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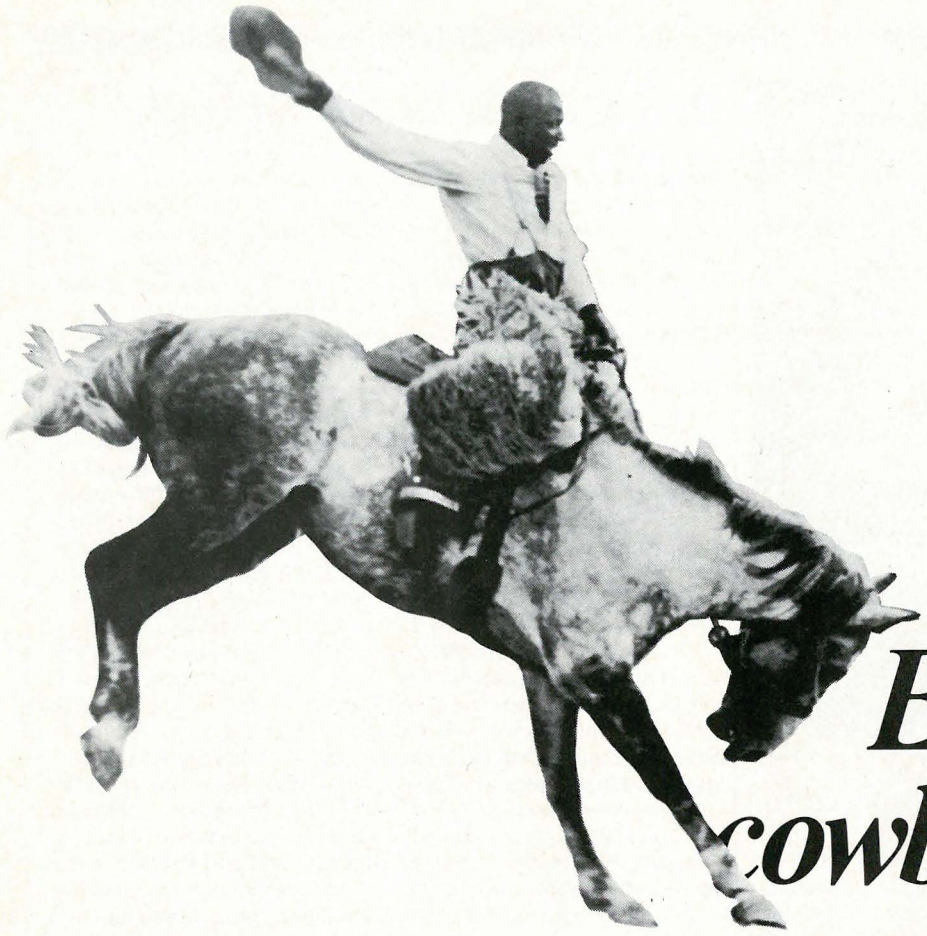
Oregon Times

JULY 1978

ONE DOLLAR

BLACKS IN OREGON



Even black cowboys get the

In 1850 a black could be the fastest gun in the West, the wealthiest settler in the Territory, even an Indian chief. By 1950, he was lucky to have a job sweeping up.

by Dick Pintarich

Is it possible that Kilchis, a chief of the Tillamook Indians in the 1850s, was black? Journals of early pioneers mention the strong Negro traits evident in the chief's appearance. If that's the case, and if the legends about either of two occasions on which Kilchis's forebearer could have joined the tribe are true, it follows that Oregon's first non-Indian settler was a black man.

Indian legend has it that sometime in the 18th century there was a shipwreck on Nehalem Beach. Indians called the vessel the "Beeswax Ship" after the quantities of cargo that washed ashore; historians say that it was probably the Manila galleon *San Francisco Xavier*. The story goes that one of the survivors was a black who taught the Indians how to make knives from the metallic parts of the wreck. His knowledge was greatly respected by the Tillamooks, and he soon married into the tribe. Chief Kilchis is supposed to have been one of his descendants.

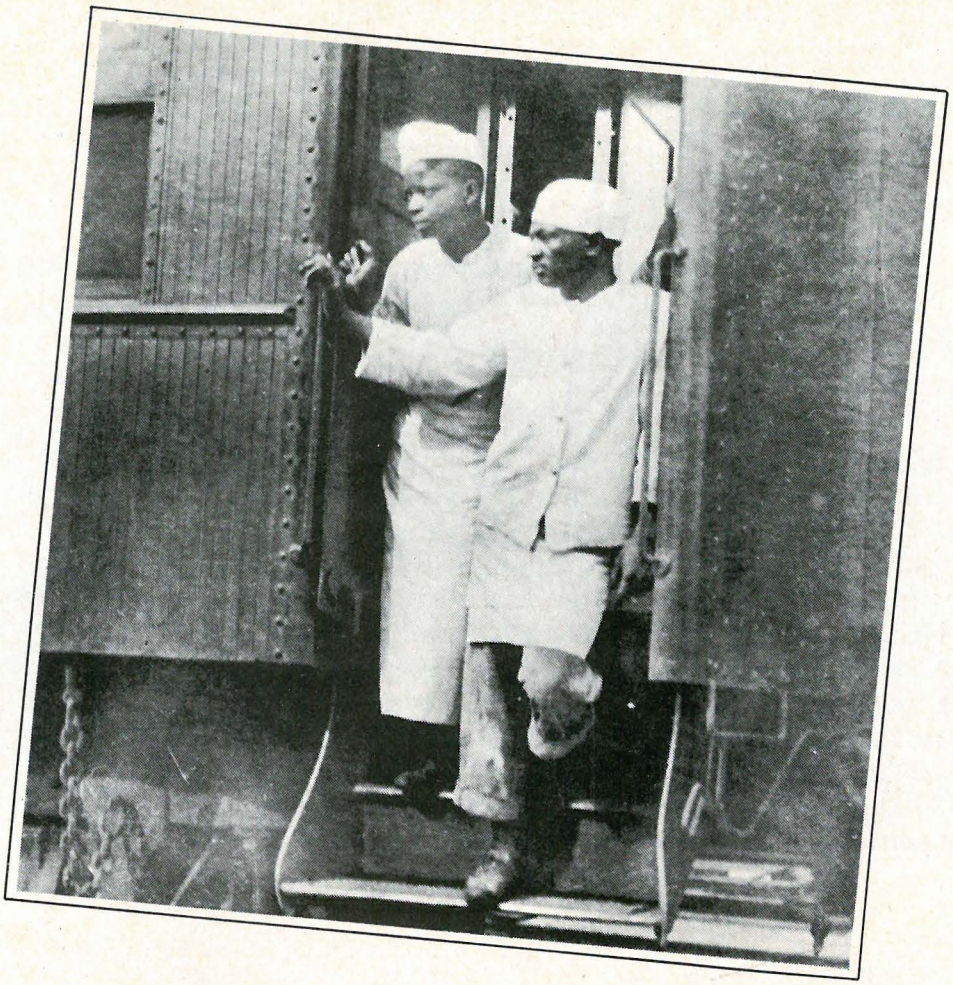
The other possibility involves the first documented case of a black in Oregon. He was Marcus Lopius, personal servant of Captain Robert Gray when he set down his anchor in Tillamook Bay in 1788. When the crew went ashore to do some trading, a squabble arose. One Indian tried to "steal" a tool—the idea of private property was a European import—and Lopius chased him down. While this act of heroism was taking place, Gray's crew of good Bostonmen beat a hasty retreat back to the ship. The last time they saw poor Lopius, he was apparently being stabbed to death by the Indians. Captain Gray moved on, but not before dubbing the bay "Murderers' Harbor."

Lopius *may* have been killed, but the fleeing crew didn't pause to check his pulse. It's intriguing to conjecture that he survived and joined the Indians, his son becoming chief.

Improbable? Not really. In the fluid days of the early pioneers, blacks were mountain men, gold miners, cowboys, wealthy entrepreneurs, even founders of cities in the burgeoning Oregon Territory. (A George Washington founded Centralia, Washington.)

The author and the editors of Oregon Times *would like to thank the Oregon Historical Society for its generous cooperation in the preparation of this story.*

blues.



Interestingly enough, Indians and blacks generally got along well on the frontier. A man named York took part in the Lewis and Clark expedition, originally as personal servant to Captain Clark, but later as an interpreter, mediator and decision-maker. He was reportedly the subject of admiration and curiosity among the Indians, and the expedition journal records that Indian women enjoyed "petting" him.

Only once was York's color a disadvantage. To the Selish Indians black was the color warriors painted themselves before battle. They regarded York with deep suspicion until, rubbing wet fingers over his body, they became convinced it was his natural color.

York completed the expedition and tried for awhile to make a life for himself in the East. When that didn't work out, he must have remembered the Indian maidens. He vanished, and years later a mountain man found him living happily among a band of Missouri River Indians —with four wives.

York profited by his frontier adventures, but Jim Crow spread his wings early over the land that was to become the state of Oregon. For fully 100 years, conditions for blacks here were scarcely better than in Mississippi. And for a brief, terrifying moment, the Ku Klux Klan rode and virtually ruled in Oregon.

Marie Smith, who came to Oregon in 1917, recalls what the state's Southern-style racism was like prior to World War II. When internationally acclaimed black tenor Roland Hayes came to perform in Portland in the 1920s, she remembers, "he wasn't allowed in any of the better hotels. He had to use back elevators, and he had to eat in his room. We found it very embarrassing that our town would treat such a great man this way."

An influx of blacks during World War II to help man Kaiser's shipyards changed all that. The state's black community went from 2,500 in 1940 to 25,000 in 1945. An urban, Northern-style form of discrimination took over, particularly in jobs and housing. It was easy for employers and unions and real estate agents to discriminate because Oregon, unlike Washington and California, had not passed one bit of civil rights legislation. An oversight, to be sure, but hardly a surprise in terms of what one historian frankly labels "Oregon's racist heritage."

39 Lashes on the Back

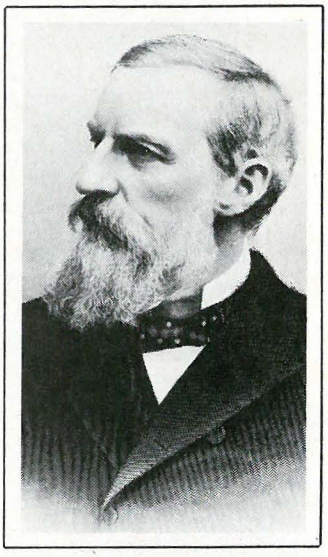
Discrimination against blacks was written into the territorial constitution in 1843, which accorded the right to vote to "every free male descendant of a white man twenty-one years old." Careful wording had to be used because many of the legislator-settlers had Indian wives. The intent was to exclude blacks.

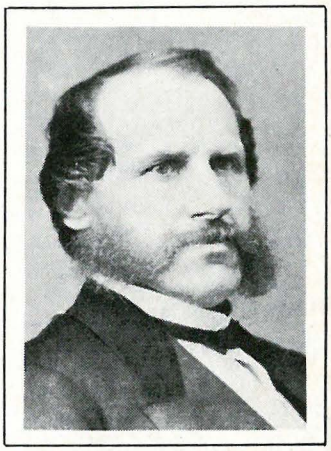
As if to underline the point, in 1844 a law was passed forbidding slavery in Oregon. All well and good. But the same law forbade blacks as well. Slaves not removed from the territory within three years, the law said, were to be freed. On the other hand, free Negroes who were still in the state in three years would receive up to 39 lashes on the back, to be repeated every six months until they left.

There were several reasons for sympathy for such legislation in Oregon, including the much-mouthed fear that Indian-Negro alliances might lead to revolution; but the determining factor was doubtless that most of the new Oregon settlers came from the South and Midwest, and their attitudes came with them. Part of the rules of an 1843 wagon train from Iowa read: "No Black or Mulatto shall, in any case or circumstance, be admitted to this society, or be permitted to emigrate with it." Ex-residents of the Midwest, while opposed to slavery *per se*, found it hard to tolerate "saucy free Negroes," as one pioneer put it.

Nevertheless, black people were not immune when "Oregon fever" bit the nation in the 1840s. George Washington Bush came west in 1844 and soon became one of the richest men in the territory through farming and the promotion of wagon trains. Anti-black laws had already been on the books for a year, and theoretically applied to the whole territory, but the sheriff wasn't required to

Left to right: Governor La Fayette Grover prefigured George Wallace in the schoolhouse door; Chief Justice George Williams pointed out that slaves would be too expensive to maintain during the winter; George Washington, like George Bush, headed north away from racism, and founded Centralia; Governor Joseph Lane wanted Oregon to secede from the Union; Mayor Earl Riley thought Portland could only absorb "a minimum of Negroes"; Dr. DeNorval Unthank fought to stop the birth of a ghetto, but later generations called him an Uncle Tom.





cross the river. Bush got as far as The Dalles, sized up the situation, and turned north, taking with him many of his companions, black and white. Ironically, it was a decision that later helped the United States claim land from the British up to the 49th parallel. The area, they could point out, had been colonized by Americans.

In the early days, the anti-black laws had little practical application, since there were so few blacks in the territory. Most of the blacks who could afford to make the trip west were free, but despite the anti-slavery clause in the constitution, several whites brought slaves with them. One such slave, Robin Holmes, tested the law in 1844 by suing his owner for custody of his still enslaved children. Holmes won his case, but not many blacks imitated him. A black drawing attention to himself could easily become the victim of the territory's *other* anti-black laws. Thus, slavery was not uncommon here, and even Joseph Lane, Oregon's first territorial governor, had a black man who wasn't given his freedom until 1878. Lane was a Southern sympathizer and chose to ignore the results of the Civil War.

When it came time to draw up a constitution for statehood, one of the key issues here, as in the rest of the nation, was the status of blacks and whether to allow slavery in the state-to-be. The debate among delegates in Salem and in the newspapers was highly emotional, but pro- and anti-slavery forces agreed on one thing: They were both anti-black.

Those in favor of slavery, mostly Democrats, spoke loudly of the need to preserve the Union by maintaining a balance between slave and free states. The Corvallis *Occidental Messenger* claimed that "African slavery is the conservative feature in our system of government and must be broadly maintained . . ." "Scientific" articles appeared which showed "Negroes were not truly human," but somewhere between man and beast.

Although outnumbered, the pro-slavery forces were better organized and boasted some of Oregon's most prominent citizens. Judge Matthew Deady was a rabid pro-slavery man; Governor Lane imported a journalist from the East to edit the *Portland Times*, a pro-slavery newspaper. When an anti-slavery convention met in Albany and wanted to have its minutes printed in the Salem *Statesman*, the pro-slavery editor Asahel Bush refused, calling the group "a collection of old grannies."

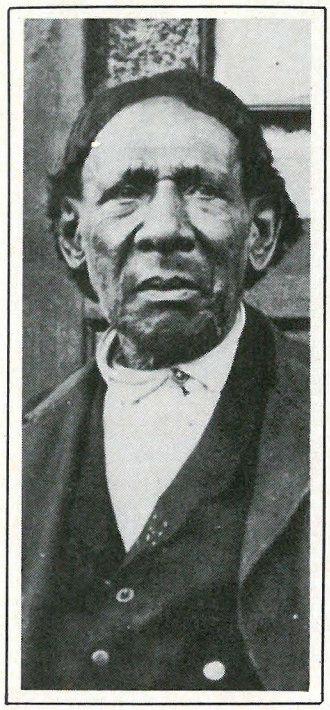
A slave state on the Pacific coast looked possible until George A. Williams, chief justice of the Oregon Territory, wrote a lengthy letter to the *Statesman*. In it, he argued the case against slavery on pragmatic, if not very enlightened, terms. Williams maintained that slaves would be too expensive to bring to Oregon and maintain during the long winters; slaves might "degrade" the quality of free white labor; and once set free, he warned, blacks might overrun the state, joining with the Indians to endanger white rule.

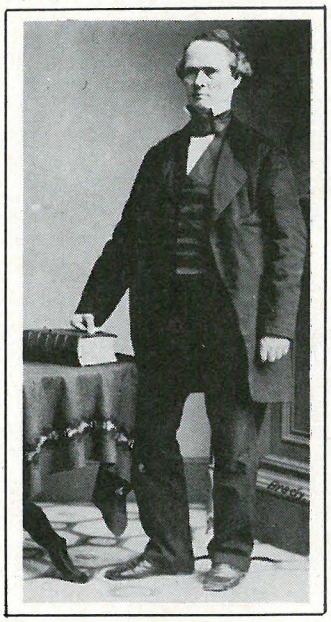
The Williams letter changed Oregon minds about slavery, but not about blacks. Slavery was rejected 7,727 to 2,645, but the measure to prohibit free Negroes from immigrating to the state received an overwhelming nine-to-one blessing.

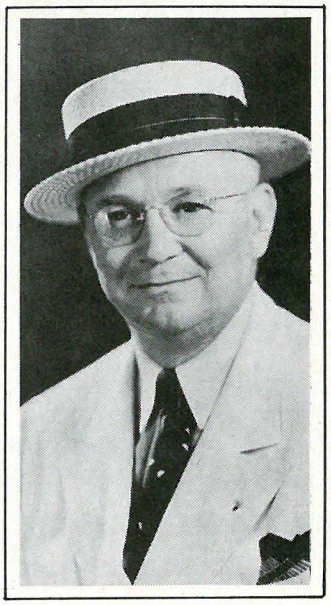
Apparently, many voters agreed with a letter which appeared in the *Oregonian* in 1855: ". . . niggers should never be allowed to mingle with the whites. . . . Niggers always retrograde until they get back to that state of barbarity from whence they originated. . . . They never kin live with the whites. The almighty has put his mark on them. . . ."

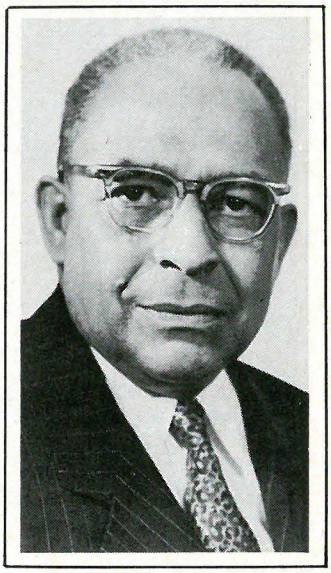
"When in Doubt, Vote No"

In their first presidential election as a state, Oregonians chose Abraham Lincoln in 1860 with the less-than-overwhelming support of one-third of the electorate. Lincoln later said he carried the state by the "closest political bookkeeping that I know of." With his election came a backlash of saber-rattling for the South. Following the lead of the "Knights of the Golden Circle,"









3,000 strong in Oregon, Governor Lane lobbied unsuccessfully in favor of seceding from the Union to form a "Pacific Republic of Western States."

After the war, the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery, passed easily enough in Oregon. But the Fourteenth, guaranteeing citizenship to blacks, barely passed the legislature, which later voted to rescind its ratification—twice. Governor Woods didn't even bother to call a session to vote on the Fifteenth Amendment—black suffrage. He knew the legislature would never ratify it, and indeed, Oregon didn't get around to approving the Amendment until 1959.

Agitation against the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments was widespread. The *Statesman* said with disgust, "The fetid corpse of buried abolitionism is risen again, quick with the demon spirit known and hated of old." The *Oregonian* asserted that it was the policy of the federal government to force white men's daughters to marry blacks.

In a move that prefigured George Wallace in the schoolhouse door, Governor LaFayette Grover said in his inaugural that the amendments "have never been legally sanctioned," and would be accepted by Oregon "only under duress."

All this vitriol, at a time when there were perhaps 300 blacks in Oregon! And truth to tell, racism in Oregon was focused on a more visible target—the thousands of Chinese who entered the state after the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, which encouraged such immigration. Still, the black exclusion law grated. One out-gunned liberal sarcastically proposed a revision in the state's exclusion law in 1864, which read in part: ". . . a white man may murder, rob, rape, shoot, stab, and cut any of the worthless, vagabond races. . . . Provided, he shall do said acts of bravery and chivalry when no white man is troubled by seeing the same."

Modify that sentiment slightly, and you hit mainstream Early Oregon. In 1900 and 1916, ballot measures to eliminate Oregon's "Black Laws" from the constitution were referred to the voters. These laws had long been made obsolete by federal law, but as the *Advocate*, a black newspaper, put it, they were "a disgrace to Oregon's fair name." Fair name or foul, in both elections the measures were defeated. Not until 1926 did Oregonians finally vote to eliminate black exclusion from their constitution. In so doing, they failed to follow the editorial advice of the *Oregonian* for this election: "When in doubt vote NO." Little harm could come of voting against a measure, counseled the editors, "But we can't be sure of the effect of change."

Like most immigrant groups, Oregon's small black population formed lodges and organizations, not only for companionship, but to help out one another in times of need as well. One such group, the Working Man's Joint Stock Association, was formed to help blacks financially, its function similar to a modern insurance company. Most often, however, blacks looked to their church for these purposes. The first black church in Oregon was the People's Church, founded in Portland in 1862. This grew into the First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in the '80s, and survives today.

Transcontinental railroads came to Oregon in the 1880s, and with them the first significant increase in black population. Many came with the railroads as porters and waiters, and a host of others sought employment in railroad-related capacities as Portland became a bustling terminus. When Henry Villard brought his Northern Pacific Railroad to town in 1887, he also began the construction of the Portland Hotel, one of the most elegant of its day. The manager imported about 75 blacks to work in the hotel as waiters and cooks.

It was difficult for blacks to get any job outside of menial labor—one man reportedly made $400 a month, good pay in those days, but he had to hold 12 janitorial jobs to do it. Not surprisingly, then, the men working in the Portland Hotel became the elite group. Once settled, they generally bought homes and moved their families out West. They also formed the New Port-

Trainworkers on parade. In the 1880's, they produced the first big increase in Oregon's black population. They were an elite, but were encouraged to leave when their employment was up.

land Republican Club, which grew to have a say in local politics—all the way down to appointments to the police force.

Others who were influential, but with a difference, were the blacks involved with the wide-open underworld life of turn-of-the century Portland. Gambling and prostitution flourished in the "cribs" of Northwest Portland, where most of the city's blacks then lived. The underworld and the corrupt politicians of the day worked together very well; political favors were exchanged liberally without respect to race.

By the turn of the century, in keeping with the national trend toward urbanization, most of Oregon's thousand blacks lived in Portland. This trend, by the way, was encouraged by ruralites such as the white citizens of Liberty, Oregon, who, in 1893, ordered all blacks out of town. This action prompted the Portland *Telegram* to suggest the town change its name.

The effectiveness of black political groups was growing. A branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was organized in Portland not long after the group was founded in 1909. When a group called the Afro-American Club began lobbying for legislation in 1919, they succeeded in having introduced a bill which called for the extension of "equal privileges in hotels, theaters, and other public places to all persons regardless of race." Because it was a politically sensitive issue, they had a hard time finding someone to sponsor the bill in Salem. A Multnomah County representative finally agreed, but it had rough sailing in partisan waters. Some Portland delegates tried to steal all available copies to prevent discussion. The lone surviving copy was cycled through more than its share of committee hearings and several moves for indefinite postponement.

Before the tally, a female representative named Thompson announced, "I am going to vote against this bill because I am a Southern Democrat and still harbor the prejudices of the South toward the colored race." Then she warned, "But no Republican, of the party of Lincoln, could vote against this measure."

This speech so benumbed one Republican from Multnomah County that he slipped out of the hall and locked himself into a committee room on the third floor—a sort of Profile in Cowardice. Unfortunately, he was missed: the Speaker ordered he be brought back "dead or alive." Discovering the locked room, but getting no response after hammering at the door, some of his colleagues crawled through a transom to forcibly evict the Honorable Representative. Asked to explain his absence, he began his explanation, "I don't want you to think I was trying to dodge a vote on the question."

"Of course not," chorused the House.

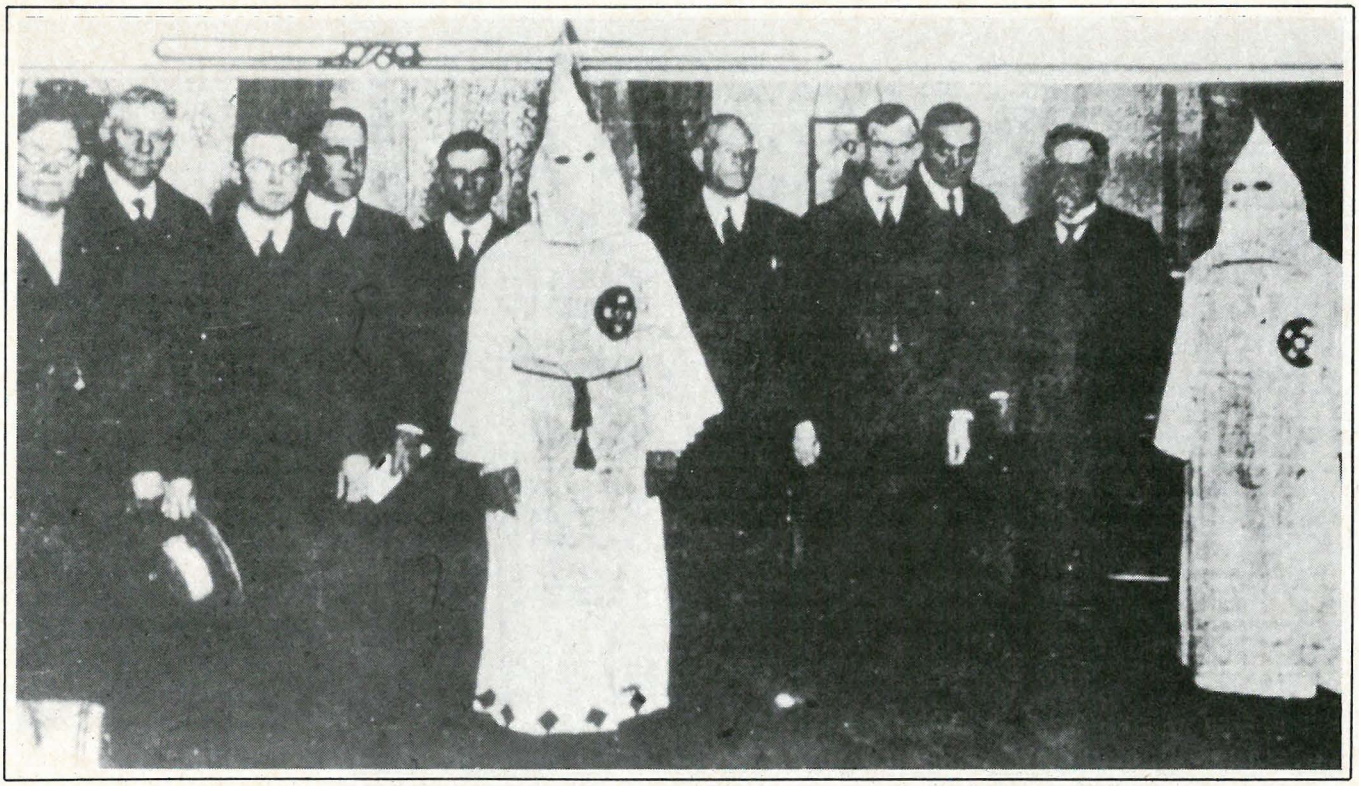
Antics over, the roll was called, and the measure was narrowly defeated.

"Koons, Kikes and Katholics"

One of the early campaigns of the Oregon NAACP was to protest the showing of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Griffith's version of Reconstruction had Southern audiences shooting up the screen when a freedman was shown seducing a white girl, and drew wild applause when the white-hooded heroes of the movie, the Klansmen, rode up to save the day.

Small wonder, then, that alongside advertisements for *Nation* was displayed the Imperial Wizard's invitation to come join the newly disinterred KKK, which billed itself as "a high class order for men of intelligence and character."

By 1921, the "Invisible Empire" was in full swing in Oregon, complete with robes, hoods, King Kleagles and all the other claptrap associated with the struggle against, as the KKK put it, "Koons, Kikes and Katholics." The Klan in Oregon was organized by Major Luther Powell (King Kleagle) and run by Fred L. Gifford (Exalted Cyclops). It was estimated that by 1922 there were 25,000 active members in Oregon, and as one historian explains, "Capitalizing on postwar tensions, the



For four years, the Klan ruled. Left to right: representative National Safety Council; Portland police captain; Chief Jenkins; Sheriff Hurlburt; D. A. Evans; King Kleagle Powell; Lester Humphreys; special agent, Justice Dept.; Mayor Baker; P. S. Malcolm; Exalted Cyclops Gifford.

Klan claimed to have grown from nothing . . . to control of Oregon politics by 1922."

There's a lot to that claim. The Klan was strong enough to pass legislation closing all Catholic schools and win the ensuing referendum vote (though it was soon declared unconstitutional), and almost single-handedly to elect a dark horse candidate, Walter Pierce, governor.

In Portland, the Klan got Mayor Baker to agree to the organization of a vigilante force of 100 to aid the police. Baker also agreed that the Klan should help choose these men, perhaps an insignificant concession, since the Klan already claimed 150 members of Portland's finest as members.

Because of the relatively small number of blacks in Oregon at the time, the Klan directed its main effort against Catholics. But blacks were not completely overlooked. A man was lynched by a hooded mob near Jacksonville in 1922 for allegedly stealing chickens, consorting with white women and bootlegging. In Medford, George Burr was lynched but cut down before death and ordered to leave the area. Women living in Northeast Portland were branded and warned to leave the city.

But the ideology of the Oregon Klan may have been confused. Once they donated the lumber for the construction of a black church—presumably on the grounds that it was not Catholic.

The Klan collapsed as suddenly as it had sprung up. Rank and file klansmen began to notice that dues were rising sharply—was Cyclops Griffin lining his own pockets? Dissatisfaction increased when some pressed to recall Governor Pierce, who appeared totally indifferent to Klan wishes once he got into office. Other kluxers argued it wouldn't look good to recall a man they'd worked hard to elect. The resulting power struggle tore what was left of the Klan apart. By 1924, it was finished in Oregon.

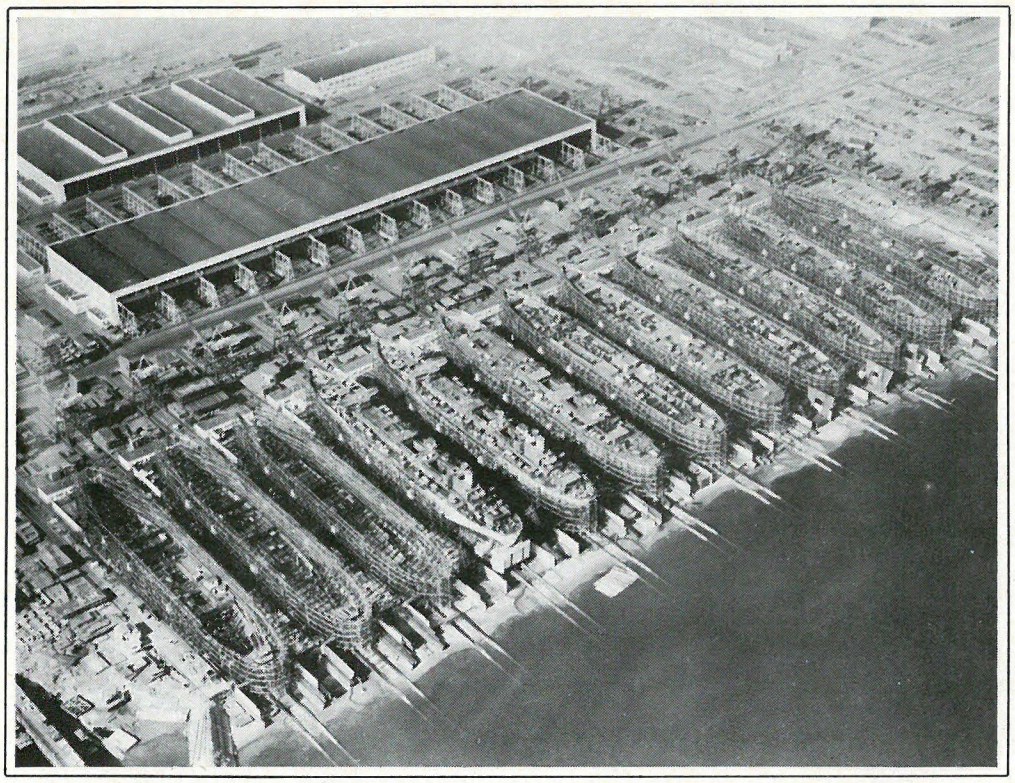
By the end of the '30s, 98 percent of Portland blacks worked for the railroads in some capacity. There seems to have been an unwritten agreement in this period that no one else would hire a black, or if they did, would pay their way out of the state once the job was finished. Even the waiters at the Portland Hotel had been fired and their places filled by white waitresses, a move combining racism with sexism that resulted in lower wages.

Jim Crow was still the norm in restaurants or theaters, but school segregation was not a problem in Portland because there were so few black children and they were widely scattered. School segregation was a reality only in towns like Vernonia, where the sawmill imported its laborers and set up separate facilities for blacks.

The widely scattered living pattern of Portland blacks was changing, however, and not by accident. Dr. DeNorval Unthank, Portland's only black doctor at the time and the black community's most important spokesman, complained in the *Oregonian*, "There is a well-organized plan—long in planning—to set aside the Albina district for Negroes. . . . [The Portland Realty Board] is encouraging and advocating this policy of discrimination and segregation."

Many years later, historian E. Kimbark MacColl in *The Shaping of a City* published proof to support Unthank's claim—in the form of a letter by prominent Portland realtor Chester A. Moores of Commonwealth, Inc. "We were discussing at the Realty Board recently the advisability of setting up certain districts for negroes and orientals," Moores wrote. "We talked about the possibility of creating desirable districts which would actually cater to those groups and make life more pleasant for them. After all," he added in a stroke of munificence, "they have to live too, the same as youngsters."

And so, segregated housing was instituted by local realtors meeting around a conference table. As a matter of "ethics," local realtors would refuse to rent or sell homes to blacks outside of specific areas. When in the 1920s the YWCA donated a building on Williams Avenue for a black YWCA, some protested, believing it should not be accepted because it was an obvious



WWII Shipyards. The shortage of workers was so acute that Kaiser was running trains from the East and South; yet the unions were locking qualified blacks out.

move toward segregation. But most blacks accepted the gift gladly as a needed center for the community. By the end of the '30s, Albina housed most of Portland's black population.

"Why Don't You Go Back Home?"

As America geared up for the Second World War, the increased job opportunities and high wages of defense work encouraged many blacks to migrate to Portland, where the shortage of workers was so acute the Kaiser Company was running trains from the East and South to transport shipyard recruits.

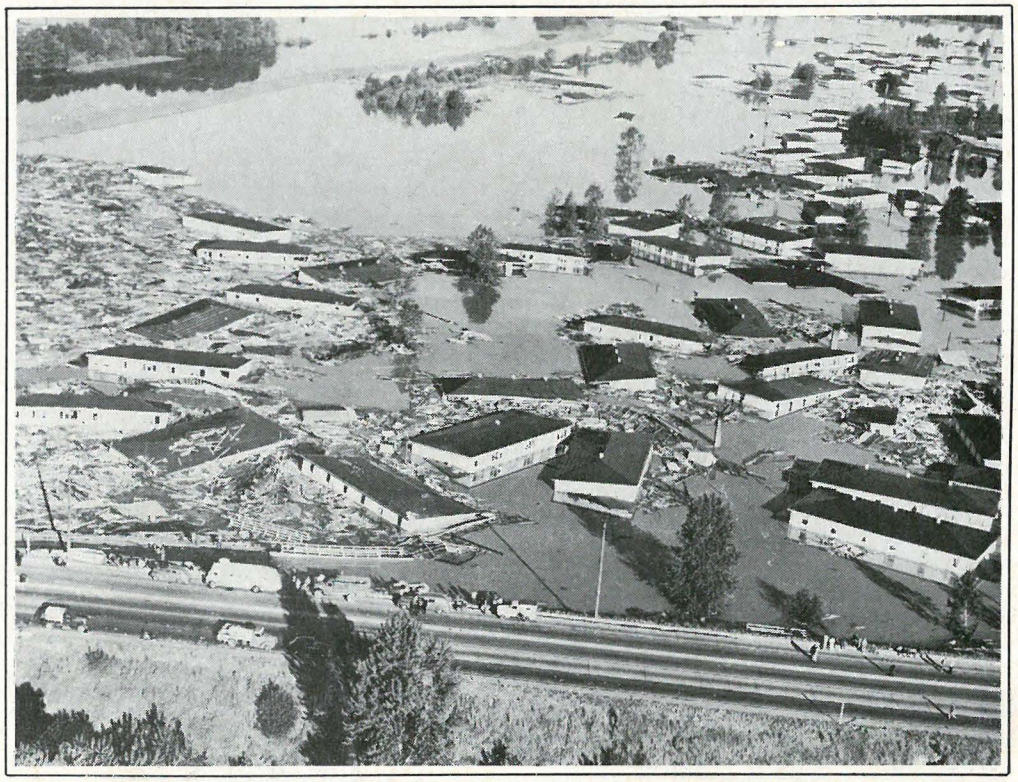
The September 30, 1942, edition of the *Oregonian* includes a front-page photo of 500 happy, singing New Yorkers arriving in Portland on the "Magic Carpet Special" en route to the Kaiser shipyards. Not shown were the 30 blacks on board. These men were the forerunners of many more, and they were not welcome. Buried in the same edition was a report on a meeting held by white Albina residents protesting the proposed construction of a Negro dormitory in their area. The major complaint was that if more blacks were allowed to move into the area it would bring an increase of crime and the depreciation of property values. Said a leader of the protests, "If it is necessary to bring in large numbers of Negro workers, locate them on the edge of the city. If they are allowed to fan out through the city, it will soon be necessary to station a patrolman on every block to prevent what some Negroes are pulling around here." There were frequent complaints that blacks were molesting white nurses around Emanuel Hospital. Of course, there had been a long history of *white* men molesting the nurses, but that wasn't news.

Blacks looking for work in the shipyards immediately ran into trouble. The boilermakers union, which controlled most of the shipyard employment, refused to let blacks work at skilled jobs even though many were qualified. When forced by federal wartime regulations to admit the black workers, the boilermakers asked them to join "an all-Negro auxiliary boilermaker union." Eighty workers refused to join the Jim Crow union and were promptly fired. The attitude of the boilermakers forced blacks into a Catch-22 situation: Unions often claimed blacks needed to improve their skills to be employable, but blacks were excluded from boilermaker and machinist vocational schools because "it was a waste of training facilities to train Negroes in these trades inasmuch as they could not find employment in them." Of course they couldn't find employment—the unions were locking them out.

The NAACP applied pressure, and matters improved—a little. Blacks were allowed to work, but there remained rigid segregation on the job. Nathan Nickerson, now acting executive director of the Urban League of Portland, came to Oregon from California during World War II. Despite a college degree, experience as a "leadman" in California shipyards, and impeccable credentials, he couldn't get a skilled job, though the doors were wide open to white people with absolutely no experience.

Nickerson went to the Oregon State Employment Office, where he was told nothing was available. Spotting a list of job openings on the desk, he read: "Swan Island Shipyards. Welder. White Only. . . . Kaiser Shipyards. Burner Trainee. White Only. . . . Oregon Shipyards. Scraper. White Only. . . ." The state itself was following the dictates of the boilermakers union. He finally took a job running a black crew which was allowed to do menial work or work whites didn't want to do. What really rankled was that, though he couldn't join the union, the shipyard took union dues from his paycheck.

Long-time residents of Portland, both black and white, expressed disgust with the well over 100,000 wartime migrants pouring into the city. While this growth brought with it undesirables of all races—escaped convicts, active burglars, peddlers of vice—race conscious Portland's main concern was writ large in a 1942 *Oregonian* head-



Vanport, 1948. Portland still hoped the black migrants would disappear, and that's nearly what happened.

line: "New Negro Migrants Worry City." Dr. Unthank complained to the paper, saying, "the worry to the city is the prejudice in its heart, the unfairness to a group of people who are coming to Portland to do their part, however small."

One problem that was not imaginary was a shortage of housing for war workers. On the East Side, black population more than doubled, and migrants were forced to sleep in churches, lodges, on tavern pool tables and in the back seats of cars. Outside the Albina area the only housing available to blacks was in a few West Side hotels formérly run by Japanese, who, of course, were now interned.

And there was endless talk about crime, even though the black crime rate, outside of misdemeanors like "loitering," was not out of proportion to the total population. But with little to do and no place to go, blacks often hung out on the streets or in local gambling parlors and were easy marks for the police. Misdemeanor arrests fed a strong anti-black feeling in Portland, aggravated by what Reverend J. J. Clow called "damaging newspaper publicity," which blamed the blacks for what was really "police hysteria."

Said Clow, "The entire Negro population should not be criticized for what one or two Negroes do. This is not a war against the Negro, but a war against Japs and Germans." But Mayor Earl Riley gave the government's view: "Portland can absorb only a minimum of Negroes without upsetting the city's regular life." The "problems" would be solved, he thought, if black migrants went back to where they came from.

Before the war was over the black population of Portland had risen to nearly 25,000, and many expressed desire to remain. Federal wartime regulations prohibited segregation, and when federal housing was developed at Guilds Lake and Vanport, the overflow of black war workers moved in. But even new communities practiced what was called "spot integration," restricting blacks to specific areas within the developments.

Although government leaders sometimes declared Portland to be leading the nation in race relations, it was a truism among black migrants that Portland was one of the worst towns on the West Coast. Black soldiers were not allowed to enter white recreation facilities, and a special USO center was opened for them on Williams Avenue. The war also saw an increase in "We cater to white trade only!" signs, declared illegal in Washington and California years before. When one black war worker went into a Chinese restaurant and his attention was called to the sign by a Chinese girl, he asked, "How the hell did you get in here?" He complained to the mayor, who promised to investigate. But nothing could be done because there were no ordinances forbidding racial discrimination by restaurant owners.

As the shipyards were phased out after the war, blacks were usually the first to go: "Last hired, first fired." Unions didn't recognize black seniority. Many left town, but not all. Two years after the war, statistics showed 12,000 unemployed blacks in Portland—the total black population was unknown.

Prospects for blacks after the war were grim. There were no jobs available, segregation in housing was blatant, and discrimination of all types was practiced more than before the war. Julius A. Thomas of the National Urban League described Portland as "the most prejudiced town in the West," and the *Journal of Social Work* said race relations in Portland were the worst of all Northern cities; yet, responding to a rumor that these tensions could result in a race riot, Mayor Riley was quoted as saying he did not believe a race problem existed. The *Oregonian* editorialized that racism was "comparatively so minor a problem, it would be shameful for us to engage in even a discussion of extreme reaction." Portland still hoped the black migrants would disappear.

Which is very nearly what happened. Many blacks lived at Vanport City, on the site of what is now Delta Park. Jerry-built crackerbox houses stood on low swampy land surrounded by leaky dikes and railroad em-

The Albina Mural Project will be a major attraction for the thousands of delegates to the NAACP Convention in Portland this month. Murals portraying black workers, Martin Luther King, measure 20 by 20 feet.

bankments. In May 1948, record stream flows on the Columbia began surging at the dikes. "Don't get excited!" a leaflet from the housing authority began, in an attempt to calm concerned Vanport citizens. The next day, the dikes gave way, the flimsy houses were washed downriver, and Vanport became a lake 30 feet deep.

By 1950, Albina had become a community of overcrowded, unemployed and largely frustrated people. Some blacks tried their luck in Eugene, lured by increasing sawmill employment. They were sold lots at inflated prices on a tract of land one and a half miles west of the city beside Amazon Creek. It so happened, however, that Amazon Creek, which drains the city and most of the surrounding area, had been "improved" by the Army Corps of Engineers in such a way that whenever it rained, water stood in large ponds around the shacks occupied by the black families. There were no water or sewer lines. "The kids were sick all the time," one resident remembers.

Eugene blacks had few choices. One family rented a home on Friendly Avenue, a nice-sounding but highly inaccurate name. No sooner had they moved in than the landlord received a call threatening to "blow the house off its foundation" if his tenants didn't leave. There were only 142 blacks in town, but Eugene residents were afraid more would follow. The prevailing (albeit familiar) attitude was voiced by a representative of the governor's office when he asked a spokesman for the Eugene black community, "Why don't you go back home?"

"Your Foot on My Neck"

Oregon had passed some civil rights legislation in 1949, the Fair Employment Practice Act. Employers and unions had to be more subtle now, but they still discriminated. As late as 1959 it was reported by Wallace Turner in the *Oregonian* that even the "flaming liberal Harry Bridges has not admitted Negroes to [the Longshoremen's] Portland local." The attitude of the public was made clear in 1950, when a Comprehensive Civil Rights Ordinance was passed by the Portland City Council. Referred to the people, it was soundly defeated.

It has been said that the 11,000 blacks who now remained in Oregon were not militant, that they were "waiting for a break in attitudes" and a fair shake in housing and employment. But, Marie Smith believes, "the migration opened up things. Now there were enough blacks to crack open other fields besides railroads and hotels. The trouble before was you couldn't tell employers to hire blacks if there weren't many blacks around to hire." Historian Gordon Dodds agrees: "The migration strengthened older community organizations like the NAACP and stimulated new ones like the Urban League." Also, "the newcomers gave the Caucasians an opportunity to deal with blacks other than as members of a tiny minority and gradually to erode Oregon's racist heritage."

If Oregon had not passed any civil rights legislation before 1949, it suddenly became very active in the field. The Fair Employment Practices Act was soon followed by the Vocational Schools Law (1951) and the Public Accommodation Law (1953), among others. In 1957, these laws were strengthened by amendment, and the first Fair Housing Act passed.

It was the overture to two decades of legislative progress, and the new sense of urgency was expressed by E. Shelton Hill, for a time director of the Oregon Urban League. "If you've got your foot on my neck," he told the *Oregonian*, "I don't want you to remove it 'with all deliberate speed.' I want you to remove it NOW."

And inevitably, men like DeNorval Unthank, who had formed their tactics as leaders of a tiny, isolated black community in a hostile society, began to be perceived as "Uncle Toms."

"They fought a good fight," said Mayfield Webb, head of the local NAACP, "but things are moving now, and they just aren't with it."

By the end of the '50s, Oregon

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Mural artist Isaac Shamsud-Din lived in Vanport until it was washed away in the flood of 1948.

had become one of the leading states in terms of civil rights legislation. If the black community was a little unfair in reconsidering the records of men like Unthank, the historical revisionism that now beset Oregon as a whole bordered on total amnesia. Here is the Oregon Blue Book for 1959-60:

"In 1949, still true to her traditional policy of fair treatment for all workers, Oregon became the sixth state in the nation to pass a Fair Employment Practices Act. . . . If Oregon sticks to her traditional labor policy, she will continue to be a good and reasonable place for the laboring man and woman to work and raise a family."

Traditional policy?

Need it be said, legislative progress does not automatically translate into social parity. According to a recent study by Portland State University, unemployment among Oregon blacks is now one and a half times the white rate, while median family income for blacks is only 54 percent of white family income.

And in 1978, school segregation is a fact of life in Portland, courtesy of an earlier era's real estate "code of ethics." In 1964 Boise Elementary School was 96 percent black. After nearly a decade and a half of integration efforts, that figure has dropped no lower than 80 percent. Several area elementary and high schools face similar problems.

Elsewhere in Oregon a residual racism survived to celebrate the bicentennial with the rest of our traditions. In 1975 Pat Wheeler, a black woman, received a grant to produce a film on Oregon black history for public television. When she walked into an Ashland restaurant with white cameraman Ed Geis, the result was a minor sensation. Amid a silent, staring crowd, the waitress made it clear that they had better clear out. Later, in Klamath Falls, Wheeler phoned a prominent local historian said to be interested in bicentennial projects. She asked him if he had any information about the history of blacks in the area. His one-sentence reply ended the conversation: "Don't know nothin' about 'em, and I don't *want* to know nothin' about 'em!" □

Six thousand delegates are in Portland this month for the national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It is the first time the convention has been held here, though there has been an Oregon branch almost from the NAACP's beginning in 1909.

Through July, the Oregon Historical Society has on display a Smithsonian Institute traveling exhibit—"Blacks in the Westward Movement." This is a subject long ignored by historians, novelists and filmmakers, despite the fact that at least half of the cowboys on the Chisholm Trail were black. A large photographic display demonstrates how common it was in the old West to see a black mountain man, gold miner or one of the many cavalrymen known as Buffalo Soldiers.

Yes, "Deadwood Dick" was black, and he may have been the fastest gun in the West.

The Albina Mural Project has completed its giant paintings of the Afro-American heritage with special emphasis on blacks in Oregon. Each mural measures 20 feet by 20 feet and illustrates one era of black life. Pioneer settlers, black workers and the Vanport flood are some of the subjects treated by local artists who know the state well; artist Isaac Shamsud-Din lived in Vanport until it was washed away in the flood of 1948. The murals are at the Albina Human Resources Center at 5200 N. Vancouver Avenue.

A badly needed new book on Oregon black history has recently been published by the Black Studies Center at Portland State University entitled *Blacks in Oregon, an Historical and Statistical Report*. It covers the subject better than anything to date.

"Freedom Frontier: A History of Blacks in Oregon," originally a film written and produced by Pat Wheeler for the Oregon Educational and Public Broadcasting Service, is now being distributed by the Northwest Media Project. This 55-minute film is available to any interested organization—schools, civic groups, etc. For information call 223-5335.

My name is Alfred Williamson, I was born in Portland, Oregon and graduated from Benson Polytechnical High School and I am presently attending the Division of Continual Education at the University of Oregon campus.

I am applying for a 1-O C.O. deferrment. I am a Conscientious Objector for all wars. I prefer to work in a civilian life only. I prefer to work in my own Black community for the health, safety and welfare of my people.

In refusing to fight in a racist war 10,000 miles away I publicly voice the feelings of the majority of Black people in the United States who have refused to express their anti-war sentiments for fear of brutal repression (lost of job, imprisonment, assassination).

In taking my stand against this racist war I urge all my Black brothers and Christian ministers to comply with the Higher Law of mankind and to actively support Anti- war, and Anti-draft in the Black community.

In resisting I stand fully aligned with other Afro-Americans who have denounced this genocidal war and have refused to participate namely: Martin Luther King, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Ronald Lockman, Eddie Oquendo and the thousands of Afro-Americans who have said, "Hell No--America is the Black Man's battleground."

The Black, Indian, Mexican, and Puerto Rican Americans of the United States are denied the basic democratic rights which are provided for them in the Constitution of the United States, "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Black people are taxed without being represented; we are subject to trials by juries which are not our peers; we are

murdered without having redress; we are taxed to provide superior schools where we are denied the right to live while attending inferior schools where we are forced to live. We are called upon for the military service of their country without receiving proper protection from the country to fight other colored people around the world and even fight their brothers, sister, fathers and mothers in the cities of these countries.

Our Race, the Black People were systematically demoralized to build this powerful nation. We have endured the atrocities for four hundred years of moral suffering that there can even be no comparison in history. We have been sold from the auction block, we have been lynched, we have been savagely punished without trial or due process of law.

We have suffered enough under the double yoke of slavery and history will judge you accordingly. By forcing me to fight the Vietnamese people which are 10,000 miles away, don't you think they are asking me to add a third yoke to the two I carry already?

Cpl Alfred Williamson

We fully support the courageous action of Brother Alfred Williamson in refusing to help carry out the racist policies of the US Government.

Black Student Union, PSC
Black Student Union, UO
Portland SNCC
SPIRITHOUSE
Black Impact

SUPPORT AL WILLIAMSON'S RESISTANCE!

Transportation provided for all who come: Jefferson H.S. 6:30 a.m.

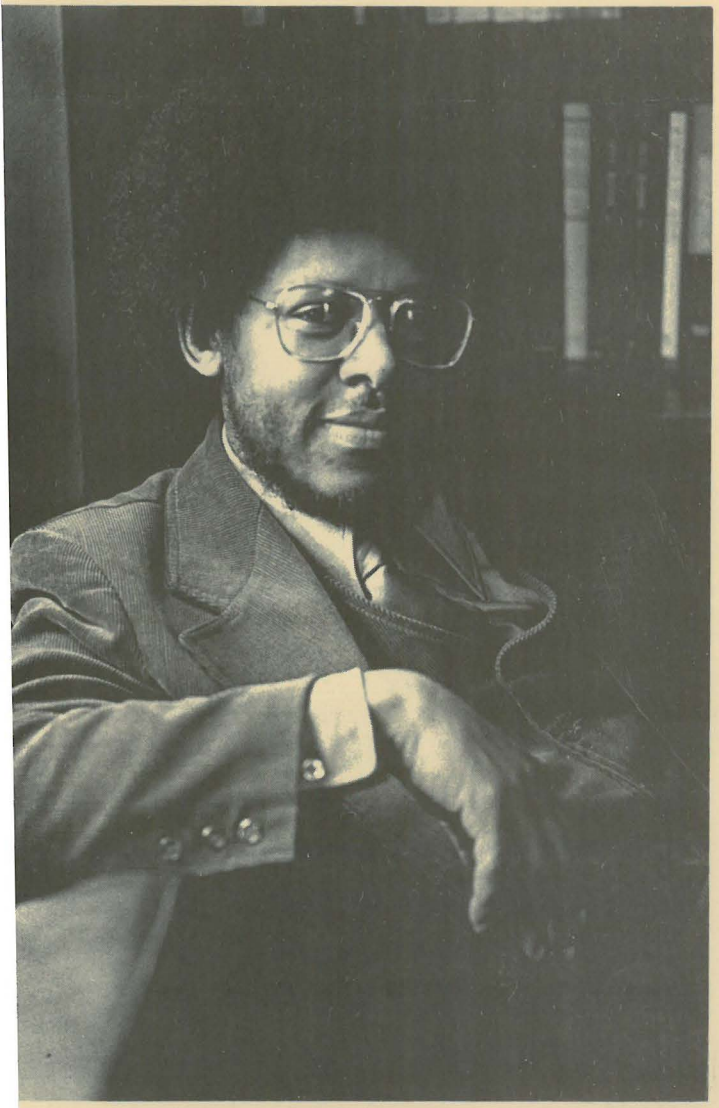
Wednesday, March 27, 7 a.m.
Induction Center
SW 5th & Taylor

Inter-Cultural Forum of Oregon presents

Dr. James Cone

A Black Perspective on America"

The historical and contemporary meaning of the Black struggle in the light of the Black Church and its theology.



James H. Cone is Charles A. Briggs Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He has earned the M.A., Ph.D., LL.D., and L.H.D. and is an expert on the Black Church, Black power and politics, Asian theology, the Third World, and feminist issues.

Dr. Cone has lectured at nearly 200 colleges, universities, and divinity schools and has given more than twice that many papers and addresses at major conferences. He has also lectured in some 14 foreign countries. His books include *Black Theology and Black Power, A Black Theology of Liberation,* and *God of the Oppressed.* His articles have appeared in *Ladies Home Journal, Christian Century, Encyclopedia Britannica,* and *Reforme.* He is also a consultant to *Scholastic Magazine.*

Dr. Cone has been on radio and TV throughout the U.S. and in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Ireland. He received a Rockefeller Foundation Research Grant in 1974. He is listed in *Outstanding Educators of America, Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of American Scholars,* and *Living Black American Authors,* among others.

Jan. 19, Linfield College

Jan. 20, Lewis & Clark College

Jan. 20, Reed College

Jan. 21, University of Portland

NOON - Wednesday

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BRING YOUR LUNCH