

It's About More Than Hardware: Try Humanity

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

Let's look behind the scenes in this continuing saga I write about black inventors and the wonderful technology they have given the world; for safety, convenience, health and wealth. I could go in this manner, reclassifying the brilliant contributions in terms of industries like transportation, communication, medicine and so forth but today we wish to go backstage for another viewpoint of this fascinating play--warm, human and compassionate.

This should not be surprising since we find that many thousands of years ago the Greeks were describing Ethiopians (Black Africans) as "the most noble and gentle of the races of mankind" (James Baldwin). This concept is certainly reinforced by an evaluation of the many devices invented by African Americans for the American railroad industry. I have a chapter in my book, "Black Inventors of America" that details a number of inventions that not only greatly advanced the "state-of-the-art" in the world's transportation industry--but demonstrated an unprecedented humanitarian and compassion for the safety and comfort of the public and workers alike.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of integrating these considerations into any evaluation of their contributions; there is so much more here than the bare nuts and bolts and the wheels and gears of technological progress that drove the industrial revolution. In a chapter that cites "a romance with the railroad" my book seeks to place in a human perspective a host of innovations driven by a greater force than a simple quest for fame and fortune. The reader, parents, teachers and youth counselors would do well to consider this approach in reinforcing our self-image against so many negatives.

Though we will discuss modern contribution as well, there is no better place to start than with "Andrew Beard", an illiterate Alabama railroad laborer who invented the Automatic Railway Coupler" around the turn of the century (Patent No. 594,059; Nov. 23, 1897). Depressed by having witnessed so many men killed or maimed during their

efforts to manually connect the massive, moving coaches and box cars--a task which required them to step between the cars and drop in a pin when they met with a horrendous crash--Beard worked nights at his kitchen table until he devised the world-famed "Jenny Coupler".

This is the device you see today all over-the-world, incorporated into each end of all railcars, tenders and the like--and which resemble nothing so much as the clasping of two human hands when two cars meet with a thunderous crash. You see, thanks to the invention of the compassionate Beard, no longer has it been necessary for workers to unnecessarily lose life and limb as they leaped between these juggernauts to drop in a pin before the cars met. So important to the welfare and safety of American workers was this invention that the U.S. Government soon made Beard's invention mandatory equipment early on under the series of Railway Safety and Appliance Acts. The same happened in Europe, for all told there had been 237 different devices in use before standardization with the "Automatic Coupler", mostly dangerous or ineffective.

You can see, also, the rather obvious consequence that beyond the solicitous application of a specific technology, the railroads must have achieved a fantastic saving in manufacture by this standardization--not to mention the "amputees and widows" they no longer had to pension. I think you see where I am coming from here as in recent weeks we have discussed the necessity for intervention in the traumatic situations gripping many of our youth. Where we have those who do not know "who they are", or who lack the "self-image" to function rationally in our society, motivational and educational solutions can only be achieved within a context of reality.

In my years of delivering the "Black Inventors and Scientists" presentation in text, lecture or class, I have found that all ages of youth (or adults) can readily comprehend who they are and what they have to offer when they can look around and see in any of the infrastructure all of their

genius and talent, and it works equally well for white youth or the adults in the workforce who have been hesitant to accept black workers aboard, having lived with vicious stereotypes all their lives. This is why the U.S. Forest Service has contracted with me all these years throughout the Northwest--A realistic "Human rights" presentation"

It will be obvious here this week and next that because of space my citations of the people making these magnificent contributions must be in the short form of cameos or vignettes. I think, however, I have not failed in an effort to emphasize how important these innovations are--and far beyond technology, at that. Let me state that Andrew Beard's invention of the "Automatic Railway Coupler" was not the only African American invention of compassion that became mandated by the government under the "Railway Safety Appliance Acts". Another was the invention of the so-called "Westinghouse Air Brake".

In my book you will find a U.S. Patent Office photostat of the original patent by the African American engineer, Granville T. Woods; "Automatic Air Brake", Patent No. 701,981, June 10, 1902; "Assigned to (sold to) The Westinghouse Air Brake Company of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania". This genius patented almost 90 other inventions that "made American industry what it is today" from railway telegraphy to the "Third Rail" for the subway. And I had the good fortune to meet the great Benjamin Spikes, the inventor of the practical "Railway Semaphore", before he died at the age of 90 in Los Angeles--still inventing. So many, many lives saved by his version of this signaling device.

Next week: The black man who invented most of the "Heating Air conditioning, and Plumbing Systems" that makes all High-rise buildings in America and the world possible (80 patents). I had many wonderful conversations with him during the 1970's; David Crosswaithe, and without him no Empire State Building, No Rockefeller Center, no United Nations Building, and no Chrysler Building of which Chrysler's chairman is so proud!

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Black Business: SOME GOOD SIGNS

By James L. Posey

While I am not as well known for my ability to praise or give positive strokes, when it comes to progress on African-American business issues, somebody ought to note it and note it well.

The following are some signs of improvement that I hope will not be short lived:

1. The state office for Minority/Women/Emerging Small Business has a new Advocate who really is an advocate. Faye Burch, formerly one of the Governor's assistants, recently replaced Clifford Freeman as the director of that office on an interim basis. I have heaped criticism on that office because, historically, it has been a joke. The brain child of Representative Margaret Carter and its first director, Leona Garcia-Seabold, was supposed to help minority and women businesses break down barriers and gain opportunities that were previously denied. But in truth, the office has been understaffed and underfunded from the beginning and has never had any legislative authority to act on behalf of minorities or women. To make matters worse, the office became the laughingstock of the entire construction industry when it introduced the "emerging small business" concept. That notion made it lawful and proper to provide assistance to white-owned contractors, companies that were already receiving 98% of the contracts in the state.

The good news is that now that the Governor has seen the light and replaced the very ineffective Freeman with Burch, for the first time the office has a real "advocate." Faye will work not only for African-American businesses but for all minority businesses that have been denied opportunities in the state. Although she is limited by having little or no business background, Faye has the heart of a lioness when it comes to challenging the system for

those who have been oppressed. She also has a dedicated staff who are ready, willing, and able to get the job done. It's a tough job coming up against all those fire-breathing dragons who are willing to see African-Americans gain everything except economic equality. So in the near future, this is the agency to watch to see if it can really make a difference under its new and improved leadership.

2. Another positive sign is the city of Portland's work with the National Association of Minority Contractors of Oregon (NAMCO) and other independent minority contractors. To anyone's knowledge, this is the first time the city has brought the lingering concerns of these contractors to the table and hammered out some preliminary solutions. David Kish, from the Mayor's office, deserves credit for the meetings. However, much of Kish's work is the result of the efforts of a newcomer to the scene, Darrell Simms, working as Gretchen Kafoury's executive assistant, has done a remarkable job of bringing the various groups together to solve problems rather than engaging in eternal bickering. Simms, along with Art Alexander from Commissioner Mike Linberg's office, has worked behind the scenes to troubleshoot problem areas and raise legitimate concerns to the powers that be.

Everyone connected with these issues seems to have a new sense of optimism. This is especially true since Katz and Hales are coming to the City Council with professed interest in changing the economic patterns of the city's contracting system to include more minorities and women. However, everyone needs to know that the city is notorious for becoming befuddled when it comes to doing something "for real" to help Blacks folks. But, let's be positive and wait and see.

3. The Oregon Department of

Transportation (ODOT) Civil Rights office, under the leadership of Bea Brooks, has gotten the Transportation Commission to agree to allot some small contracts to minority businesses. What she has done is earmark some contracts for minority contractors, primarily those connected with the upcoming light rail. Hopefully, some of these contracts will go to African-American contractors and businesses in the Northeast community who have been previously denied opportunities through the open bidding process.

Bea's office has also tried to close some of the loop holes in the bidding process and overhaul the way contractors approach doing business with minority contractors. One major point of contention is simply to make sure that a contractor has negotiated in good faith with a minority contractor. Besides this, Bea needs to get to work on developing the much talked about revolving loan program to aid minority contractors experiencing cash flow problems. She also needs to tackle more aggressively the problem of the fraudulent use of minority contractors.

ODOT still has a "go slow" policy when dealing with African-Americans. And, until Blacks are willing to get more organized and committed to exerting pressure on ODOT, a large agency with lots of dollars to spend, its programs will continue to reflect more public relations than substance, no matter who is directing the Civil Rights office.

These few bright spots, occurring over the last year, are certainly not enough to counter the years of discrimination and racism that has crippled African-American enterprise in the state. But at least it's a start, and a reason to believe that 1993 may be better.

James Posey is a local, small business owner with a background in social work and community activism.



Winter Swim Lessons

Registration has begun for Portland Parks and Recreation Winter Swim Lessons. Lessons are available for all ages and skill levels.

You may register for classes at the pools, through the mail or by phone. Mail-in registration forms are available in the Park Bureau Fall Program Guide or by calling 796-5130. If you are using Visa or Mastercard, you may register for classes by phoning the pool location.

For a complete pool schedule, see the Park Bureau Fall Program Guide or contact the Aquatics Department, 796-5130.

- Buckman Pool
320 SE 16th, 823-3668
- Columbia Pool
7701 N. Chataqua Blvd., 823-3669
- Dishman Pool
77 NE Knott, 823-3673
- M.L.C. Pool
2033 NW Glisan, 823-3671
- PCC/Sylvania Pool
12000 SW 49th, 796-5130 (lessons only)
- Providence Medical Center Pool
5050 NE Hoyt, 796-5130 (lessons only)

Fitness Club To Host Public

The Lloyd Athletic Club will hold an Open House for the public Wednesday, December 9, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. to celebrate the completion of its recent remodeling.

The four-month construction project update the fitness and racquet club's interior decor and furnishings, added child care facilities, and expanded aerobic, conditioning, massage, and locker spaces.

The club, built in 1978 by the Lloyd Corporation, is owned by Pacific Development, Inc., a PacifiCorp subsidiary. It has nearly 1,000 members.

For further information contact Ellen Campbell, 287-4594.

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