WashingtonHistory.org

SEGREGATION IN SPOKANE

Longtime Black Residents Recount the Injustices and the Victories

By Jim Kershner

COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Winter 2000-01: Vol. 14, No. 4

The word "segregation" conjures up vivid images from old civics class lessons: whites-only drinking fountains in Alabama; white mobs jeering at black school children in Mississippi; Ku Klux Klan rallies in Georgia. Up here in the more tolerant Northwest, it's easy to be smug about the bigoted South. Easy, that is, after conveniently blanking out a few of this region's own historical images: the "No Colored Patronage Solicited" signs in Spokane restaurants; the whites-only swimming pool at Natatorium Park; the "Nigger, Read This Sign and Run" sign at the edge of Wallace, Idaho.

In fact, the northern states had their own brand of racial segregation, not always legally codified but often just as blatant. In Spokane, as African-American residents were constantly aware, a particularly northern brand of segregation thrived through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s and even into the 1960s. It made for a relatively peaceful era of race relations, but at a price. It depended on white people and black people "staying in their place," as more than one black resident has put it.

"Staying in their place" meant that black people were restricted to a relatively few restaurants, shops, hotels and jobs in Spokane, sometimes by policy, more often by social pressure. How intense was that social pressure? Listen to Jerrelene Williamson, now 68, tell about her experience breaking into the previously all-white occupation of grocery checker at a Spokane Safeway around 1965:

"This man came in, I guess he was middle-aged, and he said, 'I wish I had a baby that looked like you.' I was trying to do my work, and so far everybody had been kind of decent, so I wasn't thinking he meant anything. And he said, 'Yeah, I wish I had a baby like you. I'd take it out and drown it.'

"You know something? Even today, talking about that kind of bothers me," said Williamson, getting up to search for a Kleenex. Today segregation exists mostly as history. Certainly there are more uplifting chapters of local history, but it's a history worth recounting today. For one thing, it has been mostly an untold story—any residents may not have been aware of its extent, or even of its existence. For another, if this story is going to be told at all, it needs to be told now. Those old enough to tell the story won't be around forever.

The history of segregation in Spokane goes back at least into the 1890s, when the Great Northern Railroad tried to bring in some black workers to live in Hillyard. According to local historian John Fahey, these workers were met at the train by white workers who would not

allow them to disembark. However, a number of pioneering black families soon arrived. In the 1900 census Spokane had 376 black residents, somewhere around 1 percent of the population.

The percentage has remained right around 1 percent ever since—it was 1.9 percent, or 3,416 people in the city limits, in the 1990 census—which may help explain some of this region's contradictory racial history. On one hand, racial relations were more peaceful than in the South or the Midwest, where the black population was larger and, to some whites, more threatening. Not a single black person was lynched in Washington from 1889 to 1939, according to records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

On the other hand, the black population was so small that for many decades it carried little economic or political clout, so the pressure to integrate was slight. Restaurateurs and storekeepers in places like Spokane had little economic incentive to welcome black customers, especially if doing so would drive off white customers. The result: black residents in Spokane had to know which places would welcome them and which would not. "Negro people, as we were called then, were always aware of that," said Williamson. "Even as a child."

Segregation of a most egregious kind played a part in the defining moment in the life of Carl Maxey, who died in 1997 at age 73, one of Spokane's most prominent lawyers. It took place in 1936, when he was 11 years old and living as an orphan in the Spokane Children's Home. The minutes of the Spokane Children's Home board meeting for October 8, 1936, tell the story:

> *It was moved and seconded that the two colored boys, Carl Maxey and Milton Burnes, be returned to the County, having been in the Home for years. Motion carried. It was moved and seconded that the Board go on record as voting to have no more colored children in the Home from this time forward. Motion carried—unanimous.*

"They threw us out," said Maxey. "It sure as hell says that. And it was for something that had nothing whatsoever to do with us. So if you'd like to know where some of my fire comes from, it comes from a memory that includes this event."

Maxey went on to become Spokane's first black lawyer and, as far as he can tell, the first black professional of any kind, besides teachers. Through the 1950s and 1960s and even the 1970s, he played a huge part in ending a system of legal and de facto segregation in Spokane and the inland Northwest.

Following is a portrait of segregated Spokane, as told through contemporary newspaper accounts, historical studies, and the words of people who lived through it.

Amusement Parks

Natatorium Park was Spokane's premier amusement park and garden spot, as well as the place to see and be seen in the first half of the 20th century. It was also the first institution in the city to be sued for discrimination.

In November 1900 Emmett Holmes, a prominent member of Spokane's black community, tried to take his family to dinner at a Natatorium Park restaurant. The restaurant refused to serve

him, and Holmes responded by filing a $5,000 lawsuit against Washington Water Power (WWP), which owned the park. Holmes lost.

The legal precedent was ambiguous. The WWP lawyer claimed that Holmes was turned away because the place was overcrowded. He said Holmes simply failed to prove otherwise. At the same time, the judge refused a WWP motion to instruct the jury that it was "reasonable" for a business to require "colored persons to occupy a different place from that occupied by white persons."

The *Spokesman-Review* reported that the jurors "appeared to treat the entire matter like a joke, and were overheard bandying back and forth jokes and remarks suggested by the restaurant bill of fare." The message sent to the community was clearly summed up in an indignant headline in the *Spokane Daily Chronicle* the next day: "HOLMES IS BEATEN - Natatorium Had Right to Refuse to Sell Him Food - JUST BECAUSE HE'S COLORED."

Natatorium Park continued to have a complicated (if unwritten) policy toward black customers, even through World War II. "We used to go out there all the time and dance," said Alfonse Hill, 74, a black resident who moved to Spokane in 1934. "But The Plunge, the swimming part, I heard that was segregated." He heard right. In Spokane, as in other northern cities, the color line was drawn in the water.

Maxey said The Plunge was "totally off-limits." So was the YWCA pool in the 1920s and 1930s, although the YMCA pool was open to all. As for Natatorium Park's dance hall, black customers had to follow the unwritten rules. "The deal was this," said Maxey. "If you were black and a black band was playing, you could go. As a kid in high school I, like everybody else, would go out there to watch Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, many of the great bands and musicians." But not when it was a white band. "I've been thrown out of Nat Park more times than…," said Maxey, finishing the sentence with only a laugh.

Restaurants

Here's what happened at Spokane's lunch counters when the all-black cast of Billy Rose's *Carmen Jones* played the Fox Theater in Spokane in 1945:

"These Negro thespians, many well-educated with fine musical backgrounds…, were denied cafes or completely ignored, so that after sitting endlessly at a table or counter had to betake themselves away foodless, and they didn't seek the better restaurants, but those on Main Avenue," wrote an outraged *Spokesman-Review* columnist. "One young man played the Saturday night performance without any dinner because he was refused entrance to every restaurant he entered."

In fact, such segregation had been entrenched for decades. One of the first acts of Spokane's Colored Businessmen's Improvement Club in 1911 was to protest the signs that were sometimes posted in restaurants and storefronts: "No Colored Patronage Solicited." A black minister, the Reverend Emmett Reed of Calvary Baptist Church, made a point of going around to all of those restaurants and asking them to take the signs down.

"Now maybe some did and some didn't," said Williamson. "But later they got smarter and the signs said, 'We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.'" Even without signs, the black community knew which restaurants were welcoming and which were not. "Growing up, we went to the Fern, the Coney Island and the Desert Hotel Oasis Room," said Williamson. "The Chinese places downtown, you could go to."

But not all of them. Elmo Dalbert, 81, a black Spokane resident, remembers the day in 1935 or 1936 when the proprietors of a Chinese restaurant told him they didn't want his business anymore. His only option was to find somewhere else to eat. "What can you say to that?" he said.

Here's one thing you could say: See you in court. That's what Maxey began to say in the 1950s and 1960s. "I can name three or four restaurants I brought action against, but I really don't need to," said Maxey. "They've changed their habits since then. But believe me, we started to open them up with litigation."

Meanwhile, there were a few—a very few—black owned restaurants in town. One of them was Virgil's Chicken Dinner Shack, and the other was the Willow Inn. At least in these places the black community never had to worry about seeing a "No Colored Patronage Solicited" sign.

Restaurants weren't the only places with signs. Sometimes entire towns had them. Maxey remembers going to Wallace to play a high school football game and seeing a sign on the outskirts of town that said, "Nigger, Read This Sign and Run." Maxey had to spend the night in the sheriff's house for his own protection.

Hotels

One of the cherished memories of many Spokanites growing up in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s is of meeting for lunch at the elegant Davenport Hotel. At least, it's a cherished memory for white residents.

"We didn't meet at the Davenport to have lunch," said Williamson, a Spokane resident since 1934. "Not until the later years, when the Davenport was ready to close. Then we would go in, but we always felt uncomfortable, because we knew we weren't wanted in there before."

The Ridpath Hotel was only slightly more hospitable. Through much of the era black people weren't welcome as guests, but at least they could work there. In those days it was not unusual for elegant hotels, even in big cities in the North, to refuse black patronage. Read the biographies of Louis Armstrong or Sammy Davis Jr., for instance, and you'll see that their tours often seemed to be one long search for hotel accommodations.

But there were several Spokane hotels that were welcoming. "The Spokane Hotel never discriminated," said Maxey. "Another one that deserves special accolades was the Desert Hotel, a first-class hotel." And most of the railroad porters coming through town stayed at one of the Japanese hotels downtown, all of which were welcoming. After all, the Japanese felt the sting of segregation, too, in many of the same places that discriminated against black people. In the

1940s and 1950s the Davenport and the Ridpath became more tolerant. For instance, Marian Anderson, the great black opera singer, stayed at the Davenport in 1953.

But old customs die hard. When a group of Marycliff High School girls went to see Anderson, the management told the one black girl in the group that she couldn't go into the lobby—she had to take the freight elevator. "So these girls all decide, oh, we'll all go on the freight elevator," said Williamson. "So they did, which, at the time, was pretty neat."

Theaters

Here's a bright spot in the story of Spokane segregation.

"There was no problem in movie theaters, no Jim Crow spot upstairs," said Elmo Dalbert. At least, there wasn't after 1919, when a black man named S. S. Moore sued the Pantages Theatre, a vaudeville and movie house in Spokane, for forcing him to sit in the balcony. A Spokane Superior Court jury awarded Moore $200 in damages and, more importantly, sent a message. "All of us were for damages from the start," a juror was quoted in the *Spokane Daily Chronicle*. "All declared that even if a man were black he had the right to sit where he wanted to."

The *Chronicle* said the judgment "is of widespread importance, for it means that negroes can not be segregated from whites in any place of public amusement in the state of Washington." The message didn't always penetrate into other institutions, but it opened up theaters for good.

Schools

Spokane never had segregated schools. What's more, since Spokane's black population was more scattered than in many cities, black students were spread out through many schools. When Ruth Richardson attended North Central High School in the 1930s, she was student body president, a member of the tennis and drama clubs, and she graduated fourth in her class, according to her oral history printed in the 1989 book, *All Through the Night: The History of Spokane Black Americans*, by Joseph Franklin.

But there were no black teachers in Spokane until 1936, when Helen Dundee, a distinguished young graduate of Lewis and Clark High School and Washington State College, was hired. She taught one year at North Central and then moved away. There was not to be another black teacher until 1951, when the district, encouraged by a threatened Maxey lawsuit, hired Eugene Breckenridge. Breckenridge later became head of the Washington Education Association.

Nightlife

Evening entertainment was restricted, to say the least. Elmo Dalbert summarized the situation like this, "As for most of the night spots in town, you didn't go to those places, because you didn't feel welcome. You're not looking for trouble."

The black community went to Virgil's Chicken Shack and the Willow Inn, two black-owned establishments. But a third establishment, the Club Harlem (originally called the Pirate's Den), is practically a metaphor for Spokane's complicated racial situation. The Club Harlem (or Harlem

Club) was black-owned, black-operated, and all of the entertainers were black. As for the audience, it was all-white except on Sunday nights, and sometimes Mondays.

"The whole idea of the Harlem Club was to get the white crowd out there, because that's where the money was," said Alfonse Hill, who played the saxophone in many Spokane night spots. It was patterned after places like the Cotton Club in Harlem, where a white audience could enjoy black jazz and entertainment. "Swells and everything in Spokane went to the Harlem Club," said Williamson. "They (the owners) had a big family and they would dance and sing."

Social Clubs

An Asian-American woman quoted in the *Spokesman-Review* in 1968 summed up the reason that social clubs were on the front line of the desegregation fight in Spokane. "This is a club town," she said. "And most all bar members of minority groups."

It was a club town, and private clubs and lodges such as the Elks, the Eagles, the Moose, the Athletic Roundtable and the Spokane Club provided a great deal of the city's social life. According to Maxey, the majority of clubs in town were segregated. As late as 1971 a local Eagles lodge had the words "Caucasian only" printed on the application form, although the manager was quoted in the *Chronicle* as saying that was only because the forms were "printed in the past" and they hadn't run out of them yet.

The only black lodge in town was the Prince Hall Masons, also known as the Black Masons. It was not in the Masonic Temple—it had its own building—and it was separate from the other Masonic lodges. Also, the black community of Spokane had many of its own social and cultural clubs, including the Wednesday Art Club, the Phyllis Wheatley Club, the Ashanti Club, the Crest Club and the Dunbar Literary Club, all dedicated to promoting culture and the arts.

"See how nice they were dressed?" said Williamson, looking at a picture of the Dunbar Literary Club, a poetry club. "We weren't the little raggytags they show on the movies Hollywood puts out. We were not raggytaggy people."

The Spokane Club had no black members, but it was one of the biggest employers of black people in town. "Just about every black that came here, they worked there," said Williamson. "They did the maid service, the bartending, they did all of those things, but they did not belong there." Even the USO clubs were segregated during World War II. Spokane had a white USO and a black USO.

Maxey's lawsuits in the 1960s and 1970s helped end much of the segregation in clubs. He argued in 1967 that private clubs had the right to "discriminate any way they please," but not if they applied for a public right—the right to sell liquor.

Jobs

In 1957 James M. Sims, the president of the Spokane branch of the NAACP, took stock of the job opportunities for black residents—and was not impressed. "There are no regularly full-time employed Negro sales personnel or administrative or clerical personnel in Spokane, with the

exception of the YWCA, the teachers in the county and city school systems, and the county welfare office," Sims told the *Chronicle*.

> *There are no regularly employed Negro mechanics in any major auto agency, no chefs in any major restaurant or hotel, no employees with any of the airlines, no repairmen, meter readers, collectors and so on. There are no tellers or clerical employees in the banks or savings and loan agencies. There is not a single regularly employed elevator operator in the Spokane area.*

What was left? Menial maintenance or laborer positions, noted Sims. According to census records, other common occupations were in domestic service and other service jobs, such as porter, waiter and bartender.

Early in Spokane's history, skilled black stonemasons helped build the city's tunnels and foundations. "They were stonemasons from Durham, North Carolina," said Williamson. "They would never be able to learn to be stonemasons here because nobody would have taught them."

Many skilled positions and union jobs were closed to black workers in the first half of the century. Black people were barred from certain jobs, mainly for the obvious economic reasons—taking higher-paying jobs away from white workers, for one—but sometimes the reasons were more convoluted. Williamson said a friend of hers who worked for WWP once said he could never be a meter reader because "it would not look good for a colored man to go into a white man's home when his wife was there alone." And a black mail sorter told Williamson that his boss once said, "As long as I am postmaster, a colored man will never deliver the mail on Spokane streets."

He was wrong. After World War II, attitudes began to change in these fields and many others. "The first black man to deliver mail on Spokane streets was Maurice McFarlin, a veteran of World War II," said Williamson. "The war was over, and there were veterans back, and I believe that was one of the reasons he got to be a mailman, because he was a veteran."

Black professionals, however, were slower to arrive, slower even than in the more segregated South, where separate black institutions required a black professional class. Spokane had no black doctors, no black dentists, a black teacher only briefly and, until Maxey received his law degree in 1950, no black lawyers. Black patients went to white doctors and dentists in town who were known to be welcoming, and word got around quickly in the black community. Sometimes, however, the doctors were more tolerant than some of their white patients. Williamson tells this story about what happened after she had gone to a new dentist in the 1950s: "Two days later, a girl from the office called and said, 'You can't come here,'" said Williamson. "I said, 'Why?' and she said, 'Because there was a lady in the waiting room, and she raised a whole bunch of heck about you being there.'"

To this day, Spokane has never had a black dentist.

Housing

By 1961 segregation had lost its hold on many aspects of Spokane life. But not in jobs and not in housing. Frank Hopkins, owner of the Ebony Café, told the *Spokesman-Review* in 1961 what

happened when he bought a house on the north side, outside of an established black area. Just as he was about to move in someone broke out 28 windows in one night. "I just had to let it go," he said.

That same year the Reverend J. C. Brooks of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Spokane told the *Spokesman-Review* that a black person looking for a house would be steered to the "area for Negroes," which he said was bounded by Division on the west, Altamont on the east, Ninth on the south, and Sprague on the north. Today it is called the East Central neighborhood. This kind of "red-lining," as it was known, was especially ironic in Spokane.

"The funny thing is, the original 300 (the black pioneers), they lived all over Spokane," said Maxey. "The dominant number lived in the East Side area, but, by far, it couldn't be said that there was just one area. The original pioneers were spread all over, which was very much different from other cities." The pioneer families were accepted in their neighborhoods, by most accounts. But when it came to new families, that was a different story.

"It was a gentleman's agreement type of thing," said Alfonse Hill. "There were a lot of places the realtors wouldn't take you. You could go to the East Side. But as far as the (upper) South Hill? Forget it."

Maxey debated James S. Black, president of the Washington Association of Realtors, four times on the issue of housing segregation in the 1950s. "We had tremendous arguments," said Maxey. At issue was red-lining, which was sometimes subtle and sometimes not. One passage in a 1940s-era Spokane Valley real estate code of ethics read, "A realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood…any race or nationality or any persons whose presence will be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."

"Restrictive covenants didn't go out until 1946 in a Supreme Court ruling," said Maxey. "And that gave us a foothold to blast their legal foundations out from under them."

In fact, Maxey believes that World War II was the turning point in the struggle against segregation. "Change was never explosive in Spokane," he said. "It happened with the war more than anything else."

For one thing, there were many black soldiers in uniform in Spokane, including hundreds stationed at Geiger Field in Spokane and Farragut Naval Base in northern Idaho, and "they didn't dare try to enforce it (segregation)," said Maxey. Also, the country had just fought a war over the ideals of democracy and equality. The *Spokesman-Review* columnist, in his story about the treatment of the *Carmen Rose* cast, put it like this: "And now, in the flush of victory, democratic freedom supposedly won, a group of well-behaved Negroes comes to Spokane and is unable to eat, let alone be quartered."

By the 1950s the NAACP had become a potent force and "we could actually fight back a bit," said Maxey. Not just fight back, but as Maxey said, touch people's humanity. A sense of fair play built steadily through the late 1940s and 1950s and then culminated in the great civil rights movement of the 1960s. The scenes of police dogs and fire hoses and little girls escorted to school were deeply shocking to many Northerners.

"People began to look at what they were capable of being, and they didn't want to be associated with that," said Williamson. "So it began to change. But now, with all the things you read about in the paper—is it going back the other way? But it will never go back. We've become too strong for it ever to go back to where we'll just sit around and have our feelings hurt. It'll never go back there."

Jim Kershner has been a journalist in Wyoming and Washington for the past 25 years, and for the past 11 years has been a columnist, critic and history writer for the Spokane Spokesman-Review*, in which this story first appeared.*