

Tape Interview
Otto Rutherford

Discussion of NAACP of Portland and some of its struggles, especially those leading to Civil Rights Bill of Oregon.

I am Otto Rutherford. I was born here on February 6, 1911. My parents came from Columbia, South Carolina and they arrived in Portland in 1897. Along with myself and my four brothers we were reared here in Portland and attended Portland schools. We are primarily concerned right now on a brief rundown of the National Association For The Advancement Of Colored People, particularly the Portland branch. The National NAACP was organized in 1909; however the Portland Chapter was chartered in September of 1914. The Portland Chapter has the unique distinction of being one of the very few branches of NAACP who has operated continuously since its charter was granted. The Portland charter has never been lifted. Basically, the NAACP is a Civil Rights organization. In its early days they fought for the right to register and vote and combat segregation in all its phases. Here in Portland, since its inception, the branch has never missed a session of the Legislature without having a Civil Rights Bill in the hopper, and it wasn't until 1953 that Oregon had its first Civil Rights Bill in the Legislature. They had gone back and gone back but it wasn't until 1953 that we were successful in having a Civil Rights legislation passed in Oregon. It just so happens that during the years, 1951, 1952 and 1953 I was the President of the local branch and it was during my last year of administration that this bill was passed. However, had it not been for the cooperation of the thousands of people - and I say thousands - because we send out thousands upon thousands of letters throughout the country -- we have the support of the churches, both Christian and Catholic. We have the support of the Council of Churches and numerous civic organizations throughout the country. The papers were very favorable to us, particularly the Oregonian and Journal. Now the papers down state and east of the mountains weren't quite as liberal as the papers here in Portland. I must point out that the Salem Statesman, I believe it was, and the paper in Eugene were

very liberal with their information.

(Question from background) What organizations were unfavorable around here?

(Answer) It was the realtors. They had the strongest lobby against us. And the apartment house owners.

(Question) Why was that?

(Answer) Because you see, prior to the Civil Rights they could refuse to rent you a place, they could prevent you from coming into a hotel and eating in the dining room. When the law was passed, that broke that barrier. We had great support from the local Urban League. They fought very, very diligently alongside of us. That is one time we worked hand in hand. As a matter of fact, I served on the Civil Rights Committee that the Urban League had and at that time our present Governor, Tom McCall, was a newspaper man and he served on that committee. You see, with the Urban League -- they had the expertise that we didn't have. We were composed of just John Citizen and Jane Citizen and we didn't have the expertise and the know-how the Urban League had, and they furnished a lot of expertise, plus we had all the support that the national office could give us.

We just had reams of material - how to proceed, how to go on. And we would have men from ^{Calhoun} ~~Foster~~ Current came out there. He was a Director of branches. He came out and gave us a big push. And we had a young attorney, who at one time - he was from New York - and he would argue cases at the Supreme Court and he was sent to the West Coast as our West Coast Region Director. He was stationed in San Francisco, and we got a world of support from him. He took it before the Legislature and he appeared before the Legislature and that sort of thing and it was through the combined efforts of individuals and organizations that we were successful in getting our Civil Rights Bill passed.

Now, you see, the Civil Rights Bill affected the whole State. I recall very vividly in '53 there was a Nigerian exchange student here and he went up to Milton-Freewater to work in the harvest (pea harvest) and he went in a restaurant there to -

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he and a friend from Eugene - went in to get something to eat. They were refused and one word led to another and he contacted us and through arbitration we convinced the owner of the restaurant in Milton-Freewater that it was to his advantage to drop his prejudiced feelings and he settled out of court for \$200. That was our first Civil Rights case - successful Civil Rights case - and the money was divided between our defense fund and our Student's group. That was, as we term it, the Eabaum case. The young man was an African prince, as a matter of fact - Godfrey Eabaum.

Since then we have had to go to bat for young people in school, we have had to fight the school board on more than one occasion. We have even picketed the Post Office. They weren't upgrading the black men as they should. That was during the time that Tom Vickers was president then. That was in the 60's, I imagine (talking from the top of my head on that one).¹ But they did - they picketed the Post Office here in Portland. In our schools - in the public schools here, because of the way the districts are drawn up - as a matter of fact, they just gerrymandered the thing, that the predominantly black neighborhood has a school and the attendance is predominantly black. A few years back the predominantly black schools, in order to get teachers to teach they offered them what we termed as "combat pay". This was a bonus over and above their regular salary. Well, I must say it is my considered opinion that we weren't getting the best of teachers in the black schools. That's one reason I think that bussing in some cases - it is about the only good reason I can see - that we could move some of the black kids out of the schools in their neighborhood and put them in another school. I would far rather that they upgrade the quality of teaching rather than move the child out of the neighborhood, because you are saying to me that in order for my black child to get a decent education he has to rub shoulders with a white child. I don't believe that. I believe if they would upgrade the quality of education it would solve the problem to a great extent.

Speaking of public accommodations, prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act it was very difficult - it was impossible to go into some places of amusement,

to hotels, to dining rooms and restaurants. Decent apartments were just unavailable to the minorities. Thinking of a case in point, the newscaster, Beverly Williams, she won a case. She and her husband had put money down, a deposit on an apartment and then when they went to occupy it the owners said that they had already rented it, so she went to court about it and she won her case. Had it not been for these Civil Rights Acts that we passed in '53, that would never have occurred. Now to back up a little, when I was a child, black people lived all over the City. We didn't have a concentration of black people in any particular spot. But the fact still remains that you couldn't get a room in a decent hotel - a first class hotel unless you were an artist who was passing through. As far as your job was concerned - had it not been for the railroad there would have been very little employment. They were employed as waiters, and the Pullman Company hired them and some of them worked on the tracks or as Red Caps. One or two hotels hired waiters in the hotel and two hotels had bell hops. But employment was very scarce. Now the black woman had but one source of employment. That was to be a domestic. Now we had maids in the department stores, but no clerks. There was one clerk who had red hair and was very, very light - her employer thought she was white - there has been two or three cases like that, but it wasn't that they were trying to pretend to be white. They pretended to be white to get a job but they were married to and associated with the black community. As far as young people getting a job, or even to aspire for a job, it just wasn't there unless if you were a boy you could shine shoes or look forward to hopping bells or going on the road as a waiter. I recall so vividly those around my age and older, those who did aspire to teach - my brothers were two of them - they would have to leave. They contacted a place in Chattanooga that was an agency. They would write to Chattanooga and the word would come back that there was an opening some place in the South for them, or in the East, but practically all of them went South to teach and that's where they stayed.

Speaking of schools, I recall in our schools you would never have over three or four blacks in a school and the only time that he or she got any recognition was that they had to be able to sing or had to be an outstanding athlete. Academically speaking you were practically ignored. The teachers were prejudiced, very prejudiced. I don't mean to say that all teachers were, but the majority of them were. Because when I was a boy the grade schools from 1 to 8 all the teachers were women, single women. They didn't allow the grade school teachers to marry and as a result you got a lot of old women in there who had been teaching for forty years or more and who were steeped in their southern culture - the majority of them were southern women. However, you came into contact with men after you went to high school. You see, in Portland we didn't have a junior high. You went directly from the 8th grade to high school.

Now the purchase of homes -- I remember prior to the law being passed, to purchase property up until 1926 the minorities - as they referred to them as a black or an oriental - couldn't own property. However, I was born here and my dad owned his house. But how he bought it - he bought it through a white attorney and the attorney turned around and sold it to my dad. However, the law did provide that if a real estate agent or realtor didn't choose to sell you a given house he didn't have to as the law would back him up. We had another peculiar law that blacks and orientals could not inter-marry with whites. However, it was permissible to go over to the State of Washington and marry and come back and live as man and wife. Now in the 50's - I think it was '52 or '53 - '53 that the miscegenation law was passed. It passed after the Civil Rights Act had passed, and after that law was passed the black and the white or the Filipino and the white, or whatever it happened to be, could marry in Oregon and live in Oregon.

You see, the NAACP on the local level is all a volunteer organization. There are no paid personnel on the local level. However, on regional and the national level, those are all paid personnel. Now, in the NAACP the majority of the people

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are working people and they have to do their Civil Rights work after their regular job and as a result of that it kind of slows the program along. That's why on the local level we aren't able to progress the Urban League in their program because they have professionals who spend eight or ten hours, or twelve hours, at it every day. Even for the delegates to go to the national convention, it causes a hardship. I recall back in the 50's when I went to Dallas I was given \$120 and that was to pay my fare and my registration fee, lodging and the whole ball of wax. However, the way we operated that - the \$120 came from the treasury and then we passed the hat and you just prayed the Lord you would have a few black cats to put something in the pot for you, and that is the way it was done. However, the local branch is more solvent now and they don't have quite that problem. But as I said, it was all volunteer. Until recent years the NAACP on the local level did not have an office. During my three years of administration our dining room and basement served as the headquarters of the local branch. When we had dignitaries come we would house them in a hotel but we would entertain them in our homes. There again it was a matter of chipping in because we didn't have the money. We didn't have a strong membership. When I was in office I think the highest membership there we got to was 900, and mind you, that membership was \$2.00 a year, unless you took the Crises - that was \$3.50. You retained a dollar and sent a dollar to the national office so you didn't actually have much money to function on.

There is something that is very interesting about the NAACP. In the majority of the cases throughout the country it is the black church that has kept the NAACP going. We have met in the churches. In other cities - not so much in Portland - but in other cities you will find that most of the presidents are ministers. There is a very strong support coming from the black churches to the NAACP. The NAACP practically owes its existence to the black church. Take the chairman of the board, Bishop Spotwood; the national board has several high churchmen, bishops and so on.

(Question asked from background) - Oh, yeah, we depended a great deal on the black church. We only had three predominant churches. You had the Bethel A M & E, that's

Methodist, then you had the Baptist (Mount Olive Baptist) then you had A M E Zion. Now at this time that I speak of the Vancouver Avenue and the other churches were just getting a foothold. Hughes Memorial was just a handfull, so you had the three major churches. Of course now we had support from the small churches too, but the major thrust came from the three major churches. As I say, NAACP owes its very life, I would say, to the churches as its leadership. They always came through for a place to meet. Even now, the majority of the branches throughout the country meet at churches. It may be a carry-over from former days - slave days - that the only time we got together was in a church. It may - I don't know - that's the way I feel about it, but nevertheless we do owe a great deal to the church. Now, don't misunderstand me and think that the church had any control. The church has no control over the NAACP. We maintain our own autonomy, if you want to put it into those terms, but we did have full support from the churches.

As time went on various situations would arise and then you would find masses of people coming together, but when everything was calm and serene then your attendance - not your membership - your attendance fell down. When we had an issue going, like the Civil Rights issue and it looked like we were going to be successful, you could hardly find a place large enough to contain the people. Or in the case where a Civil Rights case came up after the passing of the Bill, we had an issue - you see, without an issue you can't keep them coming; however, we still had them on the books. They were paid up members. So that's been one of the - I think the cornerstone of the success of the NAACP is that it has got to have a situation going. Our national officers are always saying, and I presume they still do, they are trying to put themselves out of business, but when that time comes it will be an utopia so I imagine you will have NAACP for another hundred years. You know - a utopian situation where you ever got to the place where you didn't need any NAACP.

Now you see, the NAACP is not beholden to anyone. We don't have any great foundations that back us up. We have a Legal Defense department. Any contribution to Legal Defense is tax deductible. Anything else is not. So its more or less a

free will sort of thing. Now your life membership in NAACP is \$500 and that is for membership for the rest of your life. And there are hundreds of those - not at Portland, but nationally speaking.

During the time the Federal Credit Union of NAACP was chartered we didn't have an office and my wife was the secretary of the NAACP and she happened to fall heir to the office of Secretary-Treasurer of the Federal Credit Union. In the early days our dining room was the office. It used to kind of bug me a bit having different ones come in for a loan. Now there's no money that exchanged hands. It was a matter of applying for the loan and having it passed by the committee and then she would get the okay and the president would sign the check and send it over to her and she would dispense the money. But from that humble beginning the NAACP Credit Union locally is an organization with assets of over a million dollars and it has the same rights and priveleges that any federal credit union has. It is also a member of the Federal Credit Union League and so it is on par with any other federal credit union.

To: Mary Peterson
From: Glenn Harper
Re: Oral History Program

Ms. Peterson,

As I mentioned to you over the phone some days ago, a project that I feel would be most interesting to me, as well as beneficial to your program would be one on the history of the black churches in Portland. Of any black institution or enterprise in the state of Oregon, the black churches have been established the longest and have been the most prosperous. It is my belief that a history of Portland's black churches would provide much insight and information on the history of blacks in Portland as well as the general history of Portland.

The areas to be covered in such a study would include a general history of the growth and development of black churches in Portland with as much detail to the history as time will permit and with emphasis on details and information not widely available or known.

Background histories of individual churches, primarily the larger, longer established or wealthy churches and those whose congregations or leaderships have standing track records of political or community service and involvement.

Roles played by the churches in the development (or deterioration, as the case may be) of the black community. This includes work done with other organizations, such as the Urban League and NAACP, as well as projects done solely by the individual church.

Background of church leadership and congregations. To what churches did the more affluent blacks go? The More, educated Blacks? Why? Also, there would be included a background of church structure.

Of course, the focal points of the study may be modified or added on to as more information is gathered and utilized. At all times I will be open to suggestions.

The ways in which I plan to gather the necessary information is to first utilize the already gathered information of the Historical Society and the libraries. I will also seek the aid of the Albina Ministerial Alliance and other agencies for information and leads on people whom I can contact for interviews.

Glenn Harper
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Nh History

Glenn H. Harper
5329 N.E. Union Rm. 218
Portland, Oregon
288-8261, 284-7000

Dear Friend,

As you are probably aware, I am presently involved in the process of gathering data and first hand information on the history of the Black Churches in Oregon, both past and present. I am most concerned with the dealings and effects the various churches have had on civic and community affairs.

An important part of this study will involve the taped interviewing of individuals on the subject of the churches since so much valuable information exists only in thier memories. But, before this can be accomplished, it is necessary that I find out who in the community is most knowledgeable about the pasts of the various churches (church elders, pastors, and long time members of the church would be good sources).

Once the study is completed, the compiled and published information could be distributed and utilized by the churches, community organizations and individuals, libraries, students, researchers and the public in general. All assistance to this project will be greatly appreciated. If you are willing to help with this study, please answer the following questions.

1. What is name of your church? _____
2. When was church first established? _____
3. Where is church located? _____
4. If present location is not church's initial location, please list other past locations and dates when there (Approximate if necessary). _____

5. Do you know of anyone in your church who might provide information on church history? (Please list names and how they can be reached.) _____

6. Would it be possible to interview you? _____

Thank you for your cooperation. Information can be mailed to above address.

Sincerely
Glenn H. Harper

Nh History

From: Glenn Harper, CWSP Student Aide
To: Mary Pederson
RE: History of Blacks in the Northwest Project

Work time during the ten week Summer program was spent in the following ways:

Locating and checking out various possible sources of information in connection with the project with the histories of the Black churches in the Albina area and the record of social action and service that the churches in Albina have provided to the community. This includes extensive checking of such sources as the Oregon Historical Society, Portland State University and County Libraries, the Urban League, Senior Citizen Service Center and Pat Wheeler of KOAP T.V., who is working on a similar project for television and was most willing to share her information.

Other sources include numerous individuals who were able to give me leads on, or introduce me to, contacts who had first-hand information on the churches.

Training in the proper use of equipment, techniques in setting up an interview, proper interviewing procedure, etc. with Shirley Tanzer at the Jewish Community Center.

Making preliminary interviews with contacts — ^{potential} ~~potential~~ tape interviewees (primarily preachers and long time church members) to discern whether or not they and their information could help further the project. Setting up taping dates with those contacts who would be taped. Actual interviewing.

Currently, the interviewing and the contacting of prospective interviewees is still going on. Among other things, this also entails the compilation of more detailed data concerning the contacts church, as well as devising an interview format (mostly questions) for that particular church.

Basically, that is the work in a nutshell. Any part of this description can be detailed if necessary.

Attached are 1) form given to Reverends and other officials who represent churches (such as the AMA), and 2) form for interviewee granting permission to be taped.