

Black History Month

African Americans Find Racism in Journey West

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where there'll be no slaves and we all start even."

Although things were bound to be better out west for African Americans than in the south, Morrison was dead wrong about everything "starting even." In the mid-19th Century Oregon would become the "most racist and prejudiced" state in America outside of the deep South.

Between the 1843 and 1844 meetings of Oregon's Provisional Government, an incident happened that increased current hostilities between whites and non-whites.

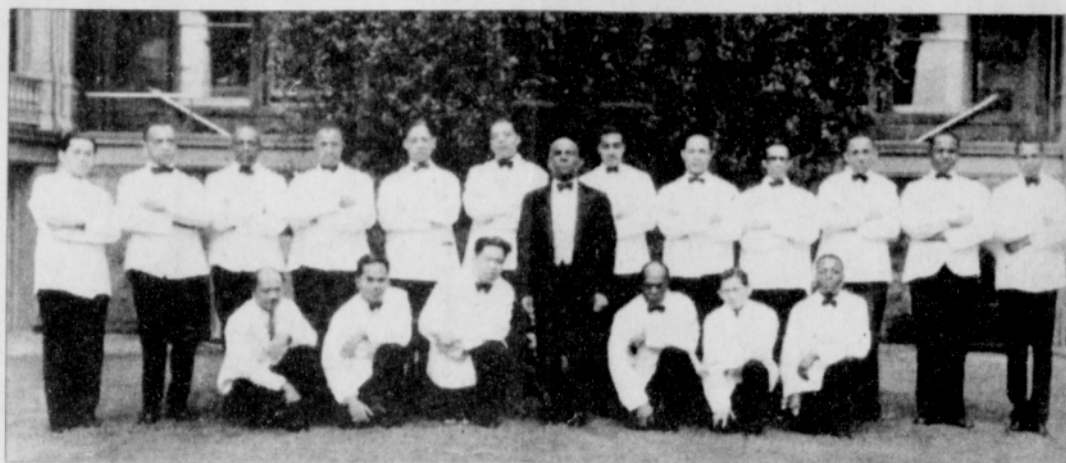
Already afraid of blacks and Indians, Oregon's racist white majority did not need much of an excuse to add fuel to the already burning prejudicial fires.

An event known as the "Cockstock Incident" became the accelerant whites needed in that fire. It involved a black man by the name of George Winslow, also known as Winslow Anderson.

He had hired an Indian named Cockstock to clear some farmland on Winslow's Oregon City homestead. Cockstock was to be paid with a horse when the job was done. However, during this time, the farm and horse were sold to another black man named James D. Saules. After the work was finished, Cockstock demanded the horse in payment. When Saules refused Cockstock stole the horse and vowed revenge upon Saules and Winslow. Elijah White, the local Indian agent tried to mediate and have the horse returned. A violent gun battle broke out leaving Cockstock, Elijah White, and one other white man dead. Several other innocent bystanders were wounded.

In 1844, the Oregon Country declared slavery illegal. Still, much prejudice existed in the state and Oregonians were still stinging from the Cockstock Incident. Thus Oregon's first exclusion laws were passed making it illegal for a black person to enter the state. In addition, the so-called "Lash Law" requiring all blacks to be beaten with a whip twice per year came into effect. Each black person was to be whipped no less than 20 and no more than 39 times. The only way out was to leave the state. By December of that year, the punishment was deemed too severe and reduced to "forced labor." Some blacks and their families left, others moved out into the wilderness hoping to avoid being discovered.

In 1848, Oregon's Provisional Government began putting more emphasis on exclusionary laws, hoping skirt the issue by not having any of America's blacks in the territory to deal with.



A photo dated around 1925 shows the African American waiters at the Portland Hotel. (Oregon Historical Society photo)

Sadly the exclusionary laws were not fully removed from the books in Portland until the late 1920s. Racist and prejudiced language can still be found in many small cities or communities today.

In the midst of the exclusionary laws being taken in and out of effect, a black man from Salem was arrested and convicted of living in Oregon illegally. In 1851, Jacob Vanderpool was a successful businessman, owned not only a saloon, but also a restaurant and boarding house. His office was right across the street from the Oregon Spectator newspaper. Although the exclusionary laws were once again temporarily not in effect, opponents said that they were in effect when Vanderpool came to Salem in 1849. This technicality was just enough for him to be found guilty. He was forced to give up all his enterprises and leave the state empty handed.

On the day after Vanderpool's conviction, the Oregon Statesman reported:

"There is a statute prohibiting the introduction of Negroes in Oregon. A misdemeanor committed by Vanderpool was the cause of bringing this individual before his Honor Judge Nelson, and a decision was called for respecting the enforcement of that law; who decided that the statute should be immediately enforced and that the Negro shall be banished forth with from the Territory."

One of Oregon's well-known pioneers, Jesse Applegate spoke of local feelings regarding the black population:

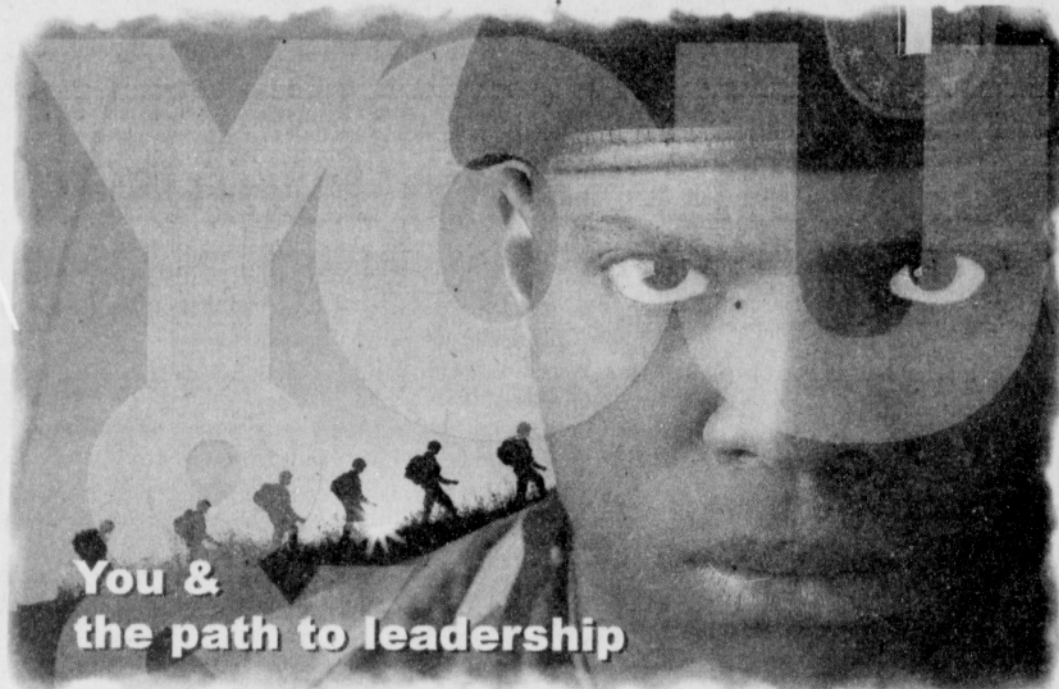
"Being one of the 'poor whites' from a slave state (Kentucky) I can speak with some authority for that

class - Many of those people hated slavery, but a much larger number of them hate free Negroes worse even than slaves."

Another influential settler in Oregon was a man named Peter Burnett. An article published by him in a Missouri newspaper was said to have encouraged racist people to move to this state during the times of the Great Migration beginning in 1844:

"The object (in moving to Oregon) is to keep clear of this most troublesome (black) class of the population. We are in a new world, under most favorable circumstances, and we wish to avoid most of these great evils that have so much afflicted the United States and other countries."

Simply put, citizens of Oregon pretended to be abhorred by the idea of slavery and yet at the same time were deeply unnerved by anything that resembled equality between the races.



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Ex-Panthers Work to Preserve Legacy



Former Black Panthers Bobby Seale (right) and David Hilliard talk about their days spent in the militant organization and its philosophies.

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both Panthers and officers.

Newton was convicted of manslaughter — a verdict later overturned — in the 1967 death of an officer who was shot when police stopped a car Newton was driving. Another officer and Newton also were wounded in that incident.

Seale and others were charged with conspiring to murder a party member who was believed to be a police informant; those charges were later dropped.

Yet these days, Seale wants to keep the focus on the Panthers' social programs. The group provided free, hot breakfasts to thousands of schoolchildren, for instance. It also conducted sickle cell anemia tests and advocated for more jobs and better housing for blacks.

"I never thought I'd live to talk about this," says the 64-year-old Hilliard who, like Seale, lives in Oakland. "We were being murdered and driven into exile and imprisoned. I spent no time thinking about history. We were too busy making it."

Seale recently moved back to his family home in this city after almost three decades away to be closer to his youngest daughter, a junior at San Francisco State University. The home occupies an important place in Panther history: The group held some of its first meetings around the dining room table in 1966.

Hilliard and Seale say part of protecting that history now is fighting an unaffiliated group called the New Black Panther Party.

PANTHER'S NAME 'HIJACKED'

They're considering a lawsuit against the organization, which they said has hijacked the Panther name to lend credibility to racist and anti-Semitic views.

"The New Black Panther Party is totally antithetical to everything we stood for," Seale says. "There's a youthful generation of people who will be totally confused."

The New Black Panthers have been deemed a black-separatist hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, but their chairman, Malik Shabazz, disputes that description.

Shabazz says the New Black Panthers focus on black power, ending violence in black communities and working with youth. They plan a national meeting early this year, where members will consider changing the group's name, he says.

But Shabazz, an attorney in Washington, D.C., also is confident the organization would win a legal fight over the name with the original Panthers.

Hilliard also works with the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, which he runs with Newton's widow, Frederika. He's motivated by a sense that the Panthers' agenda remains unfinished.

"There's a generation of people that need to know this history, because it is more than about the Black Panthers. It is about America," Hilliard says. The Panthers' activism could be a kind of "how-to" guide to help this generation fight today's battles," he says.

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