

An NAACP Pioneer

by Gregory Gudger

Marie Record Smith, wearing a sleeveless, blue flower-print dress, sat at her small dining room table with a pitcher of juice, beating the heat and humidity outside, in the evening coolness of her home.

The whole setting was characteristic of this veteran of the wars for equality and human rights; adapting to meet the challenge.

Ms. Smith, still very scrappy at "70 and above," is, and has been active with the NAACP for over 41 years, making her the "Grand Dame" of the Portland Chapter which will host the 69th Annual National Convention of the nation's oldest Civil Rights organization July 3rd-7th. For all of her struggling for the cause of human and civil rights, her battlescars are far outshone by her numerous decorations of merit.

Last year, for example, she received the Russell A. Peyton Humanitarian Award from the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission. The year before, Mayor Neil Goldschmidt proclaimed June 3, 1976 Marie Smith Day for her dedication, determination and service to the Greater Portland Community. In 1950, she was named "Negro Citizen of the Year"; a first to accompany being the first woman president of the Portland Chapter of the NAACP (1949-50).

Though age and the advent of new champions have slowed her some, Ms. Smith remains active with church activities and the NAACP.

Looking ahead to the convention, and appropriately enough in retrospect, the greatest accomplishment of the local chapter, she feels, makes it possible for the NAACP convention to be held here: passage of the state Public Accommodation Law. "Just before," she said, recalling in local Branch's lobbying efforts for mandated equal rights, "we got a little old FEP (Fair Employment Practices) bill with no teeth in it. But, each time we got one passed, they got better and better."

The local Branch didn't have the money to compete with well-financed lobbying efforts, she recounted, but a ministerial group organized by NAACP National and headed locally by a fiery young Methodist Minister named Harold Jones III, put on pressure that may have affected the decision.

"We really had no trouble getting the Multnomah Delegation to vote for our bill; we had to influence the legislators from the southern part of the state," Ms. Smith said of the NAACP strategy.

"We got permission from the Bishop (Bishop Gerald Kennedy of the Methodist Church) to write 500 letters to white ministers to convince them and to appeal to the church people."

The key, she said, as to combat the ignorance of those in areas where there were no or few Blacks. "Ignorance is the basis for prejudice; the people didn't even know what was happening."

"Portland benefitted much more than we did," she said noting the increased income of hotels as a result of opening a new market. Prior to the bill's passage into law Blacks had to rent entire hotels to have gatherings. The YWCA, to which Ms. Smith was the first (again) Black member, refused to have its conventions in Portland because of the city's segregation policies.

Now, with some 8,000 money-lodged conventioners coming (enough to fill 30 large hotels), the effects and benefits of the NAACP's efforts are quite lucid.

This year's convention will be the second attended by Ms. Smith. The first was the 1956 convention in San Francisco. During her tenure as the first woman president of the Portland chapter, Ms. Smith let others who were younger attend instead. "As a member of the Eastern Star and having attended so many of their conventions, I wanted others to benefit from the experience," she said.



Marie Smith

Ms. Smith well remembers the 1956 convention, however, because it marked the national debut of a rising young political star. After the youthful southern minister's speech, she recalls, "A. Phillip Randolph told him that he was a God sent young man, and that he was going to make a place in this world." That 20-ish southerner was Martin Luther King, Jr.

This year's convention emphasizes youth: youth unemployment is a priority issue as well as academic excellence which is encouraged with the advent of the Afro-Academic Cultural and Technological Olympics competition.

Young people have always been a concern for Ms. Smith, having worked for most of her life with church youth groups as teacher and church superintendent.

In the '40s she had fought to have racially biased literature like "Little Black Sambo," removed from school curriculums.

During her tenure as president, she helped organize the local NAACP Youth Council and sponsored an awards ceremony to honor Black graduates from high school and college. In the program for the 1949 awards, familiar names of currently active and community-oriented individuals appear: King Neighborhood Facility Director James Loving, Dentist Samuel Brown, and T. V. Newsman Richard Bogle, among others.

Ms. Smith is concerned, however, with what she feels is a retrogression of Portland schools.

"The schools are going backward. At one time, Oregon had some of the best schools anywhere. Now, you find teachers who just don't know how to handle Blacks in a class." She feels one-sided busing is divisive and detrimental to both students and neighborhoods.

She hopes that the convention takes up the issue of local schools. "Schools are where we can change things because that's where kids spend a great deal of their day."

Progressive, however, some problem areas still exist ("we have problems while we're living and undercover when we die," she injected during a discussion of segregated graves). "What we have to remember," she added, "is to keep the worst from overshadowing the good."



Benjamin Hooks, Executive Director
National NAACP

Welcome to Portland

69th Annual
NAACP
National Convention



Rev. John H. Jackson, President
NAACP Portland Branch