

Bridging the River: A History of Housing Discrimination in Eugene, Oregon.

On its journey from the Cascades to the Columbia, the Willamette River runs through the heart of the city of Eugene. An artery fed by mountain snow, valley rain and water bubbling up from the earth, the river delivers life and cultural vibrancy to the city, binding the urban landscape from East to West and North to South. Parks line the banks of the Willamette as it flows through Eugene, peopled by a diversity of folk who freely cross the river's waters on numerous bike and pedestrian bridges that stitch the city's lively mosaic. However, this image of a city blooming around a central river is one that has only recently inscribed the landscape; looking deeper, we find a much darker history of racial division and segregation, marked upon the land.

Compared to other western states, the early history of Oregon reveals an inordinately harsh treatment of African Americans. Although the Oregon country banned slavery in 1844, this action was more of a strategy to keep black populations in the country at a minimum since no slave owners were actually forced to free their slaves when they arrived. Moreover, in 1844 the Oregon country's first exclusion law was passed, preventing free blacks from settling in the territory. This law was dubbed the "Lash Law" since it encouraged the whipping of blacks every six months until they left the territory. Although this law was repealed a year later, it was replaced by another exclusion law in 1849, and in 1859 Oregon became the only state admitted to the union whose constitution had an exclusion law. This exclusion law was not rigidly enforced yet it loomed like a phantom, along with a law preventing blacks from voting, in Oregon's

bill of rights until their removal in 1926 and 1927 respectively (End of the Oregon Trail Foundation, 2006).

Viewed within the context of more recent history, this strategic legislation can be seen as original efforts of racial discrimination aimed at avoiding the “Negro problem” in Oregon by excluding the entrance of African Americans into the state at levels high enough to render them visible to the white majority. Concurrent with the general trend of race relations in the United States, discrimination against blacks in Oregon did not dissolve as the 20th century marched forward. While enormous gains for the status of blacks were made, much of the tide of racism only became less overt, now forming a strong undercurrent which still aimed to push African Americans out of the white horizon. Discrimination shifted from a state level institutional racism, which excluded blacks from entering the state, to a city level racism operating through the agents of the individual and the institution, which often denied African Americans housing and forced them outside of the city limits.

The original manifestation of this type of discrimination on a large scale in Eugene came with the westward migration of workers before and especially during World War II. This migration was driven by prospects for shipbuilding work and led to a 392% increase of the black population in Portland from 1,931 to 9,495 and an 8,690% increase in nearby Vancouver from 10 to 879 during the 1940's. Some of these workers continued on, following the Willamette River southward to Eugene to find work with the lumber mills or the railroad, and a more significant influx of workers made their way to the city after World War II defense contracts fizzled out (Taylor, 1998).

In 1937 the Washington's became the first black family to establish roots in Eugene (City of Eugene, 2003). While the Washington family was able to secure housing and jobs, the vast majority of African Americans migrating to Eugene at the time were not so lucky. Upon arriving in Eugene most blacks were not able to secure decent housing within the city due to inequities in wealth as well as direct discrimination preventing them from renting or owning property.

One form of housing prejudice was property managers or owners excluding African Americans as tenants. This is illustrated by story of Bill Powell, a black man who purchased an apartment complex in Eugene in the 1970's. The manager of Powell's apartment, who he had not yet met, called him and told him she had, "these niggers at the door and wondered if it was still the policy to not rent to them" (Nagae, 2000: 201). Her job did not last long after that, but the fact that this blatant prejudice still existed in the 70s attests to the force it must have had earlier to keep African Americans from renting.

The vestiges of Oregon's exclusion laws also found their way into housing deeds, preventing black ownership of property. This is illustrated by the text of one exclusionary reference in a deed recorded in 1946 stating: "No persons other than those of the Caucasian Race shall own, use, lease, occupy...portion of said premises, providing that this restriction shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race employed by an owner...." (Nagae, 2000: 201). Incidences such as these were not limited to a few odd cases but were common obstacles to housing facing African Americans in Eugene.

Discriminatory practices such as these did not scare the Reynolds family away. After coming to the Eugene area to find work in 1942, Sam and Mattie Reynolds, along with their four children, were the victims of numerous racist acts intended to push their family from the community. Lyllye Parker, one of the Reynolds' children, explains the difficulties her parents faced trying to find housing and work in the area:

When my mom came and they moved down to Eugene, one of my dad's patrons, I called him, had rented them an apartment and my mom said "as we moved in the front door, the white people moved out the back door." And then a petition was bought and they were asked to move. The patron then bought a house for my family on 7th and Van Buren in his name, but my father was born to make payments because, of course, he couldn't buy a house here; and when they found out it was a black family there were petitions and great concerns about us being there. So my parents once again moved and we moved to the Loraine Highway area where my father was involved in a saw mill—part owner—and his partner was a white gentlemen, and he and his wife had some marital problems and were divorced, and in her divorce she won the sawmill, so my dad lost that investment. So he decided to stay on the land and farm and his animals came up dead. And then that history then placed us, as the community started growing, into the Ferry Street Bridge area.

This was in the mid 1940's and at this time the Willamette River marked the northeastern boundary of the city. It was on the opposite side of the river, in a county woodlot near the Ferry Street bridge, where the Reynolds were provided with a shanty by William Spicer, the employer of Mr. Reynolds. Here they became one of the first African American families to settle in the Ferry Street bridge area that had historically been a transient camp. As more blacks moved to Eugene and were denied housing within the city limits, other families joined the Reynolds and eventually a community of 22 families, mostly black, grew into what was later know as "Tent City" (Thoele, 1993).

Although Lyllye was too young to remember the Ferry Street bridge community, she has learned in speaking with her mother and older siblings that "Tent City" was a bit

of a misnomer: “There were no tents. Every family in the community had a wood-framed house that was constructed by the men in the community,” explains Parker. Willie Mims on the other hand, was eight or nine years old when his family moved into the area and recalls the construction of the dwellings that made up Tent City: “They got unusable material from the sawmills around and built little huts with scrap lumber” he explains. Some of the dwellings were houses with wooden roofs, but many, such as the Mim’s first house, were simply wooden frames with canvas tents for roofing.

My father put together two places, the first place, I slept on an army cot, the ground was the floor, and I remember building a little frame around--it was probably no more than maybe about ten by ten. The frame around was about... maybe four or five feet high and from there they rigged up a tent for the rest of it and for the rooftop.

The Mims family only stayed in this house for four of five months and then built another small house with scrap lumber. “The second place had a wood floor and it also had a roof,” recalls Willie. Neither of the houses had windows, and through cracks in the thin walls you could see daylight. Apart from the houses, they built outhouses since there were no utilities available to the residents of Tent City; water even had to be carried in from a few blocks away. This was the general scheme of the shanties in Tent City.

Luckily every family had a woodstove for cooking and heating, and all the fuel they needed to keep the fire going through cold winters along the river, right in their backyard. Piles of wood literally made up their backyard, recounts Willie: “You had to move some wood in order to do anything on the ground.” This was usually only done to make way for building houses or outhouses. The community did however, construct a small church with the aid of the Fairmount Church of Christ in which the residents could

congregate and worship (Thoele, 1993). Mims recalls an event in which a famous black entertainer and activist came to the church:

My vivid memory of that was Paul Robeson... Mark Hatfield coordinated some kind of activity to bring this giant of a black man to Oregon, and believe it or not... maybe the most famous black man of that time, and this would be in the late 40's, came to Eugene Oregon where we had a population probably of about... maybe a dozen black people, and he came to that church.

The church probably helped to build the strong sense of black community in the settlement that was extremely important for enduring the hardships the inhabitants faced:

“There was a very harmonious relationship between the blacks who lived there,”

explains Mims. “There were problems, but we had a strong, almost tribal feeling”

(Thoele, 1993: 2).

Likely one of the most severe problems in Tent City was seasonal flooding of the village by the Willamette River. Flooding was a frequent occurrence at that time since the dam system which now protects the valley from floods had not yet been constructed.

While the city of Eugene was mostly protected from floods by high banks on the southeastern side of the river, the area where Tent City was located on the northwestern side of the river was all floodplain. In the Winter the river would swell with rain and snow, and floods would rush in and devastate the village. “The water probably rose... probably a good four or five feet” recalls Mims, “I know the water rose within the floor area because I remember the family cleaning out the mud and that sort of thing when we returned. It wasn't livable....”

Unfortunately these catastrophes were not uncommon and with every major flood the village would have to evacuate until the water subsided. “I remember that we had to move out of there a couple times, twice in one year and once in another year because the

dams weren't built on the Willamette River so it would flood" recalls Mims.

Recognizing the devastation that the winter floods brought to Tent City, groups such as First Christian Church and the Red Cross would help out with aid, but these groups did little to help improve the conditions of the settlement overall. The fact remained that Tent City was a marginalized and virtually segregated community, cut off from the prosperous and safe, white city of Eugene, by the natural boundary of the Willamette whose wild fluctuations disproportionately damaged the predominately black village.

Not all was gloom and hardship in the Ferry Street bridge community; Mims remembers that the elders generally protected the children from talk of hard times and the kids fully enjoyed their childhoods:

Being a young person at the age you know like 8, 9 years of age it was, you know, it was fun. I had a couple playmates and we would play cowboys and Indians in the woodpiles... we used to ramble and play through those wood piles and stuff you know so we could hide and that all sort of thing. So as kids it was fun and plus the family didn't really share the misery with the kids... I never remember my family talking or any other elders talking about the difficult times that they were having as far as the social living conditions was concerned.

Nor did the constant flooding of the Willamette distort Mim's perspective of the river at the time; like the woodpiles it was another popular play site for the children:

We could catch trout anytime, just walk down the river and catch rainbow trout anytime. We'd camp out, learn to swim in the Willamette... [We] got caught there by Mrs. Reynolds once. We was forbidden to swim in the river, but you know, being young boys we always did things that was forbidden. So she whipped everybody's tail, you know, because in the black community it is really a village. ...you obeyed all elders... when elders tell you to do something you did it. If you didn't do it you might get your hide tanned twice; once for what you did and once for not obeying what another elder would tell you to do.

These recollections indicate that the children still led relatively carefree lives and show how the black community developed to support this, protecting the children from hearing the talk of the hardships, and watching out for children communally in the pernicious area in which they lived and played. The community was strong; confronted by crippling poverty and injustice, instituted by the unsympathetic majority on the other side of the river, as well as the larger society, it had to be. “Folks had to depend on each other pretty much ... there was not a lot of intermixing,” explains Mims, “If you didn’t have employment, some kind of normal income coming in, they’d fix everything else that you need to survive on. I think probably the strongest resource that people had was each other.”

But even the tightly knit community could not stop the bulldozers of urban renewal from leveling the village in the name of development. In early 1949, the city of Eugene announced plans to replace the old, dilapidated Ferry Street Bridge. The plan for the new bridge included off-ramps in part of the area occupied by the Tent City residents (Thoele, 1993). This proposal stirred up the Eugene community, waking many residents up to the wretched living conditions of Tent City. An uproar in the community brought groups like the League of Women Voters as well as churches and businesses to the aid of the soon-to-be displaced residents, helping with their relocation (City of Eugene, 2003).

One of these activists who reacted to the injustice was DeNorval Unthank, then one of the few black students at the University of Oregon. ““People were being taken advantage of pretty badly,”” tells Unthank. ““It was a hostile situation in a lot of ways. Part of the university community and the larger community were very worried that the real-estate community and other interests were trying to sell them a pig in a poke””

(Williams, 2000: 237). This turned out to be the case for many of the residents of the Ferry Street Bridge who were relocated to an area on West 11th. Lyllye Parker remembers life there vividly,

We were outside of the city limits, there was no city benefits. We had no running water, therefore we had no plumbing. We had wood burning stoves. It was probably my—somewhere between my 10th and 13th year that we got a water faucet outside, until that time we hauled water from Tagison service station which was probably $\frac{3}{4}$ to a mile from our house.

The living conditions hadn't changed much despite the actions of concerned groups whose aid was often superficial and marked by condescension, recalls Lyllye Parker,

There was always a certain part of the white community who had heart...it was almost like we were in a third world country so they would come with their clothes, cast-offs, furniture that they no longer wanted--- and I'm not saying that it was unappreciative, but now in my older years I realize they meant well... but more out of 'we are society people and we are expected to do this for these poor negro folks...'

This didn't change the reality that there were no utilities and the community was pushed miles past the city limits out of the visibility of Eugene. The houses were better than in Tent City but Parker still describes them as "shanty houses," and the floods followed the new community. Amazon creek ran right next the neighborhood and would swell with winter rains every year, Lyllye remembers:

I do remember flooding on West 11th, they came and they put the Amazon in, and every year when they first put it in it would flood... and the Red Cross would come in and rowboat us out until the water receded.

While the floods followed the relocating families to West 11th, so did the strong communal spirit that marked the village along the Willamette: "It was a time, though times were hard, we didn't realize how hard they were because we were all there together and it was such a sense of community" reminisces Parker.

That was the scene at the largest relocation community, but families were also relocated to an area on Glenwood, where conditions were a little better. The Mims family was also able to acquire two homes within the city on 3rd and High St. with the help of the owner of the Osborn Hotel where C.B. Mims worked. The owner of the hotel purchased the homes in his name and sold them to the family. This transaction resulted in the Mim's being one of the first African American families to own property in Eugene. 3rd and High St. was a poorer neighborhood at the time, but it was a big step up for the many families that came to occupy these houses after living in the settlement along the river.

In July of 1949, when only some of the families had relocated, Tent City was bulldozed to the ground. Although the new bridge project only required the bulldozing of some of the houses, the entire village was demolished (Thoele, 1993: 2). Today, Alton Baker Park occupies much of the land that was once the dwelling area for migrating blacks who had no housing options in the city. A broad pedestrian path skirts the Willamette and divides a vast field of grass from the vegetation along the bank; a curving duck pond, always a popular attraction on a sunny day, sits where a footbridge crossing the river touches down. Running parallel to the footbridge, the Ferry Street Bridge looms up river. Where the bridge makes contact on the North side of the river, a tangle of roads branches out, weaving around car lots and parking lots. Buried beneath grass, concrete and pavement, the weight of families strolling in the sun, an athlete jogging, a group of youth throwing a disc, and an elderly woman feeding ducks, lays the village of Tent City.

A dark spot in the history of Eugene, the story of Tent City is one of harsh discrimination against African Americans driven by deep prejudice and a historical

climate of exclusion laws and mistreatment in the Oregon country. A crack in the neutral façade of Oregon, it reveals an ugly racism which likely did not surface on a more nationally recognized level because of the low population of African Americans in the state and strategies which marginalized them and rendered them invisible to the white populous. As one racist article in the Oregonian from 1952 addressing the “Negro problem” simply put it, “There aren’t enough Negroes in and around Eugene to be a major problem” (Scott, 1952: 2).

After the Ferry Street Bridge calamity the black population did gain some visibility in Eugene. Significant change was slow to come, however, and major gains for the status of blacks weren’t made until the 1950’s and 1960’s as the civil rights movement gained momentum and activism stemming from the black communities and the university strengthened. Lyllye Parker and Willie Mims were highly involved with Civil Rights activism and helped to gain equality for blacks in education, employment and housing in Eugene. Thanks to the civil rights movement, the situation is much better for African Americans in Eugene today than it was fifty years ago. Lyllye Parker works at the University of Oregon and Willie Mims owns a screen door business. The Mims family still owns the houses they purchased on 3rd and High St. after moving from the settlement along the river.

The Willamette River no longer marginalizes the black population of Eugene with an impossible divide of race and class. The Ferry Street Bridge now arcs over the river connecting a more diverse city than was imaginable fifty years ago. But still there are problems, “Based upon other places in this country, Eugene is just as bad as any other place. We can still find people getting harassed because of their color, and housing and

jobs and the whole bit” says Willie Mims. The Ferry Street Bridge debacle did help to catalyze the black population of the city in a motion toward racial equality that still continues today. But the very existence of the bridge signifies a painful displacement of African Americans driven by a strong racial prejudice that cannot be erased from Eugene’s history.

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