Winter 2002

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

Maureen Elgersman - Lee (ed.)

University of Southern Maine

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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 Andreassen, 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.

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.

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:

“In the 70s, I was young and curious. I met people of all different 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 never seen Black people when their parents had helped 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).

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.
James Sheppard

“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 I feel 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.


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 1983. 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 chose 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.