

Blacks and the Police in Portland

Part I

By J. Boles

The Portland Police Association has taken itself to court to fight a new civil service rule which would create two lists of potential new cops, and the Black United Front is running a hotline to gather data for possible court action against the Portland Police Bureau for alleged racially prejudiced behavior.

These are the two events in the local headlines recently, but it has to be remembered that they are only the latest local legal stopping places in a peculiar American history, for unique in human history is the story of the Black American. Up from a legal servitude that defined him before the world as subhuman and which allowed white America to rule him with pain and terror, the Black American has risen to a place where his right to equal treatment is usually the stated public policy. The heritage of slavery continues to trouble us all, and continues to be a factor for America all over the world: witness the Iranian terrorists cynical release of Black hostages early in the Tehran standoff.

Oregon has been no better to Blacks than any other northern state. If bigotry has been expressed less frequently here, it is probably because there are fewer Blacks here. Probably no more than 30,000 at present in Portland. Blacks numbered less than one-third of one percent of Oregon's population in 1920, according to E. Kimbark MacColl writing in his recent book, "The Growth of a City." There are about 2,500 in Portland then. About 3,000 by 1927. By 1950, 9,500, over half of whom lived Williams Avenue - Albina area.

It was no accident that Blacks here concentrated themselves in a small area. Official public policy encouraged this, for whites feared their property values would fall if Blacks lived near them. MacColl cites sources which indicate that the Portland Board of Realtors enforced sanctions against members who allowed Blacks to buy property anywhere else in town. And the official policy of the Housing Authority of Portland maintained segregated housing.

The number of Blacks jumped during World War II when many came to work in the shipyards. They were housed in crackerbox developments in Vanport and the Guilds Lake areas. After the war, the Vanport flood conveniently solved the problem of what to do with the area, and Blacks flooded out of their residences either relocated quickly in the Albina section or left town. The Guilds Lake area was disposed of by HAP to make room for industrial development with very little effort made to relocate the residents. Newspaper accounts of the Vanport flood are notably lacking the kind of "human interest" reporting that such a disaster in a white neighborhood would have generated. About one-third of the Black work force in Portland found itself unemployed in 1947, for jobs were denied them in most sectors.

The National Urban League described Portland in 1947 as "just like any southern town...the most prejudiced city in the West."

Public policy exuded racism even at the highest levels in the state, for it was not until 1953 that the Oregon legislature passed a public accommodations bill that outlawed discrimination in public industry, who feared that mixing races was "bad business." And it took Oregon 60 years longer than the federal government to repeal portions of its constitution that denied suffrage to nonwhites.

Police attitude

The battle for equal opportunity at jobs has taken many forms in recent decades, beginning with A. Phillip Randolph's organization of the sleeping car porters in the late 1920s and 1930s. These and other menial jobs were in general all that were available to Blacks until the late 60s. The concentration on railroad jobs created an early day Black neighborhood that isn't there anymore: the North Burnside area, where about 1,000 Blacks lived to be near their jobs. Local police were on record as calling it "coon town," and the area had a reputation for toughness.

This indication of a police attitude toward Blacks is supported by Det. Robert Janisse, a Black 8-year veteran of the Portland Bureau, who cites a commonly-held belief



DET. ROBERT JANISSE

about police among Blacks: "For so long police have been viewed as being oppressive to minorities specifically, and there's a lot of justification for that...if you look back at history of not only the Portland police department but police departments all over the country, usually when they were first organized one of their specific purposes was to keep Blacks in line, and they were beaten heads and thrown people in jail. Kids growing up still believe that's the way it is..."



OFFICER DWIGHT FORD

Officer Dwight Ford, a Black with three years on the bureau who now works in minority recruitment, is more direct: "It's been a traditional thing. Blacks in the community have viewed the police bureau, and oftentimes rightly so, as an extension of oppression because when the crap hits the fan, who comes in? Who does the beating, stompin and kickin? And I don't mean that happens necessarily today...a lot of people still believe that that happens in the Black community."

Black protest

Enough people, apparently, for 75 to 100 to turn out at a meeting called by the Black United Front last year, according to Rev. John Jackson of the Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, a Black man long active in civil rights locally, and a gravelly-voiced orator whose eyes always seem to reproach a listener.

In Jackson's own words: "Well, last summer when we were in the process of putting together some ideas (about school desegregation), we kept getting these expressions, 'When you going to do something about the police? When you going to do something about the police?' So one Thursday...we held a meeting and asked all the people that had been accosted in any way...and they came out...and they had a lot of complaints, but the only problem was that they were so upset, militant, and so vigorously desiring to do something, we couldn't quiet'em down long enough to talk about the possibility and plan and so forth...we felt that what they were saying ought not to have been said publicly, because they were setting themselves up to be molested, or to be troubled by the police...They wanted to march down to the police station, and all

that sort of thing, but we weren't interested in that...We were more interested in trying to effect some plans...we came up with several things..."

The Black United Front, for one thing, issued a sheet of information for persons dealing with police. Despite a disturbing similarity to a list of instructions for persons living in an occupied territory, and a further kinship with the rules and regulations of apartheid South Africa, the list of instructions found favor with Capt. Kuntz of North Precinct: "I thought it was very well-written. There was good pertinent information, and I thought that in that case did a distinct service to the community, because it did a great deal to alleviate the questions that people have when they get stopped."



REVEREND JOHN JACKSON

The list, according to Rev. Jackson, instructed citizens not to run away, to keep their hands in sight of an officer at all times, to have a reason for being in a white neighborhood, etc.

The Black United Front also talked with an official at Emanuel Hospital about photographing victims of beatings, according to Jackson, and set up contacts with lawyers to work on the civil and criminal complaints against police officers, and formulated other plans.

And, it set up a hotline for gathering data about police behavior in the Black community.

BUF Hotline

Information about this hotline is hard to find. Ronnie Herndon, the co-leader with Rev. Jackson of the Black United Front, says the BUF is on the verge of having enough data in affidavits to go to a lawyer and begin proceedings to find the City of Portland in contempt of court based on an out-of-court settlement of an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit brought some years ago. Herndon and Jackson believe promises made then to the Black community have not been kept.

Herndon says the phone line is still collecting information. The number he gives is 288-9160, a number also found on posters around the community. This number belongs to the Urban League in its offices on N. Vancouver. However, on two separate occasions, a caller to this number seeking information about the hotline was referred to Avel Waters Mayfield at 288-6708, a number which answers in the Urban League Youth Service Center at King Neighborhood Facility on NE Seventh Avenue. Ms. Waters Mayfield denied on both occasions that she knew anything about the hotline, becoming moderately defensive in doing so. She referred both callers back to the Urban League.

Politics As Usual

Freddye Pettet, executive director of the Urban League and former staffer for Mayor Neil Goldschmidt, says the Urban League is indeed answering the number, and adds that the former location in the King Facility made more sense at the time because that office is open from 8 a.m. to midnight. However, there was an official objection raised over locating the hotline in a city facility like the King Center. Pettet believes "the objection was to having a hotline, period. that point was never raised when we had, when it was with school desegregation issues...the school district raised no



FREDDYE PETTET

concern...all the person was doing was taking the complaint and giving it to an attorney or a citizen's committee...nothing was being done except accepting a complaint, so I can't really understand why it was such a problem." (The Urban League contracts with the city to provide the Youth Service Center, and objectors claimed operating the hotline conflicted with that contract). "To this date I don't accept that there was a conflict with the contract," Pettet adds.

The Urban League official adds that the hotline is still getting one or two calls a week, "but that's considerably lower than what it was three or four months ago...I think it's important that officers in whatever community that they're in understand that their behavior if unacceptable is going to be reported."

Police response

Neither Chief Bruce Baker nor Commissioner Charles Jordan is aware of the specific accomplishments of the hotline, though Baker notes that his office gets more complaints than that from white citizens alone. Police Commissioner Jordan, who says he has a "relationship" with Ron Herndon, has had no recent information about the hotline. Baker says that "if they have gathered any information then I wish they would share it with us."

Stan Peters, president of the Portland Police Association is emphatic about the hotline: "I think they're misguided and misguided and misinformed and they have tunnel vision. Narrow-minded and near-sighted. I think Ron Herndon hasn't the foggiest idea of what goes on in the real world. I think he has an ax to grind or something. He's got his own thing going and whatever that is I don't know." Peters is unacquainted with Rev. Jackson.



STAN PETERS

Herndon, a slender, fragile-looking former Reed College student described in one newspaper article as "the engine" behind a sit-in in 1968 at Reed in which the protesters demanded and got a Black Studies program at that school, is an educator and former participant in Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA). He has emerged as the main spokesman for the Black United Front, though his involvement in the struggle for his people's rights is not new. He notes with a laugh that when he sent away for his FBI file a couple of years ago, the only thing the August federal agency could find on him was a traffic citation in Coffeyville, Kansas, more than a decade ago.

Justice orders Black hiring

The Department of Justice obtained a consent decree today requiring the Fort Lauderdale, Florida, police and fire departments to hire and promote more Black persons and women.

Attorney General Benjamin R. Civiletti said the decree was filed in U.S. District court in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, resolving an employment discrimination suit filed at the same time. The decree will become final upon approval by the court.

The suit charged the city with violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the nondiscrimination provisions of the revenue sharing and law enforcement funding laws by pursuing employment policies that discriminate against Blacks and women.

The suit said there are only six Blacks and 13 women among the city's 405 police officers and four blacks and no women among the 275 fire fighters.

Drew S. Days, III, Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Civil Rights Division, said the consent decree requires Fort Lauderdale to seek to attain a goal of employing Blacks in 11.25 percent of the police and fire jobs and of hiring sufficient women to eliminate discrimination.

To meet this goal, the city is required to hire Blacks for 30 percent of the police and fire vacancies in each of the next five years. The city is also required to hire women for 30 percent of police vacancies and in proportion to the number of men and women who apply for fire fighter vacancies for the same time period.

Mr. Days said the decree also enjoins the city from engaging in any discriminatory employment practice, provides for the promotion of Blacks and women in proportion to their eligibility and forbids the city to use unvalidated hiring tests as an excuse for failure to meet the hiring goals.

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Citizen of the Week



Betty Thompson is an idealist, yet is busy working in practical programs to make life more fruitful for others.

Mrs. Thompson has been active in club work since the age of eight, and prior to coming to Oregon in 1964 she was President of the Association of Colored Women's Clubs in Wyoming. She recently completed six years as President of the Oregon Association of Colored Women's Clubs and is a Past Regional President. Her interest in club work is not merely social, but is a way of providing scholarships and promoting education.

She has served in all areas of the War on Poverty effort. She was on the organizing committee and later on the board of the Albina Citizens War on Poverty Committee; was a volunteer, board member and later an employee of PMSC; and for a time was acting director of the Foster Grandparents Program, a funded program.

She has typically been employed in management, and was responsible for establishing the Crisis Unit at the Albina Human Resource Center.

A former member of the Governor's Committee on Aging, she is a member of the board of the Senior Adult Service Center and is secretary of the Task Force to establish a senior center. Having served on many boards and committees, Mrs. Thompson is currently on the Board of Metropolitan Family Services. She is a member of St. Philip Episcopal Church.

Mrs. Thompson and her husband, Vernon, have raised four children -- Connie, Gail, Frank and Linda.

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