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LIFESTYLES

Southern immigrants beat racism in north

By Guy Tridgell
THE JOLIET HERALD-NEWS

BRAIDWOOD, Ill. — One of the largest migrations of black people to Illinois arrived in Will County in 1877 when blacks were brought in by the hundreds to break a bitter coal strike.

They were probably duped, leaving the South for promises of milk and honey but arriving by trainloads as hated scabs. Left to fend for themselves in a community torn by labor strife, it wasn't an ideal way to start a new life.

There was violence. Blood was shed. Blacks were run from Braidwood north to Wilmington. National Guard troops were called in.

Local history and the subsequent state investigation about the strike violence tell us that much, but what happened to the miners in the next few decades is unclear.

For years those questions dogged Coal City historian Dick Joyce.

"I knew blacks were in Braidwood during a strike in 1877 and had been chased out of town. I knew that end of the story. My question always was what happened to them after that," Joyce said.

Joyce began digging for answers in 1990. Six years later he uncovered a truly American story told in acts of greed, resilience and, ultimately, harmony.

Many in the mining community, black and whites, left when the coal mines closed. But before they did, the community was bound by labor strife that crossed racial lines.

"I think people learned to live with each other and found out their circumstances were the same," Joyce said. "If they didn't reach complete acceptance, at least there was toleration of each other."

After the strike many blacks left Braidwood, scattering to mining jobs in outlying towns. But many stayed, continuing to work the mines, accounting for about 7 percent of the city's population in 1880.

Coal mining was not glamorous work. It was dangerous, unreliable and didn't pay well. If there was an environment that encouraged shared misery, mining was it.

Blacks and whites were poor together and had the same concerns of losing a loved one in a mine accident. But when there was a strike, or when work was scarce, race relations strained and violence erupted, said Joyce.

"The struggle to get a job and keep a job is tough, and you are going to take care of your own people. I'm sure the blacks felt that way. I'm sure the English miners and the Welsh miners and the Bohemian miners felt that way, too."

While the life could never be mistaken for prejudice-free utopia, blacks carved a productive, accepted niche in mining towns. A couple of years after their arrival, black congregations and civic groups, like the Colored Lodge of Odd Fellows, the Colored Elks and the Colored Knights, were formed.

They also made political inroads, wooing large voting blocs of whites to win union and city elections. The biggest accomplishment came in 1883, when two blacks, Elijah Roey and George S. Bailer, were elected as Braidwood alderman.

The adhesive binding workers together was a common oppressor.

Blacks and others discovered they were being played against one another by some mine owners in hopes of driving the union apart.

"I'm very impressed by the miner's union. They always preached solidarity," Joyce said.

An ordinary family



Although Dorothy Counts desegregated Charlotte schools in 1957, it was until 1960 that school in the state capital finally accepted their first black student. That student, William Campbell went on to become mayor of Atlanta. Above, Charlotte children in integrated classroom.

Holt's effort to integrate Wake school focus of special

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JACKSONVILLE, N.C. — History books do not always tell the whole story.

Meet, for example, Joseph Holt, whose story is one of the missing chapters from the annals of North Carolina history. It is about a family's early pioneering efforts to integrate Raleigh's public schools.

Deborah L. Holt, 30, knew the story about her family needed to be told. She did so in the award-winning documentary, "Exhausted Remedies: Joe Holt's Story" — which she wrote and produced. In February she was presented with the CINE Eagle award in Washington, D.C. for her work.

But the prize is secondary to the story, which began as a project to fulfill the requirements for her master's thesis at the University of Maryland. It ended with the student serving as a teacher to others and setting the record straight for her grandparents and father.

"What a lot of people in Raleigh are familiar with is the story of seven-year-old William Campbell when he was accepted at Murphy Elementary in 1960," Deborah Holt said, referring to the first black student admitted to a Raleigh white public school, and who is now the mayor of

Atlanta. "Well, he was the first to go, but he wasn't the first to try."

Her father, Joseph Holt Jr. was.

The Holts, who have Jacksonville ties and a number of relatives in the area, began knocking down the door of segregation in 1956 when Joseph Holt Sr. asked that his son be admitted to an all-white school. The family carried the challenge all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The effort came at a high cost — but to the Holts it was worth it. Joseph Holt Sr., who died in 1995 and wife Elwynna, who died in 1966, shared a great love for education and realized the importance learning would have on black America. Joseph Sr. had attended St. Augustine's College, and Elwynna was a schoolteacher. To the Holts, education represented opportunity.

The battle, however, represented four long years of work that cost Joseph Sr. his job, exposed his family to physical and financial threats, and left psychological scars on his only son.

Herman Taylor, one of the Holts' attorneys throughout the case, said the family was harassed and bullied.

"Those people suffered," said Taylor, an attorney for 50

years who still practices law in Raleigh. "Blacks in Raleigh were afraid at that time. Nobody wanted to lose their jobs, so people pulled away from us. They were afraid to say they knew the Holts."

Joseph Jr., now 53 and a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, remembers one time being sent to stay with relatives in Jacksonville when bomb threats to their home made his parents fear for his safety.

"They tried to keep it from me, but a neighbor saw them on TV and told me," he says. "Cars used to drive by at night, and people would throw flashlight beams across our house," Joseph recalled.

"It was very painful to watch my parents' humiliation," he continued. "After my father lost his job, creditors would say, 'You can afford to pay for that lawsuit, why can't you pay your bills?'"

The story began in 1956 when Joseph Holt Sr. applied for permission to send his son to Daniels Junior High School — an all-white public school in Raleigh. A year later when Joseph Jr. became too old for junior high, they applied to Needham Broughton High School. It ended when he graduated from J.W. Ligon High School an all black school — in 1959. This was the same year the Supreme Court of the United States denied the Holts a hearing and affirmed the lower court's decision. Joe Holt

would not be admitted to the all-white school.

In the beginning Joseph Sr. never dreamed his son would be denied admission to the school. After all, two years earlier Thurgood Marshall had argued *Brown vs. Board of Education* before the Supreme Court and won. With this decision, the highest court in the land had declared segregated schools to be unlawful, a clear victory for black civil rights.

But Joseph Jr. was still denied.

Claiming their application had been submitted too late, then School Superintendent Jessie Sanderson offered the Holts bus fare to commute across town to the black school, and asked Mrs. Holt to withdraw the application.

She would not. "When my grandparents applied to Daniels, a formal procedure for applying for transfer hadn't been developed in Raleigh yet, but by the following May, a statewide pupil assignment procedure was in place," Deborah Holt said.

That plan allowed each local school board to make its own decision on how each would integrate its schools. Although school desegregation was the law, states in the deep South resisted the Brown decision, enacting legislation designed to circumvent the new law.

This type of legislation became the backdrop against

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NY kids march for Robinson

By Catherine Crocker
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Every day this month, the Jackie Robinson Center Marching Band has been practicing for its big moment.

"It will be very emotional," says 15-year-old tuba player Kevin LaBissiere of the band's performance Tuesday at the 50th anniversary celebration of Jackie Robinson's first game in the major leagues. President Clinton will attend the Mets-Dodgers game at Shea Stadium.

"I will be thinking about what I went through and what (Robinson) went through," says LaBissiere, who credits the band with turning his life around.

Once a troubled special-education student, today he is a fine tuba player and a model pupil with dreams of starting his own record company.

Robinson's spirit twirls, struts and hops in the Brooklyn marching band, which has carried the name of the baseball legend proudly since 1989.

Robinson broke the color barrier in the major leagues when he played with the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947.

These 100 youngsters also know something about commitment and perseverance. Ages 8 to 18, they have overcome obstacles like crime-plagued streets, poverty and broken homes in some of New York's roughest neighborhoods.

"He decided he wanted to play in the major leagues, no matter what," said Tyrone Brown, the 19-year-old assistant director, as the band marched in tight formation at the head of a Little League parade last weekend in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.

"We are like that because we have the same drive, dedication and commitment. People said we couldn't do it. They labeled us as at-risk, unteachable," Brown said.

With trumpets instead of mits, gold-plumed hats instead of Dodger caps, band members shone with confidence as they marched to such songs as "I Believe I Can Fly" and "I Feel Good."

"We all are a part of Jackie Robinson," said Tommy Evans, 16, a trumpeter who wants to be a music teacher.

The all-black band is a program of the Jackie Robinson Center for Physical Culture in Crown Heights, which offers academic instruction, counseling, sports and cultural activities.

It has marched for Nelson Mandela and former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and also has played in the city's Korean, Pakistani and Israeli parades — in the Robinson tradition of breaking barriers.

"Five, 6, 7, 8!" Brown shouts. And the band steps out — the horn players, drummers and cymbalists wearing black uniforms with jaunty yellow stripes, the flag-waving majorettes in flirty skirts with high-topped white boots.

No stiff-legged group is this. With a lot of swing and rhythmic hips and hops, they dance more than march their way to Prospect Park, all the while making their instruments soar with Motown and R&B favorites.

"You feel joy. You feel excited," says Neisha McCummings, 16, a cymbalist who wants to be a lawyer. "It feels good. It feels really good."

BOOK REVIEW

By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Bigmama Didn't Shop at Woolworth's
Sunny Nash
Texas A&M Press
1996

Southern literature has its own timbre. It ebbs and flows with a certainty that's as comfortable as your grandmother's quilt.

"... [Y]ou think earning a lot of money will make you more important than a housewife?"

Feeling myself start to sweat, I'd trapped myself. "Well, it won't," she scolded. "I don't care what you do for a living or how much money you make," she said, "you will sleep with your eyes closed and open your mouth to eat just like all the other men and women on

earth, whether they are maids, housewives or bosses."

Lately, most African American authors have not even attempted to recreate that warmth.

We seem to be content just to "exhale," or listen to various and sundry "suspect" diatribes on inner city horrors. Rarely does our literature make us feel warm and fuzzy.

Of course, there are exceptions. Gloria, Toni, Alice and Maya and a few others create beauty. But for the most part, mediocrity is the one constant. Occasionally, a beautiful book will slip through.

"Bigmama Didn't Shop at Woolworth's" is one of those.

At times it reminds you of childhood. It conjures images of days spent sipping Kool-Aid, when a cool slice of watermel-

on and a piece of rope entertained children longer than Nickelodeon and MTV combined.

Days when everyone had a "Bigmama."

Set in tiny Bryan, Texas, the biography traces the early life of author Sunny Nash and her relationship with Bigmama, her maternal grandmother. Bigmama is an original.

Born the financially well-off daughter of people descended from "prairie people" and slaves, Bigmama loses her money and land. Rather than mire in self-pity, she makes the best of it, moving with Nash's mother to Candy Hill, Bryan's black neighborhood.

Nash recreates the residents of Candy Hill, and her eccentric extended family which includes singer Johnny "I Can

See Clearly Now" Nash, with aplomb. Most of the book is told through the eyes of a child — Nash's.

She reminisces about her grandmother and her parents in a way that is often heart-breaking. She also talks about race and Jim Crow. No southern novel would be complete without it, she says.

Born in 1949, Nash lived through segregation. It was entrenched in everything, she says, from where she and her mother sat in Bryan's only movie theater to the standard school she attended.

At times, the book is unbearably sad; at others, Nash's joy is contagious. But Nash and Bigmama leave you with the feeling that there is a better day coming.

And you can't help but hope there is.