

First Families of Vancouver's African American Community: From World War II to the Twenty-First Century



The Myles Family: Sahaya, Kristiana, and Keanon
"First Families Voices" Reader's Theater.

Can you help us raise the last ten thousand dollars it will take to publish our story as a book?

Will you help?

We are telling our story on the most modest of budgets. Volunteers and donors have given their time and emptied their pockets.

Major funding from Humanities Washington, Black United Fund of Oregon, and Clark County's Historical Promotion Program has kept us going.

Now the writing is almost done.

Ten donations of a thousand dollars.

Or twenty donations of five hundred dollars.

That's all we need to make our story a visible, permanent addition to Vancouver's historical record.

Please think about it. If you can help...

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Will you help?

We have told our stories.

Now they are being woven into one story... the story of Vancouver's longstanding, deep-rooted black community.

We came to Vancouver to help win the war. By the time it ended, Vancouver felt like home to us. We stayed because we liked it.

We decided long ago not to settle in just one corner, but to live in every part of the city. It wasn't always easy. We did it for Vancouver, for ourselves, for the future.

Because of this, most people don't even know we're here.... but we're part of this place. We want people to know our story.

A few of our stories...

Ida Jones was thirty-four years old when she and her husband Oliver brought the family out from Kansas in 1942 to work in the shipyards. "I had a feeling it would be better for us out here," she said. "We could make a better living here. I had to go to school to learn how to weld. There was a group of us, and I got into some dangerous places. I don't like to think about it now. I was the smallest one on the crew, and I got into some holes. I wouldn't do it again."

After twenty-two years of sawmilling in Chilton County, Alabama, **Robert Davis** went out to find his mill in ashes one time too many. Andrew Davis remembers his father coming back to the house that day. "He told my mother, no, I'm not going to rebuild it, not this time. I'm going to give it up. He said, I'm going as far away from here as it would cost you a dollar to send me a postcard. He'd heard about this place out west, and that made the difference. His ambition was to stay in business, but this was the straw that broke the camel's back."

Theodie Owens left her home in Decatur, Alabama with just her two little girls, a couple of pillows, a suitcase, and forty-two dollars in cash. "That's all she had," said her daughter, Hosea Raye Lewis. "She was a very strong and persistent person. Whatever she set her mind to do, it would be done. She thought that she could make it on her own, so she headed out west."

"Four days and three nights riding on the train, our mother and five kids," said Genie Barnett's eldest child, **Thelma Harris**. "So it was me, Lilly and Verdie, and my baby brother Matthew still in diapers, and Baby Sister up and running off. That was an experience I have never forgotten." Their father, Bates Barnett, met them at Portland's Union Station on December 17, 1942. Thelma knows the date, "because it was Verdie's birthday, but we couldn't celebrate because we were all tired and sleepy after that long journey."

"People had seen such hard times," said **Belva Jean Griffin**. "The people who came out here had hope. They said, 'I'm never going back.' They were happy to find a new place, a better day for them, with better wages. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than where they came from. Here you were working to make your own life better, not just always making it better for other people."