

The Heritage of Cooking Series Pioneering Washington State

by Norma Jean Darden
for Kraft, Inc.

With its sprawling seacoasts, natural harbors, majestic mountains, untapped forests and fertile valleys, the ruggedness and the beauty of the Pacific Northwest has challenged the imagination and claimed the souls of the hardy and the adventuresome for centuries. Folktales of how the bold and courageous settlers tamed the hazardous terrain are tucked into the memory banks of all Americans—yet how many know that Blacks played an important and integral part in the process and were, from the beginning, significantly involved in Northwest history?

Some historians believe that Blacks were aboard the ship that brought Sir Francis Drake, the English explorer-pirate, on his trip around the world in 1578. As Drake sailed past what is now California, Oregon and Washington, he claimed the entire territory for the British. This of course meant little to the Indians who waved hello and good-bye to him as he cruised by. It also meant little to the United States, who based its claim to the land on voyage by a Bostonian, Captain Robert Gray, 200 years later. With Captain Gray on his first expedition to sell furs from the Northwest to China in 1788 was Marcus Lopez, the first Black man in recorded history to set foot in the Northwest. Unfortunately, Marcus Lopez's rendezvous with history was brief. Shortly after touching the soil, he was killed by Indians.

The second known Black to enter the Northwest had a much more positive experience with the Indians. His name was York and he acted as interpreter between the Indians and had just purchased a huge and unexplored block of land from Napoleon, who was going broke from his many wars. To find out exactly what he had bought, Jefferson dispatched Lewis and Clark, two Virginians.

After the historic charting of the Northwest Passage, many lone, daring Black cowboys, hunters, fur trappers, traders, cooks and guides joined the westward exodus. Some of these solitary figures were freed Blacks, others were fugitive slaves—all looking for fewer restrictions and greater opportunities. Most notable in the 1820-30 period were James Beckwourth and Edward Rose.

The discovery of gold was also heard by Black ears, and the lure of untold wealth was a great incentive to many who got the news and could



John and Magnolia Gayton were among the spirited Black pioneers of Washington, settling in Spokane at the turn of the century.



Black homestead of Roslyn around 1900

make the trip. Take the case of Richard Bogle, a penniless stowaway

from Jamaica who, during the gold rush, crossed the Plains to the Oregon Territory. Bogle managed to find gold twice and moved to Walla Walla, Washington, where he opened a savings and loan bank. The sixth generation of Boggles now makes Portland home.

But living in Oregon in the nineteenth century was no easy feat for Blacks as pioneer George Washington Bush was to discover. In 1844, wishing to move his wife and six sons to a non-slave state, Bush arranged to join a group of white settlers in a caravan of 80 covered wagons from Missouri to Oregon. It

was an arduous four-month journey of 2,000 miles. During the trip many families ran out of supplies and money and Bush assisted them. What Bush and the others didn't know was that after they began their trek, Oregon declared it illegal for Blacks to own property or live there.

Hearing this news on arrival in Oregon, Bush and some of his friends opted to homestead north of the Columbia on Puget Sound. Ironically, in its border dispute with England, the U.S. based its successful claim partly on the land on which Bush lived. This then placed Bush's property back in Oregon where it was illegal for him to live! Special legislation had to be passed to waive restrictions for him. Later, when Washington Territory was formed, his property was part of Washington.

George Washington Bush, who was a skillful farmer and businessman, went on to become one of the wealthiest men in the Northwest. His son, carrying on his tradition of leadership and social service, was twice elected to the Washington State Legislature. This same son, William Owen Bush, had displayed his prize wheat at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, winning the gold medal in world competition and thereby publicizing the resources and opportunities waiting in the Northwest.

But the Northwest was still far away from the roots and ties of most of the newly-freed Blacks. True, some had gone purposefully, some had drifted there, and others had been taken as slaves or as personal servants; but active recruitment was the catalyst that brought the first major Black migration to Washington in 1888.

It all started when the Northwest Improvement Company, a mining subsidiary of the Northern Pacific Railroad, was faced with a strike. James Sheppardson, a Black coal miner, political activist and persuasive orator, was hired to gather Black miners and bring them to Roslyn, Washington, in order to get things rolling again. From Alabama, South and North Carolina, Virginia, Illinois and all points along the way, Sheppardson collected his men with the inducement of high wages and steady work. The first train brought the men and the second brought their families.

Off the second train stepped Harriet Taylor Williams, a lone woman traveling with a two-and-a-half year old son. She had joined the pilgrimage in Illinois to escape a sour marriage and start a new life. Her daughter Ethel Craven, grandson Willie Craven, and grand daughter Beulah Craven Hart still live in Roslyn and strong are their memories of when coal was kin and two thousand Black miners and their families were in their heyday.

"Sheppardson had told the men to

expect some confusion on arrival," Mrs. Craven says. "But for people just out of slavery, born in trouble, accustomed to trouble and needing jobs and money, they were not put off coming. They didn't expect the people to be so cross, though," says Mrs. Craven, explaining how an angry armed mob met the train. For quite some time the newcomers were terrorized and only the tallest, strongest men with the longest rifles were sent to town to purchase groceries. But eventually tempers cooled and dissidents moved on or went back to work. Roslyn got used to the idea that it was suddenly fifty-two per cent Black.

Much later, some in the coal miners' union would agree to admit Blacks so they wouldn't break strikes. This was not accomplished, however, until the middle of the twentieth century, when coal was on its last leg as a major commodity.

Meanwhile, in turn-of-the-century Roslyn, things settled down to a peaceful coexistence. Perhaps it was because of the common dangers the men shared, like fear of the dread black-lung disease or the threat of collapsed mine shafts, cave-ins and explosions that killed two and three at a time. Or the fact that when the men emerged from the shafts after up to sixteen hours of work, it was impossible to tell the color of one man from another. At any rate, black culture snuggled unmolested into the Northwest mountains.

People began planting vegetable gardens and growing peonies, pansies and sweet williams around their doors just as they had done at home. Children made "coal flowers" by adding epsom salts to pieces of coal and dyeing the resulting crystals with food color. Life went on. For blacks two churches were established, two saloons and restaurants were opened, with social clubs and lodges for men and sewing and quilting clubs for women flourishing. On weekends, traveling haberdashers came up to outfit the fashion-conscious who didn't like mail-order clothes. For those in the marching band or on the baseball team, special uniforms were also made. Mme. de Neal, a beauty expert from Seattle, made periodic jaunts bringing the latest in hairstyles, hair preparations skin potions and make-up aids.

Minstrel shows and road shows also found their way to Roslyn. There were many such shows in the Northwest and one, "The Dixieland Show" in 1909, featured Ms. Nora Hendrix who settled in the Northwest and later became the grand mother of rock star Jimi Hendrix. Everybody in Roslyn followed Bing Crosby's career with interest because his father was the bookkeeper at the company store. According to Ms. Craven there was never a lack of local entertainment either. Many good musicians were in the town and after church suppers Boonie Braxton was known to play a mean banjo for dances.

But all was not fun and games. There was a lot of drudgery, toil and tension. As the child of a miner and the wife of "rough-hand Sam, the coal-digging man," Ms. Craven says that two things caused most marital rifts. One, the husband wearing his "Smokey Joe" in the house. "The whale oil used to light the flame in front of the helmet smelled up the whole house." And, two the wife not preparing the bath, which was a must for the soot-riddled miner. The water had to be hauled in, stored in a shed, heated on the stove, then poured in a large tin tub in the kitchen. "Many a woman were threatened with a black eye for not getting it hot enough," joked Ms. Craven.

Cooking was a skill that truly held a miner's wife in good favor because large meals were thought to give the miners stamina for their tough work. Breakfast was, by necessity, a lavish meal with all-night oatmeal topped with brown sugar and cream for starters followed by a slab of bacon, ham, sausage, eggs, grits, flapjacks, fried cornmeal mush or strike biscuits (created during a one-month strike when no one could afford much lard), plus syrup and every manner of fruit—fresh, dried, stewed, or preserved. They knew how to start the day in Roslyn!

As Beulah Craven Hart tells it, men without full lunch pails were not even allowed into the mines by the company. First, it was a waste of time to bring out a miner collapsed with hunger, and second, if the men were trapped and some killed, the survivors would have to rely on the lunches of others. So, into the lunch pails went pork chops, fried fish or chicken, sandwiches, sweet potatoes or fried apple pie.

Then of course came supper time



Among the historical treasures Beulah Craven Hart holds is a photograph of James Sheppardson, a Black coal miner who in 1888 brought two trainloads of Black men to work in the mines near Roslyn.

for the tired and hungry miner. "If you had a strong man, he might catch you a bear, then you could skin it and have bear steak or stew for your main course," said Ms. Craven, and she was not joking!

The holiday that meant the most to the blacks of Roslyn was Emancipation Day. It was celebrated with a picnic on August 4 because that's the day that news of freedom reached the Northwest. For the Emancipation picnic everyone contributed something—a dish, money or time to watch the fire built three days earlier, barbecue the meat, or just fan the flies away. "We always had drinks, even during Prohibition," says Ms. Craven. "People would get together and tell stories of their youth. This was a rip-roaring town!"

All that good eating not withstanding, some of the Roslyn settlers found mining too hazardous to life and limb, many owed too much to the company store, and for others the deep snow and frigid mountain climate (fifteen degrees below zero was too severe) so they moved on to Tacoma, Spokane and Seattle. Now, Ms. Craven, her daughter, and her son Willie Craven are the only three Blacks who still live there.

But Willie Craven is the mayor of the town, and they are again holding the Emancipation picnic for friends and relatives who remember that Roslyn was the cradle for many Blacks who are in the Northwest today.

The influx of the recruited Black labor force was to have a profound influence on the lives of Northwest Blacks for decades to come. But as the Black population increased so did the attitudes that many had hoped were buried on the trip there. They, who had ventured to the Northwest looking for greater freedom and found it in 1880s, suddenly were faced with anti-Black laws in the 1910s. Leaders of the group buckled down and worked harder so that their children and newcomers wouldn't face the same dilemma.

Ms. Corinne Taylor's father, Charles H. Harvey, arrived in Seattle in 1887 when it was a real pioneer town and conditions were poor. He liked the year-round moderate weather that Seattle mysteriously enjoys and felt he had a chance for unlimited employment. In 1889 most of Seattle was burned by a terrible (Please turn to page 7 col. 1)

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