

by Beth P. Wilson

The morning of May 16, 1967, the front page of the *Seattle Times* carried portrait pictures of General Charles DeGaulle, President of France and Powell S. Barnett, an 84-year-old citizen of Seattle, Washington. Barnett, a Black man with little formal education, had just received Seattle-King County's Senior Citizen Award of the year.

This distinct honor came to a man who had served as early-morning maintenance man at King County courthouse for seventeen years prior to his official retirement at age 71. Ironically, some of the men he had admired and looked up to during those years were also in competition for the honor. Other high officials, long impressed with his character and community service, had backed his nomination.

This seemed a fitting climax to years of "giving" by this short, cocoa-colored man with white hair and liquid-bulging eyes. The day before, he stood with family and city officials in the mayor's office. With shoulders slightly bent, he listened to the words of commendation. Then his eyes flashed and a ready smile rested comfortably over his face.

Soon Powell Barnett's name reached the State Council on Aging so that he might be considered for the State's Senior Citizen of the Year Award. In due time, he received a certificate as second-place winner at ceremonies in Olympia, the state capital.

What of this man, Powell S. Barnett, you may ask? How could a small Black boy in the United States of America parlay an eighth grade education into such distinguished recognition? A look at his background may clarify the picture.

Born in Brazil, Indiana in 1883, Powell was the son of a former Virginia slave person and the oldest of four children. His mother had passed away when he was four years old, after which his father, a coal miner, moved the family to the little town of Roslyn, Washington in 1889. The children lived with first one family then another, as it became impossible for Mr. Barnett to work long hours in the mines and care for his children.

"One of the happiest moments in my life" recalled Powell "was when we were introduced to our stepmother and we children were reunited with our father. Although strict and demanding respect, he was so kind that we knew he loved us. He formed a family council and when problems arose, we would sit down and talk through solutions, at dinner or early in the evening. Our stepmother was a fine woman and always fair with us."

Powell attended a free, mixed public school in Roslyn. When not picking a fight, he could always be found in the school library with a book in his hand. Math didn't interest him but he loved to read. He often picked up a dictionary, just to check new words. Once home, he would run for the newspaper as soon as it was delivered and read until told to stop. He decided early that the smartest man in this small mining town of about 3,000 people were lawyers. And that's what he would become — a lawyer!

After completing elementary school, Powell began working eight hours a day in the mines. Not long afterward, his sister passed away and the two younger boys joined him in the mines. The three brothers worked with their father in drift mines, high up in the mountain. "Sometimes we worked as high as the seventh level. We kept a family pot — a fruit jar in the pantry — where our earnings were placed the first of each month. We could take money as we needed it or as we saw fit. This honor system worked well and became a unifying factor in our household."

Mr. Barnett had many discussions with his sons about life in general. He prepared them by saying that it would not be easy; there might be some pretty rough spots. He once told them the hardest thing he ever experienced was being forced to stand back, as an eleven-year-old slave boy, while an overseer beat his mother. The room grew still and Powell dropped his head. Then his eyes lifted to the walls of their small, four-room frame house and through the window to the unpaved street. Right then Powell knew that he would have to work hard to help make the world a better place for everybody.



William E. Derry, president of Jackson Street Community Council; Attorney William J. Wong, award chairman, Powell S. Barnett (81) Council Man of the Year.



Powell S. Barnett, 85, receives congratulations on Good Citizens Award (1968).

At night, after working long hours in the mines, he would read until he fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. At times, when the work was not so demanding, he would go home, wash up, go out to play ball, then return home and read. Powell loved baseball and played until he was about 22 years old. He also loved music and played in Roslyn's brass band.

About this time, Powell met Katherine Conna, an attractive young girl from a highly-respected pioneer family in Tacoma, Washington, some one hundred and twenty-five miles away. It was love at first sight! "I couldn't get her off my mind. Seattle and Tacoma were only a few miles apart. Why couldn't I move to Seattle? I got to reading the Seattle newspapers in Roslyn and I thought, why those fellows over in the big city can't be any smarter than I am. I'm going over and get a job."

Soon he made the move. And before long, he married Katherine Conna. Together, they reared six bright, ambitious children, all of whom completed high school, the boys learning a trade or skill as well. Except for one daughter, who preferred to be a homemaker, they secured good positions or went into business for themselves. Powell Barnett, proud of the achievements of his offspring, evidenced mixed pride and concern for one. This son, Doug, in African garb, opened Seattle's "Black Theatre," magnetized by one Le Roi Jones, now Imamu Amiri Baraka. Mrs. Barnett didn't ever work outside the home, so for the family head, rearing these children meant hard work, determination and the fading of his "lawyer's dream."

"Instead, I started working in Seattle as a laborer, paving streets. Then worked as a sub-foreman for a large construction firm, supervising fifteen to twenty men. Although long hours were spent on the job, my pay was not equal to that of others doing similar work. And many times it became necessary to patch up work done by white men or turn my head to avoid a confrontation." Later, Powell went into business, forming

his own transfer company, Barnett & Sons, which he operated for twelve years.

During the depression, when the Unemployed Citizens' League came into being, Powell became a paid staff worker. He served as chairman of the executive committee for two years. "Demanding an end to favoritism in distribution of supplies, I soon earned the confidences of both Black and white members. When election time came, they were willing to trust my judgement regarding office seekers. This became my introduction to politics and a way to help poor people."

In 1937, Powell went to work at King County Courthouse in Seattle. "Many times I suffered slights and insults. Like one day in the elevator, two officials made remarks to the effect that people like me should learn to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They no doubt had shoes and boots when growing up while I was lucky to have ragged, run-over shoes with broken laces. And some pretty dirty tricks were played on me, too. But my father had told me, 'Always accept a man for what he is.' This kept me from becoming bitter and hating white people."

During this period, Powell played bass horn in the Volunteers of America band and organized the Tenth Division band which received wide acclaim. The Black musicians' union sent him as delegate to the Central Labor Council where he helped to alleviate hostilities between the Black and white unions. When the National Musicians' Union convened in Chicago, in 1954, Powell worked around the clock until the Black and white unions finally merged.

Calls came constantly for him to help smooth some racial difficulty or to serve on committees. From 1921 to 1967, Powell helped establish the East Madison Y.M.C.A., became reorganizer and president of the Seattle Urban League, founded the Northwest Umpires' Association and served as Secretary-Treasurer for seventeen years; named treasurer of King County U.S.O. and served on

the Governor's Special Committee to develop a Consumer Protection Act in 1963. He became a board member of Lee House for Senior Citizens and joined the ranks of N.A.A.C.P. Life members. A highlight in his career came when, in 1965, his church presented him with a Certificate of Recognition for fifty years of active service.

Powell's early dream of becoming a lawyer had crossed his mind from time to time but he was too busy to let it linger. Shortly before he retired, a Federal judge called him to his office and said, "Well, Mr. Barnett, I guess you're in a quandary as to why I sent for you, but I've been noticing your work in the community the past few years. The Grand Jury is about to convene and I thought I would ask you to serve on the jury. I can't force you to serve because you've passed your 70th birthday, but I would like to have you serve." Powell was taken back. Then he replied, "Well, your honor, Seattle and King County have been good to me and I feel that anything I can do for my government I should do willingly. So if you want me to serve on the Grand Jury, I'll be willing to do it." The building superintendent arranged for someone to do Powell's work while he met with the jury. During his term, several members of the Grand Jury asked him if he were a lawyer.

Powell Barnett had received the Good Citizen Award, the Annual Urban League Award, the Man of the Year Award and others. But perhaps the most exciting award came when Leschi School P.T.A. and the Leschi Community Council planned a combined Negro History and Brotherhood Week. They felt it would be more relevant for students to honor someone from the community than one from history books. The students voted for Powell Barnett. At the school assembly, he received a surprise presentation of his photograph from Eric Barnett, one of his eighteen grandchildren. The large, framed picture of Powell S. Barnett now graces the hall at Leschi School.

All these honors came before the *Seattle Times* carried his picture in

May, 1967. Two years later, the Board of Park Commissioners formally adopted the recommendation of the Seattle Model Cities Program to name the former Garfield running track Powell Barnett Park, because of his long and devoted service as a citizen of the Pacific Northwest.

The Barnetts had countless friends and wellwishers. Although Mrs. Barnett had been confined to a wheelchair her last eight years, her husband not only cared for her but remained active in the community. They owned their home and some rental property in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Although Powell fought for the right of Black people to live wherever they could afford to buy, he never sought to move. "The reason is simple" he said with a smile. "I never could afford to move."

Powell thought many Blacks struggled with an unnecessary inferiority complex. "I have never had a negative complex about anything, particularly about being Black. I have never expected anyone to give me anything just as I do not expect to be denied the opportunity to which every man is entitled."

When asked about the present crisis in our country, shortly before his passing in 1971, he replied, "There are still countless men of determination, dedicated to the principles on which this nation was founded. The present condition will pass, as have others before it, and we will build a bigger, better and more responsive nation than ever before."

Powell S. Barnett did not lose faith in the American dream — will you?

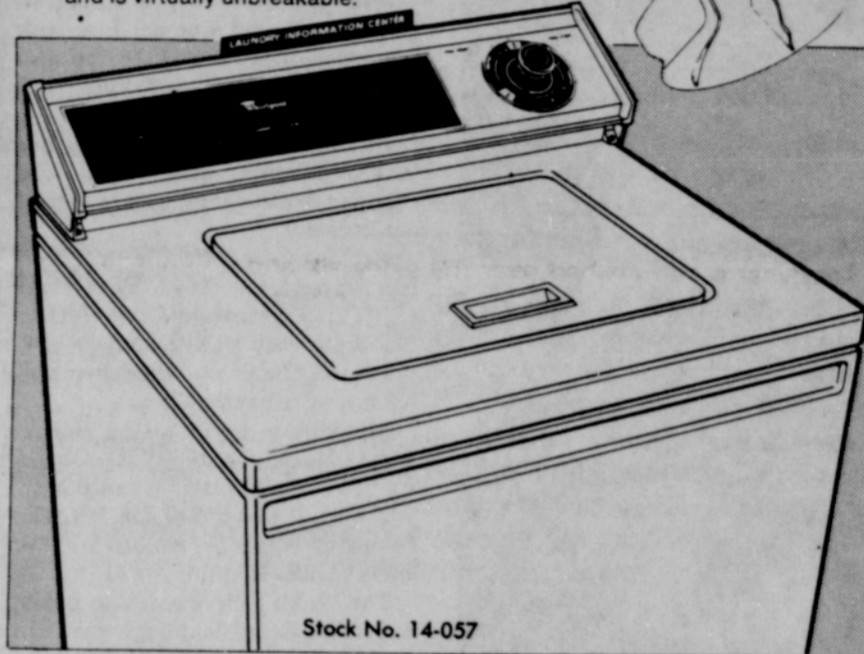
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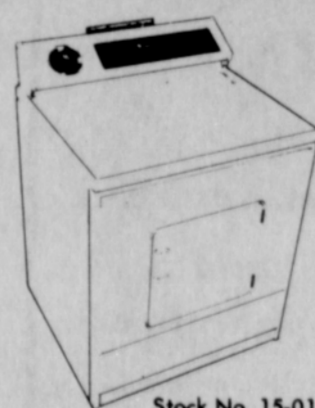
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