

Education

Harlem, the village light rail built

In case you were on another planet and therefore missed his melodic advice, the great Duke Ellington, musician, composer and orchestra leader, long ago advised us in his best rhythmic style to "Take The A Train" [to Harlem].

And a different Light Rail, indeed, was this colorful and unitarian public transport in the 1920s and 1930s when, above ground and below ground, the fare was one nickel. The elevated sections of the system dwell mostly in nostalgia and old movies, but the Subway is of very great interest to many because the invention of the "Third Rail" by black engineer Granville T. Woods made possible the elimination of overhead Trolley. "Greatest electrician in the world!", American Catholic Tribune, 1888.

There were other remarkable aspects to the clean, economical steel-ribbed arteries that served New York and its environs. In his urban masterpiece, "Subway," the Harlem Renaissance painter, Palmer Hayden, portrayed a group of black and white passengers crammed together during rush hour who felt no sense of apprehension. Artists had a new genre--rolling theatres ready for a canvas.

In his 1934 wood engraving, "Subway", Fritz Eichenberg conveyed a similar impression of riders traveling on a Broadway-Seventh train late at night. The passengers are divided evenly between black and white and between men and women, nearly everyone fast asleep. The absence of fear was essential to the populist idea of a "peoples underground". Hollywood occasionally uses this older theme-- a kinder urban America. In this very condensed version of a labor of love that will appear in a national publication and on CD-ROM in late winter and spring, I will at-

tempt to convey some idea of the serendipity circumstances that gave birth to the vibrant "urban village" we know as Harlem. Patently a contradiction in terms, perhaps even an oxymoron, but, then, this is America.

The "Interurban Rapid Transit Co." received a 35 million dollar contract to begin construction on a subway system for New York on March 16, 1894 and immediately was faced with formidable obstacles. Cliton Hood, a transportation historian, has described New York City as "The Urban Archipelago," sprawling across several big islands and divided by three major waterways -- the upper bay, the Hudson River and the East River.

It took ten years for the Rapid Transit Co. to surmount the difficulties presented by a "crazy quilt" geography, unpredictable terrain at lower depths and a series of catastrophic accidents. Finally on October 28, tipsy Mayor McClellan taking the controls of the inaugural train loaded with dignitaries.

Things went rather smoothly for the next several years, though the light rail pioneers unknowingly were fast approaching a financial moment of truth. Just as is happening in Portland, Oregon today, a number of highly speculative real estate investments were made at promising locations around the transit stops. The company faced economic disaster, having built a huge area of middle-class apartments they could not rent, but a black man came to their rescue and Harlem was born.

A very sharp black real estate operator by the name of Pickens saw this situation as the opportunity of a lifetime. He persuaded the Rapid Transit board of directors to give him an exclusive contract as rental agent, then promptly mounted a high-powered, sophisticated marketing pro-

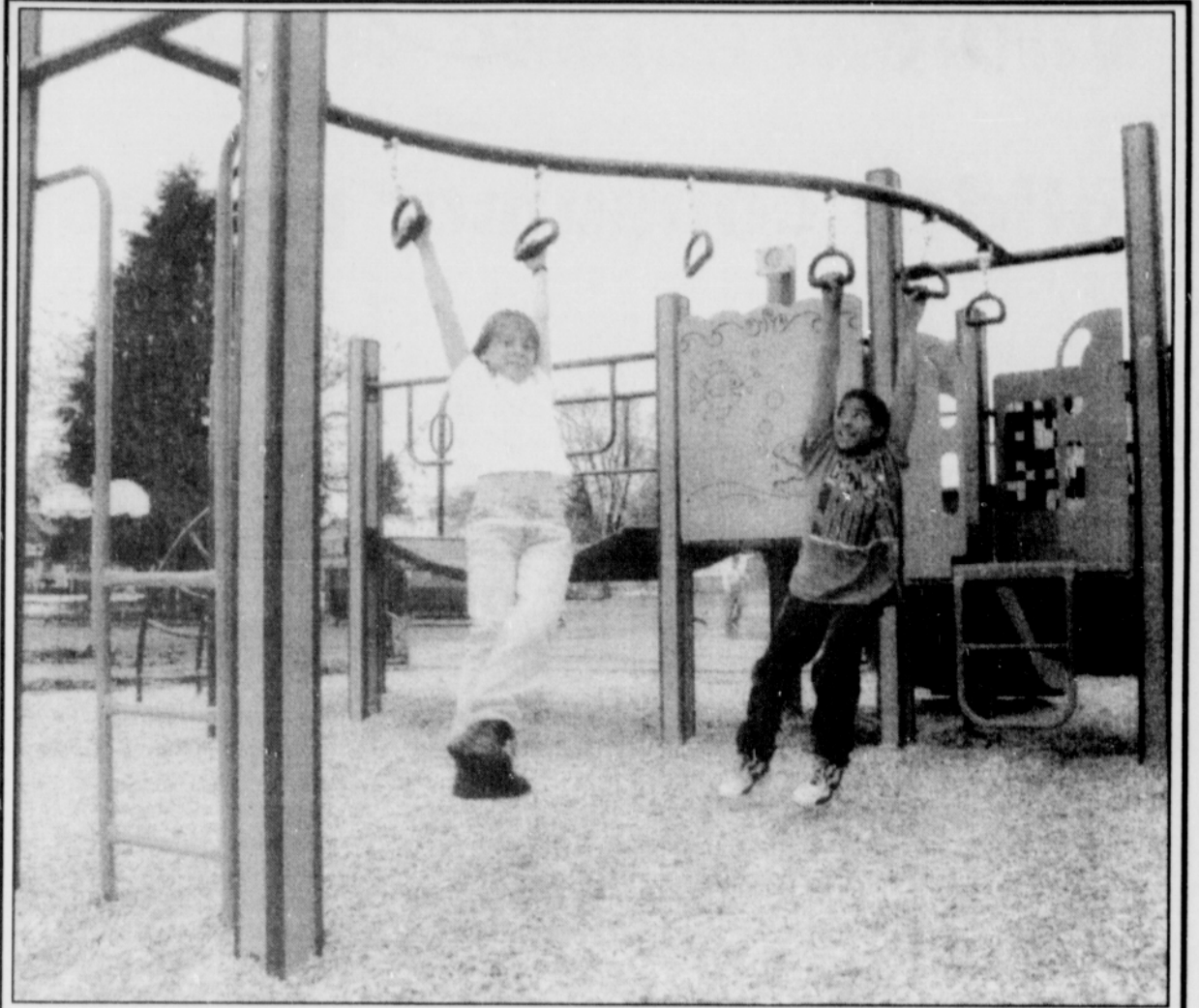
gram that Madison Avenue hucksters would have admired.

The resourceful Pickens dispatched a platoon of smooth, well-dressed subagents of color to every environ within 150 miles where experience or demographics indicated the presence of African Americans who would be very amenable to the kind of upward mobility offered by the Rapid Transit real estate. They came by the thousands in an initial wave and soon the boundaries of the fecund uptown cultural cradle expanded to accept less affluent African Americans.

Harlem had been born, kicking and screaming and creating and signifying from the "get-go"--destined to reach a cultural pinnacle in the 1920s and 1930s known worldwide as the "Harlem Renaissance". Literature, poetry, painting sculpture, music and dance were the forte of this l'enfant terrible that grew to intellectual maturity in a few short decades: Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Duke Ellington, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden, and many, many others.

And just as the power and vitality of African art and sculpture had so heavily influenced the French Impressionists, the tune smiths of Broadway embraced the pulse of Harlem: George and Ira Gershwin, Rogers and Hart, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein, et al.

(C) 1996, Mckinley Burt continued next week



Cassie Packard (left) and Teddy Pittman (right), try out the brand new recycled plastic playground donated to Sitton Elementary School by the American Plastics Council (APC). APC and the City of Portland Bureau of Environmental Services, challenged residents to recycle more plastic bottle at curbside. As a result of the increased recycling, two playgrounds were awarded, one to Sitton and the other to Whitman Elementary. As soon as the final 5.6 percent goal is achieved, a third school also will receive playground equipment. Citizens are reminded to "check the neck" and recycle all plastic bottles with threaded necks and screw-type caps in their curbside bins.

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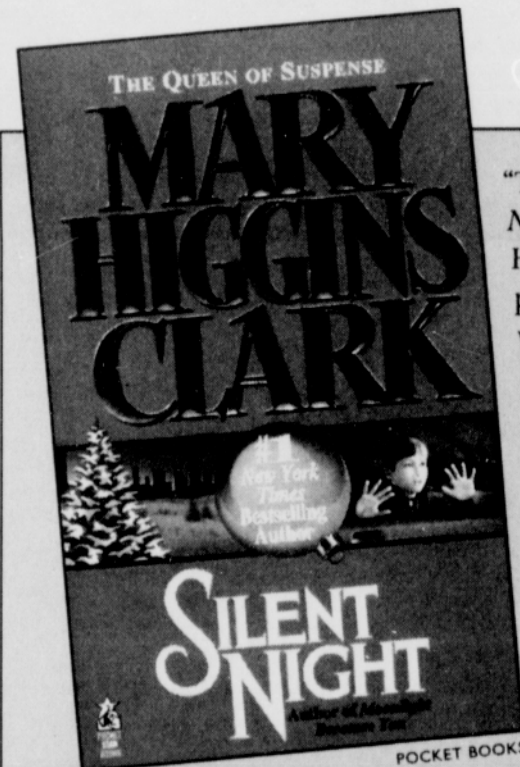
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D I V E R S I T Y

Photography workshop offered

An all-day photography workshop taught by instructor Jane Keating has been rescheduled to take place Saturday, December 15, from 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. In the morning, students will learn the process of Polaroid Image Transfer; in the afternoon, Emulsion Transfer will be explored. Both processes allow students to create full-color, painterly photographs on fine art papers from slides. Participants are asked to bring their favorite 35mm slides.

No photography or darkroom experience is necessary.

The cost of this workshop is \$60 for members and \$70 for non-members.

The Maude Kerns Art Center, located at 1910 E. 15th Avenue, is Eugene's only non-profit community center for the visual arts. Hours are from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday, Friday, and Saturday and from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday.

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