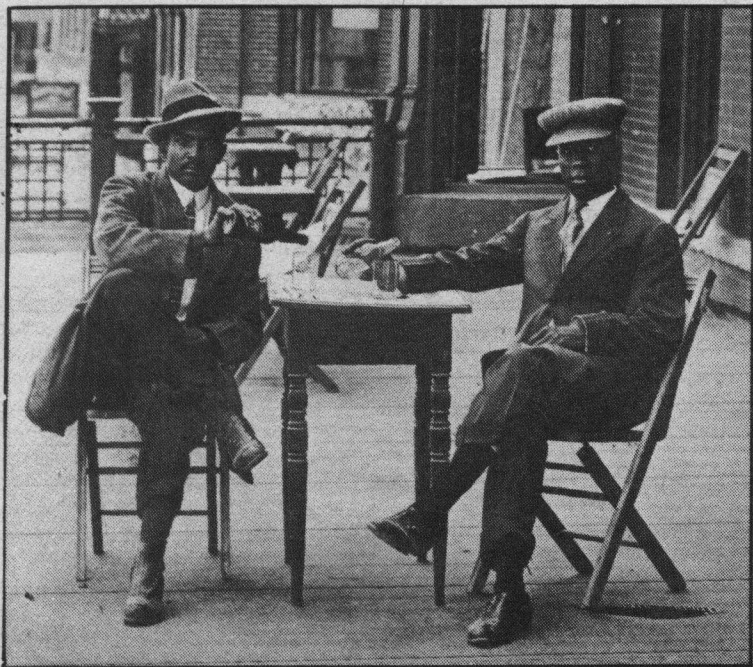


Beyond Louden Nelson: Black History in Santa Cruz



Geoffrey Dunn

The year is 1951—the scene, Winkle Avenue, near the present site of the Skyview Drive-In theater. Reverend William Brent, pastor of the Santa Cruz Missionary Baptist Church, has just purchased a small, comfortable home there so that he can move his family down from San Francisco.

On Saturday night, November 3, the day after Brent completed his purchase, a fire broke out in his newly bought home, completely destroying the kitchen and pantry and causing smoke damage to the re-

mainder of the living quarters.

At that time, Santa Cruz's black community was confined almost exclusively to the "Circles" neighborhood on the west side of the city, and Brent's decision to locate outside of those confines represented a bold effort on his behalf to break the city's segregated housing pattern.

The day after the fire, as Brent surveyed the damage to his home, a score of white residents appeared on his lawn demanding to speak to him. "They told me this is a white community and they wanted to keep

it that way," Brent later told police. "They told me that if I came back there would be more damage to the house similar to the fire if I still tried moving into the neighborhood."

The mob of white residents also offered to pay back the \$300 he put down on the home if he promised to abandon his hopes of moving there. "They were angry," Brent noted, "and they meant business."

Although a state investigator concluded that the blaze was intentionally set by an arsonist, no one was ever arrested for the incident. Brent and his family later moved back to San Francisco.

It is currently Black History Month in the United States, and there have been numerous events both nationally and locally to celebrate the occasion, but anyone trying to get a sense of black history here in Santa Cruz will be sadly disappointed by the paucity of material on the subject. Margaret Koch's widely sold history of the county, for instance, *Parade of the Past*, devotes all of seven sentences to black history here, and the story of the Brent incident is nowhere to be found in those pages.

The Santa Cruz Public Library does not even have a single file on the subject, while Special Collections at UCSC has only the most minute of references—a solitary paragraph in the historical notes of Leon Rowland. The one published work on local Black history, a thin pamphlet called "The History of the Santa Cruz County NAACP," by Kreta Graves-

Gray, provides a wonderful introduction to the civil rights organization and a general overview of race relations here, but it stands conspicuously alone, with nothing to augment it.

The great exception to this neglect, of course, are all the obligatory references to Loudon ("London") Nelson, after whom the city's now-dysfunctional community center was named in 1979. As just about everyone who has lived here for any length of time knows only too well, Nelson was a former slave—probably from North Carolina or Tennessee—who arrived in Santa Cruz in 1848. A cobbler and gardener, he died in 1860, leaving his entire estate "to the children of Santa Cruz" in order to help further their education. The present city school board's offices are located on some of the land he left to the city.

While Nelson's contribution to Santa Cruz history is certainly worthy of the special attention it has received, the subsequent chapters of local black history remain an enigma, a forgotten chronicle of life, death and spirit lost forever to the ages.

There are many reasons for this vacuum, not the least of which is the simple fact that until the end of World War II, there were never many blacks who lived here and certainly never anything that amounted to a viable black community. Nonetheless, there was a small trickle of a black population here beginning with the period of Reconstruction, and we only have the slightest sense of what life here was like for them.

The historical notes of Rowland and the legendary Ernest Otto record the existence of a barber named Joe Smallwood, a bootblack named George Chester, and a cooper's apprentice known only as "Old Joe," who, Otto recalled, "wore his hair braided in twists that stood out several inches from his head."

All of them, presumably, remained here until their deaths, but there was also a young black man living here during the 1880s who did not stay. Joseph Francis graduated with highest honors from Santa Cruz High School and left for San Francisco, where he became a widely respected editor of a weekly black newspaper and a clerk with the Southern Pacific Railroad. He never came back to Santa Cruz.

There was good reason not to come back. A rigid, often repressive, Protestant community, Santa Cruz was never particularly open to outsiders who didn't fit the WASP mold. During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan established a strong foothold here, creating an atmosphere something akin to a Pacific Coast Forsyth County, Georgia.

In the aftermath of World War II, however, with California's black population swelling to 400,000, the first substantial black community was established in Santa Cruz. The center of that community was Reverend Brent's Baptist Church, located then on Branciforte Avenue and later on Woodrow, and it remains the center of that particular community to this day.

While the history of that church has never been written, a UCSC American Studies student, Jessica Friedman, recently conducted a series of interviews there which provide the beginnings of a rich and powerful historical tradition.

One of Friedman's interviews was with Isaac Jackson, head deacon of the church for 33 years. During World War II, Jackson recalled, "my company in the army was all black, with a few white officers. I came here in '42... there was 15 blacks here, that's what you had. Most of the people you see here now have only been here the last 30 years. It was a ghost town when I arrived."

The stories recall the struggles and triumphs of a black community isolated from the white mainstream. Virtually all confirm an agony of trying to live here in a sea of subtle racism, where casual slights were often more devastating than more blatant acts and remarks.

By having a fuller understanding of this history, I think, all of us living here today can more readily appreciate the continued difficulties which blacks and other people of color experience daily in this town. They are still telling us of the oppression they face here. It's time that we listened.

REAL ESTATE FINANCING

For The Lowest Rates
And The Fastest Service Call:

- STEVEN HERBERT • JIM CHUBB
- SUE PATTON • RICK BAKER
- TOM MITCHELL

Non conforming property
and hard to qualify borrowers
are welcome here!

PACIFIC INLAND FINANCIAL
2571 Main St., Soquel, CA 95073 • 475-2600

WANTED

Exhibitors for
the 18th Annual Jaycees'
Arts and Crafts Festival
(formerly the Santa Cruz Spring Fair)

- ☐ ARTS ☐ CRAFTS ☐ PHOTOGRAPHY
- ☐ HOMEMADE ITEMS
- ☐ FOOD ☐ ENTERTAINMENT

MAY 16 & 17

At intersection of Highways 1 and 9,
adjacent to Harvey West Park.

One of the largest arts and crafts events in No. Cal.

Booths are Limited
Call 425-5645
Santa Cruz Jaycees

