

Family Living

The Portland Observer

A Family Thing Is An American Thing

By LANITA DUKE

With all the cinematic slop being produced and distribute in Hollywood it is difficult to imagine that a film as moving "As A Family Thing" would ever get produced. Well, it has.

"A Family Thing" is one of the best films I have seen in a long time. With an incredible believable plot combined with wonderful acting "A Family Thing" is a must see.

The plot is simple. Earl Pilcher (Robert Duvall), a 60 year old white man from rural Arkansas, discovers that his mother was a Black woman. In a letter from beyond the grave the woman Earl thought was his mother tells him that his father forced himself on their Black housekeeper and she died giving birth to him. From this point everything that Earl ever thought about life and himself is shaken as he goes on a journey of self discovery and truth in Urban Chicago.

In Chicago Earl meets his half-brother, Ray Murdoch (James Earl Jones), a policeman who already knows his story. Into this mix is Aunt T. (Irma P. Hall) who has the wisdom and the humor to heal this family thing.

As he stumbles in the city, his truck is car-jacked and he is forced to depend on Ray. His bewilderment at now being half-black is both sad and funny. He walks around in a daze and starts to drink in a black night club. He invites himself over to a table where a Black couple is celebrating the wife's birthday. As Earl explains his new predicament it is clear that he had no Black friends and grew up referring to Blacks as niggers.

In the meantime Ray has to deal with the unpleasant memories that Earl brings back. With the help and power of Aunt T, who raised him after his mother dies, Ray accepts Earl. And it is this acceptance which makes this movie great.

"A Family Thing" is about race, sex and class. And those things are as American as apple pie.

(Next week: An interview with James Earl Jones.) Editor's note: Lanita Duke is the producer of Grassroot News, a Video Production Company.



(Clockwise from center) Director Richard Pearce (standing) with stars James Earl Jones, Irma P. Hall, Michael Beach, Ashleigh Jordan, Lauren Leigh Phillips, Regina Taylor and Robert Duvall on location for United Artists compelling and poignant drama A Family Thing. Photo credit: Van Redin

The Black Romance With The Rails: Prize Offered To A Middle School Student

By PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

When I first researched the role of black inventors in the development of America's technology, I was simply overcome by the scope of their seminal contributions. This was especially the case with the many railroad patents which pushed the vital transportation sector to a global first ranking; so many unsung heroes, heroines.

One may well understand, then, that the table of contents of my related book would reflect such an evocative theme (Black Inventors of America). The general reader and student alike are drawn into the scheme and scope of their ebony genius: "The Romance Of The Rails" and then, next, a series of inventions of significant economic impact, "Creators Of Industry And Jobs".

Now, the railroad industry, first steam-driven, then electric, then diesel (and a possible magnetic future) has drawn the documented attention and talent of the African American from its beginning early in the 19th century, up until the present day. And their inventions and critical advancements of the art have covered a wide spectrum -- the areas of speed, safety, comfort and economic development.

You will note here that I am touching on many aspects of the vital force and drive which enabled the African American to play a key role in the development of the 'Industrial Revolution'. And it is true that over the years I probably have fondly described each and every contribution -- book, lecture, radio, T.V. -- but the task at hand is to set the stage for a request I am going to make of some young person in Middle School.

As the title of this article implies, there will be a reward for a certain task to be completed by such student -- and as you might well guess, it will relate to black inventors and the railroads. And as you might also suppose, I will be offering a prize for a well-executed bit of research. After all, that is what I emphasize in my writings here, just as I did when teaching at the university: "Informa-

tion Retrieval is the key."

As the noted comedian Bill Cosby said in a tape that was used for years by those seeking to comb at racial discrimination and to substantiate the vital role of blacks on the world stage: "Black history: lost, strayed or stolen!" It is a difficult task, sometimes, when so much has often been deliberately hidden or obscured but it must be accomplished if African Americans are to have their proper place on the world stage. Our economic and cultural future depends on the attainment of a deserved parity.

Now, in the past I have researched and presented to the world such black inventions germane to the railroad industry (and others) as the Air Brake, The Coupler, The Semaphore, The Railway Telegraph, The Third Rail (for subways), A Railroad Switch, Electric Railway Trolley, Refrigerated Box Car, and many, many more.

Now in retrieving this information for my book, I sometimes found the record in a special library, some-

times in records kept by a family, or in a publication of some industry or scientific journal, or in the records of a historical society, or in an old newspaper. Then, too, the main library in some cities has a "Patent Section" where copies of patents are filed by "date" -- and sometimes cross-indexed by "name".

Recently the media has described serious railroad accidents that occurred because the engineer could not see a warning signal (semaphore) because of stormy weather. But years ago my research led to an invention by a black man in Buxton, Iowa, in the early 1920's. A semaphore right inside the cab of the locomotive that did not require the crew to peep outside in inclement weather. I have misplaced this information but will pay \$25 to the student who can find it. And I will come to their school and make a presentation on black inventors. You will need this skill all your life. Be the first to contact me at the Observer newspaper.

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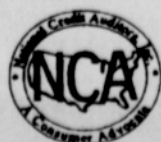
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