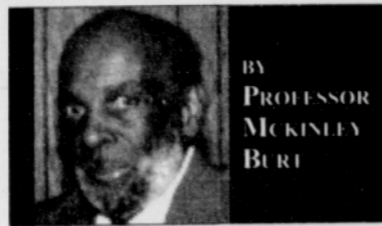


# EDITORIAL

Editorial Articles Do Not Necessarily  
Reflect Or Represent The Views Of  
The Portland Observer

*p e r s p e c t i v e s*

## The Curtain Rises On Black Inventors (Slightly) IV



BY  
PROFESSOR  
MCKINLEY  
BURT

By Prof. McKinley Burt

We left off with that shocker, The most successful and world famous product of the Westinghouse Airbrake Company was the 'Automatic' Air Brake that was patented and sold to them by Granville T. Woods, the prolific black electrical genius (No. 701,981, June 10, 1902).

And we begin this week with the entrance of yet another amazing black inventor on this often-hidden stage. Andrew J. Beard, a railroad yard worker in Eastlake, Alabama, grew concerned over the number of fellow workers who were losing lives and limbs when they stepped between moving freight cars to insert a 'coupling pin'.

That History Channel documen-

tary to which I've referred to here as a groundbreaker in its revelations concerning African American inventors - even at two out of thousands - failed to give black inventor Beard his due as the inventor of the world famous "Jenny Coupler" as it was known by its colloquial name. This 'automatic' railcar coupler invention was improperly assigned to another. In my book, "Black Inventors of America" I show a photostat of one of the most interesting patents ever granted.

There is a full-page display of this life-saving innovation by an Alabama laborer: A.J. Beard, Car Coupling, Patented Nov. 23, 1897. At the end of the detailed description, we find the signatures of the witnesses, and immediately above we have, "Andre J. (X, his mark) Beard. In other words, our inspired hero to railroad workers all over the world was "Illiterate."

It would do well to reiterate here how important the many thousands of African American invention were - not just to the economy, but to the welfare and safety of all, at work, at play and especially when traveling.

And more over has influenced the development and structure of our laws.

The "Automatic Railcar Coupler" was the focal point of the "Federal Safety Appliance Act", which Congress enacted at the turn of the century. This act made it unlawful for a railroad to supply cars which did not couple automatically on impact.

So important was this invention to the development of America's huge railroad complexes (which supported a burgeoning industrial society) that in 1908, Congress took an additional step by passing the "Federal Employer's Liability Act. This legislation gave railroad employees the right to sue in Federal Court when injuries were caused by equipment.

Let me put an end to one area of wonder and speculation. A question that frequently arose many years ago when I was on lecture tours around the country - today I still get, "How did you know the inventors were black?"

In 1908, the assistant Examiner of Patents was a black man, Howard Baker. In those days, many inventors

were still distrustful of the mail and the system in general, so consequently they delivered models of their inventions in person (The Smithsonian Museum has thousands of examples). Mr. Baker noted, quite surprisingly, that many of these visitors to the Patent Office in Washington, D.C. were African Americans.

Baker put his curiosity to a test. He wrote every patent attorney in the country with the inquiry, "have you ever filed a patent for a black man or woman? The thousands of replies in the 'affirmative' led to establishment of the "Mooreland Collection of African American Patents" as part of the Howard University Library.

When I first inspected this data bank of African American genius, I wanted to cry as the terrible truth sunk in. Generations of both blacks and whites whose minds and ambitions were formed and matured in a mental prison closely guarded by media, publishers, education establishment and Hollywood, Blacks not allowed to know who they were.

Cont'd next week.

Letter The Editor:

When congress reconvenes in January, one item again on its agenda will be a bill which would impose a national "no-fault" insurance system, allegedly to foster competition in the insurance industry and lower the cost of automobile insurance. In truth, the so-called "Auto-Choice Reform Act" is extraordinarily anti-consumer and is highly unlikely to result in lower premiums. The bill is opposed by diverse groups consisting of consumer advocates and state insurance regulators.

Under the proposed legislative scheme, many injured people would lose the right to seek compensation for permanent injury from the party

at fault. In turn, drivers who negligently or even recklessly cause accidents will be immune from responsibility for such harm, for example, causing the death of a child. This is nothing more than the tired and unfair concept of no-fault insurance, which has been repeatedly rejected by most states since the idea first appeared in the 1970's. No fault insurance does not fairly compensate seriously injured people and flies in the face of our well-placed beliefs in personal re-

sponsibility.

Nothing in the proposed legislation would require insurance companies to reduce premiums for anyone. The truth is that of the ten states with the most expensive automobile insurance, eight have no-fault insurance. When Connecticut repealed its no-fault law in 1994, insurance rates actually dropped 9.7% the first year after the repeal went into effect. In Georgia, a 6% drop was seen.

If Congress truly wants to in-

crease competition in the insurance industry, perhaps it should consider eliminating the industry's exemption from the anti-trust laws that apply to every other business, instead of trying to force Oregonians to adopt a scheme that voters in other states have repeatedly rejected when given the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Todd A. Bradley

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THANK YOU FOR READING THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

## What Is Education, What is Technology? III

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

There are many, many residents of Northeast and North Portland who are to be congratulated for that "hard work and dedication to task" cited last week as prerequisites for successful education experiences.

And we can speak of their mounting frustration when after years of commitment and energies devoted to the supporting activities which produced the superb science and technology projects mastered by black kids (Nov. 4) - the media, print and electronic, features only those high-profile, sophisticated projects of white students.

"It is heartbreaking" cry out dedicated innercity parents, a few teachers and pupils who know very well what this means in terms of lost opportunities for motivation and career direction. Curriculum choices must be made early on and not only is it the case that young black pupils are denied meaningful role models, but we find some counselors deliberately directing them away from subject that prepare one for science, and technology.

Especially to be commended are those perceptive and energetic parents who say they have received more than a hint that any idea of a central black community of "yesterday" with its support mechanisms may have to be forgotten. Citing the city's housing policies and even the scattering pattern of "Section-8" rentals - all in conjunction with a renewed and vigorous regentrification of central Northeast - these parents have become "technology moms" rather than "soccer moms". And they hit the suburbs.

They stay busy picking up and delivering black kids to "safe havens" where they can study and learn with peer groups, and be introduced to progressive role models. I found great satisfaction in that several of these activities were extensions of projects I suggested earlier this year; that youth science clubs be built around great African American engineers and scientists as role models.

Several examples are being featured this month in my weekly "Perspectives" column on page 4; Granville Woods ('Westinghouse' Air Brake, Third Rail, Railway Telegraph, etc.) and Howard Lewis Latimer (Patented the carbon light bulb filament that made Edison's light bulb practical). The Portland observer featured a number of half-page spreads on black contributors to the worlds technology. This was during Black History Month and many parents and teachers say that this was a real motivator and inspiration to students.

Last week's message about the "information glut" seems to have been well taken; especially where we quote Clifford

Stoll, the once chief guru of the Internet: Massive amounts of unsorted, untrustworthy information dumped in your lap - and the amount of isolation it can bring." Sort it out!

In addition to an already burdensome but necessary 'school district watch', parents and students find that they have to deal with new concerns. The GED (General Education Development Test) is becoming of increasing concern to employers. And they have to consider that this coincides with increased emphasis on "Proficiency-based Admission Standards Systems"

Every year over half a million people earn their GED certificate, but the school reform movement is raising the requirements for high school graduation across the country. Employers, colleges and military recruiters prefer high school graduates to GED holders. Parents and teachers alike are mounting even greater effort to discourage dropping out. This is so very important.

Many readers say that our original question may be moot (What Is Education, What Is Technology). "We may have to play this system by ear as it slowly defines itself. We like your choice of Humpty Dumpty's pronouncement, "Things are what I say they are". Is the entire next century to be like this?" Who really knows.

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