'I Too Am Eugene': Project studies history and - Register-Guard, The (Eugene, OR) - July 19, 2003 - page 1B
July 19, 2003 | Register-Guard, The (Eugene, OR) | Joe Mosley The Register-Guard | Page 1B

Even African-American children who have lived their entire lives in Eugene learned something on Friday about their cultural heritage: in a city often presumed to be lily-white, some roots can be found of a decidedly darker hue.

"I learned that black people are in the history of Eugene, and people don't notice that a lot," 11-year-old Garrin Black said. "It makes me feel good."

Black and 18 other students from seven local middle and high schools, along with Lane Community College, got a half-day tour that began Friday morning at the grave site of Wiley Griffon, one of Eugene's earliest black residents.

The tour wound up at St. Mark Christian Methodist Episcopal Church for a lunch and question-and-answer session with 84-year-old **Mattie Reynolds** - a Eugene resident for 61 years, an elder in the local African-American community and a founding member of the 55-year-old, predominantly black church.

The tour was a part of "I Too Am Eugene," a multicultural history project offered through LCC's Rights of Passage summer youth program.

The history project - which also includes offerings for Asian, Hispanic and Native American children - was initiated by Cheri Turpin and Mark Harris because they felt their children had been taught too little at school about either the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday or Black History Month.

"So we wanted to focus on what was happening here, back then (during the civil rights movement)," Harris said Friday during the project's inaugural tour.

Throughout the morning, Harris and other adult chaperones fleshed out snippets from the black history of Eugene - a city described by the 2000 census as 88 percent white - while their students absorbed the past and took notes that will be transformed into a report and eventually a brochure.

"Then we're going to give that to the Chamber of Commerce (to be included in materials on Eugene's background)," said Bahati Ansari, another of the adults on Friday's tour.

The multicultural history project - which played a role in bringing "Talking Stones" engraved with Native American terms to the Whilamut Natural Area of Alton Baker Park - also is raising money to pay for a headstone to mark Wiley Griffon's grave in the Masonic Pioneer Cemetery at 25th Avenue and University Street in Eugene.

"When he died, there were probably no living relatives," Harris told students as they hiked a gravel path to the hillside where Griffon is buried. "So one of the projects we can do is keep up the grave site."

Griffon was a tram operator for Eugene's mule-drawn trolley, and subcontracted his mule to pull caskets to the cemetery where he would ultimately be buried after his death in 1913, at age 46.

Griffon's grave had a marker until the 1950s, but it is in an area of the cemetery where few headstones exist.

"There are 46 unmarked graves here, and there are a couple things we can probably assume from that," Harris said as his students clustered around a trail marker bearing information about Griffon.

"If Wiley's buried here, there are probably other people of color buried here," he said. "Part of the historical practice was that people segregated you in death, as well as in life."

Harris pointed out that Griffon had a house in Eugene near where the Eugene Water & Electric Board parking lot now lies, during a time when Oregon had "exclusion laws" prohibiting permanent residency by people of color.

"Obviously, some people overlooked that," he said, noting that the law remained in the state Constitution until several years after Griffon's death. "It was selectively enforced."

But even into the 1940s and beyond, African-Americans were excluded by vagrancy laws from remaining in Eugene after dark - resulting first in a "tent city" across the Willamette River near the current entrance to Alton Baker Park, and then a largely segregated neighborhood west of where the city limits were drawn at the time.

"People basically just camped out here and then crossed the bridge to work in town," Harris told students near the tent city site.

The semi-permanent settlement, located near an earlier bridge, was torn down when the Ferry Street Bridge was built in 1949.

That's when **Mattie** and Sam **Reynolds** - for whom Sam R Street is named - moved out West 11th Avenue to the area where St. Mark now stands.

"It was just like living in the South," said **Mattie Reynolds**, adding that there were five other permanent black residents in town when she and her husband arrived seven years earlier.

"The only difference was, in the South you knew where you stood," **Reynolds** said. "Here in Eugene, you didn't. We couldn't find a house they'd rent to us, and we couldn't find decent jobs. So we had a difficult time."

Even into the 1950s, black people in Eugene lived lives of exclusion, Harris told his students, citing the example of the historic Mims house on High Street - another stop on Friday's tour.

The black Mims family had been sold the house by a sympathetic employer, and wound up operating a boarding house for other African-Americans who had no place else to stay.

"So back in the day, when entertainers like Ella Fitzgerald came to town, they weren't allowed to stay in the hotels," Harris said. "So they stayed at the Mims house."

At the end of the tour, as they munched on pizza in St. Mark kitchen, students reflected on what they'd learned and what their predecessors had endured.

"I learned that we had slavery (in the United States) for a long time, and the Ku Klux Klan did all kinds of things to us," said 12-year-old Christina Stubbs.

"I learned that there used to be, like, a lot of segregation and they still believed in it after (death)," said 14-year-old Lashe Brown. "I didn't know that there used to be, like, no black people allowed. But I feel proud of my African-American culture."