

The Black Pioneers of the San Gorgonio Pass, Part 2: A Look at the History of the Black Community in Banning from 1965 – 1970s

***Disclaimer** – Some of the terms used in this research describing the black community are direct quotes from historic newspaper articles and are not intended to offend today's sentiments on accepted terms for racial identity.*

The first part of the history of the black pioneers of the San Gorgonio Pass covered the arrival of the Swait and Wilkens families in 1942, followed by more families who moved from the Southern states, Texas, and later Palm Springs in the 1950s and 60s. This second installment will highlight the years from 1965 to the 1970s and will feature many of the influential black educators who have contributed to Banning.

The communities within the San Gorgonio Pass were no different from other parts of America in the 1960s and 1970s that were experiencing racial tensions associated with the dawn of the civil rights movement. Some aspects of integration evolved naturally as people learned each other's cultures and eventually accepted them. However, in most instances this integration had to initially be forced by the law of the land and guided by the U. S. Constitution. Discussing the ramifications of racial prejudice is beyond the scope of this article but it is an obvious factor as we examine the history of the San Gorgonio Pass and the diverse cultures that have chosen it for their homes.

Newspaper accounts are considered "secondary sources" when researching time periods in history, not entirely accurate in some cases but usually providing an unfiltered account of events that occurred within a short time frame. Microfilm research of the Record Gazette provided valuable insights to the late 1960s and much of the material in this article is based on newspaper accounts of events and commentaries in the form of interviews.

Local newspaper reports of confrontations within the city of Banning began showing up in 1965, 1966, and 1967. In September of 1966 there were reports of confrontations between black youths and the Banning police on N. Allen Street between Nicolet and George Streets. The First Missionary Baptist Church was literally in the middle of numerous incidents and it was the intervention by Rev. Prior and members of his congregation that kept the incidents from escalating into more violent situations.

A July 1967 article in the Daily Record Gazette reported that "incendiary bombs" and rocks were being thrown near the corner of N. Allen and Nicolet Streets. The incident drew responses

from both police and fire units. There were also confrontations during these years involving black, Mexican American and Morongo Reservation youths. Many of these situations escalated into 1968 and 1969, the two most tumultuous years in race relations in the San Geronio Pass. Paralleling these confrontations were the efforts of individuals and organizations in Banning dedicated to keeping the peace and resolving issues through community dialogue.

Mike Rose moved to Banning in 1963, and began teaching classes in World History, Speech, Tennis and Photography at Banning High School. Although there was already a Black Student Union in place when Mike arrived, he initiated an "ethnic studies program" on campus around 1966, after spending three years seeking school board approval. The class was composed of about 40% Black, 40% Mexican American and 20% Native American students who took the class offered by their white teacher. The students were assigned a research paper but allowed a "project" as an alternative. The "projects" often involved the hosting of an ethnic food dinner supported by family and friends. The class was described by Mike as "a kind of learn by doing" environment and was one of the first programs in the school system created to build a better understanding between the races represented on campus. In Mike's words, "Understanding a community comes through the kids in school and how they react to things." Mike and some of his students founded the first Hispanic club on campus named, the "Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). They also started an organization for Native Americans called, "Americans of Indian Descent (AID).

There was an incident on a Sunday night at the Fox Theatre in 1968, that triggered fights at the high school the following day. Mike Rose brought some of the black students into his classroom who were frustrated by a variety of issues that were escalating on campus and throughout the city. He gave them the opportunity to voice those frustrations which helped diffuse some of the immediate anger that continued to surface on and off throughout the day. The teachers, families and churches in Banning were all emphasizing the same thing at this time, the value of talking through some of the issues that were the root cause of the tensions.

One of Mike's white students was Patty Nelson Limerick who later became a professor of American Western History and is now Director of the Center for the American West at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Patty was Mike's teaching assistant and was interested in measuring the integration of blacks into Banning's commercial district. Patty conducted a survey of town merchants to determine if they had any employees of color and by doing so raised awareness of the needs of equal employment opportunity within the city. Patty was also involved in the Human Relations Commission to be discussed in more depth later in this article.

When asked to grade Banning on its assimilation of other races into the community Mike Rose gave the city an A-. He believes that by the time the Hmong community arrived in Banning the city and school district were better prepared to handle the changes, due in large part to its

experiences in the 1960s and 70s of incorporating the black community into Banning. In Mike's words, "I think the community overall did a good job of adapting to something they were completely unprepared for."

Another one of Mike's students at the high school was current Banning resident, Clarence Taylor, who was 13 when he moved with his parents, Cornelius and Maude Taylor to Banning from the Los Angeles area in 1967. In Clarence's words, "Leaving south central LA and coming to Banning proved to be an eye opening experience". Clarence first attended Coombs and later graduated from Banning High School in 1972. As a teenager growing up in Banning Clarence was involved in the Teen Outpost Club, a government sponsored effort directed by Mr. Theatlas Reagor. The Teen Outpost Club provided a place for students to congregate after school and offered services ranging from career counseling to piano lessons.

Clarence gave a personal account of the before mentioned incident at the Fox Theatre in 1968, that triggered fights that night and the following day on the campus of the high school. Clarence was one of a large crowd at the Fox to see the movie, "Uncle Tom's Cabin." A fight broke out in the concession area after the movie between two black girls. The police were called and when they arrived the white officers used force in dispersing the group of young blacks which resulted in vandalism and some rioting down Ramsey Street, east of the theater.

A Riverside Press Enterprise article about the incident erroneously reported that the fight was racially motivated when in fact the fight was one of a personal nature between the two girls. However, the reaction by the police department was perceived to be racial in nature and many in the black community were angered by this. The incident spilled over into the high school the following day when there were fights throughout the day between black and white students. Clarence mentioned that Rev. John Prior later went to the Police Department with some of the black students to discuss the use of force at the Fox Theatre. As was so often the case, Rev. Prior was instrumental in keeping the peace when these kinds of incidents occurred in Banning. Clarence Taylor was the first black to sit on the Library Board and served from 2003 to 2011 as both a Trustee and a Commissioner.

Another perspective on the racial climate of the 1960s in Banning is given by Banning educator and sports counselor Jim Anson. Jim moved to Banning from Orange County in April of 1963 when he was 15 yrs. old. While attending Banning High School Jim was inspired by teachers Mike Rose and Howard Noble who got him interested in politics and history. Jim graduated in 1965 and continued his education at Riverside City College and California State, San Bernardino. After receiving his degree he returned to Banning to teach math and later special education at Coombs Middle School and Hoffer Elementary.

In 1969, Anson began his coaching career at Banning High School, principally with the football team. He remembers the football team as being racially mixed and that race only became an issue when playing other high school teams in the Inland Empire when he had to prepare his black student athletes for the racial taunting they would receive from all-white opponents.

When discussing race relations in the San Geronimo Pass Anson says, "Only when banking and real estate institutions had to legally give loans to minorities did things start to change. Not only did it take the law but it also took a new generation to replace the 'good old boy' network of businesses that excluded minorities. Racism is still prevalent in our society but now it is coded and more subtle."

Jim experienced numerous incidents of prejudice during the late 1960s in Banning. He remembers witnessing a shop owner "filing" a black youth's application into a trash can after the young man applied for a job in his store. He also remembers a coffee shop owner burning a take-out dinner for a Banning black man with the hope that he wouldn't return to her establishment.

Jim Anson was responsible for several black athletes getting athletic scholarships for college. He remembers some of the greatest of the Banning black athletes as being; Art Robertson, Johnny Robertson, Alvin Walton, Charles Titus, Forrest Pllum, Don Pllum, Charlie Brown, Gilly Malone, Dicky Brown, Tony Prior, Mario Montgomery, and Larry Strange.

1968 was the year Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, O.J. Simpson won the Heisman trophy and the movie, "Tell Them Willie Boy Was Here" was being filmed in the San Geronimo Pass. Many of the racial confrontations during the summer of 1968 may have been a reaction to the killing of Dr. King. After his death some of the civil rights progress that had been made was seen as a dream that was now awakened by the harsh reality of race relations in the United States.

There were legitimate fears in the white community in Banning that the violence would escalate and threaten the safety of the town. 1968 was the year of many fires in Banning caused by unknown arsonists. Firemen and police officers were often met with rocks after responding to a fire. This was a smaller-scale reaction to some of the larger race rioting across the U.S. in towns like Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Oakland, San Francisco and Los Angeles. According to a 1970 Press Enterprise article one "prominent Banning Negro" said, "Trouble? No, there's been no trouble. Oh, there's been some rock throwing and kids have had fights but kids will be kids. That's not what I call trouble. Detroit had trouble. Watts had trouble. There's been trouble all around us but not here."

Organizations Offering Solutions

In response to violent incidents and the fear of more escalating violence several organizations were formed by civic and church institutions in Riverside County and Banning to assuage some of the fears and concerns of the community. There was a series of meetings held during the summer of 1969 sponsored by the Human Relations Commission, a group organized to diffuse some of the racial clashes flaring up in Banning. Some of these meetings were held in civic community rooms and the Teen Outpost Club. Many of the concerned citizens attending these sessions complained of prejudicial city hiring practices, police tactics, and housing segregation policies.

Groups in attendance at the Human Relations Commission meeting in July of 1968 were the Mexican American Political Association, the NAACP Youth Organization, the Black Assistance Association and the Morongo Indian Tribal Council. Meetings were called by the Commission because "there was talk of violence in Banning," in the words of acting chairman and moderator, Everett Jenkins. Many of those attending these sessions complained of the lack of job opportunities in Banning. Dennis Lyons, a participant in the meetings commented, "If the community continues in its present direction you won't have Stagecoach Days, you'll have a ghost town." Others complained that if they addressed their problems to the City Council "they would refer it to a committee and nothing would be done."

The Anthropol Club was a philanthropic organization of black women started in Banning in 1968 and founded by Mrs. Theotrice McDonald. Mrs. McDonald named the club "Anthropol" because of its reference to African culture. The Anthropol Club raised funds in a variety of ways including glass bottle collecting and recycling. The profits were principally used for scholarships for students of all races. Some monies were also contributed to fundraisers for the building of a community swimming pool and for presenting the annual fireworks program in Banning. In addition to monetary contributions several Anthropol Club members volunteered their time at health fairs held at the San Gorgonio Memorial Hospital. The Anthropol Club is still active in Banning and its current members include; Marion Johnson, Ivy Wilson, Clara Thomas, Estelle Lewis, Deborah Washington, Vanessa Warner, Suzette Wallace, Drina Lucas, Jennifer Johnson, Deborah Dukes, Patricia Henderson, Eva Jo Thomas, Pearl Thomas, Sella Wallace and Debbie Franklin.

An example of the difficulties blacks faced in integrating into businesses and the local government in Banning can be seen in a quote by a Banning city councilman in a 1970 Riverside Press Enterprise article; "If a colored leader is looked up to by his people he doesn't have communication with us. If he has communication with us they don't want him for their leader. We're going to have to incorporate them (blacks) into our world. Not that we're going to dance with them, but we're going to have to incorporate them into our everyday worker world."

Mr. Lester Lewis was hired through the Office of Economic Opportunity for the eastern part of Riverside County to organize the Banning Opportunity Center located next to the Banning Chamber of Commerce, then at 80 N. Murray St. The Center was staffed with employment counselors and served the entire San Geronio Pass. There were two smaller satellite offices; one in Beaumont and one on the Morongo Reservation. The Opportunity Center represented all races in their search for employment. In a 1968 Daily Record Gazette article Mr. Lewis said, "We have as many Anglos as minority groups inquiring about local jobs." Unfortunately those local jobs were difficult to find in 1968, especially for minority applicants.

Rev. John Prior and Cordelia Henderson Stewart

Two prominent black Banning residents emerged during the late 1960s who personified the philosophical differences between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Rev. John Prior and Cordelia Henderson Stewart both expressed the difficulties of the black community's struggle to integrate into the white community in several interviews with the Banning Record Gazette newspaper. Rev. John Prior could be described as aligning himself with Dr. King's philosophy of change through non violence. Cordelia Henderson Stewart could be described as aligning herself more with the philosophies of Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael.

In a May 20, 1968 article in the Daily Record Gazette Rev. Prior commented on the relationship between blacks and whites in Banning: "Whites need to come to know the black person. If the white man would really come to know the black man he would get rid of his fear. It's a frustrating point that every move the black man makes frightens the white. All we want to be is Americans – not white. We want all the rights and liberties possessed by any other man in this country. That's the basis of the whole racial problem. I believe it's lack of communication."

Cordelia Henderson Stewart was also interviewed by the Daily Record Gazette in May of 1968. In the article she described herself as a "Black soul sister" and offered her perspective of growing up in Banning that was a sometimes harsher view of the problems than those expressed by Rev. Prior. Several individuals interviewed for this article remembered Cordelia as being an outspoken activist in her beliefs. They also remember her as having the most beautiful singing voice they had ever heard.

Cordelia Henderson described her frustration in finding a job in Banning after attending the American Business College in San Bernardino and applying for numerous openings with Banning businesses. "I know there has been discrimination here because I've experienced it personally." In a letter to the editor in September of 1968, Cordelia attempted to explain the concept of Black Power. "The fact that we are black is our ultimate reality. To the smug middle class white American, Black Power is a threat, a threat to the secure position they have been and still are reluctant to share. I must stress that the revolts and fires in our ghettos are not the response to

the stimuli of Black Power, although the cry can be heard. It is the failure of white society to realize that white racism is the cause, no other, of the black revolt.”

Prominent Black Citizens of Banning

Some of Banning’s first and most influential black teachers and public service employees who volunteered to be interviewed for this article are listed below. Their individual accomplishments are too numerous to acknowledge in the confines of space but all who know them know of their contributions to our community. More detailed biographies will soon be available on the Banning Library District website.

Mr. Louis Davison came to Banning from Riverside in 1963. He was hired by then Police Chief Harry Moore and was the city’s first black police officer. He became Banning’s first black police sergeant, the first black police lieutenant, and in 1981 became the city’s first black Police Chief and held that position until 1989. Mr. Davison received a Medal of Valor and a Citation of Praise from the City of Banning in 1974 for acts of bravery in the rescue of three individuals from an apartment fire in Banning.

Schoolteacher Barbara Butler moved to Banning from Loma Linda in 1972. Barbara first taught 7th and 8th grades at Coombs Middle School and later consumer science and art at Banning High School. She was the first black female teacher at the continuation school, first called “Ramsey,” and later “New Horizons.” She taught at the continuation school for 28 years. “Ms. Bee” as Barbara is affectionately called by her students, has been active in Stagecoach Days and won numerous sweepstakes awards. Barbara is also well known for her displays at the library and was the first black female Board member for the Banning Public Library. She retired from teaching in 2009.

A majority of the black educators in Banning were hired by the school district in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the black schoolteachers in Banning who Barbara remembers are Homer Shepherd, Donna Thomas, Claire Wooten Thomas, Charles (Rusty) Stokes, Freddie Hawley, Sally McDonald, William Hawley, Barbara Reagor, Sally Hurley, Andrew Hurley, Ruth Powell, Darlene Swinson, Dorothy Howard, Ann Louise Peace, Gilbert Gebo, Blanche Teague and Pelton Teague. Many of Banning’s black schoolteachers came to Banning from the Southern states and Texas.

Blanche and Pelton Teague moved to Banning from Arkansas in 1968 to accept teaching positions with the Banning Unified School District. Pelton taught English, Speech, Journalism and Drama at Banning High School and served as a Banning Unified School District Board Member from 2001-2009. Blanche was a student counselor at Coombs and later at Nicolet Middle School. Now retired from their teaching positions the Teagues regard Banning as being a friendly, family-type community where people support each other.

Clara Wooten Thomas came to Banning in 1968 by way of San Bernardino and earlier, Louisiana. She received her Masters Degree from UCR in music and education and first taught at Central Elementary School. When she first arrived in Banning as a young schoolteacher she remembers being frightened, not knowing what to expect, but she was “treated well.”

During her tenure as a teacher with the Banning Unified School District Clara remembers taking busloads of Mexican American students to Hollywood to listen to prominent Hollywood Hispanics speak about the importance of pursuing higher education. She became a member of the Banning Planning Commission through the encouragement of one of her mentors, Mrs. Brigetta Page. Clara is also a founding member of the Anthropol Club in Banning and continues to work with a mentoring program.

Barbara and Theatlas Reagor were married in 1966 and moved to Banning in 1967 from Abilene, Texas. After arriving in Banning, Barbara was hired as a schoolteacher first at Hemmerling and later at Central Elementary School. Her career as a teacher in Banning spanned 38 years. Mrs. Reagor was also involved in sign language instruction and retired from teaching in 2001.

Theatlas Reagor has had a long career in law enforcement both as a reserve police officer and as a probation officer and has specialized in drug, spousal abuse and job counseling. While working with the Sheriff's Department in Banning Mr. Reagor developed a “Life Skills” program to prepare inmates for life after their incarceration. He is currently an Associate Pastor at the First Missionary Baptist Church in Banning.

Debbie Franklin moved to Banning from San Diego in 1985. Her husband Roy was the first black fireman for the Banning Fire Department. Debbie had worked in insurance claims for 28 years and became involved in politics through insurance industry related legislative propositions. After moving to Banning she felt compelled to represent the east side constituents in Banning and ran for office for a city council position in 2006. She was elected to this position and is now serving a second term as a city council member.

Debbie expressed her feelings about living in Banning, “Banning is a family community. Even if you're not related to your neighbors they treat you like you are family. For children, Banning is an excellent environment because of its diversity. Our city has great potential and we should be proud of our history and use it as the foundation for our future. You have to know where you came from to know where you are and where you are going.”

Some of the “firsts” discovered in the research on the black history of Banning are presumed to be; Grady Ware, the first black volunteer fireman, Roy Franklin, the first black fireman on the Banning Fire Department, Gale Slayton, the first black library director for the Banning Public Library, Roosevelt Williams, the first black city councilman and the longest serving councilman,

John Hunt, the first black mayor of Banning, Debbie Franklin, the first female black council member, Clarence Taylor, the first black Banning Public Library Board member, Barbara Butler, the first black continuation schoolteacher, and Louis Davison, the first black police officer and Chief of Police. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list and we hope to learn more about those individuals in the black community who have contributed to the history of the San Geronio Pass.

“We All Need Each Other”

There were numerous letters to the editor during the tumultuous years 1968 and 1969, from both blacks and whites calling for understanding, respect and a better world to live in based on Christian and humanitarian principles. A 1968 editorial by Daily Record Gazette editor Jerry Ringhofer put the racial struggles in Banning into a larger perspective.

“Most human beings invariably discover after barriers such as race and language are overcome they are rather more alike than unlike....the first step on the long, hard road to mutual understanding is to cultivate a resistance to thinking of other persons in terms of stereotypes.....we all need each other if America is to continue to prosper and progress.”

In a town like Banning, where we can celebrate the diversity of our neighbors, the eloquent words of black pioneer educator Mrs. Thomye Pellum ring with a lasting truth, “I am me and a part of those around me.”

(Special thanks to Barbara Butler, Marion Johnson, Emma Pellum, Jim Anson, Mike Rose, Estelle and Lester Lewis, Ivy Wilson, Lou Davison, Clara Thomas, Debbie Franklin, Barbara and Theatlas Reagor, Ruth McCormick, Deborah Dukes, Blanche Teague, Pelton Teague, Clara Wooten Thomas, Patrick Percy, and Ruby Swait. Extra special thanks to Clarence Taylor who’s perseverance in documenting the history of the black community of Banning contributed to the writing of these articles. While serving on the Banning Library District Board Clarence was instrumental in supporting the research needed to document the histories of all the ethnic communities represented in the San Geronio Pass. Thank you Clarence!)

We ask for the public’s help in sharing your stories, photographs and information relating to this important research on Banning’s history. With your contributions we can add more images of the black community to our collection of historic photographs on the California Digital Library’s online archive, making it an accurate representation of our city.