



Swing the Door Wide: World War II Wrought a Profound Transformation in Seattle's Black Community

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World War II was a pivotal moment in history for the Pacific Northwest, particularly for Seattle. The spectacular growth of Boeing, the "discovery" of the city and the region by tens of thousands of military personnel and defense workers, and the city's emergence as a national rather than regional center for industrial production, all attested to momentous and permanent change. The migration of over 10,000 African Americans to Seattle in the 1940s also represented a profound change that made the city - for good and ill - increasingly similar to the rest of urban America. That migration permanently altered race relations in Seattle as newcomers demanded the social freedoms and political rights denied them in their former Southern homes.

The migration increased black political influence as reflected in the 1949 election of State Representative Charles Stokes as the city's first black officeholder. It strengthened civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and encouraged the enactment of antidiscrimination legislation in Washington for the first time since 1890.

The wartime migration also increased racial tensions as the interaction of settlers and natives, white and black, came dangerously close to precipitating Seattle's first racial violence since the anti Chinese riot of 1886. Moreover, severe overcrowding was particularly acute in the black community and accelerated the physical deterioration of the Central District into the city's most depressed area. But tensions also rose within the black community as the mostly rural African Americans from Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma faced the disdain of the "old settlers" blacks who had arrived in the city before 1940.

The African-American migration to Seattle was part of a much larger regional transformation stimulated by the growth of World War II defense industries. The war generated profound changes in economic and social conditions in the Pacific Northwest, prompting historian Carlos Schwantes to describe the years 1941-45 as the beginning of the modern era for the region. The Puget Sound area soon became a major center for ship and aircraft construction, which in turn stimulated other sectors of the economy. The region's shipbuilding industry was revived in 1941 after its virtual collapse following World War I, as 88 shipyards, 29 in Seattle alone, furnished vessels for the Navy, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine. Seattle's aircraft industry also came of age during World War II, although the process of growth and transformation had begun long before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The Boeing Airplane Company in September 1939 already employed 4,000 workers making military planes for the Army Air Corps and some commercial aircraft such as the Clipper airships that crossed the Pacific.

After fighting broke out in Europe, the British Royal Air Force purchased the company's B-17 Flying Fortress bombers for use against Nazi Germany. As orders came in, Boeing's work force grew accordingly to nearly 10,000 by June 1941, 20,000 in September, and 30,000 when the United States officially entered the war on December 8, 1941. In 1943 Boeing began production of the Super Fortress, a larger, longer-range B-29 bomber, from its facility in Renton. Boeing workers soon produced one B-29 bomber every five days and one B-17 every 24 hours. By 1944, at the peak of wartime production, Boeing employed nearly 50,000 workers in the Seattle area and amassed total sales of more than \$600 million annually, sharply contrasting with the \$70 million value of all Seattle manufacturing in 1939.

Although no other Seattle firm could rival Boeing in employment or production, other companies also experienced spectacular growth during World War II. Pacific Car and Foundry Company in Renton, which manufactured logging trucks before 1941, now produced Sherman tanks and employed nearly 4,000 workers in 1944. Shipyards in the Puget Sound area, including the Navy's facility at Bremerton and 29 yards in Seattle, employed 150,000 workers by 1944. Seattle's wartime contracts, totaling \$5.6 billion, ranked it among the nation's top three cities in per capita war orders.

Greatly expanded wartime production quickly exhausted local labor pools, and in 1942 the War Manpower and Civil Service commissions began recruiting workers for plants in the Pacific Northwest. While recruitment took place throughout the country, most of the workers destined for West Coast production plants came from rural areas of Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and Arkansas, an economically depressed region with surpluses of unskilled and semiskilled workers, including a large number of African Americans. By war's end, 45,000 black workers and their families had migrated to the Pacific Northwest.

Although Seattle ultimately received the greatest number of newcomers in the region, its black population grew slowly at first, increasing from 3,789 to 7,000 between 1940 and June 1944. In 1942 most black workers came to Seattle as shipyard employees, and by 1943 the National Youth Administration brought to the city the first group of blacks to work for Boeing, now the largest employer in the Pacific Northwest. By war's end 4,078 (7 percent) of the 60,328 shipyard workers in Seattle were African Americans. Blacks also found work as nonmilitary government employees. Of 18,862 nonmilitary federal employees in Seattle in 1945, 1,019 (5 percent) were black. Moreover, the 4,000 black soldiers and sailors stationed at Fort Lawton in Seattle and other military installations nearby contributed to the new employment diversity of the African-American population. Wartime job demands had finally broken the seven-decade employment pattern of black workers as unskilled laborers and domestic servants.

Despite the acute shortage of workers in Seattle's defense industries, some segments of organized labor opposed the hiring of African Americans. In 1941, when President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 (a federal fair employment practices law), the Northwest Enterprise noted that it "falls on deaf ears in the far northwest." The newspaper had valid reasons for its pessimism. Boeing had never hired blacks in any capacity. Moreover, that pattern seemed unlikely to change: in the ten weeks after the executive order became law, the company hired 1,000 new employees per week, but not one of them was black. In response, the black churches, fraternal organizations and political and social clubs organized the Committee for the Defense of Negro Labor's Right to Work at Boeing Airplane Company.

Some white Boeing workers were also attempting to integrate the company's work force. In 1940 Aero Mechanics Local 751 of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the major union at Boeing, became the focal point of their efforts. In a contest unknown to most of Seattle's African-American community leaders, or to the general public, advocates of equal employment opportunity at Boeing were soon embroiled in intra-union rivalry and forced to respond to charges of political disloyalty and communist subversion.

Loca1 751 was a young union, chartered only in 1935 with 35 founding members. Nevertheless, one year later it signed its first collective bargaining agreement with Boeing. Although essentially an industrial union, it was assigned by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to the International Association of Machinists, a craft union that had long denied membership to women and nonwhite males. The prohibition on membership was offensive to some Loca1 751 members, who worked to eliminate the clause from the IAM ritual and simultaneously to encourage Boeing to hire nonwhite workers. In 1940 those workers invited Bernard Squires, executive secretary of the Urban League, to address a 751 meeting. Union members at that meeting vowed to open their ranks to blacks and instructed president Barney Bader and business representative Hugo Lundquist to call for removal of the membership ban at the 1940 International Convention in Cleveland.

Internal union politics quickly ended these attempts at reform, however. In October 1940 C. A. Stone, editor of the union newspaper *Aero Mechanic*, released an unauthorized edition in which he "exposed communists." Bader and Lundquist were among the accused. When a trial among Loca1 751 members exonerated the leadership, the IAM intervened, suspended the charter of the local, and called another trial in which 50 people, including Bader and Lundquist, were found "guilty of subversion," which in the terminology of the IAM meant they were advocates of communism. Bader, Lundquist and most of the other members accused were expelled from the union.

With the proponents of nonrestrictive membership removed from the leadership in Local 751, the new union officers quickly rescinded the earlier decision to admit black workers. Nevertheless, pressure from the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee, the intervention of William Green, president of the AFL, and the growing labor shortage forced Boeing and Local 751 to allow the first black production workers at the Seattle aircraft plant in the spring of 1942. Under the terms of the arrangement, nonwhite employees and white women, who had been allowed to work at the Boeing plant for the first time the previous summer, were required to purchase weekly temporary permits granting them permission to work at Boeing. Union leaders unequivocally voiced their displeasure with the "temporary" opening jobs for black workers. "We rather resent that the war situation had been used to alter an old-established custom," declared James Duncan, IAM representative of Lodge 751, "and do not feel it will be helpful to war production."

Boeing management and Local 751 were eventually reconciled to the permanent presence of African Americans in the work force. When Boeing began gradually integrating its work force in 1942, its first two African-American employees were women. Stenographer Florise Spearman was accepted as an office worker in January. Four months later Dorothy West Williams, a sheet metal worker, became Boeing's first black production worker as well as the first black member of Loca1751. That the first African-American employees at Boeing in white-and blue-collar positions were women reflected the expanding role of black female labor both in the overall World War II migration and in the industrial workplace. By July 1943, just eighteen months after Spearman was hired, African-American women constituted 86 percent of the 329 black employees at Boeing. However, as Karen Tucker Anderson has written, despite the obvious labor shortages, black women nationally continued to face gender and racial discrimination and thus remained an underutilized work force.

Boeing employed a wartime peak of 1,600 black workers, a presence large enough to persuade Local 751 leadership to again challenge the "whites only" provision in the membership ritual. Powell, vice-president in 1945, led the local delegation, the largest at the International Convention in New York in 1945, where he introduced a resolution to remove the word "white" from the initiation ritual. Powell recalled that their aim was "to get rid of...a stigma on the IAM. In the 1945 convention we lost the fight to do this. We were outvoted. But it was the beginning of the end for discrimination." The succeeding convention removed the word "white" from the ritual. After a three-year campaign to obtain employment in the largest

manufacturing facility in the Pacific Northwest, and another four years to get permanent union membership, the "battle for Boeing" was finally over.

Once inside Seattle plants, black workers faced various forms of discrimination, which heightened tension with white employees. Some discriminatory practices involved non-economic issues such as segregated lunchrooms and toilet facilities. In other instances black workers were denied promotion or were laid off for protesting the union policy of deducting monthly dues from the wages of African-American workers for membership in auxiliary locals while barring them from participation in regular union affairs. Occasionally a worker found herself challenging a discriminatory practice within a larger injustice. Ruby Black, for example, filed suit in Seattle Superior Court against Boeing and Local 751, "asking for a restraining order against the automatic deduction of \$3.50 from the pay of black female employees for a work permit while white women, also denied regular union membership, were charged \$1.50. Black noted in her suit that when she complained about the higher dues for black women she was fired.

African-American workers at Pacific Car and Foundry in Renton also found that after initial employment barriers were removed they still faced opposition from various sources in management and labor. In May 1943, 29 black employees led by Marjorie Fitter protested signs announcing the segregation of restrooms. Fitter explained the incident to a Northwest Enterprise reporter: "We protested to the superintendent of the foundry. He told us the signs were ordered by higher officials and would remain." Then Fitter said tersely, "We declined to work." The company vice-president, claiming the union asked for the signs, said, "It would be company policy for a few days." Union officials denied responsibility and the protesting workers eventually discovered a fellow employee, J. Columbo, had initiated the segregated restroom policy with the approval of Captain Stretcher, the 13th Naval District inspector responsible for oversight at the plant. Columbo said "he did not appreciate skilled Negro workers...receiving higher wages than many whites"; and Captain Stretcher, who claimed credit for the segregated washrooms, declared that "if the black workers refused to accept the separate rooms they should resign immediately." Ultimately, black workers won their protest and Stretcher was transferred to another naval district.

Not every challenge by black workers was successful. In 1944 white workers at Doran Brass Foundry demanded separate showers, prompting a protest by black employees. Some angry black workers then announced they would take their grievance to the War Labor Board, a threat met with a retort from the foreman that "two white workers were worth more than all the colored employees of the company." All of the black workers quit in protest, but Doran Brass refused to rescind its policy and the workers were not reinstated.

In contrast to the treatment blacks received at Boeing, Pacific Car and Foundry, and Doran Brass, Seattle's shipyards eagerly employed black workers. Unlike other West Coast cities, no major company dominated Seattle's shipbuilding industry. In addition to the Todd and Seattle-Tacoma shipbuilding companies, the largest in the region, the 27 other shipyards in the Seattle area collectively employed about 60 percent of the shipyard workers. Furthermore, the powerful and racially exclusionist International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, which dominated shipyards in Portland, the San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles, had exclusive bargaining agreements only with Todd and Seattle-Tacoma Shipbuilding.

Most of the smaller firms had contracts with the rival, racially integrated Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America. Consequently, Seattle's African-American shipyard workers were not segregated into the auxiliary locals of the Boilermakers' union, nor were they denied promotion opportunities. Moreover, racially integrated waterfront unions, including the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, the Marine Cooks and Stewards, and the Ship Scalers, applied pressure to discourage the discriminatory practices of the Boilermakers' local. While there were sporadic complaints of

discrimination in Seattle's shipyards, the systematic segregation of blacks that persisted throughout the war years in other West Coast ship construction facilities did not evolve in Seattle.

Racial tension elsewhere in the city mounted as growing numbers of black and white newcomers clashed inside and outside the workplace. Such tensions were not unique to Seattle; in the summer of 1943 race riots broke out in Detroit and Harlem, and the primarily anti-Chicano Zoot Suit Riot erupted in Los Angeles. Against this backdrop of local and national racial tension, Seattle police chief Herbert Kimsey felt compelled to announce to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, "We're preparing for anything that might result from a crowded, mixed and excited wartime population." Kimsey's concerns were all well-founded. In March 1944 a black woman was evicted from a city bus by the driver and arrested by four policemen who allegedly manhandled and cursed her. The Northwest Enterprise angrily denounced the police for using "Gestapo tactics" and speculated presence of black soldiers at the scene could have riot. Six months later a city bus driver advised some white persons about to board his bus that he had several black passengers and suggested they wait for another bus. One of the black passengers accused him of trying to run a "Jim Crow" bus. The driver called the man a "black nigger" and was subsequently threatened with a knife.

The violence that many feared that summer of 1944 finally erupted in August, not on Seattle city streets but at Fort Lawton. Black troops stationed there were subjected to humiliating treatment by the military and civilians. Their complaints included the Army's exclusive use of black soldiers to shovel snow in Seattle and their confinement to a single base tavern and PX while Italian prisoners of war were allowed outings to Mount Rainier and supervised visits to local bars that excluded black soldiers. Enraged by their treatment, the soldiers rioted at the fort, lynching private Guglielmo Olivott, an Italian prisoner of war. In the mass court-martial that followed, 36 soldiers were brought to trial. After being convicted on various charges, including murder and rioting, 23 were sentenced to prison while the remaining 13 were acquitted.

Concern about the possibility of racial violence prompted Seattle Mayor William F. Devin to form the Seattle Civic Unity Committee in February 1944. The mayor set the tone of urgency in a speech at the University of Washington in July, five months after the committee was founded and only weeks before the Fort Lawton riot: "The problem of racial tension is one which is fraught with a great deal of dynamite....It is going to affect us not only during the War, and it is our duty to face the problem together. If we do not do that, we shall not exist very long as a civilized city or as a nation."

Patterned after similar agencies in Detroit and New York - cities that had experienced race riots - the Civic Unity Committee was both an acknowledgment of racial tension and an attempt to combat it by gathering and disseminating information on interracial matters, encouraging programs to reduce tensions, and making recommendations to the mayor and other officials on policy regarding racial issues. Designed to be representative of diverse community views (with the notable exception of "leftist elements" who were purposely excluded), the committee was composed of a cross-section of citizens including a University of Washington educator, an industrialist, a Protestant clergyman, two women active in community work, two labor representatives (one AFL and the other CIO), one Jewish member, and two black members: a minister (Rev. Fountain W. Penick) and a dentist (Dr. Felix B. Cooper).

Seattle's growing black population faced increasing segregation and exclusion as "Whites Only" signs suddenly appeared for the first time in restaurants, theaters, motels and recreational areas. Businesses and public accommodations that did not openly exclude blacks often discouraged patronage by providing poor service or by segregating them from whites. The Northwest Enterprise and the NAACP campaigned against such policies, with the latter filing successful suits against some of the worst offenders. Now, however, the NAACP was joined in the campaign for racial justice by old and new allies, including the Christian Friends for Racial Equality (CFRE, formed a year earlier by a local group of black and white club women), the local

Communist Party and groups such as the University of Washington black students whose direct action demonstrations integrated the swimming pool at Colman Park in 1944.

African-American newcomers faced chronic wartime housing shortages which, although shared by the white and Asian populations, were exacerbated by residential discrimination. Unlike Los Angeles and San Francisco, where black residents quickly occupied housing vacated by the Japanese, Seattle African Americans found that the new white owners and managers of the former Japanese hotels and rooming houses barred black tenants. Reverend Fountain W. Penick, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church and NAACP president in 1942, reported that, despite denials by owners that evictions were not racially motivated, 90 percent of the evicted tenants were black.

By 1945 over 10,000 blacks occupied virtually the same buildings that had housed 3,700 five years earlier. Migrants crowded into established Jackson, Madison and Cherry street sections or moved into newly created temporary housing projects such as Duwamish Bend Homes and Yesler Terrace. Because restrictive covenants confined African Americans to specific residential areas, newcomers soon found themselves doubling or even tripling up in houses that were already among the oldest in the city. One black defense worker attempting to purchase a home for his family in an all-white residential area was immediately confronted with various legal and extralegal maneuvers by neighborhood whites. Finally, a court ruled that the house violated Seattle's building code and ordered the family to leave.

Yet Seattle was the only city in the Pacific Northwest and one of the few major cities in the country that did not segregate blacks in its public housing projects. Jesse Epstein, director of the Seattle Housing Authority, instituted the unrestricted occupancy policy and easily integrated Yesler Terrace, Seattle's first public housing project, when it opened in 1940. Located on Yesler Hill above the city's International District, the apartments, with their sweeping view of Seattle's harbor, were a vast improvement over the deteriorating Victorian homes and craftsman cottages that housed many of Seattle's south-side poor. During a Housing Authority staff meeting in 1940 Epstein reportedly declared, "We have an opportunity to prove that Negroes and whites can live side by side in harmony...but it's going to require skill and patience to make it work." Housing staffer Ray Adams commented that because of housing discrimination blacks had fewer options and thus would concentrate on public housing. He asked Epstein, "Will you set up a quota to keep Yesler Terrace from becoming a ghetto?" "Let's avoid the ugly word 'quota,' Ray," Epstein replied, "but we must limit the number of Negroes if we are to achieve integration. Keep in mind that we are determined on that. Coloreds and whites will live side by side; this in itself is revolutionary." Epstein's approach to the problem of interracial adjustment included limiting black occupancy to 20 percent and quickly moving neighboring black and white tenants who clashed to other housing units in the project.

Epstein's "social experiment" generated strident criticism and growing opposition from businessmen and residents when the Housing Authority built projects in the all-white areas of West Seattle, Sand Point, Holly Park and Rainier Vista. Those residents, already apprehensive over public housing for the white poor, including a disproportionate number of southern-born war workers, now feared an influx of southern black migrants into their neighborhoods. Conversely, some blacks were angry that the unofficial 20 percent quota to foster integrated public housing, as well as a 25 percent quota on welfare recipients, reduced their access to badly needed public housing for the sake of "social engineering." Despite such criticism the Housing Authority, unlike similar agencies in most American cities, refused to succumb to community demands for segregated public housing.

Seattle's NAACP and Urban League grew rapidly during the war and became increasingly vocal against injustices toward African Americans. The NAACP increased from a prewar high of 85 members to 1,550 in 1945. Moreover, a new generation of leaders emerged, including E. June Smith and Philip Burton, local black

attorneys who initiated suits against discriminatory practices and lobbied for stronger state civil rights laws, and Reverend Fred Shorter, a white minister who headed the chapter from 1943 to 1947.

The Seattle Urban League doubled its membership and tripled its staff during the 1940s, benefiting from aggressive leadership by Bernard Squires, executive secretary from 1939 to 1943, and his successors Dean Hart (1944-47) and Napoleon P. Dotson (1941-50). Under their leadership the league initiated or supported antidiscrimination suits and assisted lobbying efforts for a state fair employment practices act. Both the Urban League and the NAACP increasingly relied on the support of sympathetic white organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the Jewish Anti-Defamation League and the CFRE.

The CFRE began examining cases involving public accommodations, housing discrimination and police brutality. Members campaigned against numerous racially based practices, including higher automobile insurance rates for non-white drivers, housing segregation at the University of Washington, and segregated cemeteries. By 1950 the CFRE had 200 members, an annual budget of \$1,900, and an office in downtown Seattle. Among other public activities, it awarded an annual \$300 scholarship to a minority student gifted in graphic arts and sponsored interracial meetings among the city's religious denominations.

The epitome of this aggressive new thrust in civil rights was the campaign to enact a state fair employment practices law. The first effort had been initiated both before World War II and outside the black community. In February 1939, 37th District Representative Ernest Olsen had introduced a bill barring discrimination on the basis of race, creed or color, patterned after a similar New York statute. But even the Northwest Enterprise, while expressing gratitude on behalf of black Seattle, was reluctantly forced to concede that the bill would not be reported out of committee because Olsen was associated with the "left wing" of the Democratic Party.

Conditions had changed dramatically in Seattle by 1944. Although blacks had made impressive gains in employment, they remained excluded from entire segments of the Seattle economy. Their more visible presence, and the accompanying tension, made the question of fair employment far more urgent. In 1944 the Seattle NAACP, the Urban League, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the Negro Republican Club joined forces with the Seattle YWCA, the American Federation of Teachers, the Jewish Anti-Defamation League and the International Longshoreman's and Warehousemen's Union to lobby in Olympia for a state fair employment practices law. Modeled after President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, the bill was labeled "communist-inspired," and the Washington Federation of Labor opposed its passage. But proponents persisted, reintroducing the measure in 1947, garnering allies or at least reducing opposition along the way. The Fair Employment Practices Act was finally enacted by the Washington legislature in 1949. The act declared discrimination "a matter of state concern," prohibited employment bias "because of race, creed, color or national origin," and also created the Washington State Board Against Discrimination (WSBAD) to encourage compliance.

The migration of African Americans to Seattle during World War II continued into the postwar decade. Unlike most American cities whose economies were buoyed by wartime production only to experience a postwar slump, Seattle remained prosperous. Boeing now received Cold War-inspired military contracts and saw a steady growth in commercial airline orders throughout the late 1940s. The continuing prosperity of the city and region lured African Americans to the Pacific Northwest long after postwar industrial cutbacks forced thousands of other West Coast African Americans into the unemployment line.

The outlook for Seattle blacks in the early 1950s was so encouraging that the Chicago Defender, the nation's largest African-American newspaper, urged in 1951 that blacks leave the Midwest and the East for Seattle. The median income of black families in Seattle was \$3,314 or 53 percent above that of blacks nationally. In fact, the median income of Seattle blacks averaged only 1.0 percent below that for white families nationally.

Not surprisingly, the city's African-American population grew by 5,000 between 1945 and 1950 as defense industries continued to lure black workers.

Seattle's expanding economy seemed capable of absorbing black and white newcomers, generating a euphoria about and pride in local conditions that masked evolving problems such as deteriorating housing, de facto school segregation and continued employment discrimination in large segments of the local economy. Nonetheless, the euphoria cast Seattle as the race relations "frontier," with its implicit suggestion that the city had managed to solve or at least avoid the problems of Southern and Eastern cities. The "frontier" model found its way into articles written by local people and national observers. But as the local civil rights movement of the 1960s shattered long-held assumptions about both the Central District and the city, black community residents, indeed all Seattleites, would soon realize that in the matter of race both the best and the worst were yet to come.

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