



Group Oral History Interview of Hazel Murray, Cleophas Smith and Others, 1980s

Title

“Group Oral History Interview of Hazel Murray, Cleophas Smith and Others”

Date

1980s

Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

In this short collection of excerpts, various speakers recount their experiences. Hazel Murray tells the story of being shipped to Vancouver by the Army with 500 black troops and the racism encountered both on the train and upon arrival in the city of Vancouver. Other topics include changes in racism in Portland, Oregon and Cleophas Smith’s recollections of growing up during the Depression.

Interviewees

Cleophas Smith, Hazel Murray

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/murraygroup/>

Transcript

Hazel Murray: When the war come along I was inducted in the service. That was in...It was in '43 [...] we was on the troop train, five hundred of us on the troop train, all black. That's before the Army was integrated. We woke up the next morning, we was in the state of Georgia, and on this train we had five white officers on the train. They walked through the train all day long, said "fellows, don't put the shades up, don't raise the shades," said "we're in the state of Georgia. We don't want the train tore-up." So it's like we was in a cage or something and we couldn't even raise the shades because we was in the state of Georgia. [...] We was in route for five days and five nights and we was coming to Vancouver Barracks. [...] See one time—a lot of people didn't know it—but Vancouver Barracks used to be a POE. They could take them, after twelve o'clock at night, take them right down, put them on the boats, send them right on the South Pacific. That's the way it was at that time. [...] When we did get a pass to come out of town, like Vancouver and Portland, I'm going to tell you that sign went up in all the places downtown in Vancouver; in restaurants and places like that, anywhere I drove, taverns: "we cater to white trade only." [...] So the next night they went downtown on Saturday night, and they was together, they went downtown in Vancouver, and man they wrecked that place. [...] People out in the street didn't hear about that, it didn't hit no paper, wasn't on no news. They just washed it down, see.

Unknown Speaker 1: Portland has changed; of course the city itself was a very prejudicial place that such time when I was in high school we were not able to go to restaurants with our classmates who were predominantly white. Signs were up that would not allow blacks to attend eating places or other establishments of entertainment. Eventually they, instead of putting up signs for white only that say "no colored allowed," but the whole atmosphere gradually took a change over a period of years. But the advent of the war, changes were quite major at that time because of the heavy influx of servicemen into the area.

Unknown Speaker 2: As you may know, porters running charge, what's they—most of the porters, on some part of their trips, they would sell space, take up tickets, make out diagrams and turn the tickets and the money into the office when they get back to their terminal. You see we had a lot of short runs, like from here to Yakima, Bend, Oregon, Coos Bay. They had cars running everywhere on these short trips and they had the porters in charge. [...] When I was first porter, promoted to a Pullman conductor.

Unknown Interviewer: Tell us about that experience, please. [...] What are some of the things you would like to see in this community?

Unknown Speaker 3: That's a big question.

Unknown Interviewer: Well how about let's chop it off by—let me ask you what advice do you have for today's young people?

Unknown Speaker 3: Well, I advise them to get a good education, the best they can afford. And if you get the education and have the personality, well you can get the jobs that pay well and respected.

Cleophas Smith: Well I grew up, I grew up in the Depression as a youngster.

Michael Grice: Okay. What are some of your recollections that were significant?

CS: From my recollection is living from, like living in a nice six-room apartment, you know; our people didn't own houses or properties—I mean if you were a doctor, possibly a lawyer, you owned an apartment building, maybe, but my father worked as a construction worker and we had a, say, six-room apartment, and everything was nice. I went to Catholic school when I was young. And then all of the sudden we had moved out of this apartment when I was around ten, eleven years old, and we were living in one room. And from that one room, that was a time that from that was the time that I started to work, after I got around sixteen years of age, I started to work; going to school and working, and then I eventually quit school and just worked constantly. And I worked from the time that I quit school at sixteen until 1976.

MG: When you retired.

CS: When I retired.

MG: Okay. You retired from the railroad, Union Pacific Railroad.

[00:05:02]

CS: Union Pacific Railroad, that's right.

MG: Now where did you start working on the railroad? In Chicago or in Portland?

CS: I started in Chicago, I worked two weeks for the Milwaukee Railroad and then they laid us off, we couldn't get any work, and a fellow came by and said that they were hiring over at the UP office, and they were sending fellows to California and Ogden, but they didn't mention Portland.

[end of interview 00:05:37:09]