Still We Rise Materials Packet

COLOR, CULTURE, CONDITION

Reclaiming Place -
Demolition Of A Neighborhood

In 1956, congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act and created a vast interstate highway network across the country. It encompassed a 41,000 system that connected populations of more than 100,000 residents. Completed in the 1990's and at a cost of a hundred billion dollars, it profoundly changed the landscape of America and how citizens travel and conduct business.

Interstate 10 was one of the largest interstate highways built with a length of 2,500 miles. It spans from Jacksonville, Florida to Santa Monica, California. Interstate 10 made its way through El Paso in the early 1960's. Much of the interstate would cut through existing El Paso neighborhoods such as Lincoln Park, Rio Grande, Downtown and Sunset Heights. Large parcels of land were bought out and families left their homes. Much of this demolition happened in El Paso's then Eastside which included Lincoln Park Neighborhood, the epicenter for El Paso's African American community. A large amount of homes and businesses were lost despite a nationwide protest to save these communities from erasure and possible health hazards coming from construction and automobiles.

Bernice Love Wiggins

I could sing a mournful song
With its metre doleful, long
I could turn reformer, ever shouting “Don’t.”
I could tell a tale of woe,
Set to measure sad and slow,
But I won’t.

I can sing a cheering lay
Sing of lovers happy, gay,
In a rippling rhyming rhythm that will thrill.
I can make this old world smile,
And forget its cares awhile,
And I will.

From *Tuneful Tales* by Bernice Love Wiggins, published 1925

Black El Pasoans In World War II

For El Paso, the contributions of the African- American community can be traced to as far back as the early to mid-nineteenth century. The African-American community in El Paso has historically comprised a little more than 3% of the population but have largely contributed to its development and are intrinsically seated at the heart of most facets of this border's narrative. According to the Black Chamber of Commerce's 1947 directory, several black-owned businesses ranged from barbershops, beauty salons, hotels, to a taxicab company and theater.

During World War II, young women signed up to work for the USO. Several social and charitable groups organized around the McCall Day center which served as a hub for the community. Enlisted black soldiers arrived at Ft. Bliss and then returned to make El Paso their home after the war ended contributing to the growth of the African American population.

In all, the community continued to thrive and demonstrate its resilience despite Texas' racist efforts to uphold the color line through segregation.

A Way Around Segregation

Though compared to other cities in the United States El Paso had a greater level of racial solidarity and acceptance, it was not exempt from slavery, state-mandated Jim Crow laws, and discrimination. Up until the Civil War, the population of African Americans in El Paso was small, fewer than 50 people, and less than half were free. After emancipation, more African American individuals began to move West, but it was not until the arrival of the railroad in 1881 that African Americans began to settle in the Southwest region in large numbers. One of the earliest of these settlements was Vado, NM, a short drive from present-day El Paso. Many of these early African American settlers found El Paso desirable and slightly more tolerant due its borderland culture. In Mexico, segregation laws did not exist, and as long as people had capital, they could hold a high social standing regardless of race. North of the border, however, many Anglo-owned local businesses adhered to segregation laws and either did not serve or banned African Americans, as well as Mexicans, from patronizing their businesses. Education was similarly segregated, and in 1891, El Paso's Blacl< community organized to open Douglass School, named after formerly enslaved abolitionist Fredericl< Douglass, in the Second Ward (Segundo Barrio) where most of El Paso's African American community lived. As El Paso experienced a boom in growth following World War II, mortgage lenders coordinated the redlining of Southside El Paso to delineate between desirable and undesirable neighborhoods. Areas with white homeowners were labeled as "desirable" and areas with Blacl< homeowners were labeled as "hazardous." This process was a way to restrict economic growth in Blacl< communities, deter white citizens from patronizing Blacl<-owned businesses, and maintain segregation even after it was made illegal.

Success

When it carne to civic and social strength, El Paso's Black community gathered their own resources to support and uplift one another. Up until the 1970s and the construction of Interstate 10, the majority of El Paso's African American community lived near one another in Second Ward (Segundo Barrio) and the Eastside (present-day Central). The Aldridge, Parish, Stull, Henderson, and Bluford families all owned homes in the Second Ward, and community leaders like Marshall and Olalee McCall had their home on the Eastside. Black-owned businesses also flourished in Second Ward and the Eastside during the first half of the 20th century. These businesses ranged in type and included Curley's Taxi Cab, Little Harlem Restaurant, House of Charm and Beauty Salon, and the OK Barbershop to name a few. The vibrant commercial corridor along Alameda Avenue and Piedras Street served not only the needs of the surrounding community of African Americans but also Black soldiers from Fort Bliss and Black railroad workers. In the fall of 2022, Ms. Estine Davis retired from a 70-year long career as a barber. Her shop, Estine Eastside Barbershop, was the last of the original Black-owned businesses along El Paso's Black Wall Street .

Second Half Of The Twentieth Century

During the second half of the 20th century, the African American community in El Paso continued to bloom, building new business, new spaces, and new legacies. In 1955, after two years of litigation,Thelma White won a lawsuit to desegregate Texas Western College, now known as UTEP. Texas Western College won the NCAA basketball championship with an integrated team. Jethro L. Hills was elected to El Paso City Council, and General Dana Pittard became the first Black commander of Fort Bliss, to name just a few milestones. From civic engagement to social organizing to entrepreneurship, Black El Pasoans have continued to make their marl< on the city.

During the 1960s, the Texas Department of Transportation demolished several blocks of homes and businesses in the core of El Paso's Black neighborhood in order to build Interstate 10. The construction displaced many families and businesses, and even those that were not directly impacted by the construction now found themselves on the opposite side of a highway from their neighbors, businesses, churches, and gathering places. Several folks had established themselves further into the Lower Valley, Hacienda Heights area, while others moved toward the Northeast and so on. What was not destroyed with construction was a sense of resilience and community. Regardless of where people moved, their ties remained through social and civic organizations

NAACP

The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was founded in 1909 by W.E.B Du Bois, Mary White Ovington, Moorfield Storey, and Ida B. Wells. Its mission is “to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.” The El Paso chapter of the NAACP was founded in 1910 and is the oldest chapter in the state of Texas, with Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon holding the distinction of Charter member. The NAACP has helped numerous individuals in El Paso, such as supporting Donald Williams, who became El Paso’s first African American judge, aided Thelma White to be the first African American woman to be accepted to Texas Western (now UTEP), and many other cases where individuals were discriminated for the color of their skin. With the chapter being over a hundred years old, it remains a pillar of resistance and aid to the African American community here in El Paso.

Sunday Best

The term ‘Sunday Best’ is based on the Christian tradition of wearing one’s finest clothes while attending Sunday services. Attendees would arrive to services in their best clothes as a way to adhere to the rules of the church but to also project their influence and status amongst other church attendees. Sunday Best was also a form of resilience during the Civil Rights movement. Activists wore their Sunday Best to protests as a sign of worth, dignity, and respect as they challenged individuals and institutions who put them at the bottom of hierarchy. In modern times, churches have relaxed their approach on Sunday Best for a more relaxed and welcoming approach of attire to attend services.

Let’s Talk About Hair

According to Native El Pasoan, Angie Barraza, historically, it was more common for African American individuals to receive hair services out of black person’s homes in the early to middling decades of the 20th century. As discovered through reconstructing El Paso’s Black Wall Street, several beauty salon services were indeed provided out of many homes such as The Glamour Beauty Salon, owned by Mrs. C.B. Mathis at 304 N. Raynor. In terms of education, Ms. Barraza refers to the lack of formalized beauty school as “El Paso’s underground hair network” where women learned from one another how to style textured hair.

Social mores in the mid-century dictated straightening the curl to mirror non-textured hair. Nevertheless, as the years passed, many Black women have considered their natural curl a mode of resistance and a way of reclaiming Black Pride.