

BRIEF HISTORY: METROPOLITAN HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION

In February 1950, the Portland City Council unanimously passed an ordinance making it illegal for public accommodations operators to refuse service on the basis of race, color, religion, ancestry, or national origin. That ordinance had been proposed and backed by a group of citizens appointed by Mayor Dorothy McCullough Lee to serve as a Mayor's advisory committee on inter-group relations. On March 9, 1950, that group received official status as a City Commission with the passage of an ordinance creating the Portland Intergroup Relations Commission. The duties of this Commission were listed as carrying out programs of public education concerning prejudice and discrimination, investigating discrimination complaints, and making recommendations to the City Council.

Shortly before the Public Accommodations Ordinance was to go into effect, a group of hotel, restaurant, and tavern owners succeeded in having the ordinance referred to the voters. In the November ballot, the voters turned down the measure.

The Intergroup Relations Commission then undertook the project of attempting to educate businessmen who did discriminate. Since their efforts were not backed by law, they were largely unsuccessful. Finally, in April of 1953 the State of Oregon passed a Public Accommodations Law prohibiting such discrimination. Enforcement of the new law was entrusted to the Civil Rights Division of the Oregon State Bureau of Labor.

From its creation in 1950 until 1966, the Intergroup Relations Commission continued to function without benefit of a full-time staff, investigating discrimination complaints in the areas of employment and housing. In 1965 (during what will be remembered as the era of the "race riots") Commission Chairman Fred Rosenbaum requested funds for a full-time staff, and in 1966 a budget was approved. An Executive Director was appointed, and the organization was renamed the Portland Human Relations Commission. In 1969 an Assistant Director and a full-time Secretary were added to the staff.

Citing the need for a centralized agency with special authority to carry out programs for improvement in the field of human relations, the City of Portland and Multnomah County joined together in December 1969 to establish the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission. The City/County Agreement set forth for accomplishment the following purposes:

- Securing mutual understanding and respect among economic, religious, ethnic, and social groups;
- Conciliating intergroup conflicts;
- Conducting positive programs aimed at improving intergroup understanding.

The action of joining with Multnomah County produced a significant effect on the Commission's scope of activities. While previously it had concerned itself almost exclusively with civil rights matters, it now found itself becoming involved with promoting citizen-government relations. In addition to providing support to the Commission's civil rights activities, MHRC staff began providing information regarding various government services, assisting citizens on the use of government service, and dealing with complaints or grievances

against local government. Staff members also served as a referral source and provided other assistance to local private helping agencies.

It was during this period that the Commission first became involved in the mediation of neighborhood conflicts. Neighborhood conflicts are among the more difficult cases brought to the Commission's attention. In most cases of this type, Commission staff members act as communication bridges for neighborhood residents and attempt to work out problems informally. The addition of a Neighborhood Mediation Unit, which is projected to be a CETA grant in the fall of 1977, will considerably enhance the effectiveness of this process.

During the 1974-1976 period, question had been raised about whether this metropolitan area continued to need the services of a Human Relations Commission. The rationale often given was of three sorts:

1. Those who thought that since the mass racial confrontations of the late sixties were no longer occurring, there was no need to have such a Commission;
2. Others thought that the Commission was not an effective or productive agency; and,
3. Still others thought that the agency had overstepped its mandate by becoming involved in certain very controversial issues; e. g. , the police killing of a Black youth (Ricky Johnson), and the advocacy of equal employment for homosexuals.

The first assertion -- the lack of large-scale racial confrontation implied that a Human Relations Commission was no longer needed -- is obviously erroneous and rhetorical. This City needs more than just a crisis-oriented tactical squad for quelling group conflict. The City's commitment to having a broadly representative citizens' body to conduct programs, investigate and fact find, promote and advocate; to monitor and advise in matters pertaining to human rights and human relations issues, has been established. To turn back from that commitment would be a digression of grave portent to us all.

To the second assertion -- that the Commission was ineffective -- the proper response would be to make it effective, not abolish it.

The third assertion can be responded to thusly: The American society and the Portland community have evolved a consciousness that concerns itself with the human rights of all its disadvantaged citizens. Only if there were no more unfair discrimination would there be no more need for such a Commission.

In its present form, the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission is comprised of fifteen members: seven appointed by the Mayor, seven appointed by the Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, and one member elected by the City/County appointees. Each serves a three-year term. The Commission is functionally organized into the following committees:

Executive Committee - to provide over-all direction to the Commission and its committees; to take action when the Commission is not in session; to provide consultation to the Executive Director.

Housing and Employment Committee - to promote fair housing and employment policies and practices.

Education Committee - to promote high quality equal educational opportunity for all students.

Equal Justice Committee - to promote equal justice for all, with special regard for those traditionally disadvantaged.

Staff support to the committees is provided by the MHRC office. Permanent staff currently consists of an Executive Director, one Human Relations Program Coordinator, one Human Relations Specialist, and one Secretary. The Commission also takes advantage of programs such as the College Work Study Program to secure additional staff support. This year (1977-78), the Commission's capacity has been extended by several CETA positions. The Executive Director is selected by the Commission, with approval from the Mayor and the County Chairman, and is responsible for the hiring of the other staff members.

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RUSSELL A. PEYTON

On January 1, 1967 he became the first salaried staff member to serve on the Portland Human Relations Commission. As Executive Director of the Human Relations Commission, he will coordinate the work of the Commission members in carrying out studies of inter-group relations problems in the City of Portland, and how they may be improved.

He is a graduate of Oklahoma University, and he has had several years of study in Law. One of his first jobs was to accompany a member of the Chinese legation in Washington, D. C. on an extended tour of the United States to study conditions of people of Chinese ancestry in all the major cities of our country. From 1928 to 1942 he was a partner and a member of Sheppard & Peyton, a firm that worked closely with the petroleum industries. While he was a partner in this firm, he did a unique kind of work that involved investigations of contractual relations between oil and gas producers. He was frequently called upon as an expert witness in oil industry disputes.

Following the declaration of war in 1942, he was requested by the War Manpower Commission to aid in the production of ships. He was head of the inspection and testing department for the Kaiser Company at the Oregon Ship Yards. He represented the company in its relations with all government agencies concerned with documenting the vessels for delivery.

Following the war, he decided to remain in Oregon and became interested in social work. He joined the Urban League in working for civil rights legislation in the State of Oregon and assisted in making an attitudinal survey of white home owners and assisted in other research problems.

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In 1954 he took the position of representative for the Civil Rights Division of the Oregon Bureau of Labor and held this position until his recent change to Director of the Human Relations Commission. He was also a member of the Washington County Community Council and was President of this organization for several years. It was during his term of office that consideration was given to the establishment of agencies in the County for service on a local basis. He also became a board member of the Portland Community Council.

In 1955 he became a charter member of the National Association of Social Workers. He was also a board member of the Oregon Prison Association and former President. He is a delegate to the Joint Council for Social Welfare Legislation and has been Chairman of this organization for several years.

Under Governor Holmes, he was President of the President's Committee on the employment of the physically handicapped for Washington County. For some 15 years he has been Chairman of the Salvation Army's service unit for eastern Washington County. He has been a board member of the Portland Urban League for many years, and, at the present time, is secretary to the board. He is a member of the committee for the National Urban League Convention to be held in Portland in August of 1967. For many years he has been a member of the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials, and, at the present time, is co-chairman of the Northwest Region of that organization.

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His is on the committee for the Self-help Housing Program that is being sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. He is on the board of the Oregon Social Welfare Association, and he has held various offices in that organization. He is also secretary of the State Advisory Board of the Salvation Army. He is on the Steering Committee of the Greater Portland Housing Council.