

Priscilla of Pacific Northwest Bell

by Karl Holifield

There's nothing prissy about Priscilla the pioneer. When she first got a job at the Seattle branch headquarters of the California based Pacific Telephone Company, there were few if any Blacks let alone Black women. In fact all women were very restricted as to job opportunities in any business or industry in 1950.

Priscilla Proctor was raised in Seattle's Madrona district. After graduation from Seattle's Garfield High School in 1946, she married Wilbur Strothers of Tacoma.

When she began working as a clerk in the Engineering Mail Room of the telephone company in 1950, her favorite music (and Wilbur's) was Glen Miller's "String of Pearls" and such other tunes. And, Seattle barely recovering from the World War II influx of job seekers, was undergoing a recession without the knowledge that the Korean War buildup was just a year away.

The Strothers lived just two blocks from Lake Washington in the Leschi district which was a delightful wooded residential area then (not as populated as it now is). It was a natural playground for Dale,

their oldest son, Carol, their oldest daughter and Kathy the younger daughter. Soon the youngest son Noel joined the family.

And, in 1957 the Strothers moved further south to Rainier Beach where they still live. All of the kids graduated from Rainier Beach High.

Priscilla managed to be a mother and work full time which was even more difficult then ("We didn't have Cuisinarts") than it is now. She worked her way up from her beginning job which paid \$36 a week to become a drafting supervisor in the Engineering department of the telephone company in 1966.

Two years later she was picked by Bob Quickstad, the Assistant Vice President for Public Relations to become his executive secretary. In the meantime, Pacific Northwest Bell had become a company independent of its California parent, Pacific Telephone Company, right after the Seattle World's Fair of 1962.

In 1968, Priscilla was tapped by Knute Sandbeck, the Vice President for Finance at Pacific Northwest Bell

to become his executive secretary.

In the late seventies, as more jobs began to open up to women, Priscilla tried her hand at a "job of more interest than just being a secretary." She became a staff specialist in the Comptroller department's Wage/Tax Unit.

And at present she has another assignment. She analyzes and develops instructions for the payroll office concerning group insurance, pensions and things of that kind. Very heavy.

In the long haul towards a management

job, Priscilla is reluctant to admit that she ever became discouraged. Nor did she ever doubt that someday she'd land a management job.

"I always taught my kids that if you play fair and work hard, you'll be able to get as far ahead as your talents will let you." But, Priscilla never doubted the obstacles to job success in the telephone company.

Once many years ago she was told by a higher ranking supervisor, "You're okay, Priscilla, except you have two strikes against

you. You're Black and you're a woman."

However, as the Black revolution progressed and as the Women's Rights Movement took

form, Priscilla was eventually afforded more recognition. Her husband Wilbur, now retired, describes Priscilla as a

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Mrs. Fern Johnson Proctor, daughter of Pacific Northwest pioneers, community and civic leader is gratified that her daughter Priscilla and three of Priscilla's four children work for the Bell System.

wife and mother "who always had time for her family without neglecting her job." Wilbur said she's his best fishing companion. They've a trailer at Long Lake in Lacey where they spend as much leisure time as they can fishing and romping with their two dogs.

Priscilla's mother Mrs. Fern Proctor, a descendant of Seattle-Tacoma pioneers, is quite proud of her daughter as is Priscilla of her mother. Mrs. Proctor holds many offices in her Masonic Organization and is active in civic and community affairs. An inveterate traveler, she most recently returned from Scandinavia. She has in the past visited Australia, Africa, Japan and other parts of Europe. She gave

Wilbur and Priscilla a trip to Hawaii for their 30th Wedding Anniversary in 1976. (One of the Strothers' favorite tunes is still the "Hawaiian Wedding Song"). Three of Priscilla's four children work for the company. Carol, Kathy and Noel. Son Dale works for Schuck's Auto Supply in Renton. Priscilla feels that the future is bright for the young Strothers as it is for others of minority classification and

women) at Pacific Northwest Bell. She points to Pacific Northwest Bell's President Andrew V. Smith's recent statement at a Martin Luther King Day celebration. President Smith said, in part, "...one thing is certain. Regardless of the shape our business takes, this company will continue practicing and upgrading its policy with respect to Equal Opportunity Employment and Affirmative Action... it has become a way of life at Pacific Northwest Bell, a matter of routine." And, that's good news for all of the Priscillas of the future.

As to the future, Wilbur built Priscilla a greenhouse. Now it's only populated by flowers but soon they hope to raise vegetables. Typical Northwesterners.

A magnetic personality and matching good looks endeared her to PNB friends. Carol McGraw wants to come home. She's presently at the Bell Center for Technical Education in Lisle, Illinois (just out of Chicago) where she safeguards the privacy of employee records. She also supervises aiding employees who are relocated to other Bell companies. She links those buying or selling homes when they move with the realtor who shows and sells homes owned by transferred employees. She previously worked in the Public Relations Department of Pacific Northwest Bell.

Priscilla's youngest daughter...supervises operators. Kathy Hailey is an Operator Services manager in downtown Seattle. Kathy's proud of her family, her roots in the Puget Sound country and the company where she's a worker and a stockholder.

Larry Finn, Pacific Northwest Bell Vice President for Finance and Comptroller, and Priscilla have known each other for many years. He heads the department Priscilla works in after having worked his way up through the management ranks.

He likes the-out-of-doors as well as the city. The youngest son, Noel Strothers, Priscilla's mark of a Puget Southerner. Priscilla's youngest son, is a supply attendant at the Pacific Northwest Bell facility in Kent. He drives a truck throughout the entire Puget Sound area performing his various supply tasks.

