



Cultural

CULTURAL GROUPS

“ In the mid 1930's, Eugene, Oregon, with a population of 29,092, was basically a white city with a few oriental residents. The population was quite bigoted and the Ku Klux Klan was still organized though not active.”¹

African-Americans

The racial make-up of the local population changed in 1937. Leo and Pearl Washington arrived from Texarkana, Arkansas, and “ became the first African-American family to establish permanent residency in Eugene.”² The couple was employed by the Russell family, of Russell's (department) Store, with Leo as a part time butler and gardener and Pearl as a housekeeper. By 1945, the Washingtons were living on East 6th Avenue, and Leo was operating the Washington Shoe Shine Shop at 610 Willamette Street, in the Hampton Building. During the war years, the couple took in African-American boarders who were employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad, where Mr. Washington worked as a baggage handler in the passenger depot. Black entertainers also stayed in their home, as the local hotels would not accept them.³

In 1942, Sam and Mattie Reynolds arrived in Eugene with four of their twelve children. The couple had a hard time finding housing, as no one wanted to rent to an African-American family, much less one with four children. Sam Reynolds obtained work with William Spicer, who owned a construction company. Spicer was able to secure a house for the Reynolds family on property owned by Lane County on the north bank of the Willamette River. It was near the Ferry Street Bridge, the only bridge connecting Eugene to the businesses and small towns to the north and the west. In 1943, Sam Reynolds purchased a sawmill on Loraine Highway with Tom Taylor and moved his family into a small house located on the property. Sam would remain in the lumber industry for many years, while Mattie worked as a salad cook at the University of Oregon.

“ In 1943, several other African American families moved into the settlement near the bridge. It continued to expand until as many as fifty persons resided in the sub-standard tent village.”⁴ However, it wasn't until after World War II that significant numbers of African-

Americans began relocating to Eugene. During the war, many defense plants and shipbuilding yards were located in Portland, which brought a large influx of workers, both black and white, from the Midwest and South. Thousands were housed at Vanport until it was obliterated by a flood in 1948. Workers dispersed throughout the state, including Eugene, where most worked in construction, the timber industry or for the railroad.

These newcomers had the same problems finding housing as their predecessors, based in part on restrictions being placed in deed transfers. These often stated that no person, other than those of the Caucasian Race, shall own, use, lease or occupy any portion of the premise, with exceptions being made for domestic servants. Consequently, most new arrivals took up residence in the bridge area, dubbed "Tent City." This was because most 'houses' consisted of a wood framework built on a wood floor with a tent pitched over the top for a roof. By 1948, there were eleven tents and three real houses in the settlement.

Not all Eugenians held the sentiments reflected in the deed restrictions. In 1948, when Leo and Pearl Washington moved to East 2nd Avenue, neighbors circulated a petition to encourage their departure. William and Minda Gilham lived directly behind the couple and refused to sign. Instead, they talked to other residents and ultimately convinced them to drop the petition.

In the late 1940s, Eugene and Lane County were making plans to replace the narrow and deteriorated Ferry Street Bridge. As the new design included off-ramps on the land occupied by Tent City, residents were served with eviction notices. To the surprise of some, this action created an uproar in the community. Groups, such as League of Women Voters, churches, and businesses assisted in the relocation of these families.

Of those forced to move, five families were relocated to the south side of the river, east of the bridge near High Street. Some moved into Glenwood, which was inhabited by low-income whites, where African-Americans were accepted, but essentially ignored. Many other families were placed in poorly built homes in an isolated section of West 11th Avenue near Bailey Hill. These homes had no modern conveniences, no flush toilets, not even a well for water. However, despite the lack of amenities, there was a strong sense of community. Incongruously, despite the good intentions of those involved, there was no thought to integrating the African-Americans into established neighborhoods.

The increasing presence of African-Americans in the community led to the establishment of new religious congregations. The Christian Methodist Episcopal St. Mark's Church was established in 1948 as a branch of the First Christian Church. It was founded by Pearl Washington, Mattie Reynolds and Annie Mims, with services initially held in the Washington home. The following year, the congregation purchased property at 3995 West 12th Avenue and services were held in a house that sat on the lot. In the early 1960s, the congregation constructed a church building at 4100 West 12th Avenue.

Although the section of West 11th Avenue where black families were relocated was beyond the city limits, by 1952 the deplorable housing conditions caused a stir in the city. The area had apparently been barred from the installation of water and sewer lines and septic

tanks. A state panel called the records of racial discrimination in Eugene and Salem among the worst in Oregon. As a result, a local civil rights organization, the Lane County Fellowship for Civic Unity, was established. Its first president was H.V. Johnson, a prominent local lawyer and former minister. The Fellowship focused on better housing and employment opportunities for African-Americans.

Despite the 1948 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court against discrimination in housing, the local middle-class did not readily accept blacks as neighbors. Inadequate housing continued to be the number one complaint during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1960, there were four complaints filed against local restaurants for refusing to serve minorities. Local beauty parlors simply stated that they did not know how to cut “that type of hair.”⁵ As a result, in the early 1960s, a black barber and beautician from Portland came to Eugene every Friday to cut, press, and shampoo the hair of the black community.

Some key events in 1963 had a direct impact on local discrimination. First, University of Oregon professors and students organized the Eugene chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). One of their earliest studies focused on police harassment, which they defined as the “systematic, patterned policy bias in using their authority to follow, stop and interrogate Negroes.” Second was the appointment of Oakley Glenn, a Native-American, to Captain of the Eugene Police Department and as chairman of the Lane County Fellowship for Civic Unity. This group was asked by the City Council to prepare a report on current race relations. As a result, the Human Rights Commission was established in 1964, and blacks began to be employed by the City, Pacific Northwest Bell, and downtown markets and department stores.

In 1964, the city announced that it would build a low-income housing project at East 2nd and High Street, in the area in which families from Tent City had been relocated. With the assistance of Civic Unity and the Civil Rights Commission, the city also planned a program “to aid black residents in obtaining good housing in any area of the city in which they chose to live.”⁶ This time, no two families were moved to the same neighborhood. It was the first step in integrating the Eugene community.

Danes

The Danish community that resided primarily in the Danebo (Danish borough) area west of town continued to grow during the Modern Period. This neighborhood was, for the most part, agricultural, with land described as “swamp-like”. “There was nothing to do but spend endless days draining the acreage and making a start at dairying.”⁷ The emphasis was on poultry raising, particularly White Leghorns, and dairy farming. The Eugene Farmers Creamery, a cooperative founded by resident farmers, was evidence of their success. Wick’s Barn, now the Petersen Barn, was constructed in the early 1930s for dairying pursuits.

Danebo residents continued to speak the Danish language and celebrate their native heritage and customs. Not until 1940 was service at the Bethesda Lutheran Church

presented completely in English. The following year, the Bethesda congregation erected a new brick church building adjacent to their existing house of worship. In 1945, six acres of church land were set aside to create Church Park, a memorial to those who had served in World War II. Without a town hall or civic building, the community's identity and focus centered on the church. Over the years, it offered such activities as bible study, children's ministries, women's circles, friendship groups, and exercise classes.

By the early 1950s, growth in both the neighborhood and congregation made it evident that larger and better facilities were required for social gatherings. Thus, Danebo residents and the Bethesda congregation began a building campaign, which resulted in the construction of a large parish hall, with stage, lounge, kitchen and seventeen classrooms in 1952-53. Ten years later, a new entrance to the church and a covered walkway to the parish hall were added. The Church continued to serve the community at large, reaching out to those not part of its congregation.

Asians

During the Modern Period, only small numbers of other minority groups resided in Eugene. Asian Americans in the area tended to teach at the University of Oregon or own small businesses, such as restaurants. In 1954, Ada Lee arrived to attend Northwest Christian College, and in the late 1950s, Tony Lum became the first Asian in a UO fraternity. Filipino women, who had married American soldiers, arrived in small numbers after the war.

Hispanics

"The Great Depression and a lack of jobs slowed, but did not entirely halt, the flow of Hispanics coming to Oregon. Even as unemployment soared and relief lines grew, Anglos avoided hard 'stoop' labor farm jobs."⁸ Hispanic workers from Mexico were hired out of need, and Oregon became a principal user of interstate migratory laborers. They arrived each spring to harvest strawberries, peaches, walnuts and apples, among other edibles. The railroad companies also hired large number of Hispanics to maintain the tracks.

During World War II, Oregon farms produced unprecedented amounts of food for both national consumption and for distribution abroad. This led to a critical shortage of workers. "Between 1942 and 1947, the federal government recruited an estimated 15,136 Mexican men to alleviate the farm-labor shortage."⁹ Laborers were employed under an international contract, which included provisions for a guaranteed minimum wage, health care, and housing. Although this contract labor was phased out after the war, there still existed a need for farm laborers, as Americans were hesitant to return to agricultural positions. This was an unprecedented opportunity for Hispanics. Workers were no longer confined to harvesting and picking, but had the chance to drive tractors and combines. Positions also became available in warehouses and food processing.

As a result, Hispanics began to settle permanently in Oregon after the war. They clustered along agricultural corridors, such as the Willamette Valley and Lane County, where jobs were plentiful. Oregon was an attractive destination due to the lush vegetation, lack of a sales tax, and better working conditions than those found in Texas. The Hispanic populations tended to be close knit and predominantly Catholic. Local retailers recognized the purchasing power of this group and stocked the groceries and household items they desired. Movie houses showed Spanish films. While integrating themselves into the larger community, Hispanics also maintained a strong sense of identity and continued to celebrate the traditions of their homeland.

By the 1950s, Eugene's hundred-plus Hispanic residents were mostly from Mexico and were drawn to the University of Oregon or jobs in the "thriving industries of the day, including lumber mills and railroads."¹⁰ As many did not speak English and the group did not have its own congregation, a priest from Salem or Portland came to Eugene once a month to hold a Spanish-language mass. It was not until 1965 that Club LatinoAmericano was established. This informal social-civic group provided Hispanics with an opportunity to both maintain their culture and introduce it to the broader community.

Summary

During the Modern Period, the local population truly began to diversify culturally. The African-Americans and Danes living in Eugene in the 1930s increased in numbers and prominence, and ultimately became integrated into the local society at large. However, not until the mid-to-late 1950s did the Asian and Hispanic populations begin to grow and become a noticeable presence in the community.

Cultural Endnotes

1. Oakley V. Glenn, Untitled history of minorities in Eugene and the establishment of the local Advisory Commission on Human Rights, c.1985, 1.
2. City of Eugene, Planning & Development Department, *Eugene Area Historic Context Statement* (April 1996), 96.
3. Glenn, 1.
4. *Eugene Area Historic Context Statement*, 103.
5. Glenn, 11.
6. *Ibid.*, 24.
7. *Lane County Historian*, Vol 47, 5.
8. Erasmo Gamboa and Carolyn Buan, eds., *Nosotros: the Hispanic People of Oregon*

(Portland, OR: Oregon Council for the Humanities, 1995), 12.

9. Gamboa, 41.

10. Kathleen Holt and Cheri Brooks, eds., *Eugene 1945-2000: Decisions that Made a Community* (Eugene, OR: Xlibris Corporation, 2000), 232.