

P E R S P E C T I V E S

By Professor McKinley Burt



**"Mama, You Ought to See All the Xmas Trees Out Here!"**

“A nd the lawns stay green all year.” That’s what I wrote home when I first came to the Pacific Northwest. A teenage high school dropout from St. Louis, Missouri, the adventure had begun -- working as a track laborer or as a section hand for the Southern Pacific Railroad. High up in the Willamette National Forest above Oak Ridge or Eugene, the mile post read “800 miles to San Francisco.” (Time: Late 1930’s).

Obviously, the “Perspectives” column is still out in the “boonies” (boondocks). This period was a prelude to the activities I described in the previous columns. At “home” one could work across the Mississippi River in Decatur, Illinois during summer school vacation for \$18 a five and a half day week on the Wabash Railroad -- while if you shipped out to Oregon you could make the fantastic sum of \$32 a week. And during the winters of 18 foot snow drifts, twenty-hour shifts could see you sending home as much as \$500 in a month.

You would have to emerge from a trap door in the roof of the little cabins furnished for quarters -- coal stoves to cook on and huge tin tubs for baths and washing. The ice boxes were fashioned to the porches of the cabins with log chains -- but, still, hungry bears would sometimes come up at night, rip them loose and carry the works down into the

canyon to break open and feast. At the end of a shift of clearing snow from the switches of a ‘house track’ it could be difficult getting home. Walking on top of the drifts you had to sweep newly-fallen snow from the roof in order to find the trap door.

Working on the track in winter was a very hazardous activity, for falling snow muffled almost all sound. You cannot hear a train whistle (steam) or the clarion blast of a streamliner diesel. A ‘safety man’ would stand beneath the warning semaphore (which could not be seen through the driving snow). When he heard a warning click (barely) he would plod down the line of men, slapping each on the back. It would seem only seconds later that a 70 mile-an-hour passenger train would swoosh by, bound down grade for Portland. (Interestingly, a black man from Iowa invented a signaling device for use INSIDE THE ENGINE CAB, so that a locomotive engineer could determine if the track ahead was clear of trains -- even if snow or rain obscured the semaphore.

There is one thing I wish to bring to your attention, for it relates to the employment situation of young people today - and to many social traumas from education to gangs. Like most late teenagers of those days, I knew how to operate several dozen types of machinery and equipment. And because of a thorough grounding in the basics (math and language), I could read and interpret detailed instructions - and could carry out many tasks unsupervised. This background was rather typical of the times -- even for many who went no farther than the 8th grade.

I totaled up this ‘equipment savvy’ at one time: back hoe, welder, truck driver, leather cutter, steam cleaner, freight handler, chicken plucker (smiles), compressor operator, push cart delivery of coal and ice, freight checker, landscaper assistant, grinder, clerk, porter, bellhop, dishwasher, pinsetter, miscellaneous equipment in foundries, and much else.

All by the age of seventeen. It must be realized, of course, that in those days child labor laws were weakly enforced, and that many employers had none of the applicable insurance. But you were always busy after school and on weekends -- little time for nonsense or mischief.

Back to the mountains and forests of Oregon. Another thing that you wrote home about was, “You just think we’ve got mountains back there in the Ozarks -- those are hills, believe me.” On the mountains there was both tragedy and comic relief. Men secured a ‘grub stake’ for the future, and others died. Some went on to become craftsmen and professionals and other stayed on the job until retirement -- or ‘fell in their traces’, the railroad often burying them up when no relatives could be located.

I remember the time we sent “Pete” down the mountain to get some liquor at Oakridge, 70 miles away. Hopping freights was the usual means of transportation and when he did not return the same evening, we went looking for him early the next morning. Pete had gotten to Oakridge all right, but had gotten drunk in town before hopping a freight back with a big sack of wine and whiskey. We found him where he had fallen off a flat car, his leg cut off just below the knee. He had stuck the stump in the snow and packed it in tightly. And there was Pete, stoned, singing at the top of his voice, “What took you so long” he exclaimed. Relieved somewhat, we demanded, “What happened to the booze, man?” (he survived).

And then, too there were the “happy girls” who rode freights to the railroad and logging camps on paydays - bringing ‘happiness’ and, sometimes, familiar ailments. In later years I was to meet several in Portland or Los Angeles -- proper, sedate matrons with respectable holding in rental units and/or a “good man.” A quick wink or smile and then to pass on in the play of life. Affirmative action and non-discrimination before its time.

“People who keep their word are trusted and admired. People who do not are regarded like garbage. Those who break their word often never get another chance.” L. Ron Hubbard, one of the most acclaimed and widely read authors of all time.



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Thank You For Reading the Portland Observer

...And Justice For All

by Angelique Sanders



Though I try to express my love all year long to those who mean a lot to me, sometimes I still manage to neglect to thank everyone enough for the joy they've brought me--however, at the end of the year, I try to make up for these shortcomings. Now, I'd like to tell my readers (though I try to respond to those who write me) "thank you" for taking the time to share my thoughts and feelings throughout the year, by reading my column.

The bond I have shared with this community will never be broken, nor will I forget it. At the happy moments, like covering rallies and celebrations, and other community events, to covering the tragic moments, such as witnessing the grief at pickets and murders...and sharing my grief or joy with my readers: you are all my confidants, my unseen friends. Being a reporter, to me, is like being a doctor: I'm there at birth, I'm there at death, and I'm there in-between. I share in the happiness and sadness, trying to find the line between legitimate public interest and exploitation. And when you, the members of the community, can't be there for a certain event, I am happy to know that I can go in your stead, and show you these events through my eyes, as I saw it and felt it. Thank you for listening to me and sharing my emotions, as well as writing me and calling me. I enjoy hearing from the community and finding out what people enjoyed/didn't en-

joy, and what they would like to see in my column in the future, as well as how they felt about an event, or even what's going on in their lives. This column is for you, and for it to be complete, it helps to hear your perspective.

This year has been a rich one for me at the Observer: I've experienced a wide range of events, and met a wide range of people. My column "This Week In History" at the beginning of the year (for the new readers, that column traced the history of significant minority events, for the particular week of the issue) brought me much joy: plowing through old newspapers (I found, for instance, the first-ever issue of the Portland Observer, dated December 16, 1938) and literature was not only fascinating, but I learned a lot more about black history than I could ever have found by simply reading books: mostly, because it gave me an actual feel of the times rather than simply stating what happened. "...And Justice For All" has provided me with the opportunity to pursue anything that interests me, and that I think will interest readers, to truly pursue justice for all. The vision that "keeps me at it" is symbolized by a picture by my desk at work: it is of Martin Luther King, Jr., and it reads: "If a man hasn't found something he will die for, he isn't fit to live." And I would die for justice, so I find my column more than suitable: it is my soapbox, it is my way of writing the entire community (as well

as several other states) a letter, telling them my proposals for reform, and hoping it makes a difference. I never expected my column would result in a clean, happy, just, non-racist environment for Portland: my hope is that it has caused people to THINK, and to FEEL.

Outside of my column, I have had the opportunity to enter your house via my articles, and to share various experiences of mine, many that I'm sure you were present at yourself: from the Janet Jackson concert, to the Nike controversy (when PUSH came to town); from reviewing albums, movies, concerts, and books, to meeting (and loathing) Tom and John Metzger; from the school district's meeting on abolishing the CBES test, to the current Portland Public Schools boycott; from the violent demonstrations when Bush and Quayle came to town (on separate days), to the peaceful antiwar protests. Just attending these events wasn't what made this year so rich and full: it was being able to bring these events to you, and share the emotions present, so that--while you couldn't always be there--you could always feel as though you were.

Thank you, once again, for listening and sharing in my life. I wish you the best of luck in 1991...I will be there with you.

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I see a parallel between those picketing Bill's Kwik-Mart and the boycott in Brooklyn of the Korean market. Thumbs up, picketers!

**Its' Time To "Heal Our Land:" African Americans Must Build for a New Tomorrow**

Jonathan Bulter, the popular South African guitarist and vocalist, in prescribing a cure for the pain and agony of the apartheid system, sings the compelling lines, "we must heal our land." Since Africans arrived in America we have faced the challenge of building community out of diverse peoples uprooted from our original cultures by slavery. The ever present reality of racism and brutal economic exploitation has always complicated the vital task of forging a common peopleness and community as Africans in America. We have never quite been welcome here, but somehow, Africans in America have taken the basic strengths that we brought with us from our ancestral homeland and struggled to survive and sustain ourselves as a people.

Whether it was the Black church and the mutual aid and benevolent societies which grew out of the black church; the "African Free Schools" which we evolved to educate our own children when white society refused to do so; the organizations of resistance which we crated to fight against slavery, segregation and discrimination; or the Black press as an independent voice to articulate our own interest and needs; the magic of our music; or their enormous strength of the African family, African Americans have engaged in a perpetual

struggle to survive and build/sustain community. Obviously the struggle to build community has been ongoing given the nature of the United States as a racist and exploitive society.

The horrendous depth and magnitude of the crisis we now face makes it imperative that African Americans consciously focus on the need to continue the vital process of community building. African Americans are still largely unwanted, unwelcome and increasingly not needed in this country. Witness the recent increase in immigration quotas which will allow 400,000 skilled (mostly white) and wealthy people to come into the United States.

The U.S. still prefers to bring in people from foreign lands instead of investing the resources required to upgrade the "skills" and "wealth" of Africans in America. With the exception of a small number of acceptable or symbolic Blacks who are included so that the masses can be excluded (inclusion for exclusion), this is still inconceivable to be tolerated. Only our exercise of POWER prevents our total obliteration in this country. We are still our own best hope for the survival and development of African Americans.

So we too must heal our land, our people, our community. African Americans must counter the abuse and neglect

of the racist exploitive state in the U.S. with a passionate commitment to have concern, compassion and tender, love and care for our people. We cannot leave the children unattended, uneducated and detached from family. We must overcome the recklessness and callousness of a wilding generation of young people by demonstrating with deeds of care and kindness that we are absolutely wild about them. They are our future.

We cannot leave the flower of our manhood and womanhood to waste away in American's prison warehouses. They are the victims of the violence that begets violence, the crimes that beget crime. They are our brothers and sisters, our family and we must fight for their release and prepare a HOME for them when they return.

Finally, we must heal our land, our community because we must prepare to fight. America must be put on notice that we will not fall prey to her schemes of neglect and genocide. We will not die or go away. It is a decadent America which must die and out of its demise must rise a new nation. And it is we, who have suffered most, who must lead the resurrection of a new and humane society. Africans in America must heal our land, our community so that we might live to build a new tomorrow.

**Tobacco Co. Launches New Initiatives to discourage Smoking Among Youth**

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. and its fellow members of the Tobacco Institute today announced new initiatives to discourage young people from smoking. "We don't want young people to smoke, and we don't market our products to young people," said James W. Johnston, chairman and chief executive officer of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. "The Tobacco Institute's new program will make it more difficult for children to have access to cigarettes, and we support it wholeheartedly," he said.

The new initiatives expand the system of voluntary restraints the tobacco industry has adhered to for nearly 20 years.

"Time and again, studies have shown that young people cite the influence of friends and family as the reason they began smoking," Johnston said. "The Tobacco Institute's new programs will help parents counter those influences, and will make it more difficult for children to buy cigarettes.

"They will also demonstrate what we as an industry have said for years: that we don't market to children, we don't advertise to children and we're willing to put into place voluntary programs that will help keep children from smoking," Johnston said.

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**Oregon's Minimum Wage Increases January 1, 1991**

Oregon's minimum wage will increase from \$4.25 an hour to \$4.75 an hour on January 1, 1991. This is the third of three minimum wage increases approved by the 1989 Legislature. The two previous increases took place on September 1, 1989 when the minimum wage went from \$3.35 an hour to \$3.85 an hour and then to \$4.25 an hour on January 1, 1990.

Commissioner of Labor and Industries Mary Wendy Roberts notes that the passage of this 1989 legislation eliminated the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act exemption under state law. This meant most employees in Oregon must be paid the higher Oregon minimum. The Bureau of Labor and Industries enforces Oregon's minimum wage law.

The federal minimum wage increases from \$3.80 an hour to \$4.25 an hour on January 1, 1991.

Federal provisions for a subminimum "training wage" for teenagers who

have not worked before and a "tip credit" as an offset for the minimum wage do not apply in Oregon.

"My advice to employers is to assume that your workers are covered by state law requirements of overtime and working conditions, and the \$4.75 minimum wage," said Roberts.

"Employers with questions should call our technical assistance unit in Portland at 229-5841. We want employers to get the information they need to comply with the law."

Still exempt are students employed by a primary or secondary school that they attend, casual babysitters and some domestic workers.

Oregon will have the highest minimum wage of any state in the nation until Alaska's \$4.75 minimum wage kicks in April 1, 1991. Right now Washington DC has an array of industry specific minimum wages ranging from \$4.25 to \$5.85 (dry cleaners) an hour.

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