.

With a few exceptions, the government has supported affirmative action. It has opened doors to the much-maligned black world and all women for a short time. But it is now in jeopardy. Its opponents argue that it discriminates against white males — which confirms that white males do not understand semantics, and should return to the study halls and take advanced courses in English.

The effort to end affirmative action will serve only as a weapon to bring even greater racial discord to the nation. None of its opponents seem to understand that discrimination based on gender and race only fertilizes social unrest. It serves as a breeding ground for hate and fear, based on the myths of one class that they are superior people.

What will it take to make white people realize that affirmative action does not — nor did it ever — mean preferences? Nowhere in the definition of affirmative action does one find the word "preferment." I never saw any diminishing of white males as the overlords of all they surveyed in the nation. Every time blacks barely open a door to a particular service that had no blacks before, opponents of their entrance start talking about quotas. It

seems that the word "quota" was first used by those people who continue to fight to maintain discrimination because of race.

Affirmative action was a sound policy. Note that I use the term "was." But it seems that foes of the measure fear that this might always be a nation in which race will be used to determine who receives most of the benefits in society.

At first, the outcry against segregation was so great that the real reactionaries went to the woods to skulk. But then they started counting their numbers again. Now affirmative action and some of the other changes that occurred during the '60s are under fierce attack. Those white students have become middle-aged. They've forgotten, and they don't bother anymore. The Klan and all of that curious melange of human haters are busily arming themselves and undergoing training to challenge the very government someday.

The forces of reaction never sleep: they are always looking for legal loopholes to continue to justify their denial of civil rights to some people native to this land. All one has to do is look at the constant litigation in the courts and the legislation that have been used since the 14th Amendment became a part of the Constitution.

I believe in affirmative action because it opens up doors not only to blacks, but to women — regardless of their color. That was a revolution in itself. To me, affirmative action is just an affirmation of the 14th Amendment — the right to an equal opportunity. That's all we've ever asked for. And we're not going to stop trying to attain that goal. It seems that we've had to fight for everything we've gotten, ever since emancipation. We've

got to keep pressing, because they ain't going to give you nothing easy.

Voting was another measure that many states used to bar black people from participating in the democratic system. Even the most ignorant redneck in the rural South was never denied the right to vote. But blacks were virtually excluded from voting in all of the former member states of the Confederacy until the federal government made changes as a result of the civil rights demonstrations that led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. After that, blacks voters began to elect blacks to all offices, including many members of Congress, from states in the Deep South.

In 1967, during the period of rioting in the streets of some large cities, President Lyndon Johnson asked onetime Illinois Governor Otto Kerner to head a commission to study the state of race relations. Kerner, with the president's approval, conducted a nationwide search for members, composed of people from many walks of life — black, white and others. They became known as the Kerner Commission.

The report's conclusion was something that blacks already knew — that the United States was two separate nations, one white, one black, but unequal, because blacks enjoyed few privileges that whites accepted as their right. What will end that state of inequities is the economic factor: Whites largely suffer no discrimination because they control the wealth.

Economically, blacks are far better off than they were in the days of my youth, but things are happening too slowly. Banks and insurance companies still support racism; it's a problem that blacks must face every day. Un-

fortunately, we don't have too much to leave to the younger generation: Blacks are still on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. We don't control a single big financial house in the country.

In the sixties, when the civil rights movement gripped the whole United States, I felt we were really going to have a change. Because I saw the black and white kids moving together, going down South on those bus rides, and I knew that some of them were going to become leaders in the country. Goodlett and I both thought it was the beginning of the new age. We kept waiting for it to happen, but it didn't happen. I was just fooling myself because we're still undergoing the same fight.

Dr. Carlton Goodlett (center) at San Francisco State College during the student strike of 1968-1969. Photo by Clarence Gatson, courtesy of Gado Images.

BLACK PRISONERS

From time to time, an agency issues a report on our nation's penal system. When the report is concluded, one learns that black males are incarcerated far more than any other group. According to the Justice Department, in 1993 the percentage of blacks in state and federal prisons was 50.8 percent, while blacks were only 12 percent of the population. Since I have heard this not astounding news so often, I was not surprised.

One must question the purpose of the studies, when they all seem to reach the same conclusion but offer no solution. Blacks would like for one of these studies to conclude that all people, regardless of income, should get the same level of legal representation as the more affluent members of society.

The black male since the days of slavery has been the object of law enforcement. The U.S. has always used the jails as a place to confine black males by convicting them in far great proportion than whites. Black people have been aware ever since emancipation that there are two kinds of law enforcement in the nation: one for whites and one for blacks. And that has not changed at all.

I asked Tom Lynch when he was the chief deputy district attorney in San Francisco — he was later elected attorney general of the state of California — why there were so many blacks on death row and in the penal population in California. What better person could you ask than him?

Lynch, who was always honest when asked a question, stated that many whites arrested on suspicion of the commission of a capital crime have money, or access to

money, from their families or friends. They can borrow money if they do not have their own financial resources, and bail themselves out of jail. They can hire an attorney to defend them in court. Most blacks, on the other hand, do not have access to money, and usually are represented by the state in the person of the public defender. Lynch said the public defender does not have the staff or resources to provide a first-class defense, so blacks are found guilty more than whites.

Because many Latinos are victims of poverty, they too suffer from inadequate defenses, and are also incarcerated in numbers disproportionate to their population.

Lynch was not knocking the public defender, but simply informing me that there were so many people charged with capital crimes that it was impossible for their office to hire a large enough staff to defend them in court.

They ought to do something about that, because there's a great deal of inequity. I'm opposed to the death penalty, but when someone commits a homicide, if we're going to put them in for life, keep them in there. I think it's worse than taking their lives. You give them a long time to think about what they did.

One disturbing factor leading to the heavy imprisonment record of blacks is addiction to narcotics. And since the state does not have the mental institutions where persons convicted of possession of drugs can be treated, they go to penal institutions.

Profiling of black males has been a part of police policy for a long time. I can recall the period when cops halted a car if it was a Cadillac or any other expensive car driven by a black. The police clung to the view that the man had to be a pimp, a gambler, or engaged in some

other unlawful activity. They didn't think that we had brains enough to do anything else. Because of that, the cops felt they had a legal right to conduct this form of harassment.

Until blacks and Latinos across the land are accorded the same citizenship rights as whites, they will continue to be the special preserve for police to indulge in acts of misconduct, which none of them would ever attempt to do in the wealthy neighborhoods of Piedmont in Oakland, or Pacific Heights in San Francisco. One can understand what Eldridge Cleaver meant when he spoke of the police as being the army of occupation in the black community.

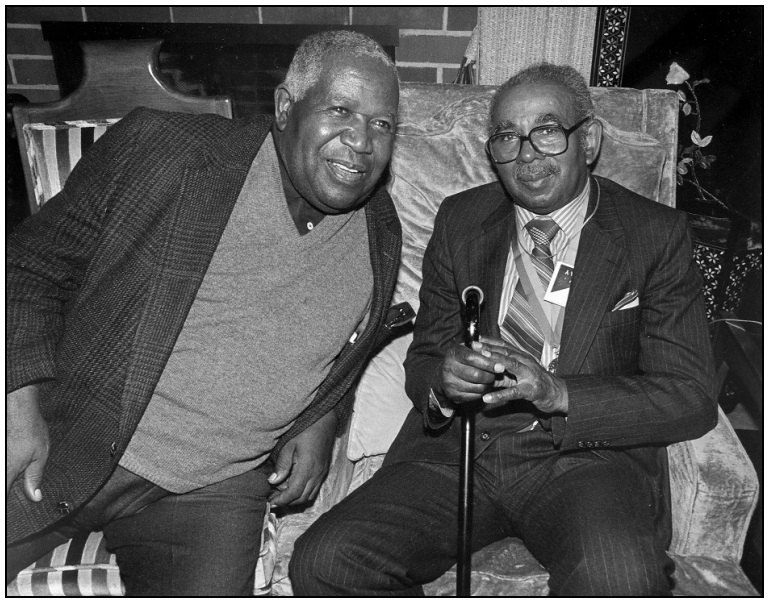
Racist elements in the nation simply believe that there is no such thing as all men are created equal. But people are people, whatever their color, speech, or religion. The use of ethnicism in describing people has never been correctly honest: Such descriptions only serve to maintain a false sense of identity and separation.

Some blacks have been around long enough to see that in their lifetime, women and blacks have made tremendous steps forward in attaining equality in every field of endeavor in the nation. They know that the petty politicians who have fought so hard to halt these advances cannot halt them. Delay, yes, but never halt.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Carlton Goodlett retired from his medical practice in 1983. He remained the publisher of the *Sun-Reporter* until his death in 1997. One of the best things that ever happened to me in my life was when I met Carl. We called

one another "my boon coon." We got mad at each other sometimes, but nobody else better interfere: it didn't mean anything. He was truly a great man in many respects.



Thomas Fleming (l.) with Dr. Carlton Goodlett in 1994. In January 1999, San Francisco Mayor Willie L. Brown Jr. led a ceremony to officially rename the address of City Hall to 1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place. Photo by George Kruse.

I retired as executive editor in 1997, but kept writing editorials and opinion columns until 2005. Then I stopped because I couldn't keep the continuity of my thinking together the way I used to. I had done it out of sheer joy before, but it became a task to me.

But I've had a lot of fun doing this. It's taken me all

over the globe practically, because I've been to Africa, to Asia, to Egypt a couple of times, to Latin America and Cuba.

People ask me how I remember so much about what happened to me. I don't always remember dates, but everything remains very clear. For some reason I have that gift. You have a lot of time to reflect when you're by yourself. If I start writing, things come back to me. I never made any money, but I've had a rich life and had a lot of fun. I attended nine national political conventions and met two presidents.

Some people, particularly women, have charged me with being selfish for doing what I wanted and not marrying. My answer to them has always been: Nobody ever wanted me badly enough. And of course I infuriated some of them with that answer. But I choose to live this way and I don't think I have hurt anyone. I was more interested in accomplishing one of my goals: to see that we had a black newspaper in San Francisco. I never thought too much about income because my needs were very simple, and as long as I could purchase books and records and things like that, that's about all I wanted out of life. I think I was able to help people by living my life as a newspaperman.

I have no regrets about spending my entire career with the black press. I might have enjoyed it better with the white press, but they weren't hiring us. When I look back at how much effect the black press has had in solving racial problems, I can only say that it's made a slight dent, because the problems still exist.

Black people still depend upon the black papers, particularly for news about their social events and their

churches. Now there are national black news services that can send stories to the local papers and get them in the next issue. And the black press now gets full-page ads from big corporations. In the 1940s the ads were looked upon as charity. Then companies realized that blacks buy in the same quantities as whites.

If a young black journalist asked me today whether he should work for the black press or the mainstream press, I'd tell him to get a job wherever he can, because jobs in the media are very limited now. I think the day's not too far away when we won't have newspapers any more. Television gets about 90 percent of the advertising dollar, so there's very little left for radio and the printed word. But I still think the written media is far superior to TV, because if you're really interested in something and you've got the paper, you can always go back and look at it again. With TV, you get that flash and it's over with.

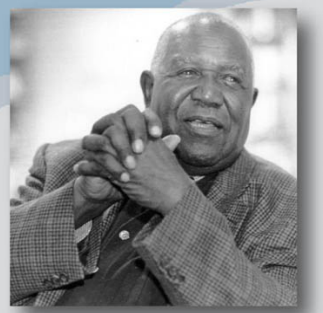
Today, the daily papers and other media have more objective coverage of the black community because of the addition of black reporters; their interest is greater because their private lives are spent mostly in the black community, and they can make suggestions about what to cover. But the papers are still owned by whites, and they're not going to express the blacks' editorial opinion.

There's still a need for the black press — not only in San Francisco, but all over the nation. If the daily papers covered all the different facets of black society the way they do white society, there wouldn't be a black paper in existence. As long as there's racism in America, there will be a black press.

* * *

More information about Thomas Fleming is available at www.maxmillard.com/blackhist.htm

"If you don't know who I am, you don't know who you are."
- James Baldwin



Thomas Courtney Fleming was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1907.
For 61 years he was an editor, reporter, and columnist for the *Sun-Reporter*, San Francisco's weekly African American newspaper, which he cofounded in 1944. In this memoir, he first traces his youth in Jacksonville, Harlem, and Chico, California. Then he relates his adult years as a railroad cook, Depression worker, draftee in World War II, and finally his emergence as a newspaperman. When Fleming died in 2006, he was honored with a memorial service at San Francisco City Hall, whose street address was renamed in 1999 for his publisher and best friend, Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett.

Thomas Fleming, 1996. Photo by George Kruse.

Max Millard grew up in Maine and moved to San Francisco in 1980, where he worked on the staff of 10 newspapers before switching careers to become a teacher. From 1995 to 1997 he was a staff writer for the *Sun-Reporter*. After leaving the paper, he recorded more than 100 hours of interviews with Thomas Fleming. Those recordings are the centerpiece for this book.

Max Millard (r.) with San Francisco Mayor Willie L. Brown Jr., 1996. Photo by George Kruse.

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