

Winter 2002

Portland Area Oral History - Odessa Barrett - James Sheppard - Rupert Richardson

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Recommended Citation

Elgersman - Lee (ed.), Maureen, "Portland Area Oral History - Odessa Barrett - James Sheppard - Rupert Richardson" (2002). *The Griot*. 5.
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THE GRIOT

Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

Volume 5, Issue 2
Winter/Spring 2002

African American Archives of Maine

Public Hours

Tuesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.,
1:30-4:45 p.m.
Wednesday: 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.;
1:30-4:45 p.m.

Archives Contacts

Maureen Elgersman Lee, faculty scholar
(207) 780-5239

Susie Bock, special collections librarian
(207) 780-4269

David Andreasen, archives assistant
(207) 780-5492

Please note that the African American Archives of Maine is located on the second floor of the Gorham library until the renovations to the Portland library are finished.

Calendar of Events

February 15, 16, 2002:

"Africa/Portland"

Main Stage, Russell Hall, USM Gorham campus, 7:30 p.m.

An artistic testimony from African women who have emigrated from their native land to Portland, with storytelling, slide photography from Africa and Portland, Maine, and African drumming, singing and dancing. Directed by Emmanuelle Chaulet. Photography by Marie Hamann. African drumming by Annegret Baier of Inanna with the USM Percussion Ensemble under the direction of Nancy Smith. A USM Gloria S. Duclos Convocation event. Reservations: (207) 780-5151; admission: \$10 general public, \$7 seniors, \$5 students and USM faculty & staff.

Fall 2002: Black Women in the Americas

This course explores and compares the history of Black women in Canada, the United States, Jamaica, and Barbados. Topics include slavery, production and reproduction, post-emancipation labor, and migration. No prerequisites; 3.0 credits. Time and place to be announced. Call Maureen Elgersman Lee at (207) 780-5239 or email: elgersma@usm.maine.edu for details.

From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

I find my engagement in the nostalgic heightened by the annual array of retrospectives: the year in pictures, in sports, in music. I enjoy these journeys in time for two reasons. The first is that by December I have forgotten many of the events that took place in January and February. The second is that no matter how exhilarating or saddening the events of the past 12 months may have been, I feel the need to ride that emotional roller coaster one more time before I can let it go and begin the task of inscribing history on the *tabula rasa* of a new year.

People who really know me will tell you that I am nostalgic—not necessarily a bad trait for an historian to have. I enjoy contemplating past events and interpreting them in the light of events more recent. As one year ends and another begins,

In pausing to remember those political, cultural, and sometimes even personal figures who died in the past 12 months, I feel the passage of time most. And in 2001 we did lose much and many. For me, the personal loss of my father was compounded by the resounding collective loss ushered in by the events of September 11th. For many people the legacy of the year 2001 seems to be reflection on and reevaluation of those things most important in their lives. Two recurrent elements of that reflection are home and family, and it is in the midst of what is, perhaps, a newer, deeper appreciation of home that the exploration of the "Home Is Where I Make It" interviews continue. This installment features brief sketches of four interviewees, Blacks who have lived in the Portland area from several years to several decades and with various forms of community engagement and various experiences of Black community in the state. The final four interviewees in this series will be introduced in the next issue of the *Griot*. Also, look for notice of the "Home Is Where I Make It" photograph exhibit to be scheduled later this semester.

Maureen Elgersman Lee is an assistant professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library

A PLACE IN TIME:

Odessa Baett "Community is really hard descriptive word for Maine and me."

A native of Port Arthur, Texas, and a Maine resident since 1979, Odessa Barrett is the mother of two adult children who still reside in Portland. A public health advocate of HIV/AIDS prevention, Barrett, like other Blacks, has struggled with the idea of a Black community in Maine:

When I came here, there weren't very many Blacks, so there was no real community—sense of community. There was no place where you could go and see yourself en masse.

For the children that she brought with her, Maine presented unique challenges:

[M]y kids, being from the South, had already had their sense of identity so it was really hard for them because they either had to teach people who they were or struggle to maintain their own identity.

Those challenges had similar implications for Barrett, too.

Maine is like being on the other side of the world. Maine is like—I don't know. I've never been in a place where a mass of people have not known other races, have not been really integrated into other races. When I came here, people still were asking questions about Blacks. About your hair, about everything. Questions that people just weren't asking in the '70s anymore, and they were still asking these questions. Because people I was meeting had not even met Black people before; they had seen Black people on television, but had not met them before. And other people that I was running into had seen Black people when their parents had help come up for the summer and had only known them as little monkeys, so it was a really weird trip.

Despite struggling with the ideas of community in Maine, Barrett has been engaged in the Black community as a member of Green Memorial AME Zion Church and of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

[From: Interview with Odessa Barrett, May 31, 2001, Portland, Maine. "Home Is Where I Make It" Project, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine.]

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James Sheppard "You profit from traveling; just simply traveling and seeing."

One might describe James Sheppard as a traveling man. Born in Harlem of Antiguan parents, Sheppard graduated from high school and served in the United States military as an aviation mechanic and flight engineer during World War II. After his time in the military, Sheppard attended technical college and began a long-term career in aviation. After having worked for a number of years as an aviation mechanic with the airlines, Sheppard then became an aviation safety inspector with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). During his tenure with the FAA, Sheppard lived in New Jersey, Albany, New York; Portland, Maine; and Manchester, New Hampshire.

It was in 1971 that Sheppard moved to Maine. His children attended school in Westbrook and went on to graduate from the University of Southern Maine, Bates College, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). While Sheppard's children have settled in cities in Maine and across the country, Sheppard has remained an important presence in local education as a mentor at Portland High School, a social responsibility he takes very seriously. In addition, Sheppard regularly lectures to school children and business and civic groups about World War II, he is a member of the Lions Club, and he and his wife have helped African refugees make more comfortable transitions to life in the Portland area.

While not able to claim the diversity and practical geographic position of New York City, Portland has been a good place for Sheppard and his family. In commenting on the impact of living in Maine on his family, Sheppard explained:

Well [we] profited from it....When the boys came to Maine, Westbrook school, they both met people and learned things that they would not have, probably would not have in New York City or New Jersey. So I would say they gained a lot by moving to Maine. In addition to their training in New York City, they had a well-rounded education....So they gained that way; they were able to participate in more activities here than they ever would have in New York City.

[From: Interview with James Sheppard, March 31, 2001, Portland, Maine. "Home Is Where I Make It" Project, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine.]

Rupert Richardson "I Think the Community is Disarrayed."

A native of Portland, Maine, Rupert Richardson has lived his entire life in the city. The son of a Jamaican mother and South Carolinian father, Richardson recalls his childhood with fondness:

I think it was great. I know, I lived here. As I pointed out, you know, I was born and raised here in the city. And the section of the city that we lived in all the people got along famously. We were one large, happy family in the west end. And to this day, those that are still living, you know, we're still one happy family.

A veteran of the Korean War, Richardson used the GI Bill to obtain a bachelor of science degree. After graduation, he held a variety of jobs including working for a trucking company and a department store, before beginning a 23-year career with IBM. The father of three sons and the grandfather of one grandson, Richardson had a philosophy that his children came first. As a native of the state with significant familial roots, Richardson laments what he sees as a fragmented Black population in Maine:

I think the community is disarrayed....I think it lacks a real, true leader that's gonna...take all the people, all the African Americans and unite them as one solid group. This I don't...this I'm not seeing. This is what should happen. Should I go out there and try to do it?...I'm from the old school. This is the new school nowadays, and they don't need anyone from the old school trying to teach their kids in the new school. That just doesn't work.

A self-described home body, Richardson has not held extensive membership in local organizations, but is a member of Portland's Williams Temple Church of God in Christ, where his wife is church mother.

[From: Interview with Rupert Richardson, March 31, 2001, Portland, Maine. "Home Is Where I Make It" Project, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine.]

Edgar Anderson "The Richness of the Culture . . . Has Really Been Good For Us."

By far one of the most recent Portland arrivals in this pool of interviewees, Edgar Anderson came to Portland in 1985. A native of Chicago, Anderson finds:

Something about people that live near the water that makes them different from people that live near mountains, or certainly people in the Midwest who live on flat land. People call them "flatlanders." That the ocean brings out something different in people, and...once you're near it, you really never wanna go back.

A former West Point cadet and co-initiator of that institution's first training program in racial awareness, Anderson has worked for Hewlett-Packard and currently works for the United Parcel Service (UPS). Anderson is actively engaged in the local community, serving in executive leadership capacities with the local chapter of the NAACP and its New England conference. Describing himself as "still involved in the Civil Rights Movement," Anderson did not participate in the protests of the 1960s but wants to have some part of protecting civil rights in Portland. As an equally engaged father, Anderson actively supports his son's Cub Scout troop and his daughter's softball team.

Clearly satisfied with his decision to move to Portland, Anderson professes:

I think overall that I'm glad to have had the opportunity or the luck, maybe, in a sense, to have chosen to come to live in Portland, Maine. The other places I could have chosen, well I don't know how my life would have been different had...my wife and I chosen a different place to live, but we certainly feel that the place was right, the time was right for us to come here....We've really been blessed in a sense to have had the opportunity to be part of the growth of Portland—the Portland area.

[From: Interview with Edgar Anderson, June 4, 2001, Portland, Maine. "Home Is Where I Make It" Project, African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine.]