

100 years later, NAACP still has work



PETER HALEY/Staff photographer

Longtime NAACP members Jim Walton and Harold Moss stand Wednesday in the Tacoma Association of Colored Women's Clubs headquarters. A portrait of Nettie Asberry, who founded the Tacoma branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People 100 years ago, hangs between them.

NAACP CHAPTER TURNS 100

What: Anniversary celebration for the Tacoma branch of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

When: Thursday; 6 p.m. social hour, 7 p.m. dinner program.

Where: Greater Tacoma Convention & Trade Center, 1500 Broadway.

Keynote speaker: Willie Brown Jr., former San Francisco mayor and speaker of the California State Assembly.

Ticket information: Gail Alexis Ray, 253-565-4843, to reserve a table. Shiloh Baptist Church, 253-272-4949, for individual tickets.

HISTORY OF THE TACOMA CHAPTER

Timeline, [back page](#)

Tacoma chapter saw more challenges in past years, but members say they still must maintain vigilance



BY ALEXIS KRELL
Staff writer

Pierce County had roughly 900 black residents in 1913, yet that was the year the first chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People west of the Rockies was started in Tacoma.

Among the residents was Nettie Asberry, a music teacher who founded and personally submitted the application for the NAACP chapter.

"She was an unusual woman, a most unusual woman, especially for those times," said former Seattle librarian Mary Henry, who has researched and written about Asberry. "There were very few black people, and she took a

leadership role, and as a woman. She was extraordinary."

Asberry protested segregation at Fort Lewis, challenged restricted seating for blacks in theaters and organized a letter-writing effort to inform downtown store managers that discrimination by store clerks would not be tolerated.

When the branch celebrates its centennial Thursday night at the downtown convention center, it will recognize Asberry and other civil rights pioneers from throughout the chapter's 100-year history.

In that century, the branch grew from 10 members to at

See NAACP, back page

Left: Nettie J. Asberry, founder of the Tacoma chapter of the NAACP.

Courtesy of Washington State Historical Society

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BACKPAGE

NAACP

From A1

least 300. Tacoma saw discrimination and racial rioting, as well as advancements that included the city's first black mayor and manager. Still, the NAACP's work is far from over, its members say.

"If it takes another 100 years, we will still be here, working on these issues for equality and justice," said executive committee member Lyle Quasim, who also co-chairs the Tacoma/Pierce County Black Collective.

LAWS CHANGE, PRACTICE DOESN'T

The local NAACP's first official act in 1913 was to organize overnight a caravan that surprised the rules committee of the Legislature and led to the defeat of a measure against interracial marriage, according to Henry's research.

"Even in places like Washington state that didn't have segregation laws, they had segregation practices," said Michael Honey, a professor of African-American history at the University of Washington Tacoma. "The NAACP was always working on all of those issues."

Harold Moss, a former chapter president and Tacoma's first black mayor, remembers the effects of segregation at Fort Lewis.

It was about 1950 that Moss, a dental technician at the fort, was moved from the all-black artillery quarters to bunk with the medical personnel he worked with daily.

"The reception was: 'Moss, what the hell are you doing here?'" the 84-year-old recalled. "You can't live with us. Then we've got to have a big fight about whether I'm going to stay there, and I'll be goddamned if I'm going back and live with the artillery. It was difficult for everybody."

He stayed.

Moss and others with the chapter worked to make sure Tacoma

businesses followed anti-discrimination measures in the 1950s by trying to patronize stores accused of refusing to serve blacks, then taking legal action against those who refused them.

"Once it was written into law that you cannot do these things, then they (the businesses) have to be challenged," Moss said. "That's what I was doing during that time."

Moss and other NAACP members went up against a Tacoma tavern for discrimination, leading to the first complaint over public accommodations brought before the Washington Board Against Discrimination.

"The guy says: 'You've gotta get out of here, you're already drunk,'" Moss said of his run-in with a tavern employee. "I said: 'We haven't had a drink of anything today.' Everyone in the bar stopped to listen to this guy who was just not going to serve black folk nothing, and we took that to court."

In the end, the tavern was disciplined, Moss said.

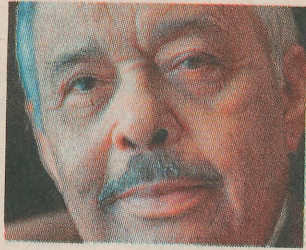
He said another business that they challenged was the Top of the Ocean restaurant.

"You could call down and make a reservation, then they find out you're black and they erase the reservation and give you some garbage about why they cannot accommodate you," Moss said. "They look you right in the face and said: 'Sorry, you have to have a reservation here; and you look around and the room is near empty.'"

Discrimination wasn't confined to the business community, he said, identifying other displays of racism that changed incrementally.

"There were places where black people simply did not go to seek housing. There were jobs that black people never applied to," Moss said. "You couldn't rent a house, for instance, on the North End of Tacoma. I don't know how long it took for black people to live in Fircrest."

When the law and practices were at odds, he said his first step was to



Jack Tanner, first black federal judge in the Northwest

HISTORY OF TACOMA'S NAACP CHAPTER

1913: Tacoma's branch is founded. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois visit the city.

1925: Dr. Emmet Elmore, a black surgeon, moves to Tacoma and performs operations at St. Joseph Hospital, becoming the president of the organization from the late 1920s through the early '30s.

1968: Chapter founder Nettie Asberry passes away at age 103.

1969: Mother's Day riot happens in Hilltop when police try to arrest black man there.

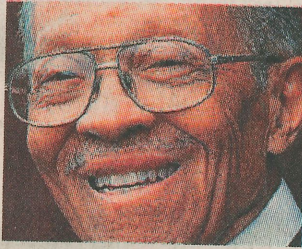
1970: Harold Moss becomes first African American appointed to the Tacoma City Council.

1978: Jack Tanner is confirmed as the first black federal judge in the Northwest.

1993: The Tacoma NAACP office on the Hilltop is bombed; three young white men are convicted of hate crime.



Ella Mae Crawford, first black woman hired by Tacoma



Rev. Earnest Stonewall Brazill, past NAACP activist and long-time civil rights activist

1994: Moss appointed first African-American mayor of Tacoma.

1996: Moss becomes the first African American to serve on the Pierce County Council.

2000: City names part of South 12th Street downtown for the Rev. Earnest Stonewall Brazill, past NAACP activist and long-time civil rights activist.

2013: Tacoma chapter celebrates its centennial.

Sources: Tacoma NAACP, News Tribune archives.

use the legal system as the primary tool, such as he did with the restaurants.

"If you have no recourse, that's when everybody erupts and they go to the street and raise hell, etc.," Moss said. "When people really reach that stage, they take it to the only court that will listen, and that is the streets."

AFTER RIOTING, CHANGES COME FROM THE INSIDE

When police tried to arrest a black man on outstanding warrants on the Hilltop on Mother's Day 1969, Jim Walton was one of the people who stepped in to help stop the rioting that ensued.

Walton, 74, is a former NAACP executive committee member and Tacoma's first black city manager.

He and others, including the Rev. Earnest S. Brazill, stepped in to discourage the violence. Windows were

broken, businesses were looted, and ultimately a police officer was shot and seriously wounded.

"You just start trying to intervene and talk with people to de-escalate their anger and to try to stop the violence," Walton said. "We tried to get people to take a more peaceful approach to resolve underlying issues and concerns."

Days later, racial tension in the city almost turned violent again, this time at Tacoma Community College.

"The black student union, we were fighting for recognition and establishment as an official organization on campus, which would then entitle us to resources and space," Moss said. "We were having a rally here on campus, and we were surrounded and challenged by a large number of white students, kind of cornered in the center of campus."

TNT

ONLINE

Read a letter to the editor from Tacoma NAACP founder Nettie Asberry that was published in the Tacoma Daily Ledger in 1916 at thenewtribune.com

The two people who in Walton's opinion saved the members of the black student union were professors who intervened. Later that day the university's president met with the students, and the union became an official campus group.

About 1970, Walton was hired as the executive director of the city's Human Relations Department.

Joining government wasn't something he wanted to do, he said. Leaders within the black community, including his pastor, Brazill, persuaded him to seek change from inside the system, when he had the chance.

"It was very scary," he said of taking the position. "I had built up an unhealthy disrespect and anger against government service, because government had been used to deny us rights and services."

He went on to become city manager in 2003.

Public service, he said, was the only way to accomplish things such as affirmative action within the city's hiring practices, and contract compliance, designed to open up city jobs and contracts to minorities.

"It was a godsend that I took the chance that change could be made from the inside, because in my opinion, the core things we were working on, that's the only way you could do it," Walton said. "From the outside, they almost just wait you out. Nothing happens."

That progress hasn't been without backward motion at times, said executive committee member Quasim.

He remembers the July 20, 1993, pipe bombing of the NAACP offices on the

Hilltop.

"I grew up in Chicago, I've seen a lot of harm occur, and I did not think that would occur in Tacoma," Quasim said. "I thought we would not have that kind of activity in this community. It makes you feel, for a moment, at least, that the things that you have struggled so hard for just took a tremendous step backward."

The FBI said the perpetrators had a plan to "commit racially directed bombings and murders" in Washington and elsewhere, according to court records. Three people were convicted.

THE NEXT 100 YEARS

The Tacoma chapter's leaders say its priorities today are to seek equality in education, voting rights and to fight racial profiling by law enforcement.

"We have come a long ways, and I'm proud of the way we've done it," Moss said. But then he cites the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision that invalidated parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965:

"I will fight to the end to not go back to those days," he said. "Where we are now is at a really awkward place, because youngsters have no idea of how cruel and how indifferent we can be to one another. They don't think this will ever happen again, but it can."

The court's decision lets nine states in the South change election laws without prior federal approval, which some say still is needed to protect voting rights in the region and others say guards against discrimination that no longer exists.

Quasim said the Tacoma chapter is focused on social justice, education and economic development as it has been throughout its history of fighting discrimination.

"The issue is persistence, it's longevity, it's the ability in the cold and the dark in the night when nobody is looking to stay the course," Quasim said. "The biggest strength of the NAACP is that we've been here for 100 years, and we're not going away."