Marking history - A memorial would recognize two homes' role in the city's past

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Ella Fitzgerald slept there. So did Louie Armstrong and Nat King Cole.

So did many a black University of Oregon athletes and who knows how many black laborers, including railroad workers just looking for a place to spend the night between jobs.

"This house has probably housed as many as a dozen men at one time," says Willie Mims, sitting on the patio behind the Gothic-style farmhouse at 336 High St. that, according to city records, was built about 1880.

This, of course, was decades ago, when that house and the one next door at 330 High St. — owned by his parents, C.B. and Annie Mims and believed to be the first black-owned properties in Lane County — served as a place of refuge for blacks who were not welcome in area hotels.

Now, all these years later, 80-year-old Willie Mims is raising money to erect a memorial not only to his parents and the two historic homes they were able to buy in 1948, thanks to the help of a prominent white citizen, but to what they represent in a city that is, and always has been, predominantly white.

Mims is more than halfway to his goal of $3,500 — he has raised $2,410 so far on the crowdfunding website gofundme.com. But he may need a few hundred dollars more than that, he says, for the granite column and copper plate he is hoping to purchase.

"Ever since my parents have passed, I've been in the motion of trying to preserve this property as much as possible, because it represents a lot to the black community," says Mims, who lived with his parents in the Gothic Revival-style house at 330 High St., built in 1867, when he was in junior high and high school.

Since his mother died at age 93 in 1995, Mims has rented out the two homes, after helping to restore them in the 1980s using federal historic preservation funds obtained through the city. Along with several other homes in the East Skinner Butte Historic District, they are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Across the Bridge"

C.B. and Annie Mims and their two children, Willie and Pearlie Mae, who is 17 years older than Willie, came to the Northwest from Marshall, Texas, during World War II.

They first landed in Vancouver, Wash., where C.B. Mims, who died in the early 1960s, got work in the shipyards during the war.

After the war ended, though, so did the work. In 1945, the family relocated in to McCredie Springs, a tiny community east of Oakridge, where C.B. Mims found work on the Southern Pacific Railroad, Willie Mims says.

In 1946, they moved to Eugene.

Back then, most of the few blacks who lived in the area were congregated on the north bank of the Willamette River near the present day Ferry Street Bridge, in what is now Alton Baker Park.

White people called it Tent City.

To the black families who lived there, in dirt-floor shacks, it was just known as "Across the Bridge," Mims says. "Anybody asked, we would say, 'We live across the bridge.' "

They drew water from the Willamette, cooked food on an open fire and erected a small chapel with a canvas roof.

A late 1940s tally of Tent City counted 22 families living there and a total of 101 people, 65 of them black, the remainder poor whites, according to a 1993 Register-Guard story.

The Mimses left that site in 1948, a year before the county claimed the land for the building of a new Ferry Street Bridge.

Loan of a lifetime

Upon moving to Eugene, C.B. Mims got a job as a busboy at the Osburn Hotel, built in 1910 at the northwest corner of East Eighth Avenue and Pearl Street, where the Lane County Public Service Building is now located.

The Osburn Hotel was a stately brick building in its day that hosted the likes of John F. Kennedy, during his 1960 campaign for president.

In 1948, it was owned by a man named Joe Earley Sr.

Sometimes, when the Tent City area would flood, he would let the Mimses and other black families stay in his hotel.

But it's what he did in 1948 that the Mims family will never forget.

He loaned C.B. Mims $5,500 to buy the two then-dilapidated homes at 330 and 336 High St. It was unheard of back then for a bank to loan a black man money to buy a house, Willie Mims says.

"I know the story about it, and I was shocked, because I remember when a black man was not legally able to rent a room in a hotel," says Phyllis Earley, Joe Earley Sr.'s daughter-in-law, now 91 and still living in the same south Eugene home she and her husband, Joe Earley Jr., bought in 1963, the same year the Osburn Hotel was torn down.

After Joe Earley Sr. died, Joe Earley Jr. took over running the hotel, where the Earley family also lived, in the 1950s.

Steve Earley, who now lives in Monterey, Calif., was born in 1957. He never knew his grandfather, who he believes died about 1954, but he has often heard the story of what he did for the Mims family.

"I always heard that he was completely incensed by the 'law of the land,' " says Steve Earley, who has made a contribution to Willie Mims' fundraising effort for the memorial.

"Everybody knew what he was doing, and not everybody agreed with what he was doing, but he just said, 'It's what I'm doing.' He was doing the right thing 60 years ago that we still struggle with doing today," Steve Earley says.

His parents were able to pay the loan back a few years later with money from the sale of their home in Texas, Mims says.

"Although Mr. Earley was a good man; he still had to live in this community, and I'm sure it wasn't that easy for him," he says.

Ella who?

The homes needed a lot of work after purchase, Mims says, and his father couldn't get a home-improvement loan from a bank. He couldn't even get anyone to help him fix the roof, Mims says, so he did it himself.

Willie Mims says he's proud of "how hard my family worked to make this a decent place to live, and all the black people who passed through. It brings back a lot of childhood memories."

He and his wife of 22 years, Sally, live in Eugene's Amazon neighborhood. He has a daughter, D'ana Washington, who lives in Atlanta, from a previous marriage. A son, David Mims, died in 2009 at age 49 of colon cancer.

Together, Willie and Sally have three daughters, nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

A wall in their home is filled with photographs of all of them. The two most prominently displayed are large, oval-framed, black-and-white images of his mother and father.

These are the pictures Willie Mims wants to put on a copper plaque, supported by the granite column, along with

text explaining the importance of the homes to Eugene's black community, which registered just 1.4 percent of the city's 156,185 residents in the 2010 U.S. Census.

He plans to put the plaque in the front lawn of 330 High St., a two-story home distinguished by a steep gable roof with cross-gable and pointed arch windows.

Built just two years after the end of the Civil War, it initially was on the southeast corner of East Fourth Avenue and High Street before being moved to its present location, set back off the street, between 1918 and 1921, according to city records.

Willie Mims remembers someone in the neighborhood sending around a petition to have his family removed, but few people signed it and the issue died.

He remembers legendary UO football coach Len Casanova talking with his father in the kitchen, asking if some black recruits could stay with the family while visiting Eugene.

"I remember a couple of athletes being like big brothers," Mims recalls.

He barely remembers meeting Ella Fitzgerald, the great African-American jazz singer, when she stayed with the family while performing a show in Eugene.

"I remember just barely saying hello to Ella. I didn't know who she was," he says with a snicker.

Although he has no memory of the time another jazz great, trumpeter Louie Armstrong, stayed at the house, he does remember going with a girl cousin to see Armstrong perform at a "barnlike building" on what is now West Seventh Avenue, about where Sheppard Motors sits today.

"Here and there"

Mims would go on to be one of just five black students at Eugene High School in the early 1950s, none of whom he remembers graduating, including himself. He left in April of his senior year in 1953 to join the Air Force.

He came back to Eugene in 1956 before going off to study at the University of Washington for a couple of years.

Then he came home for good and became a staunch civil rights activist in the 1960s, following in the footsteps of his mother, who in the 1950s used to walk Eugene streets with signs protesting housing and employment discrimination against blacks.

Willie Mims remembers himself and other blacks meeting with four prominent white Eugene men, whose names he still will not divulge on the record, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. They wanted to know what they could do for Eugene's black community in light of the tragedy.

In exchange for their names remaining anonymous, the four men agreed to hire more blacks at their businesses and to encourage their friends and cohorts to do the same, Mims says.

It's something that, 47 years later, needs to happen again, he says.

Racism always has been subtle in Eugene, Mims says.

After working as an urban coordinator in the 1960s for the nonprofit Lane Human Resources, Mims tried to start his own marketing company in the '70s and applied for many jobs but always found himself coming up short and wondering why.

"It's here and there, but we find that minorities are treated differently in Eugene-Springfield, just like they are nationally," he says.

In 1984, he started his own company, the Oregon Wooden Screen Door Co., marketing turn-of-the-century screen doors across the nation. He and Sally ran it until he retired in 2007.

"I got doors in every state in the union," Mims says.

A fixture at UO football and basketball games for years, he finds it difficult to attend now, getting winded climbing stairs after losing a lung to cancer a few years ago.

"Soar like an eagle"

It was a grandson, Eric Washington, now an Air Force man himself, in Idaho, who first mentioned, during a visit to Eugene last year, the idea of a memorial to his great-grandparents.

It was Eric Richardson, president of the Eugene-Springfield NAACP, who suggested to Willie Mims that he try to raise the money on gofundme.com.

"I'm just a lover of history and African peoples and their accomplishments," Richardson says.

"They need to be honored in some concrete way," he says of the Mims' homes, much the same way there is a memorial to Wiley Griffon in Eugene's Masonic Cemetery.

One of Eugene's first black residents, Griffon, who operated his own mule-drawn trolley in Eugene more than a century ago, and who died in 1913, is buried in an unmarked grave on a slope of the south Eugene cemetery.

Mark Harris, a Lane Community College instructor, and his wife, Cheri Turpin, spent years raising money, $3,500 of it through LCC's Black Student Union, for the memorial erected in 2013 above the spot where Griffon is buried.

Willie Mims gets a gleam in his eye when he thinks about what such a memorial would mean for the memory of his parents.

"I would just be overjoyed. To use a phrase from an old movie, I think my heart would soar like an eagle," he says, referring to a line by Chief Dan George in 1970's "Little Big Man."

"I think that my mom and dad would be smiling somewhere in heaven that we carried on. The spirit of that monument and the spirit of the history of the property will carry on years and generations after us."

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MEMORIAL FOR MIMS HOMES

To donate to help erect a memorial to C.B. and Annie Mims and the historical homes they owned at 330 and 336 High St. go to www.gofundme.com/blk-historymatters. Or send a check for "The Mims Memorial" to the Eugene-Springfield chapter of the NAACP at P.O. Box 11484, Eugene, OR 97440