

The Black Pioneers of the San Gorgonio Pass, Part 1: A Look at the History of the Black Community in Banning from the 1940s to 1965

***Disclaimer** – Some of the terms used in this research describing the black community are direct quotes from historic newspaper articles and are not intended to offend today's sentiments on accepted terms for racial identity.*

In the Banning Public Library's last local history column we asked the public for assistance in researching the history of Banning's black community. The following article is a result of that response to our request and is in no way to be considered conclusive in the highlighting of certain individuals interviewed for this research. There were numerous Banning residents who contributed to a black presence in the San Gorgonio Pass and we hope the public will continue to assist us in learning of those individuals we may have missed in our research. This history of the black pioneers of the San Gorgonio Pass will be divided into two parts. The first part will cover the time period of the 1940s to 1965. The second installment will cover the time period of 1965 to the 1970s.

For approximately 80 years, prior to 1940, Banning had maintained a residential history of predominantly Native American, white and Mexican settlers. The 1940s through the 1970s brought a new kind of pioneer settler to the San Gorgonio Pass and between its bordering mountain ranges the seeds of a growing black population were planted. A geological pass is sometimes defined as a "bridge." In the case of the San Gorgonio Pass this "bridge" has often been one between cultures.

As with the history of all pioneers the path wasn't easy for the black pioneers of the San Gorgonio Pass but they followed the same path as the settlers before them, a hopeful path to a place where anyone had the potential to realize their dreams of a better life. This racial assimilation was not a smooth and easy process for residents of the San Gorgonio Pass but it did unfold in its own unique way and this article attempts to document the individuals and events that contributed to a community that now benefits from that diversity.

Some of the earliest black families to arrive in Banning relocated from the South and parts of Texas and Oklahoma. According to Banning resident Ruby Swait, the first black families to move into Banning were the Wilkens and Swait families who came to Banning in 1942 by way of Oklahoma and the Blythe/Indio area. Ruby remembers Jessie Bracy, who came to Banning soon after the Wilkins and the Swaits. Ruby's parents were D'arcy and Ruby Brown and her family moved to Banning from Palm Springs in the mid 1950s. Before moving to Banning she

remembers being bused to high school in Banning from Palm Springs before Palm Springs had its own high school. After graduating from high school Ruby had a long career at the Bank of America in Palm Springs and married Satch Swait in Banning.

Banning resident Deborah Dukes recalls that the Benson family came to Banning in October of 1949, even earlier than her parents, Rutha and Leroy Miller, who also came to Banning in 1949 from Mississippi by way of Perris, California. The Millers lived in a house on N. Allen Street near the First Missionary Baptist Church which was organized at about the same time. Deborah's father, Leroy, worked as a cook at the Banning Hotel and later at the San Geronio Inn. She mentions Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Galloway as being early Banning schoolteachers in the mid 1950s-mid 1960s. Deborah's uncle, Mr. Abron Evans was the first black member of the Banning School Board. Deborah served on the Banning School Board from 2007 to 2011.

Other early black families in Banning include the Warren, Stewart, Alexander, Wallace, Jesse, Porter, Walton, Hawley, and Lacy families.

Although most of these early black families migrated to Banning from other states a situation was developing in Palm Springs in the mid 1950s that would soon have an important impact on the history of the San Geronio Pass.

Section 14 is a 640 acre square-mile of land near the downtown center of Palm Springs bounded by Alejo Rd., Sunrise Way, Ramon Rd., and Indian Canyon Dr. Section 14 had been awarded as reservation land to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians during the "checkerboard" appropriation of land in the 1870s. As the resort industry boomed in Palm Springs in the early part of the 1900s, the need for workers grew along with it and Section 14 became one of the only residential locations for low-cost housing.

Housing was affordable in Section 14 because of the lack of building restrictions made possible by its status as reservation land. There were problems with utilities and sewer service and the neighborhood began to be viewed as a "blighted" area to Palm Springs city planners. Section 14 was also a matter of concern to city officials who began to have a vision for the downtown area that didn't include affordable housing and its ethnic majority.

During the 1930s and 40s Palm Springs struggled with its identity. It had been "discovered" by Hollywood and the hoped-for commerce associated with movie making and glamorous stars became its master plan. Section 14 no longer fit this image. Unsightly living conditions would not attract the sought after developers the city had in mind so city officials found a way to take back the square-mile section of land from the Agua Caliente by arranging a Bureau of Indian Affairs abatement approval.

After the abatement approval, eviction notices were served to the residents of Section 14 beginning in early 1951. The burning of condemned structures in Section 14 began in 1956. Some residents returned home from work to find their houses and belongings destroyed. It may have been the location of the only affordable housing in the area for the workers who supported the hotel and construction industries but Palm Springs officials took the chance that eradicating the homes in Section 14 would not affect the progress of developing their "ideal city." They were partially right in that the minorities displaced in Section 14 found housing in nearby North Palm Springs and Banning. 100s of black families were displaced from their homes in Section 14. Some settled in an area in north Palm Springs. Others relocated to Banning, 22 miles to the west.

Palm Springs financial institutions would not give loans to evicted minority residents so many of them turned to the Dunes Construction Company in Banning. Dunes Construction arranged home loans for many of the evicted black families and built a 85 home subdivision just north of the Palm Springs city limits called, Desert Highlands. Some of these loans were arranged through the San Geronio Bank in Banning and the Sterling Savings and Loan in Riverside. Other evicted families moved to Banning and built or rented homes there, at the time all east of Hargrave Street.

According to a January 1970 article printed in the Riverside Press Enterprise, the black population in Banning in 1960 was approximately 500. After the Section 14 evictions were completed in 1966, Banning's black population had nearly tripled to roughly 1300. This represented approximately 13% of Banning's total population at the time. Many of these displaced individuals from Palm Springs kept their jobs there and commuted daily from Banning for years until retirement.

Many early black families in Banning have firsthand knowledge of living in Section 14 in Palm Springs. Oral history interviews were conducted with Emma Pllum, Ivy Wilson, Estelle Lewis and Marion Johnson, all current residents who moved into Banning in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Ivy Pllum Wilson's family came to Palm Springs, California from Carthage, Texas in 1943. She remembers hearing that during the 1940s and 50s people in Texas thought of California as a "dream state" where you could go into your backyard and "just pick dollar bills off the tree." Many families of all races migrated to California during and after the WWII years with the same dreams of prosperity.

Ivy and her family lived in Section 14 in Palm Springs. She remembers city officials meeting with the residents of Section 14 and telling them of their plans to redevelop the area. Her family decided to move to Banning in the mid-1950s, before the forced evictions occurred. Ivy's

parents, Thomye and Odis Pllum were important and influential members of the pioneering black population in Banning. Her father, Odis Pllum, was a well respected local contractor who built homes in the San Gorgonio Pass and also subcontracted with several construction companies, including the Arinda and Dunes Construction Companies.

Odis Pllum was more than a building contractor in the community. He was also a mentor to young black couples starting out who were trying to find ways to buy their first home. He would counsel them on matters of financing and according to Ivy and other early Banning residents he loved nothing more than helping young families learn the importance of starting a family in Banning as proud homeowners and showing them the way to do so. Odis Pllum also built the First Missionary Baptist Church on the corner of Nicolet and N. Allen Streets.

Ivy has positive memories of growing up in Banning. She remembers her neighborhood as being racially mixed but “everyone got along.” She felt nurtured by a strong home life and the support of a large extended family. Ivy and several other interviewees for this research remember the local black churches in Banning as being critical components in bringing the community together when faced with difficult circumstances. Her mother, Thomye Pllum, was an important educator in Banning, both as a teacher and later as the director of the Banning Headstart program for 18 years.

Emma Pllum was born in Clayton, Texas and came to Palm Springs in 1955, where she and her husband, J. B. Pllum, a construction worker, lived in Section 14. She remembers that most of the people who lived in Section 14 worked in the hotel business or in construction. Emma and J.B. moved from Palm Springs to Banning in 1960-1961, after being notified by the City of Palm Springs that people were going to have to leave Section 14. They moved before they were forced to leave. She remembers the city of Palm Springs burning down houses and said it took about six years to “get everyone out of Section 14.” Ivy Pllum Wilson’s father talked to Emma and J.B. about a lot for sale in Banning and they decided to buy it and build a house on it.

Emma continued to work and do her shopping in Palm Springs and because of her time spent there didn’t interact too much within the city of Banning, even after moving there. She raised three sons and one daughter and attended the First Missionary Baptist Church. The other black churches in Banning at the time were the God and Christ Church, Shiloh Baptist, and the Fountain of Life Church.

Estelle Lewis is a prominent Banning businesswoman and community advocate who’s family moved from Section 14 in Palm Springs to Banning in 1955. While at Banning High School she met her future husband, Lester, who was attending school in Riverside. Estelle’s father-in-law was Rev. John Prior and their families have been active in the First Missionary Baptist Church in Banning, an important cornerstone in supporting the black community.

Estelle shared her recollections of life in Banning in the 1950s and 60s, when the black community was small but growing. She remembers that during times of racial strife the community would come together to resolve issues concerning the integration of blacks into the white community. They would organize core groups to address the need for improvements for the East side and stop some of the injustices affecting the black community. Estelle mentioned that she could not overemphasize the influence of the Banning chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in the 1960s when Banning blacks were seeking employment with local businesses and industries not yet receptive to hiring minorities.

Estelle's husband, Lester Lewis, has spent years counseling young people in finding employment and careers. Mr. Lewis will be featured in Part 2 of the Black Pioneers of Banning: 1965-1970s.

In 1961, Marion Johnson moved to Banning from Chicago with her husband Edward and four sons. It took them some time to adjust to the drastic climate change but they soon adapted to living in the West. Edward had worked with a hotel chain in Chicago and was offered a position in the medical field in Palm Springs. Edward also worked for a time at the Three Rings Ranch in Beaumont. Marion worked for Deutsch Engineering in Banning as an Employee Counselor, starting in 1962-63. She held that position for 31 years. Through the assistance of Nat Green and the NAACP she was encouraged to apply for the job. It was intimidating for a young mother to be thrust into a working environment where she was the first black woman to be hired but as time went on and people worked together they began to realize that cultural differences were not an issue and lifelong friendships were formed.

Marion has been a long time member of the Anthropol Club in Banning which will be discussed in the second part of this series. Looking back to the 1960s Marion remembered Maxine Smith, the first black member of the School Board, as being an important individual in the community. She also mentioned Suzette Wallace who's father was the first black child in kindergarten at Hoffer Elementary School. Marion Johnson is still an active member of the Banning Homeowner's and Residents Association.

Like Ivy Wilson, Emma Pellum and Estelle Lewis, Marion Johnson has predominantly positive memories of living in Banning and raising a family here but all those interviewed for this research remembered the difficulty and frustration blacks had in the 1950s and 60s in attempting to rent or buy homes in the San Gorgonio Pass west of Hargrave St. in Banning.

Reports of isolated racial incidents began showing up in local newspapers in the late 1950s. As the town progressed into the 1960s the incidents became more frequent. One of the earliest reports of racial turmoil in Banning occurred in January 1958, when six black individuals accused a Banning café on E. Ramsey of refusing them service because of their race. The owner

of the café denied the charges but a subsequent court ruling by the San Geronimo Judicial District awarded one of the plaintiffs \$50.00 in damages.

There were several influential individuals and organizations within the community of Banning who realized the critical need for employment opportunities in the late 1950s and 1960s. The burgeoning black population in Banning needed jobs at a time when doors were more often than not closed to black applicants. Rev. John Prior, Lester Lewis, and Nate Green, along with the organizations of the Banning chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the Banning Opportunity Center, The Teen Outpost Club, the Neighborhood Youth Corps at Banning High School, the Junior Citizen Group and others assisted Banning residents of all races and ages in finding employment during these years.

One especially important and influential individual in Banning was Rev. John P. Prior. Rev. Prior moved to Banning in 1951 and became the pastor of the First Missionary Baptist Church which had been formed at 1380 E. Nicolet about a year earlier. Without exception every individual interviewed for this research has a high regard for Rev. Prior and his wife, Mrs. Rosy M. Prior. In the words of educator and counselor Mike Rose, "Rev. John Prior was Banning's Martin Luther King Jr." He was a peacemaker between black youths and the all-white (prior to 1963) police department. He opened his church to be used as a forum for community issues to be discussed. Both the white and the black population turned to him for guidance during these difficult years of racial integration.

All the black churches in Banning have at times served as catalysts in the community, opening their doors for public meetings and ministering to the needs of the growing black population that was moving into the area. In 1964, Nat Green, a leader in the black community who started the Banning chapter of the NAACP, purchased a former courthouse building in San Bernardino and moved it to Banning to be used by the Shiloh Baptist Church. Mr. Lou Davison was the first black police officer in Banning. He came to Banning in 1963 from Riverside and was hired by Police Chief Harry Moore of the Banning Police Department. Mr. Davison later became the first black Police Chief in 1981 and served as Chief until 1989.

Many businesses along E. Ramsey Street, east of Hargrave, catered to the black neighborhoods in the late 1950s-1960s. There were at least three popular all-black nightclubs in Banning during the 1960s. The Elbow Room was located at the end of Phillips St. at 1104 E. Ramsey St. The "We-2" nightclub was located at 724 E. Ramsey. The Guys and Dolls nightclub was located on E. Ramsey at the junction of Hathaway. Members of the black community today still remember these nightclubs and some of the music that could be heard coming through the walls.

In the early 1960s, national events affected all races of residents in the San Geronimo Pass. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his historic "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, the same year that

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The Civil Rights Act passed in 1964 and the Watts riots took place in the summer of 1965.

The next installment on the history of Banning's black pioneers will cover the tumultuous times between 1965 and the 1970s. The late 1960s brought unprecedented social change to Banning and the entire United States. How the San Geronio Pass addressed those social issues is a compelling and all-American story told in the words of those who lived it. Part II of the "Black Pioneers of Banning" will feature interviews with Rev. John Prior, Cordelia Henderson Stewart, Barbara Butler, Theatlas and Barbara Reager, Percy Patrick, Mike Rose, Clara Thomas, Jim Anson, Clarence Taylor, Louis Davison, Blanche and Pelton Teague, and Debbie Franklin.

(Special thanks to Ruth McCormick, Marion Johnson, Emma Pellum, Jim Anson, Mike Rose, Estelle Lewis, Ivy Wilson, Lou Davison, Clara Thomas, Debbie Franklin, Barbara and Theatlas Raeger, Deborah Dukes, Patrick Percy, and Ruby Swait for their assistance in researching this history. Extra special thanks to Clarence Taylor who's perseverance in documenting the history of the black community of Banning contributed to the writing of these articles. While serving on the Banning Library District Board Clarence was instrumental in supporting the research needed to document the histories of all the ethnic communities represented in the San Geronio Pass. Thank you Clarence!)