

Your Niche In The Workforce III: Black Inventors Come Right Out Of History

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

I spent a great deal of time in the 1970s and 1980s conducting workshops around the Northwest for the personnel managers and administrators of federal agencies. The purpose was to enhance the acceptance of African Americans into a highly technical workforce by documenting their proven capabilities as inventors and innovators.

The process worked very well indeed, with many of those hired still employed; here and in other parts of the country (a goodly number were my students at Portland State University). Interestingly, one could always expect two key questions: 1. "How did you know that all those inventors you cite in your book were black?" 2. In respect to the very early patents, how in the world could people a generation from slavery conceive, design and build so much of the sophisticated equipment that made the industrial revolution possible?" ("Black Inventors of America", 1969, National Book)

The answer to the first question is

that the Examiner of Patents in Washington, D.C. at the turn of the century was Howard E. Baker, a black man. At a time when many leery inventors insisted on bringing their inventions and/or applications to the Patent Office in person — sometimes traveling thousands of miles — Baker saw that many of the inventors were African Americans. In addition, some patent illustrators would use a rather obvious African figure to depict the use of the device.

So it was that Mr. Baker sent out standard questionnaires to every patent attorney in America: "Have you ever registered a patent for a black person? He received thousands of replies in the affirmative. At the "Moreland Library" at Howard University, Washington, D.C., I was able to tap into this gold mine of documentation which had been preserved by the perceptive examiner. It was 1969 and the occasion easily the most memorable that I can remember.

Now the answer to the second question — "how were former slaves

or their children and grandchildren able to contribute such sophisticated technology to the world?" — always provided me the opportunity to present a 'real' history of slavery and of indigenous technology on the African mainland; That is, details of those documented accounts which Bill Cosby described in his famous tape as "Black history, lost, strayed or stolen." Facts that are usually omitted in schools and text, and usually ignored by media.

For instance, ranging from Saugus, Massachusetts and south to the Chesapeake Bay area, there were over 230 "iron plantations" operated solely with complements of African men, women and children" — so went the sales advertising for these profitable American enterprises in the 18th century. I called the British embassy in Washington and they verified that the 'Colonial Office' kept meticulous records of the daily ingot production of every slave. Funny, they only told 'us' of "Cotton Plantations — with a workforce of happy, igno-

rant, spiritual singers.

For research purposes, the former "Colonial Office" is now the "Foreign Office". Also see such authors in the slave genre as Genovese, (Roll, Jordan, Roll), Mier & Rudwick (From Plantation to Ghetto); and see W.E.B. Dubois, J.A. Rogers, John G. Jackson and Lerone Bennett. The National Geographic Index (1888-1988) will cite a series on "Colonial America" which describes this type of slave enterprise. I have misplaced my notes, but will supply the information soon.

Next week I will describe the historical background of technology on the West Coast of Africa. The forging of iron and "steel" was such a sophisticated operation that the artisans were divided into three distinct groups. There were those who made agricultural implements, those who produced pots, pans and other cooking utensils, and there were the forgers of weapons of war. "You don't learn that in school" as the old song by Louis Jordan went. Are there those

who don't want some of us to find a "niche" in the scheme of things? Motivation and a sense of self-worth is required.

Author Explores Lives And Loves

She'd read an article in the newspaper during Black History Month about how Black women should treat their men. We should treat them with the utmost respect, love, kindness, and recognition... We should encourage them to seek brighter horizons beyond merely being athletes, to strive to become scientists, attorneys, and congressmen, the article had told her. But what of our hopes and dreams?, Ginger wondered. Were they insignificant? Who would help the women?...

Rosalyn McMillan, an exciting new voice in contemporary fiction, will touch, thrill and tantalize readers with her powerful, poignant and provocative debut, *Knowing* (Warner Books Hardcover, January 22, 1996). Exploring the lives and loves of a middle-class African-American family, McMillan cuts to the heart of challenges facing all women and men today: how to balance the bonds, burdens and demands of family with the need to nurture the self.

At the center of *Knowing* stands Ginger Montgomery, 36, an attractive and intelligent woman suffocated by material trappings and self-doubt. On the surface, Ginger seems to have it all: a comfortable home in the Detroit suburbs, a lucrative factory job at Champion Motors, four beautiful children, and plenty of pas-

sion with Jackson, her intoxicatingly-sexy second husband. Ginger knows she should be happy, yet she's restless and troubled: all the perfect parts of her life add up to an aching emptiness. Through McMillan's detailed, true-to-life depiction, readers come to know the real Ginger — and experience her confusion, her frustration, and her pain.

As *Knowing* soon reveals, beneath his suave facade Jackson is spoiled, jealous man, who seizes every opportunity to sabotage his wife's dream of breaking free from the factory tedium to pursue a career in real-estate. Ginger also realizes that, despite their ever-burning desire, the only place she and her husband truly connect is in bed. To complicate matters, Ginger suffers from alopecia areata, a disease that causes recurring hair loss, each time shaking her sense of sexuality and self-esteem. Torn apart by conflicting impulses — to give everything to her man and family, to preserve something for her own unique identity and fulfillment — Ginger grapples with life's most difficult choices, unaware of the irrevocable changes to come.

Brimming with heartfelt emotions, scintillating dialogue, surprise revelations and steamy sex, *Knowing* is above all a novel rich in character.

Widmer Joins Beer Quarrel

Regional and local brewers joined with the world's largest brewer recently in requesting new federal rules that would make sure consumers are honestly informed about who actually produces the beers that they drink.

This step is necessary because of claims by some companies that their products are "brewed in small batches" or "created one batch at a time" when in fact they are contract-brewed by large brewers who have under-utilized production capacity.

Two examples cited in the request, which was filed with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms are the Boston Beer Co., which sells various brands under the Samuel Adams name, and Pete's Brewing Co., which sells Pete's Wicked Ale and other products.

According to the group's request, both companies fail to "disclose on their labels that brewers such as the Stroh Brewery Co., G. Heileman Brewing Co., Pittsburgh Brewing Co. and others actually have been hired to brew, bottle and package their products..."

Those seeking the new rules are Anheuser-Busch, Inc.; Widmer Brothers Brewing Co. of Portland; Hart Brewing Inc. of Seattle; Full Sail Brewing Co. of Hood River; Redhook Ale Brewing Co. of Seattle and the Oregon Brewers Guild of Portland.

Their request seeks the adoption of rules requiring companies to inform potential purchasers on the label of their products if someone else has actually produced their beer. The requested rules would also require that advertising materials be consistent with label information.

"As someone who takes pride in our products, I am offended by people who claim to be something they aren't," said Jerome Chicvara, director of marketing and sales for Full Sail.

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