

FROM THE ARCHIVES

'Mayor of NE' Ran Hot Night Spot

By Paul Knauls Sr.
As Told to Helen Silvius
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My wife Geneva Fraser Knauls was 6 years old when she came to Vancouver, Wash., in 1946. Her dad came out from Minden, La., to work at the shipyards in Vancouver. The U.S. Army had depleted the work force, so they recruited African Americans to come here. Salaries in the South were very low, and up here they were much higher — so everyone just packed up and came to the Northwest.

I was born in a small town in the northwest corner of Arkansas — Huntington. It was a coal-mining town and my dad worked in the coal mine, which eventually killed him, because he got the black lung. My dad owed his soul to the company store. Every time he got paid he'd go by and just give them the paycheck. I went back there last summer and its population has grown to 681 — that's 200 more than it was just four years ago.

I joined the Air Force in June 1949 and went to basic training in San Antonio. Then I was sent to Fairchild Air-Force Base in Spokane, Wash. I was the first African American on Fairchild; they sent me to inte-

grate the base. Being the only Black man on a base with 4,000 Whites was quite an experience — it was very enlightening. Later on, five more African Americans came and we were in the same barracks.

We volunteered for three years, but the Korean War was on so they extended us by a year. I got into a good trade there; I learned to repair typewriters. If you didn't go to college you just had the armed services back then. Very few African Americans came out of the Air Force as staff sergeants in just three years and 9 months, but I was a good soldier.

I lived in Spokane and worked two jobs for 12 years because I wanted to be an entrepreneur. I was saving up my money so I would be able to go into business. I would go to work at 8 a.m., repairing typewriters for the Royal Co. I did that 8 to 5. Then from 6 to 11 p.m. I would work at the Davenport Hotel as a wine steward in the Matador dining room.

I was the first African American to work at the hotel, and I'll never forget the day when the hotel manager saw me there in my uniform. He almost died. He went straight to the manager of the dining room, Jack Gordon, and I just knew he was asking him what I was doing there. But Gordon just said yes, he'd hired me — and he left it at that.

Later on he got fired and I was still there — they all got fired, in fact, and I outlasted them all. Spokane had a population of about 15,000 at that time, and there were about 2,000 Blacks in the city.

My demeanor is such that I get along with



The Cotton Club today, on North Williams Avenue

everyone, so I can't say I suffered discrimination. I bought a house in a White neighborhood. The neighbors were a little rough, but they never saw me because I worked all the time.

On the mountain when I started skiing, I was the only African American on the slopes until I took my son, Paul Jr., when he was 5.

After those 12 years, I decided to come to Portland and buy a nightclub. My first choice would have been Seattle, but the rest of my family had moved out to Seattle — and they're very religious so I didn't want to open a nightclub near them.

My first nightclub was the Cotton Club at

2125 N. Vancouver Ave. It was named after the famous club in Harlem. In those days, all the artists trying to make it had to go on a circuit — it was actually called the Chitlin' Circuit — and it doesn't exist any more. So we provided that venue for artists to make their names known. Everyone back then knew: You haven't been to Portland if you haven't been to the Cotton Club.

All the big celebrities who played the Schnitzer and the Keller would come by after their performances and lots of them would play our stage because it was a safe place and a nice place to perform.

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Glass Floats on the Beach

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