

1976— The darker brother says, 'I Too, Sing America'

"Some people are arguing that the Negro has nothing to celebrate this Bicentennial. He has everything to celebrate. He has overcome all kinds of obstacles. If he cannot celebrate, no American can."

Roy Wilkins, Former Executive Director
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People



by Tonya Widemon
Editor

In 1852, ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass asked the meaning of the Fourth of July to the American Negro. He angrily told America that he and enslaved Black people had nothing to celebrate because they were excluded from the freedoms and privileges that white Americans enjoyed.

The character and conduct of America never looked blacker than on the Fourth of July, Douglass said.

July 4th will never have the same significance of gaining liberty in 1776 for Blacks that it has for white Americans because we were not allowed to share the first celebration 200 years ago. We had worked equally hard, if not harder, than any people in America at that time. Generations of Black men, women and children have endured gross injustices—and in many cases today, we still suffer. Human rights and human liberties had no discernible meaning to many generations of Blacks born on this continent for more than 200 years (about 1619-1865) because they had never experienced freedom.

There was, however, a raging spirit of liberty in their hearts. That undying hope is what July 4th means to the American Black today.

The same hope was raging in the heart of Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave in 1770. Leading a group of Boston patriots against the British, Attucks was killed—the first martyr during the War for Independence at the Boston Massacre.

Salem Poor, James Forten, James Armistead, Prince Whipple, a woman who called herself "Robert Shurtliff" (Deborah Gannett) and hundreds more Blacks dedicated their lives as soldiers and spies for the liberty of America. Many had even been runaway slaves guaranteed freedom in return.

At the close of the American Revolution, Blacks were cheated of their American rights, and even more, their human rights. They were forced even further away

from the realizations of liberty and justice for all and every man created equal.

Still, those people had toiled and lost lives in the struggle. The investment of their lives has been too great for us, today, to deny that part of our heritage. If we



Black American "Moses"
Harriet Tubman

refuse to recognize our part in building the United States of America, then we deny those Blacks who shed blood and sparked the centuries of hope that

one day we, too, would be able to sing America.

The hope for freedom also burned in the heart of Harriet Tubman—the Black American "Moses" who led 300 slaves to freedom safely by way of the Underground Railroad. She also directed Union raiding parties during the Civil War and built a home for old and sick ex-slaves.

Blacks felt that hope surge again when the Emancipation Proclamation dissolved slavery in 1865. Again, Blacks believed that their dreams for American citizenship and human rights would come true. And, again, they had given lives as soldiers and spies during war. But, the true liberties and privileges did not come even then.

It took more than 100 more years through Reconstruction, the Freedman's Bureau, lobbying, legislation, lynchings, Jim Crowism, riots, World Wars, court orders, nonviolent marches, more riots, more court cases and even assassinations, before we finally began to experience the rights of humans and of Americans.

Faced by these obstacles, Black people continued to make worthy

contributions (although historically ignored) to the total American heritage, in education, politics, labor forces, arts, sciences, and civil rights causes.

Today, we are beginning to see the dream come true—the privileges of freedom and citizenship.

"Being a Black American means being perennially hopeful," wrote professional tennis player Arthur Ashe. (*Readers Digest*, March, 1976). "Hopeful that one day we will be able to live any place we can afford. Hopeful that we may one day not have to worry whether race is a factor when applying for a job—or, worse, have to explain to our children why more Black Americans are not found in our history books."

During the 1976 July 4th celebration year, Black Americans do have something to be proud of—our own Black heritage and the victories of the undying hope that only we can know.

The hope that Attucks and Tubman had is still our hope today—the hope that one day, each Black American can say, "I, too, sing America."

I, Too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,—

I, Too, am America.

Langston Hughes

