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Upcoming Events

**THERE ARE NO
EVENTS PLANNED
FOR THE NEAR
FUTURE DUE
TO THE
CORONAVIRUS
PANDEMIC**

A Publication of The South Oroville African American Historical Society

The Southside Chronicle



President Message by Dr. John H. Rivers

As I reflect on the many social issues in America today, I am reminded of how unique the experience has been for people of African descendants. They were among the early explorers and invaders to come to North America, before it was called America. Arriving first in the West Indies, South and Central America, and Mexico. Their early experiences as owned property was primarily in South America and the West Indies. Twenty Africans were brought to Jamestown Virginia in 1619, and thus slavery and its after effects begin in America.

One of the sustaining effects of slavery today is the view that was used to justify the inhumane treatment of Africans and their descendants. The notion of superiority based on inherited physical characteristics is the underlining reason for our ongoing problems between Whites and other Americans. Yet I marvel at the strength, courage, faith, and wisdom of our ancestors whose Country is America. Yes, we have a story and stake in America. We have skin in the game. As Curtis Mayfield's song states "THIS IS MY COUNTRY".

BLACK BUSINESS OWNERSHIP

"The hard way"

By Dr. John H. Rivers

A functional community can be defined as an identifiable physical space and composed of people who share a common set of beliefs, aspirations, and cultural characteristics. Ideally this community would have social systems that function to provide for and sustain human life and well being. Southside in the 1940 – 1970s would have been defined as such, with one exception. It never developed an economy that could meet the sustainable needs of Black individuals and families. It is probably more correct to define Southside as a collection of neighborhoods where Black people lived, bought, or rented homes, built churches, and developed social institutions that gave them a strong sense of social/cultural identity.

The absence of critical and necessary pieces in a functional economy where inhabitants could find steady work and livable wages, or economic activities that kept money flowing through and back into the neighborhoods would auger against the definition of community as discussed earlier.

One Southside Black family did start a business in 1942 that almost established the

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Membership Committee's Corner

by Van Bilbo

This has been a most unusual year. We have had to cancel all of our normal activities for the year. No Fundraisers, no in person Board meetings, no Festivals or Historical events and for the first time in twelve years no Legacy Awards Ceremony. There is a vaccine on the horizon for the corona-virus, hopefully it will bring about a change in the new year and get us back to a sense of normalcy.

Even though our activities have been limited we are continuing to investigate and do historical research. The featured article in this edition of the newsletter is about a prominent African American family in Oroville, the Gabriel family. Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel worked tirelessly to make a better life for their family and to build a successful business in spite of the many obstacles put in front of them. There are many stories like the Gabriel's that need to be told and it is our goal to tell them.

Support from our membership is what allows us to collect and preserve historical information about the African American community in Oroville and surrounding Northern California communities. Thank you for your continued support.

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necessary foundation to move toward establishing a Black economy. In 1942, Barney Gabriel Sr. and his wife Katherine founded the first stage of the Yellow Cab company in Oroville. This was achieved despite the racial barriers in the 1940s in Oroville.

In an interview reported in the San Francisco Examiner, DECEMBER 13, 1982, Mr. Gabriel talked about some of the experiences he and Katherine had in starting and growing their business.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW WE DID IT. Me and my wife worked around the clock, 24 hours a day in 12 hours shifts, and we fought hard".

Mr. Gabriel's parents were one of the first Black families to arrive in Oroville in 1921. They migrated from Neeryville, La. His father was a lumber mill worker, and one of the Black men to bring his family to Oroville. There was a very small number of Black individuals in Oroville at this time, and no such thing as a Black community existed. Local Jim Crow practices were in full force and only fair-minded landlords would rent to Blacks. Papa Gabriel, as he was called by others, was able to rent a house for \$3.50 a week downtown. Later he moved his family to Southside and lived in a tent until his family was able to build a house. This was the same pattern for other Black families during this time.



Mrs. Katherine Gabriel

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Young Barney and Katherine inherited their parent's optimism and belief in the value and necessity of hard work and independence. Katherine's family migrated from Dusett, Texas to Oroville in 1935. Her parents were Madison and Mamie Smith. She graduated from Oroville High school in 1941 and married Barney the same year. She attended Chico State College in 1942 where she studied business. This education would become invaluable to the growth and success of the family yellow cab company. Barney and Katherine were a team in the truest sense.

Barney worked downtown shining shoes while attending grammar and high school. While shining shoes, he kept an eye open for possible business opportunities. According to Barney, Blacks were not allowed in most restaurants and stores downtown in the early 1940s, but it did not hurt to be positive.

Oroville had only one taxicab after World War II which was parked at a cab stand at Montgomery and Myers streets close to his shine stand. He stated in his interview: "One day I looked at all these people waiting for a cab. I had to go to the store for polish and while I was there, I saw the cab parked in front of the bar. I looked in the bar and found the driver drinking and having a good time. When he returned to his stand most of the would-be fares had walked home. "I decided to start my own cab business".

He had saved money from his shoes shine business, so he went to city hall in downtown Oroville and got a license. His business venture started with a 1940 Buick and a friend who would do some of the driving. When his friend (Rufus Noland) would drive Barney would shine shoes and answer the phone. At first no body wanted to ride in a car with a Black man, but customer's needs and Barney's services won the day. More customers began to use Barney's Yellow Cab.

He was up against strong competition from the other eight local cab companies in the late 1940s. Katherine and Barney out competed them by emphasizing availability, service, and courtesy. Alone with the obstacles mentioned earlier, the Gabriel's had to overcome harassment from the local police Chief. In his interview with the San Francisco Examiner, Barney said,

"The chief of police is tough on me, almost tough enough to put me out of business, the Chief was giving my cabs tickets at every turn".

The Gabriel's needed an infusion of cash to grow their business and went searching for a loan with one of the local financial institutions, but they would not give him a loan. They had to sell some of their personal possessions to purchase a much-needed cab for their business. "We tried to grow like other white business do but we were turn down like other Black people who wanted to start or grow their business. I gave up on trying to get money from local banks like other white business people could, we Just did it by wheeling and dealing. We borrowed from Peter to pay Paul, and then asked Paul for a loan".

This finance method appeared to work. On advice from a friend and cab repair man in Sacramento, Barney quietly arranged to become a Yellow Cab franchise. During the 1940s, the Gabriel's were the first Black persons to hold a Yellow Cab Franchise in the United States. To gain more credibility in Oroville, Barney surprised everyone by running for City Council in 1952.



Mr. Barney Gabriel

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He did not win, but he did get the business class attention in Oroville. Barney stated in his interview: “It was kind of a joke, I told someone that I was going to run for the City Council and the police Chief found out about it. He said he would resign if I won, so I took out nomination papers”.

Gradually the business bloomed amid the Jim Crow climate which included courts battles and harassment. Barney and Katherine surpass their original dream of owning five cabs and came out of the 1960s with the school-bus service and ten cabs. In 1980, they contracted with the city and county to run the Oroville Area Transit and senior citizen shuttle. In 1993, the Gabriels had 50 employees working the cabs, two city buses, and 44 school b

The Gabriel parents worked 24 hours every day of the week. They operated their business in their home at the beginning. Their home was located on El Noble Street. Their home was small and crowded because space was needed for dispatch machinery. They raised three sons and one daughter in this home and latter moved to a larger home on Greenville Avenue. As the scope of their business expanded, they moved the business operation downtown on Montgomery Street.

While their ongoing focus was on the business and raising their children, Barney and Katherine provided personal support to individuals and families in need. In Barney’s case, his service on the County Private Industrial Board and Oroville Hospital Board brought a wealth of business knowledge and a prospective on Community needs, as well as pragmatic solutions. His appointment to the State Small Business Development Board was another opportunity for him to serve the public/business interests over the entire state. He was appointed to this position by State Senator David Roberti, Chairman of the State Senate Rules Committee. The 17-member board set policy guidelines, advised the executive director for the state Small Business administration, received, and disbursed federal state and local funds, and adopted regulations for the supervision of small business development corporations.

After 52 years of service, the Gabriels shut down their 1875 Montgomery St. facility. Oroville was without a cab service for a short while and employees sought new forms of employment. The family had operated the company continuously 24 hours per day since 1942. The parents and their four children shared a division of labor plan where each member had a specific responsibility.

David Gabriel (one of the founder’s sons), wrote a statement on the reasons for the closure. He wrote: “The company’s 24-hour service was too taxing for the family to keep up and its members are burned out”. He also wrote that the cost for during business had increased rapidly. He pointed out the raising costs for gas, auto parts, insurance and workman’s compensation were not covered by the company’s zone rate for service rather than a meter fare for service used in other towns and cities. David thanked their customers for their patronage over the many years.

David finished his statement with these words: “The taxis company had been the fulfillment of a dream for my parents who had migrated here from Louisiana and Texas in search of their goals.”

It is inspiring to learn the lessons that others have left for the benefit of those who dream and make them real.

SOUTHSIDE REPRESENTING DURING THE 1950'S



Sally Childs Walker is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Childs. The Childs lived on Danielson St. in the Ora Vista section in Southside. After graduating from Oroville High School, Sally achieved another first. She was the first Black person to become a sworn law enforcement officer between Sacramento and the Oregon border .



Gracie Lacey is one of the first two African Americans to enter the Regatta Days queen contest for the title of Miss Oroville. She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Lacey. The Lacey family was one of the early settlers in Southside. They lived on a ten-acre small farm located at the east end of Fort Wayne St. Mr. and Mrs. Lacey received one of our first Legacy awards,

Hooker Oak Elk Lodge sponsored an adult basketball team during the early 1950s. The team played in the Oroville Adult Recreation Basketball League. They won two back to back championships in the league. They played their games in the Municipal Auditorium in downtown Oroville. The league stopped operations after the Hooker Oak team only lost one game in two years. Most of the team members were former Oroville High School stars who competed in football, basketball, and track. Team players were Con, and Valtee Belcher, Carlton Biley, Ronnie Newsom, Jay King, Emmett Whitfield, Clyde Tucker, T.C. Dennis (team captain) and Cleveland Moore.



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