

The Portland Urban League 1945-1965
Two Decades of Change in the Pacific Northwest

History 407 Final Research Essay
African/Americans in the West
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During the 1940's. the expansive need for labor to build ships for the World War effort lead to a population explosion in Oregon. The three shipyards established by Henry Kaiser in 1941 brought nearly 160,000 persons to the Portland area. Seventeen car trains, called "Kaiser-Karavans", brought workers from New York and the South,¹ with recruiters and news coverage promising work in the Pacific northwest. This sudden mass immigration created an intense housing shortage and forced the construction of a temporary housing project, Vanport, which began on September 1, 1942²

The creation of Vanport, is attributable to the efforts of Henry Kaiser, who was tired of the local bureaucrats that wanted to build 4,900 units in the summer of 1942. Kaiser signed the contract with the U.S. Maritime Commission to build 10,000 units, north of Portland, which would house 42,000 residents at its peak.³ This would be the largest wartime project in the country.⁴

The war swept in various nationalities and attitudes. Portland's black community grew tenfold to more than 20,000, many from the South. White Southerners came, too. Overnight, Portlanders were confronted by brassy New Yorkers and the rural twang of Oklahoma. The shipyards became a Pandora's box of cultural change. Later, Portland would be unable to stuff the forces of change back into the box⁵

The melting pot of Americans would contain 6,317 blacks by the end of the second World War from Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma, who would be segregated from their white neighbors in the eastern section of the Vanport project. Surprisingly, Southern black children went to school with Southern whites and Vanport would hire black teachers long before the Portland School system⁷, however many of the other aspects of Vanport were

segregated, including unions and recreational facilities.

Native Portlanders resented the immigrants (both white and black) in Oregon. They claimed that the outsiders "brought their racial attitudes with them"⁸ and wanted, or better yet expected, the workers to leave after the war. But many migrants, especially black Southern migrants had no intentions of leaving the Portland area and were determined that Portland would not be like their former Southern homes.

Amidst the tension between Portlanders and the defense workers came the National Urban League. Reginald Johnson, the field secretary for the National Urban League, arrived in Portland in late 1944 to conduct a study of the problems affecting the African-American populace in the Portland area.

The state of affairs in Portland, Oregon, were reported by Johnson as:

Serious present and post-war problems face one-fourth million Negro workers who have migrated to the west coast in war years. Dangers of racial conflict are seen as these persons begin to seek permanent abode while the old populace regards them as temporary.⁹

His report attacked the growth of Jim Crow exclusion of Blacks in labor unions (AF of L), in restaurants and public areas. He stressed the serious need for adequate housing for the growing Black population and warned of the "distress" that Blacks in the defense industry would face when the war ended.

Many Portland organizations responded quickly to Johnson's arrival, creating a Board of Directors for an Urban League by December of 1944. Civic minded groups in Portland, including the City Club, condemned the "discrimination against Negroes practised in restaurants, hotels, resorts, hospitals, apartments, and in the writing of certain types of insurance."¹⁰ Also, fears of interracial strife as evidenced in Beaumont, Texas, and Detroit were factors in establishing an Urban League for minorities in Portland.¹¹

Forced segregation was quickly becoming the norm for blacks in Portland as evidenced by the Portland area realtors and the Portland Housing Authority Dr. DeNorval Unthank, who would later become the President of the Board of Directors for the Portland Urban League, is credited as the most influential Black Portlander in the creation of the organization which was established in April of 1945.

1945-1955 The Berry Years

The "Berry Years" as I have called the era between 1945 through 1955 would represent a dramatic change in race relations in the city of Portland.

The Portland Chapter of the National Urban League would arrive in the "worst Northern city in racial relations"¹² as declared by the Journal of Social Work in 1945. This regnant reputation, "partially explains why over a million blacks migrated to California between 1940 and 1970, while only 24,000 chose to move to Oregon in the same period,"¹³ and allows for a good general background to understand the racial climate that the Portland Chapter, hereafter referred to as the "League", would be working to change.

Edwin C. Berry was hired May 1st, 1945 as the director of the League. Berry, former staff member of the Pittsburgh Urban League, arrived in Portland on April 26, 1945 and would direct the early years of the League.

Berry faced an uphill battle from his first meeting with the League Board of Directors. Berry felt that the board "had no orientation about what the hell the Urban League was,"¹⁴ and put that blame on field secretary Johnson for the Board's lack of knowledge or direction. He would have to build the

League from the ground up, and this no-nonsense man from Pittsburgh would outline a program to attack the problems of segregation and discrimination in housing, education, recreation and law.

Berry would attempt to integrate Portland by educating and informing Portlanders in regards to the plight of the Black population on the city. His tools would be the committed members of the League, concerned citizens of Portland, public speeches, and the news-media.

Berry, like field secretary Johnson before him, foresaw a volatile and dangerous housing situation growing within the city. On May 15, 1945, he forewarned the city officials,"...that Portland would have immense squalor, misery and crime if the city fathers continued to herd Negroes into the Williams avenue district. He predicted that if this practise is not checked that such conditions will be rampant within the next 10 years."

Berry and the League went to work immediately to begin to implement change in Portland. Berry's hope for merit and fitness "to take place of color in the American work force" began soon after his arrival. On June 11, 1945, the first two Black teachers were hired in the city of Portland, on probationary status. Mrs. Leota Stone and Mr. Ford would represent a slow change in attitude toward the occupations that Blacks could aspire to in the city, and this changing attitude can be attributed largely to the League.

The Portland Housing Authority

Housing, education and employment opportunities were the major concerns of the League during 1945. The League was quick in determining that "restrictive agreements between property owners and regulations of the

Portland Realty Board render it practically impossible for Negro families to buy or rent outside certain designated areas."¹⁵ The Black populace did not "fit" into the proper category according to the "Code of Ethics" of the Portland Realty Board. Realtors understood that:

A realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character or property a occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.¹⁶

Yet this attempt to control housing and further segregate the black population was only in its infancy as Blacks lived in 60 of the 63 census districts.¹⁷ Blacks were still able to buy homes from willing whites, but the forming of the Black district in Portland was well under way in 1945 and was encouraged by the Portland Housing Authority.

The Authority, which was in charge of public and war housing, stated to the City Club of Portland that their segregated approach to housing followed "the city pattern," although Blacks lived city wide at the time. Therefore the Portland Housing Authority was not following the community pattern, but reversing it instead.¹⁸ The League acted swiftly in attacking the policies of the Portland Housing Authority for decades while offering efforts to solve the growing problem as well.

The League went directly to Public Housing officials to improve Black Living conditions in the segregated Vanport area and outlined a need statement for all Black families in Portland. This plan included: new, privately financed low cost housing; slum clearance; and a revision of the "Code of Ethics" of the Portland Realty Board.

By 1946, the League would learn that "scheming Negroes and ruthless realtors"¹⁹ were major contributors to the restrictions on minorities from

attaining suitable housing the the city. The League called for new plans to be drawn up by the Portland Housing Authority to not further segregate minorities.

Berry's moving speeches, which included statements relating to constitutional rights and the poor image of race relations portrayed by the United States to foreign nations sparked debates, and made the people of Portland aware of the issues concerning Blacks in their city. Berry's use of news-media to push his vision to the public was very successful. Numerous local articles during the 1945-55 era are symbols of his attempts at raising the consciousness of race related issues. The emergence of the League as a news issue also helped bolster the ranks of the growing organization. These new members expanded the base of the Urban League and eventually allowed for the League to gain valuable contacts with press organizations such as Peter Gantenbein, powerful board member of the Oregonian (and eventually the League).

Berry would use the papers to fight what he saw as oversights in regards to the minority community. Berry would also reprint correspondence between himself and others to heighten awareness. His very public manner of approaching situations forced issues into the public arena. The League would print every event of gain or setback to the minority community that it could. Examples include reprints of letters written to policy makers, including Mayor Earl Riley regarding his needed assistance in "correct[ing] oversights in policies that lead to [a] break down of communities," and statements publicizing the first Chinese girl elected as Princess at Commerce High.²⁰

The Public Education Program of 1945 reached "in excess of 30,000 persons"²¹ and informed Portlanders of the injustices and inequalities faced by Blacks in the city. The League had presented speakers on at 120 plus occasions audiences that year, and reported the distribution of over 8,000 pieces of race and industrial related literature to help heighten awareness of the plight of the African-American in Portland. The program also called for the ceasing of the practice of racial designation in the press about Blacks, citing that "Portlanders acquire a fallacious and unfavorable attitude after reading news treated with this technique."²²

As for employment, or "Industrial Relations", the League indicates that of the 1,932 Black persons in Portland in 1940, 97% were employed in the railroads, as domestic servants, or as common laborers.²³ Also the estimated 22,000 Black defense related workers who were then out of work would need help. The League conducted a survey in 1945 to determine the post war situation for employment in Portland. The result was a speculation of 10,000 individuals who would remain in the city,²⁴ all that need employment, and help to find it. The League determined that these 10,000 persons were largely unskilled laborers, with the exception of some teachers, stenographers, etc., and the League went to work in job placement.

First, the League surveyed employers and found that a majority of employers had very negative stereotypes about Black workers and therefore resisted hiring them. Some of the stereotypes included: "Not-dependable; unclean and have offensive body odor; ...carry guns and razors...;[and are] too ignorant," yet the League garnered 278 job placements, many in "new" areas

where Blacks had not worked before in the first year of the program. This would be the beginning of the continuing struggle for Black employment in Portland.

Membership by the end of 1945 had grown to 700 members.

"Not Alms- But Opportunity"²⁵ would be the slogan adopted by the League in 1946. 1946 was marred nationally by lynchings, mob violence and a resurgence of hate crimes and bigotry, but the League continued into its second year to serve the community. In this year the League would propose, as long range objectives, ways of creating job contacts with: labor unions (CIO, AF of L and Independents); community groups; and the Black community itself to promote better welfare for the black populace. The activities consisted of:

1. Employment interviewing.
2. Job placements.
3. Employment and vocational counselling.
4. Vocational guidance programs.
5. Services to veterans.
6. Field interviews and conferences with employers and unions.
7. Inter-agency coordination of services- Oregon State Employment Service, Veterans Administration, Office for Vocational Opportunity, etc.
8. Civil Service Classes.
9. Information and education releases.
10. Information service for students and general public.
11. Public addresses.
12. Research and reports.
13. Program Planning.
14. Cooperation with National Urban League.²⁶

The League felt that the city of Portland still had little intention of integrating the minority population into the city operations. Over 30% Black unemployment motivated the League to push hard for job integration in Portland. Berry's hope of people of color being placed in jobs on the basis of merit and fitness was slow, to say the least, in becoming reality.

As for housing, the "misery and squalor" prophesied by Berry was becoming a grim reality in the lower Williams avenue area. The segregated Albina district was quickly becoming dominated by Black people. The Eliot School, for example, went from being only 30% Black in 1940 to 73% in 1945.²⁷ These figures were not to be ignored by the League. They again approached the Portland Housing Authority, Portland Realty Board, and used the press to heighten awareness about the growing problems in Portland. The rights of all citizens were not to be ignored while the League still operated.

Attempts to re-enfranchise minorities included a joint effort with the N.A.A.C.P. and the Negro Citizens and Taxpayers League (headed by E. Shelton Hill) that registered the largest number of Black voters in the history of Multnomah County. The December, 1946, edition of the Portland Observer ran an article titled "Job Openings Sought," which was a reprint by the League to urge employers to hire minorities in the city. That same month, Charles Duke became the first Black police officer in Portland.

1947 brought tragedy when Jule K. Lott, Industrial Secretary of the League, died in an automobile accident on April 3rd. His successor, E. Shelton Hill, would guide much of the policy until his appointment to Executive Director in 1959.

By 1948 the League credited many organizations who were allied in the fight to improve race relations. The organizations were: "CIO Local 901, the League of Women Voters, the Council of Churches, Americans for Democratic Action, the A.F. of L, the Young Republicans, the Young

Democrats, the Y.W.C.A, the Catholic Diocese of Portland, the Lutheran Ministerial Alliance and the Methodist Church of Oregon, to name a few."²⁸

By 1948, the League claimed victories in the discontinuation of racial identifications in the Oregonian; the first (failing) proposal for the Fair Employment Practices Bill (to be covered later); further job opportunities for minorities; a non-discriminatory policy statement from the Portland Housing Authority; and a concession from the Portland Realty Board who "revised its tendencies" concerning the African-Americans in Portland.

The flooding of Vanport on Memorial day of 1948, Memorial Day, caused by a break in a dike 90 miles above Vanport, displaced 5,000 Black residents and forced their subsequent relocation to the expanding Black district of Albina. Konrad Hamilton wrote that "while the flood was a personal disaster for the thousands of Blacks who lost their homes, it ironically gave integration in Portland a shot in the arm."

His statement is based on the overwhelming offers of aid from white individuals and groups that gave money, clothing and food for the flood victims. He points out the important step of providing refuge for Blacks in white homes. "White Portlanders, some of whom had previously refused to eat in restaurants with Blacks, now opened their homes and resources to fellow human beings in need."²⁹

The disaster and subsequent relocation of its Black population to Albina, placed additional strain on the already overcrowded district. The people from Vanport were largely unemployed, and the local officials ceased welfare payments despite the urgings of the Red Cross, who was providing the food,

to continue payment of benefits.³⁰ The seriously overcrowded district, in north central Portland, was quickly becoming what Berry prophesized in 1945.

For the moment, however, much of the ignorance and bigotry was out of the spotlight and basic human survival became the focus of the city. At this point, Berry noted, "integration reached a point previously unknown in Portland."³¹

Under this "new air" of integration the League quickly began to encourage business to hire minorities in the city, but the results were not anywhere near what the League had hoped for. Berry recalled the hassles of convincing an employer to allow Black women to run elevators. And he described Portland as a city where employers often flaunted their bigotry, which made it easier to attack. The League used its white supporters to pressure some business to hire workers, yet there were significant numbers of business who failed to comply.

The League then turned to law and attempted to enact a Fair Employment Practices law in Oregon (much like the former Federal Fair Employment Practices law) to protect minority interests in the job market.

It took two attempts to get the bill introduced in the state legislature, of 1947, which ended in defeat. The following year the League rallied, with the cooperation of the Oregonian, Richard and Maureen Neuberger and Mark Hatfield, for public and private support. Sources differ on the senators who signed the bill but the Fair Employment Practices law (FEP) of 1949 created an avenue for complaints to be filed by employees who were discriminated against. The FEP law ended the legal discriminatory hiring practices in Oregon.

By December of 1949, the League placed 310 Blacks in jobs by December of 1949, forty in "new" positions. And by 1953, nearly 1000 blacks had jobs in commerce, industry, plus federal, state and city departments. Following the FEP law, numerous laws including the Vocational Schools law of 1951, and the 1953 Public Accommodation laws were also enacted to allow for more rights for minorities in Oregon.

Membership by 1953 had risen to 1,800 persons.

1954 marked the passage of the Oregon Public Accommodations law. This symbolic event came about largely due to the campaigning of the League and concerned community members. This campaign outlawed discrimination in restaurants, hotels, motor courts, and amusement parks.³² The year also brought about the hiring of the first Black Bus in Oregon. The three individuals hired were all referred from the League and marked a new era in Blacks in the transportation industry of Oregon.

1954 brought the signing of the "job pact" by the Oregon State Employment Service and the League which formalized the 1949 FEP practices which, until then, only dealt with complaints of job discrimination. The agreement placed more reliance on the state in placing members of the minority community in the job market. The pact was signed by E. Shelton Hill and Peter Gantenbein, Industrial Secretary and President of the Urban League, respectively.

1954 also marked the beginning of extensive studies on the supposed correlation of non-white home purchases and the marked dropping of property

value.

By 1955, the preliminary reports, compiled by 200 community groups showed that there was "no evidence of mass panic selling at lower prices"³³ in the areas where white and non-white families resided. Integration had to occur in housing, especially, for many of the civil rights goals of the league to work. The League's struggle for human rights and housing desegregation would become nationally recognized as "one of the most aggressive in the nation."³⁴ Credit for success of the city's desegregation attempts would be given to the League by news-organizations including the Chicago Defender. The League, however, had a long road to travel to desegregate Portland.

The end of 1955 brought the resignation of Executive Director Berry. Berry would assume the same position in the Chicago Urban League. The "Berry Years" brought about serious changes in the racial climate of Oregon. Laws to empower non-white peoples helped many to escape segregation and allowed for many more personal freedoms throughout Oregon. The prevailing attitude toward non-whites still needed improvement, and Berry's resignation allowed for the second Executive Director of the League, William H. Boone, to continue the struggle.

William H. Boone 1956-1959

I could gather surprisingly little regarding William H. Boone from primary sources including newspapers and annual reports available at the University of Oregon Libraries. The few documents unearthed at the Urban League of Portland only yielded a constitution adopted in 1958 (see appendix

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five racially segregated schools while having a total Negro population so small, --there are not enough of us to live one family to every ten blocks."³⁶

The League again opposed the Public Housing Authority during the Sixties regarding the proposal to put further housing projects within the Albina district. The League understood the need for low cost housing, but wanted the project to be built elsewhere to stand off further segregation.³⁷

And to further educate citizens about problems with Portland the League, in 1964, would open a field office at 3298 N. Williams avenue to further help with the Albina district. By 1965, the League would place 338³⁸ persons into jobs.

The Urban League of Portland led the struggle for civil rights in Oregon under the leadership of three Executive Directors and fifteen Presidents (see appendix for listing). The League's concentrated efforts in housing, employment and education led to major gains in nearly every aspect of life for minorities in Portland and Oregon.

Its attempts at desegregating the city of Portland are commendable and met with limited success, but the pressure of the League and its efforts opened the eyes of unaware Portlanders and closed the doors on many discriminatory practices in Oregon.

Our challenge is clear. It is to accelerate the full achievement of American ideals for our city in a method which will improve conditions under which Negroes live, work and play. It is to attack bigotry and discriminations whenever and wherever we find them. Our efforts must be honest, intelligent and courageous- without vacillation or equivocation. We can no more compromise with racial discrimination than a physician can compromise with small pox.

...Some will say this is a long road, but the path of injustice is longer. Some will say this program is too severe, but bloodshed, hate and division are more severe. The timid will say it cannot be done, but that is what the bigots, exploiters and enemies of democracy are counting on us to say.

-1946 Annual Report

SECTION II

COMMENTS REGARDING LITERATURE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

I cannot say that there was an abundance of literature available regarding the Urban League of Portland, Oregon. Sources for this paper came mainly from news-articles during the 1940-1979 period. Three papers had the majority of articles regarding the League: The Oregonian, The Oregon Journal and the Portland Observer. Other papers included: The Eugene Register-Guard, The Catholic Sentinel, Coos Bay Times, and the Daily News-Register of McMinnville, Oregon. Of these news-papers, I could find only one index covering the Oregonian and the Oregon Journal. The rest of the papers I had to scan through and search for articles, many of which I found by luck.

The news-paper articles were of two basic types: 1) A reprint of letters or press statements from the Urban League, or 2) Highlights of UL activities and meetings. There were no "investigative essays" or articles of that type that I found in the papers on the League. The articles, however, were extremely helpful because there were few other sources available.

Of other sources available from library-type agencies would include: The 1945 and 1957 reports on the "Negro In Portland" written by the City Club of Portland (at the Oregon Historical Society); "Blacks in the State of Oregon 1788-1974" by Lenwood G. Davis (contained in Council of Planning Librarians #616), which lists various articles and books on several black agencies (at the University of Oregon Library); A short newsletter by the UL titled "Interracial Progress" written from August 1952-June 1957 (on reserve

at the Multnomah County Library); and excerpts are available from some National Urban League literature as well.

The main place for source information is the Urban League of Portland, itself. They have one essay written about their early years, a collection of random articles mainly from the 50's and 70's/80's era, a few annual reports, minutes from Board of Directors meetings, and a very helpful (and knowledgeable) staff. Also, the League has a short film by KOIN-TV about the early years of the League and numerous files that could be of interest. The Annual Reports are helpful, as well, but after 1954 the reports are not as thorough as the prior period (1945-1954). They do list the highlights of the year and can lead to other sources.

-Suggestions for future research.

Nearly all of the source material on the Urban League of Portland are in Portland, Oregon, and therefore I suggest that one should plan on spending considerable time in that city. I found virtually nothing at the Portland State university Library, but the Oregon Historical Society and Multnomah County Library had useful literature on the League.

The best source, of course, would be direct interviews with the Executive Directors and Presidents of the League for whatever era so desired, but the news-papers, again, contain the most written accounts pertaining to the League.

Finally, the Urban League used numerous other race-improvement oriented agencies to aid in the struggle for human rights. A careful search of their archives could yield helpful information regarding the Urban League of Portland.

APPENDIX ONE

URBAN LEAGUE OF PORTLAND EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS 1945-1972

1945-1955	Edwin C. Berry
1955-1959	William H. Boone
1959-1972	E. Shelton Hill

URBAN LEAGUE OF PORTLAND PAST PRESIDENTS 1945-1966

1945	James Hamilton
1945-1946	William Brewster
1946-1947	Dr. DeNorval Unthank
1947-1951	David Robinson
1951-1952	Dr. DeNorval Unthank
1952-1954	Peter Gantenbein
1954-1956	Mark A. Smith
1956-1957	Robert Fritsch
1957-1959	George Dysart
1959-1961	Dr. Walter C. Reynolds
1961-1961	Gerald H. Robinson (Resigned)
1961-1962	E. Kimbark MacColl
1962-1964	Dr. DeNorval Unthank
1964-1964	Walter E. Holman
1964-1966	C. Don Vann

APPENDIX TWO

URBAN LEAGUE OF PORTLAND OBJECTIVES

ARTICLE II (of Constitution adopted June, 1958)

The objectives of this organization shall be:

1. To secure equal opportunity for all persons to contribute and fully participate in all phases of the community life and to share the benefits therefrom without regard to their ancestry.
2. To encourage and assist members of nonwhite and other minority groups to prepare themselves to take increasingly greater advantage of current and future opportunities to participate in the community life.
3. To stimulate the development of such understanding and attitudes among white and nonwhite persons as will enhance a continuous extension of unencumbered opportunities for all until complete equality of opportunity has been achieved.
4. To engage in education and research in the field of intergroup relations.

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