

## Oakwood Group Interview 4-7-15

Five people, former residents of the disrupted Oakwood Avenue neighborhood in Orange, discuss the area as it was, with an emphasis on the wholesomeness of life there and the opportunities it offered them growing up. Several seem to be or to have been politically active, and all seem politically astute.

They begin by reminiscing about the physical layout of the neighborhood, following the streets around their former homes and the shopping district in their mind's eyes, listing the names of people who lived and worked on or near Oakwood Avenue, and connecting certain spots to distinct personal memories. Even as they introduce themselves, however, one participant, Walter Preston, introduces the YMCA, saying "I grew up in the Y."

The "Y" is picked up again later on, and the group eventually agrees that the destruction of communal gathering places like the YMCA, the YWCA, and Reid's Temple, removed essential factors in the life of the community; these centers of community life made the area an attractive and viable place, especially for young people. Moreover, the destruction of businesses and professional offices, including a number of African-American ones, removed the "professional" tone of the area that not only made it easy for neighborhood teens to get part-time jobs, but provided examples of a variety of paths into a successful adult life. (The word 'professional' is used by the group to describe the atmosphere of the neighborhood and the way they saw their elders dress, and they are particularly good at recalling the names of the several A-A doctors who practiced there.)

Town sports were another unifying factor in a town that participants experienced as a face-to-face society where people felt they knew everyone.

[sbh notes: Was the destruction of community facilities and businesses an automatic result of a deliberate or politically necessary effort by planners to minimize the embarrassing number of homes to be destroyed? Also, African-American women have expressed to me their frustration with the male domination in A-A churches, so I would guess that the loss of those institutions along with so many A-A businesses and professional offices was especially harmful to the development of young men. No woman doctor is mentioned here, but when I visited the Planned Parenthood clinic on 125th St., Harlem, in the 1950s, a black woman gynecologist was working there.]

Introductions and personal info—

Susan Ray, b. 1936:

Lived on Olcott Street, Orange, "on the other [W] side of the park." An area of family homes: the traffic light at the corner of Oakwood and Central [N of park] installed only after a brother was killed there [in the early to mid-nineteen-thirties], on his way from Oakwood Avenue School (OAS). Father had a business in Orange. [Triangle Tailors?]

Goldie T. Burbage (née Webster, m. Purnell "Pete" Burbage)

Born in house at 88 Parrow [? sounds like 'Perot,' as in Ross]. OAS, Union Baptist church (UBC). "Oakwood Ave. was a microcosm of businesses and professionals, a very vibrant community."

Gordon Robards/Robarts/Roberts(sp?), Jr., Orange HS 1945.

Lived on Oakwood Ave., "pre-280 and pre-Rheingold brewery." (Knowing laughter) [sbh cannot find brewery on a map.] A friend lived at Oakwood and South Street [which is now apparently buried under Freeway Drive E.]

Gordon reviews the Oakwood Avenue area: Between Main and Hill, two doctors, a YM, a YW, Reid's Temple (corner of Oakwood and Hill). On corner of Oakwood and Parrow, an A&P, an ice cream parlor, next to it a pool room; also nearby Cotton's Funeral Home, the school (OAS), and the church (UBC)), then Woody's Funeral Home, Dr. Mulchur/Melchor (??). Three doctors on Oakwood.

Tom ("Butch"?) Puryear

Raised on Reynolds St. by grandparents. OAS, UBC. The A&P was gone by his time. "A very exciting, vibrant community as I remember growing up." Graduated from HS in 1965. [Six years younger than Walter.]

Walter Preston

Raised on South St (see above), an Italian street at the time of his birth, with the YMCA at one end, Mt. Carmel Church at the other. OAS, UBC. Mentions Dr Sparks, Mr. Fitzhett's, a cleaner/tailor on Oakwood.

"I grew up in the Y; I can walk you through, uh, the entire Y and tell you what it looks like [sic]. I started working there when I was fourteen-and-a-half years old. Him [?? Tom?? Who?] and my group." (laughter). "But anyway, Oakwood Avenue was like our Mecca, it was kind of, it had an aura about it because normally if you came down to Oakwood Avenue you didn't fool around a lot." Also has detailed memories of OAS classrooms and teachers he had.

"First activities dealing with de facto segregation" took place at OAS: Ernie Thompson [1957?]. His conservative Mom kept him home from school to avoid trouble until she was forced to send him.

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General conversation:

Business district:

The Parrow A&P was small, but characteristically red, and "the focal point....in our time." Old Man Liebernan's was a "meat market." Other butchers: Melingers (sp?) on corner of Hickory and South, Karol's(?), Maggocane's(?). Mr. Geezer was at Parrow and Central; Monte Irvin's father-in-law Oatey worked there, a first for an African American. [Irvin may still be living. Also, my husband attended the same Lincoln University that participants mention along with Howard. At that time it was a more religiously oriented school than it is now, with, e.g., prizes for Bible memorization.]

Fitzhett's was an African-American (A-A) business. Mr. Johnson was a black shoemaker on Parrow, with daughters Margaret and Alma. Both men lived above their shops.

Reid's (later Whitlock's) ice cream parlor across from A&P replaced a pharmacy. An A-A pharmacy, Beiman(?) and Kaplan's, was on the corner of Parrow and Hickory, with Maybin's, an A-A restaurant; the son is/was a policeman in Orange.

Gordon: "It was the black section of town."

Goldie(?): "During that time we were not known as Blacks, we were African-Americans or Negroes. We never used the word 'black.' Never."

Gordon(?): "Or colored."

More A-A businesses:

Titan's Hall (Fred Penniston), a pool parlor, was previously owned by a mover, Breton, and was a basketball court for the Orange Triangles, part of the old Negro basketball league. Beyond a beauty parlor next to the A&P was the headquarters for the Triangles, who played [semi-]pro baseball, basketball. They also met in Susan's(?) father's tailor shop, Triangle Tailors.

Titan athletes included Lenny Pearson (baseball); Johnny Isaacs (basketball). Gordon (who played in 1944): "We beat the Harlem Renaissance...the first all-black team to win the world championships." People now trying to get Isaacs, who moved up to play for the Renaissance and lived until 2009, into the Hall of Fame.

Tom Puryear: Triangles were still playing in middle 60s. (And Goldie met her husband, a player, at a game.)

A-A Doctors:

Longshore; Burgen/Burgin Sparks; Lanky Jones; Stanfield on corner of Oakwood and Berwyn; Dentists: Dr Harper; Dr. Omar; Dr. Bumps.

Walter: The "dean" was Dr. [Walter Gilbert] Alexander, office on Berwyn, first black elected official in NJ, for whom he himself (Walter Preston) and Walter G Alexander Housing are named. Alexander's son John worked with Ernie Thompson. All the Oakwood Ave. doctors cooperated in trying to send kids, including Gordon(?), to Howard and Lincoln Universities via scholarships and alumni contacts.

Other businesses and facilities:

Pete Faison was the first A-A policeman in Orange, during the 30s. Much later Howard Farley was the policeman at OAS.

Reid's Temple, at Hill and Oakwood, "holy and sanctified," had a big fall convocation with busloads of people and "lively music." Elder [name or title?] Reid was the confectioner at Oakwood and Parrow; later owned by Mary and Harry Whitlock.

An ice house preceded the brewery (Trolla's(?) Brewery, then Rheingold). [No mention of ethnicity of owners.]

Schools:

Cleveland Street, Park Avenue, Oakwood Avenue, Lincoln, Central, Colgate, Tremont.

OAS: The Principal was a Mr. Bunce (Caucasian), much much later Joel Hosted (who earlier was an English teacher at HS). The First A-A teacher was Susie Peters (m. a Chennault), Miss Hooper was the second, probably in the 50s; the rest of staff was all white. Early on, students were a "rainbow coalition," with a number of Italians, a few Jews, a couple of Polish families, but by the time Puryear got there in 1953, the school

was mostly black. Some activities (dentist, cooking) took place at Lincoln for OAS students, who would walk over.

Middle Schools: Central, Lincoln, and Tremont (a "white" school). [sbh: I did not hear any mention of Heywood.] At Central Middle School (now Rosa Parks) there was some culture shock, and the first neighborhood students were "dispersed" onto one or the other of two sides with different teachers; Former Oakwood students (incl. Walter, Diane Fredericks, Wayne Young, Barry Schreiber) were "gate" students when they arrived at Central, but when Tom got there six years later the school was mostly black. On the other hand, Goldie(?) states that she did not experience social separation from non-blacks until HS. She felt part of the elite at Central. She and Sally (Irwin's niece) were invited to attend the YWCA, a white "Y."

Orange HS: Originally students from the Oakwood neighborhood were encouraged to take general courses, but Puryear did not experience that when he got there in '61.

#### The Town:

Walter Preston emphasizes that Orange was a Catholic town, with political power originally in the hands of the Irish, while "Italians and Blacks were like this." Eventually Italians broke away from Blacks and became Republicans; his own family were staunch Republicans, esp. his father ("a big time Republican"), as were his grandmother Preston; the mother of Ben Jones ("our first Black elected official who Mindy's father put in office"), Cotton at Cotton's funeral home; Bobby Bowser's father; Mr Quorum(?); but aside from a small group, Blacks became Democrats. When he and a group of Democratic friends took over the Mayor's office and he became Complaint Officer, his father's friends could hardly believe it: "Friend Joel: Your father know about this?"

Walter goes on to describe the destruction that 280 wreaked on the community, emphasizing again the destruction of the YMCA, because ""Destroyed us as a people....All of us leadership people, we came through that YMCA." Describes in detail the political power of the UBC and the church where group met; Gardiner Smith was a mentor to students there.

The group is (understandably) proud of the history of their town and of the well-known African Americans it produced:

Alexander (see above)

Monte Irvin

Ernie Thompson (father of Mindy)

Ben Jones (first Black elected official)

Ray Murphy ("Set things up" politically: ~1955 began to encourage Black participation in town politics)

Freddie Polhill (a judge)

Dr McIver, ran for office (the Assembly)

Minister of UBC (J Vance McIver?)

Mr. Woodie, his mother Mary.

Jesse "Mr." Miles, ran Friendship House, worked for city, easy to get along with, and also had a lot of authority. HS gym named after him.

Rabbi Prince, a white person, worked with King.

"Y"s

Main Y on Main Street, "We affectionately called it the white Y...it was predominantly Jewish." Then three Black basketball players were taken in: John Hatcher, Alfonso Harris, Jojo Jenkins, "to beat us in the Olympics.," but eventually Walter was on the Board of Directors there in the 1970s.

The "Italian Y" over on Hulbert(?) Street.

"Our two," the YMCA and YWCA were on Oakwood Avenue near Webster; not contiguous on the street, but joined at the back with an extension that contained the pool. Much reminiscing about old times there: Basketball, swimming, dancing, etiquette, leadership groups, etc. etc.

What was lost:

Walter says the town was a "unique" place where you knew everyone and he did not experience "negative sensitivity" (overt racism) there. He felt the whole town supported the Little League teams, for example (probably leading him to be surprised when he experienced "negative sensitivity" (racism) at a game in Livingston. He describes the ethnic differences between the various Catholic churches, and how 280 took South Street entirely but went around Mt. Carmel Church (Italian). Although Mt. Carmel was only one block from his house, his parish (Holy Spirit) was a black one, and the only one without a school. Our Lady of the Valley and St John's were/are Irish parishes.

Goldie enumerates the businesses lost when 280 went up Parrow, this time avoiding the OAS playground: The Monahans, Mrs. Peters, and the Oateys lost their homes, and Titan Hall was razed.

Tom and Gordon: 280 took away from kids the Friendship House (city-run recreation involving Jesse Miles, Miss Henderson, with kids during the day, teens and adults in the evenings), "the church" (Reid's Temple), and the two "Y"s. "You always had someplace to go." They name some businesses that made jobs available to young people, Monroe Calculator and others.