



Behind the Wall

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"What Cells Are The 'Niggers' In?"

When you spend years at O.S.P. you cannot help but become socially conscious or even racially paranoid. Both of which, if you allow yourself to feed upon such sicknesses, are doomed for mental destruction. It is very evident each day by watching the disproportionate number of Black prisoners being squeezed into this sardine can. You begin to question the destiny and future acceptance of Blacks in this State.

With a Black prison population 15% times greater than the State Black population it should indicate that there is a problem. This is not to say that it is not a concern of the people who work here in the corrections and criminal justice field, but it is apparent that they do not know what to do about it.

Portland is fifty miles from this state prison where over 90% of the Black population has settled. In many cases those same fifty miles seem like 500 for obtaining correct information and community resources to balance the racial problem.

Can you imagine a Black stranger coming to the capitol city of this State and inquiring, "Where do all the Black folks live?", only to be directed to 2605 State Street where the 'hotel' sign reads 'Welcome to the Oregon State Penitentiary.' But again, this problem is not the creation of the City of Salem, nor can you believe that Salem wants to inherit the notoriety of having the second largest concentrated Black population in Oregon. When most of them are behind bars.

Naturally communication plays a great role from one community to another — be it from this Black prison community to Albina in Portland. Sometimes there comes a need for Black people to talk just to Black people and this is what this Correspondent is going to attempt with this article. In other words I'm gonna talk a little "turnip greens and chittlin' and sprinkle some fat-back" for soul.

This article is not directed at any one particular leader in the community — where a face just happens to be born Black — shoes sometimes can fit on the strangest feet.

This column serves a great need. To inform Black people everywhere in order that they may stay abreast of the prison scene and with their loved ones who are confined. The distribution of the *Portland Observer* every Friday throughout the cell-blocks presents a positive effect on Blacks who are here. It keeps them clued in on the 'happenings' around their stomping grounds which seem to be changing every day.

Sure you're not going to agree with everything this Correspondent comments on but you reserve that right. But the prisoner also reserves that right. The main thing is that this

column is one step closer to closing that gap in communication over those fifty miles. Having the chance to shout every now and then, "Hey! Yal", there sure is a lot of Black faces down here, regardless if they've gotten a fair shake in court or not. The sad thing is that most of those faces are young and they ain't doing nothin' but just trying to wear out a cell.

Now don't get me wrong. Some of us belong here, but not this many.

Again, there are those people who would be just as happy to see this column disbanded, because of the fact that they might not want it known that this prison is full of Black people in their neighborhood. And then again there are those who believe this Correspondent isn't radical enough in his articles to excite some of the influential Blacks in this State into addressing the Black incarceration problem. Well, have you ever considered that there are those influential Blacks who may not know the answers either, or maybe they just don't care, there is an old saying, "out of sight, out of mind." And for Blacks inside these walls who want to "get-down for the get-down" (radical writing), come on with it. Guaranteed it will be printed, and uncensored too. Just make sure you got your signature on the dotted line. This Correspondent will personally testify that since the birth of this 'Behind the Wall' column, not once has any institution staff member censored or stopped one article from going to publication. How many other prisons in the U.S. can make that statement?

A young Black creative mind is a delicious treasure to destroy these days. Our prisons are filled to the brim with them. For what purpose, to rot? Walking the 'Big Yard' daily scratches the nerves as one watches the non-motivation circulating among the prisoners. A majority of the young Blacks have lost the ambition to hit the books for a certain number of hours a week, and challenge what vocational training there is here. But how do you tell a young Black in prison that there is more to life than 'going to the hoop' (basketball) or 'killing big 6' (playing dominos)? Sadder yet is to ask one to name a Black public or community leader, only to watch a blank expression slip quickly across their face.

HELP WANTED. Any Oregon Black leader to volunteer a little time assisting in a struggle to save some of these young Black 'roots' of tomorrow.

In past years many Oregon Black leaders had to "window-dress and buck-dance" to help other Blacks. Hopefully those 'skinnin' and grinnin' days are over. So yal', come on. Please don't bring any disappointed promises or fading campaign speech-



CALVIN HENRY

es. Don't try to stand before these young unconscious desperate Black bucks with a, "you should do this and you should do that" sermon. Word your conversations with "we's and let's." Don't leave this responsibility for the Senators from Josephine and Jackson counties; Representatives from Marion and Lane districts; or preachers and town folk from Salem. You are the Black community leaders whom many of the State and public officials turn to when a Black problem arises in this State. Not even the caseworkers of this institution can bring the effect that you can — as far as guidance and community acceptance. The young incarcerated Black people are a product of your community, they are not the 'Niggers in that cell,' unless you want them to develop into such. Let white leaders of this State look into your Black faces and know you are not lying when you step forward to speak on their behalf. All Black people — even those caged in cages each night.

Recently a Black leader did step out of the shadow of his norms, and left a tremendous effect on a large group of Black prisoners by his comments. His name is Calvin Henry, President of the Oregon Assembly For Blacks and the founder of the Corvallis and Salem NAACP Branches.

Henry expressed grave concern for the mass of incarcerated Blacks in Oregon prisons and jails today. He enlightened them on a couple of bills slowly creeping through the Legislature (HB 2749 and SB 579). Bills that would call for the establishment in Oregon's government for a Black Commission. The passage of this bill will provide answers and solutions for all the Black people in this State. Henry informed his captive audience and their families that he will never turn his back on the people who have strayed to this depth. It was quite apparent as he looked out across the full room and into their darkened eyes that there was



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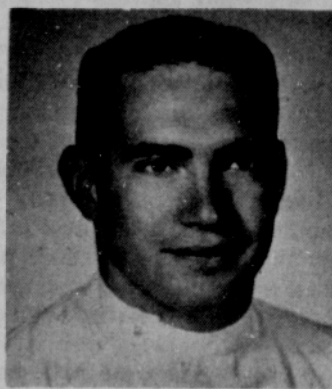
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APRIL 1979

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF EXODUS

THE BETTER WAY

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me, than merely
show the way.

The eye's a better pupil and more willing than
the ear;

Fine counsel is confusing, but examples always
clear.

And the best of all the preachers are the men
who live their creeds,

For to see the good in action is what everybody
needs.

I can soon learn how to do it if you'll let me see
it done.

I can watch your hands in action, but your
tongue too fast may run.

And the lectures you deliver may be very wise
and true,

But I'd rather get my lesson by observing what
you do.

For I may misunderstand you, and the high ad-
vice you give,

But there's no misunderstanding how you act
and how you live.

STRENGTH OF MAN

The strength in a man
is not his power or his land
nor the money he holds in his hand

The strength in a man
is his heart and soul
to keep him beholden to You Dear Lord,
to keep him beholden to You Dear Lord

A man with a mind that is weak and
soft will hasten when old satan comes
his way and he will listen as he glisten
to the glorious things he can earn, he
can earn if he goes his sinful ways,

The strength in a man is not his power or
his land nor all the money that he can
hold in his hands,

The strength in a man is his heart
and his soul to keep him beholden to You
Dear Lord . . . to keep him beholden to You
Dear Lord.

Robert Ramsdell #36506

I've Run a Road of Snow and Slush
I've never felt a better rush

I remember things I've never known
I've forgot the things I've often known

I've tripped, I've fallen
I've done them all
and if you'll listen, you'll here me call

Help!