

Discrimination came early to state

By JIM GERSBACH
Of the Emerald

Blacks celebrate their culture

February is Black History Month, and most Oregon whites probably will observe it as they did last year — by ignoring it.

That's unfortunate, according to some University blacks, because many white Oregonians need to know more about black history and culture.

"They (white students) don't know about black dancers, authors or playwrights," says Paula Tode, a peer advisor with the Black Student Union. "They think black culture is pimps, drugs and hanging out on the street corner."

Because Oregon and Eugene are so heavily White Anglo-Sax-

on Protestant (WASP), the need for whites to study black history is all the greater, says Northwest history Prof. Richard Brown.

BSU Director Don Brown agrees. Brown says he sees Black History Month not only as a time for blacks to celebrate their cultural heritage and contributions to American life, but also as an opportunity to teach whites about black life and culture.

Although Oregon has never had a large black population, blacks have been involved in Oregon's history since the region was discovered by Europeans.

The first black to set foot in Oregon was Marcus Lopez, a cabin boy on Robert Gray's 1788 expedition to the Northwest. A few days after that historic footfall Lopez was killed by Alsea Indians in an altercation over a stolen sword.

A black man accompanied the first American overland expedition to Oregon. York, a slave of William Clark, traveled to Oregon with the Lewis and Clark expedition in the early 1800s. York proved popular with Native Americans encountered by the expedition, who had never seen a black man before.

Oregon's white settlers were not as enthusiastic about later black arrivals. Oregon's Donation Land Act, the legislation that gave free farmland to pioneers who settled the Willamette Valley and the land around Eugene, barred minorities from receiving land grants.

Although Oregon was a free state prohibiting slavery, some blacks were openly kept as slaves until the Civil War.

About the time of the war, the first black family in Lane County is believed to have settled near Eugene. No blacks attended the University, however, until 1924 when Sherman Savage enrolled in a master's degree program. Savage later became a history professor at Ohio State University.

The University's first black undergraduates were two athletes, Bobby Robinson and Clarence Williams, both from Portland. They weren't allowed to live in the University dorms and wound up renting an apartment from a shoe repairman, says University archivist Keith Richards.

During their senior year, white members of the football team protested the enforced segregation and got Robinson and Williams accepted into Friendly Hall, then a University dormitory.

That same year, the University team played Miami in a precursor of the Orange Bowl. Williams and Robinson, however, had to stay in Oregon since Southern colleges didn't permit black athletes to play against white athletes.

The first black woman to attend the University also faced the color barrier.

Although Mabel Byrd's application for University housing had been accepted, she was refused admittance to the

women's dormitory in the fall of 1927. The housemother hadn't known that Byrd was black.

After spending the night in a residence hall lounge, Byrd found off-campus accommodation. But her plight caused an outcry in Portland newspapers that prompted the University to end segregation in University housing.

Although only a handful of blacks attended the University during the 1930s, several made important contributions.

Black University track star Mack Robinson placed second behind Jessie Owens in the famous run that shattered Hitler's hopes of Aryan victory during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Robinson's brother Jackie, incidentally, was the first black to play major league baseball.

After World War II the number of black students at the University increased substantially. Black students formed the Black Student Union in 1965, and 11 years later in 1976 University students elected Jan Oliver, a black woman, as student body president.

One black graduate of the University, Emery Barnes, was elected to the provincial parliament of British Columbia.

Despite these successes, Brown says he is concerned about the declining enrollment of black students at the University. Enrollment is down from 300 several years ago to about 170 now, even though Oregon's black population has increased to over 30,000, according to Brown.

To boost black registration, the BSU plans to incorporate recruitment into their Black History Month activities, Brown says. Activities will include a film festival the last week of February and various workshops and speakers, including black historian Herb Cawthorne.

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