

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

The Portland Observer

Vignettes Of Early Settlers



J.A. Wisdom, former slave, and A.E. Flowers

In 1830, Lou Southworth was born in Tennessee as a slave and took the name of his owner, James Southworth. When Lou was in his twenties, he came to Oregon with the Southworth family. Lou lived with his master for awhile, and then went to Jacksonville to begin mining gold. He did very well and was able to purchase his freedom. He also fought in the Rouge Indian War. When Lou's mother died, he traveled to Yreka, California, where he earned a living by playing the violin. He played the violin so much that his church asked him to leave, worried about the effect his playing would have on the congregation. He expressed his feelings about his expulsion thusly:

"And I know, friends, you won't

think hard of me and give me the cold shoulder for loving my fiddle these many years. I sometimes think that when you go up yonder and find my name to your surprise, in the Big Book, you'll meet many who remembered the old fiddler who played Home Sweet Home, Dixieland, Arkansas Traveler, Swanee River and other tunes for the boys who were far away from home for the first time."

In 1917, Lou Southworth died in Corvallis at the age of 87.

We know that the early black settlers who came to the Willamette Valley, like George Washington Bush and George Washington Cochran, settled outside of the region that was affected by the Exclusion Laws. When A.E. Flowers arrived in the North-

west, he did a lot of sojourning in this area of the country. Here is a partial account:

"I held various jobs at The Dalles, Umatilla and Lewiston, Washington. I worked as a 'Bull Driver' from Lewiston to Walla Walla, Washington. There was one main street in Walla Walla and gambling dens and saloons flourished on all sides. Murder was frequent occurrence in that town. I worked in that country for awhile and then I come to Portland, Oregon, again."

Another pioneer was Columbus Sewell, who came to Canyon City, Oregon, in the 1860s, and became a miner and then a freight hauler. He was married with four sons, the oldest being a freight hauler all his adult life.

William "John" Livingston traveled to the Oregon Territory as a free man, although he'd formerly been a slave. Back in his birthplace, Missouri, speculation existed that he could possibly be one of the playmates of the famous Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain). Livingston was brought here by a Judge Ringo, who gave him 40 acres of land. The following is a description of John Livingston by Judge Ringo:

"I never saw a finer man than John Livingston. He was the soul of honor. His skin was as black as coal, but his heart was alabaster. His word was gospel, and I have often heard the bankers of the city say they would rather have John Livingston's word than that of any white man in the county in a financial transaction."

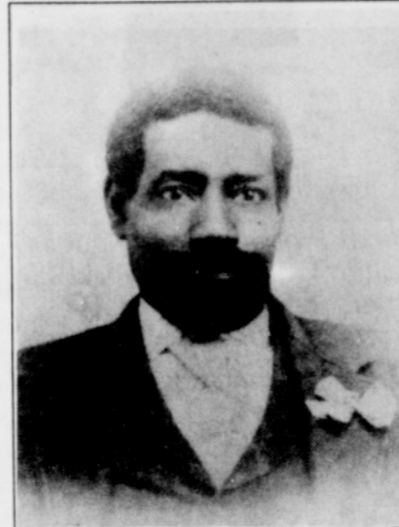
Another early black settler was Richard Sorter, who came to Oregon in 1858. Here is an account of his death:

"Richard Sorter (colored) died at his home near Kalama, yesterday, aged 72, of paralysis. 'Dick,' as he was called by his friends, was an old landmark and a man of varied expe-



Columbus Sewell

rience. He was a great favorite among the officers of the Northern Pacific Railroad Co., being an employee of the company for fifteen years, nine of which he was freight agent at this place. He was born in Princeton, New



William "John" Livingston

Jersey, and was for many years permanently connected with the 'underground railroad' prior to the Civil War. He arrived in Oregon in 1858, and came to Kalama in 1871. He was in the employ of the government and assisted in establishing Forts Walla Walla and Boise. He was personally

acquainted with a large number of government officials and prominent businessmen of the coast in early days."

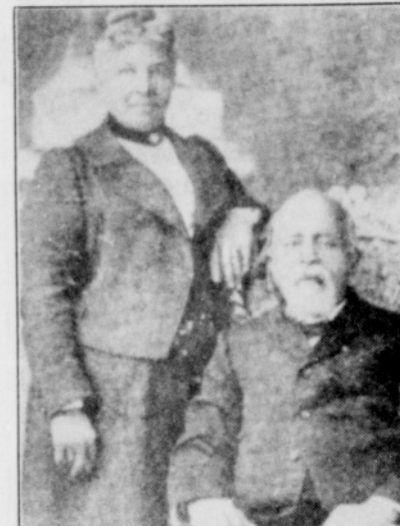
They called William Rumley "Uncle Bill" and regarded him highly in his 70 years of living in Curry County near the Rogue River. He earned goodwill for being "big hearted," "hospitable" and "ready to run errands or help anyone." Rumley had been a slave in the South and had run away about 1850, fleeing "as far away as possible." He had been born in 1830 in Missouri, the son of a black mother and a white father.

Rumley was listed as a miner in 1851 on the Klamath River married in 1864 to an Indian woman, Lucy; mined and raised livestock on Squaw Creek in Curry County, where he was a charter member of the Curry County Grange. In 1878, Rumley was appointed Justice of the Peace, and managed a ferry and repaired boats. He died at age 90 in 1921, having left thirty acres on the Illinois River to his friends in his will. His wife and two children preceded him in death.

At the age of twenty, Amanda Gardener Johnson was brought as a slave over the Oregon Trail in 1853.

But she hadn't been a slave paid or bartered for, rather, she'd been a wedding present in Kentucky for her owner's daughter. Amanda settled with her owner on his land claim between Albany and Peoria. In the same wagon train that bought Amanda to Oregon were other slaves, including Benjamin Johnson, who later became Amanda's husband, and Lou Southworth. Amanda's owner brought her here despite warnings that Oregon would not allow slaves to enter.

By coincidence, when Amanda was fourteen, she was baptized in Missouri by a Baptist minister named the Rev. James. Rev. James was the



Richard and America Waldo Bogle

father of Jesse James, born in 1847; the same year Rev. James had baptized Amanda.

The Bogle family tradition started with Richard Bogle, who came to America from the West Indies. He eventually traveled to Oregon and married America Waldo. They then moved to Walla Walla to escape the restrictions that Oregon's Exclusion Laws forced upon blacks. Their descendants today continue the Bogle's proud tradition of service to the Pacific Northwest.

Slavery

In the 1840s and 1850s, white-hot disputes over whether Oregon should be admitted to the Union as a slave or free state lit up the nation and the Oregon Territory. These disputes arose from the Territory's first efforts to form a provisional government in 1843. The controversy continued through 1848, when territorial status was granted by Congress, up to the time Oregon became a state in 1859.

Even through the Civil War and post-war period, opinions differed over the civil and social rights of non-whites—even over whether blacks and Chinese should be allowed to live in Oregon.

The problems with slavery were legal, economical, political and social in nature. Many early settlers came from the south and, while some of them were slave-owners, others settled in Oregon to escape the storm brewing over slavery and secession. Another problem was that slavery seemed impractical where no cotton plantations existed. Of course, a deeper concern grew from peoples' belief that slavery was immoral and inhumane.

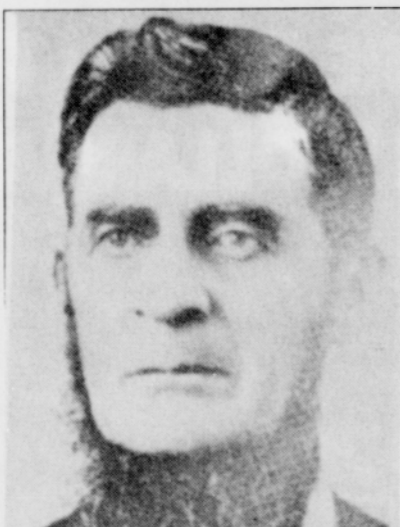
Those with political minds worried about the balance of power Congress, i.e., the slave states vs. the free states. Members of congress thought twice before admitting a new state, pondering whether it would give the balance of power to pro-North or to pro-South parties.

In Oregon, it mattered a great deal whether the President was a Democrat (pro-slavery) or a Whig (anti-slavery, later known as the Republican party). It was the President's duty to appoint Oregon's territorial governors, and from 1849 to 1859, he appointed six Democrats and only one Whig.

The issue of slavery troubled many people as the Territory began shaping its constitution to submit to Congress. The Constitutional measures that settlers voted on would be hard to believe today. It's even more shocking to note that blacks and mulattoes couldn't vote until 1927.

The following are the most significant measures and votes in Oregon's history regarding minority rights:

1844: The Provisional Govern-



Rev. Obed Dickinson

ment's Legislative Committee voted that slavery be prohibited in Oregon. If slaves were brought into Oregon, their owners had three years to remove them. If the slave owners refused, the slaves would be freed.

1845: The Provisional Government's Organic Laws required free slaves to leave within two years, or be flogged from 20 to 30 stripes if found guilty in a trial. This punishment would be repeated every six months if the free slave still failed to leave. Fortunately, this law was repealed in 1845.

1848: Slavery was forbidden in the act that established the Oregon Territory.

1855: An anti-slavery convention was held in Albany, passing resolutions that formed a platform for the anti-slavery party, the Whigs. In 1856, the Whigs became the Republican party.

1857: The State Constitutional Convention was held in Salem, with Oregon's constitution being adopted on November 9 by a vote of 7,195 to 3,215. Slavery was voted down 7,727 to 2,645, however; permitting residence to free blacks was voted down 8,640 to 1,081. A black or mulatto also couldn't own property or make contracts.

1860: Oregon supported Lincoln and the Abolitionist ticket, although Oregon's former Territorial governor, Joseph Lane, was a Vice-Presidential candidate on a ticket run-

ning against Lincoln. The 1860 census: 128 blacks.

1862: A poll tax of \$5 a year was imposed on "Negroes, Chinamen, Kanakas and Mulattoes." If not paid, the sheriff could put the person to work on public highways.

1865: Oregon ratified the U.S. Constitutional amendment abolishing slavery.

1927: Oregonians voted to repeal the section of the 1859 state constitution that denied the right to vote to blacks and mulattoes.

The Rev. Obed Dickinson's stand against slavery and his insistence on civil rights for blacks in Oregon made him a target as he preached in the Salem Congregational Church from 1853 to 1867. His verbal ammunition from the pulpit was aimed at those who didn't see that "the Gospel applied also to the few Negroes living and working in Salem."

When Dickinson arrived in Salem, it was a village of 500 people and also the new capital of Oregon. Its small public school denied admission to blacks. Only Dickinson's church had black members, an issue that cost him financial support. So his wife, Charlotte, taught blacks in the Dickinson home, and the Salem Congregational Church became their center of social and religious life.

In a community divided by the slavery issue as the Civil War approached, Dickinson termed the slavery dispute as "Satan coming among them." This remark provoked a comment from the private secretary of Governor George Curry, a Democrat, that he wouldn't go to Dickinson's church because "I won't hear an abolitionist preach."

Dickinson described in a letter in 1862 how three blacks were admitted to membership, along with six white persons, before a packed church. "There was a stillness which spoke the presence of God," he wrote. "Even breathing seemed to be suppressed by the intensity of the feeling. God bless Old Black Robert."

He preached in June of 1861: "There is a wrong public opinion in this town. It has closed the doors of all our schools against the children of these black families, dooming them to ignorance in life...I said this was wrong, and what else brethren could I do?"

Northwest Black Pioneers

Jason Dodson, a black man who came to Oregon in 1843 with the John Fremont expedition, was a servant for the family of Thomas Hart Benton.

According to records, Dodson was granted the same status and responsibilities as Ben York was with the Lewis and Clark expedition. Records also described Dodson as being very strong, which qualified him to participate in the expedition's most arduous task: exploring and mapping the geographic features of the east side of the Cascade Mountains to the Klamath Falls.

But probably the most famous black mountain man of all time was Moses Black Harris. His fame stemmed from his skill as a trader, trapper, guide and teller of tall tales. In 1844, he was chosen as a guide for one of the largest wagon trains to

come to Oregon. This party arrived in what is now Oregon's Willamette Valley in early fall of 1844.

Harris also accompanied Elijah White as a guide to The Dalles. His service was then obtained by Stephen Meek to rescue some settlers stranded in a desert nicknamed the "Blue Bucket." Fortunately, Indians helped out by giving them much-needed supplies, and Harris was able to lead the stranded settlers back to The Dalles. Again, in 1846, Harris rescued another wagon train coming into Oregon across the Applegate cutoff. He began the rescue in mid-December and finally succeeded in mid-January of 1847.

Moses Black Harris died of cholera in 1849. During his life out west, he was held in high esteem by many of his fellow mountain men, as well as

by the many wagon trains he successfully led to Oregon. People thought of him as an American, above and beyond any color. Harris could easily be compared to George Washington Bush, who wasn't a mountain man, but who showed the same compassion and love of country. A journal entry from that time captures this pioneer spirit:

"Here lies the bones of old Black Harris who often traveled beyond the far west and for the freedom of equal rights. He crossed the snowy mountain heights was free and easy kind of soul especially with a belly full."

In retrospect, a common thread ran through the lives of these black pioneers: the sacrifice of individual safety and comfort for the good of all people.

Challenges In Oregon Black History

As previously written, blacks faced a great deal of discrimination in early Oregon history. And much of this unfair treatment stemmed from the Organic Laws passed by the Oregon Territory's Provisional Government. Here are some examples:

No free land for blacks in Oregon-exclusion from donation Land Act (Homesteading):

Paragraph 4. "There shall be, and hereby is granted to every white settler or occupant of the public lands, American half-breed Indians included, above the age of eighteen years, being a citizen of the United States... the quantity of one-half section, or three hundred and twenty acres of land... (from The Organic Laws and other General Laws of Oregon, 1843-1872)

Prohibition of Intermarriage (1867):

Paragraph 689: Hereafter it shall not be lawful within this state for any white person, male or female, to intermarry with any Negro, Chinese or Kanaka blood, or any person having more

than half Indian blood... (from The Organic Laws and other General Laws of Oregon, 1843-1872)

Lynching episode (1902):

"Alonzo Tucker, the black fiend who assaulted the wife of Benjamin Dennis, at Marshfield yesterday, was captured and lynched by his pursuers this morning. Immediately after hearing the report that Mrs. Dennis, the wife of Benjamin Dennis, a miner, had been brutally assaulted by a Negro yesterday afternoon, a party of men started in pursuit of the fiend and instituted a search that proved successful this morning. The frenzied men searched through the long hours of the night until early this morning this black fiend was discovered, who on seeing that he had been caught began to cringe and plead for mercy... But the hand of justice had secured too strong a grip on the miscreant and all the pleading in the world would not have saved him from the death he so thoroughly deserved." (from the Oregon Journal)

Theater segregation upheld

by Oregon Supreme Court; lauded by Oregonian editorial (1905):

"It is obvious that any place of public amusement would speedily lose patronage if it were not understood that certain discriminations would be made..."

Reality practices and housing segregation. The following is a typical clause written into deeds for houses in Corvallis, Benton County, Oregon, in the 1940s:

"No person other than those of Caucasian Race shall own, use, lease or occupy any portion of said premises, providing that this restriction shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race employed by an owner or tenant and occupant of the premises occupied."

Chain reaction of adjustments created by black migration to Oregon (1940s):

"Portland can absorb only a minimum of Negroes without upsetting the city's regular life." (Mayor Earl Riley in the Oregonian)