



FORGOTTEN COLOR

Black Families in Early El Paso

by Charlotte Ivy

Editor's Note: Password is pleased to present the following article in celebration of Black History Month 1990.

Founded as Negro History Week in 1926 by historian Carter Woodson for the purpose of publicizing the contributions by blacks to United States society, the celebration was originally held during the second week in February, this week selected because it coincides with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln, February 12, and Frederick Douglass, February 14.

By 1980, the entire month of February was being declared Black History Month so as to accommodate the many programs offered in commemoration of the black citizenry's achievements.

IN THE MIDDLE DECADES OF THE NINETEENTH century, the pioneers of the far Southwest were trying to tame a desert land. The early Anglo pioneer families of Hart, Magoffin, and Stephenson were joined by the Woods, the Hendersons, and the Smiths. All came to build a life in the wilderness. For families like the Hendersons and the Woods and the Smiths, what they were able to accomplish depended not so much on how hard they worked or even on Lady Luck, but on the color of their skin. These families and others they would later welcome were black. Sharing the dreams and hopes of all those in the area, they put their roots down in El Paso. They were

determined to live in a civilized land and to make the most of the opportunities offered by the budding border town.

John Woods settled at the Pass of the North during the Civil War, and shortly after the War ended he married Mary Velar, an ex-slave from Missouri. By 1869 the Woods were beginning to prosper; they owned a saloon, a boarding house, a blacksmith shop located on the town square, horses, a buggy, and an ambulance service.¹ During the year 1880 Woods was employed briefly by the city, having been appointed on August 3 by the aldermen as assistant to the new marshal, John B. Tays. Woods and Tays were not salaried employees; they derived their income for their public service from fees collected from individuals arrested. On October 12, following a dispute with the City Council over maintenance of the city streets, both men were relieved of their offices.² Woods was an enterprising and able man who invested his time in many occupations. He was able to accrue a sizeable estate which he left to Mary at the time of his death in 1898. Mary in turn proved to be an excellent businesswoman. When she died sixteen years later, her estate was worth an estimated \$160,000.³

Joseph J. Smith, another of the early black pioneers, and his family had established themselves in El Paso by 1883. Their home was located at the corner of St. Louis (present-day Mills) and Stanton Streets, and Smith was employed by Hill and Palmer,⁴ a wool, hide, and skin company.

William Alexander Henderson arrived in the El Paso area as a guide for the United States Army during the Indian Wars. He was discharged in 1878 and took a job as guard for the Pony Express. He later worked as a brickmaker.⁵ He acquired several pieces of property, one of which is today occupied by Thomason General Hospital, and another by the Union Depot.⁶ In 1895 he left for a brief visit to Wharton, Texas, and returned with his bride, nee Lucinda Godfrey. They lived in a home that Henderson had built near the present Union Depot.⁶ Of their children, only their daughter, Blanche Ethel, grew to maturity. In 1896 Henderson joined the Second Baptist Church at the request of his wife and was baptized in the Rio Grande. He served his church as deacon and served his community through the local Masonic Lodge. In later years blacks were prohibited from participating in Lodge activities, but Henderson, a 33rd-degree Mason, faithfully paid his dues until his death in 1935.⁷

The Hendersons, the Smiths, and the Woods were not the only blacks

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to settle at the Pass in those early years. Among others who were drawn to the border town was James Willis Shanklin, a young man from Wichita, Kansas. In 1886, he read newspaper accounts of an impending war between the two El Pasos over the imprisonment of a newspaperman named A. K. Cutting.⁸ He promptly set out for the border to help capture El Paso del Norte; by the time he reached the Pass, the two cities had made their peace. Still looking for adventure, Shanklin joined the army and served until 1892. After his discharge, he returned to El Paso and took a job at the federal building. In 1899 he was appointed mail carrier No. 5 and was assigned to the section of town referred to as the Second Ward. Shanklin retired from the postal service in 1930 after having delivered the mail to the Second Ward for thirty-one years.⁹ Other black pioneers in El Paso worked as servants, barbers, porters, cooks, and laborers.¹⁰

In May, 1881, four railroad companies were laying track and making their way toward El Paso. The first train to reach El Paso was the Southern Pacific, which rolled into town ahead of the Texas and Pacific, winning a much-publicized race between the two companies. Soon these two lines were joined by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and by the Mexican Central Railroad. These railroads meant a new prosperity for all El Pasoans and a greater job variety for black El Pasoans.

As the town grew into an important transportation center, many black families came to El Paso as railroad employees. On the trains they worked as day-coach porters, dining-car waiters, chefs, and sleeping-car porters. The day-coach porters made the shorter 300-mile runs to Tucson, to Albuquerque, and to Sanderson. The Pullman porters worked the longer runs to California, theirs being the most prestigious of all the jobs on the trains. Their nighttime duty was taken in shifts, usually three at a time sleeping in quarters near the sleeping passengers.¹¹ Black porters functioned also as brakemen, jumping off the trains to switch tracks and to help direct the flow of traffic.¹² The hours were long and hard. The men assigned to the California run worked a 240-hour month with no days off.

In the rail yard, men were employed as yard laborers, car repairmen and cleaners, boilermakers and cleaners, and locomotive inspectors, the boilermaker holding the most respected job in the yard. El Pasoan John Best, a boilermaker employed by the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Line, invented a tool that allowed the boiler to be cleaned from a safe distance, thus protecting the workers from being burned by the hot liquids pouring out of the boilers.¹³ The flushing commode for trains was invented by another black El Pasoan, Charles Moore, a concerned passen-

ger who wanted to improve sanitary conditions on the trains.¹⁴

The railroad was a popular means of travel for all El Pasoans. For the black traveler in the South, there was a special coach called the "Jim Crow" car which was supposed to provide separate but equal accommodations.¹⁵ This car was often situated behind the coal car, closest of all the coaches to the engine. The "Jim Crow" car was a day coach with no sleeping facilities for the passengers. Black travelers, having no dining car of their own, were usually allowed to go to the dining car to eat in a section that was separated from the other diners by a curtain. However, most black travelers took their own picnic lunches and stayed in their coach.

Western states had no laws designating separate seating arrangements and no "Jim Crow" coach.¹⁶ El Paso was a hub for the change to the "Jim Crow" coach for eastbound passengers heading into the South. El Pasoan Ruth King recalls that her father would go to Las Cruces, New Mexico, to purchase tickets for the family in order to avoid having to purchase "Jim Crow" tickets.¹⁷

"Jim Crowism," as practiced in El Paso in those decades, meant that black El Pasoans were not allowed to enter the socio-political-cultural mainstream of the city. As a consequence, they determined to "cast down their buckets"¹⁸ where they could and to make a world of their own.

The formation of a church community was a major concern to the black pioneers. The first denomination established was the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church shepherded by the Reverend Thomas Grigsby. It had been holding services for sometime when the Reverend E. M. Griggs, a Baptist missionary from Dallas, arrived in 1884. He found fifteen of the twenty-five black El Pasoans in attendance at the services, and a poll showed that five of these fifteen were Baptists. The congregation was then divided into two denominations. Reverend Mr. Grigsby established the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Mr. Griggs established the Second Baptist Church. The A. M. E. congregation met in the home of Joseph J. Smith until 1888,¹⁹ when the congregation moved into an abandoned blacksmith shop at Oregon and Main.²⁰ This was probably the shop formerly owned and operated by John Woods.

Grigsby continued as pastor and was also employed as a janitor for the El Paso National Bank. From the blacksmith shop the congregation moved to the second floor of an old fire department building. In 1900 the group was able to purchase a lot and construct an adobe building on South Florence Street which it named Visitors' Chapel. The trustees of the church included Joseph J. Smith and a Dr. Lewis, El Paso's only black

doctor at the time.²¹

The Second Baptist Church was organized with the guidance of the Reverend Mr. Griggs. The tiny congregation met in a small rented room on South Stanton between San Antonio and Overland. Mr. Griggs, whose job was completed upon establishment of the church, appointed Calvin Neal as temporary pastor. Mr. Neal's congregation consisted of Joe Pollard and his wife, Thomas Gaines, and George B. Duval. Gaines was employed as a janitor at the County Court House; Pollard was a porter for the Mexican railroad; Duval, who was employed at the time by The Austin House, later became the janitor for the Franklin Public School for blacks, which was built on property Duval had previously owned.²²

As in other communities in Texas, these churches were more than religious organizations. They became an important part of the everyday life of blacks, both men and women. It was to the church in particular that the black men turned in great numbers as they realized that they were to be denied political voice in the world at large.²³ In the memories of those reared in El Paso, the church was central to their lives.²⁴

In addition to the churches, the black men of El Paso formed benevolent associations. The first in the community was the Myrtle Lodge No. 10, Knights of Pythias. Organized by James Walker, porter at the Gem Saloon, and A. E. Graham, porter for the El Paso National Bank,²⁵ this lodge was a branch of a statewide organization which had been founded to provide "relief funds," a kind of insurance policy that paid a death benefit to the deceased's family.²⁶ The Sunset Lodge Number 76, Free and Accepted Masons (Prince Hall Affiliation), was organized by H. J. Daniels in the early part of 1892. Its purpose was also to serve as a relief agency and a charitable institution.²⁷ H. J. Daniels may have been the legendary Dan Daniels, a businessman who owned a hotel, a taxicab company, and a Chinese restaurant located in the Second Ward. Descendants of pioneer black El Pasoans recall their forebears' stories about the generosity of Dan Daniels, who was occasionally referred to as the "Second Ward's Godfather."²⁸ Lodges such as the Myrtle Lodge and the Sunset Lodge were common throughout Texas and the South and provided, along with the churches, a forum for leadership among the black population.²⁹

While laying the foundations of their religious and social community, black El Pasoans also began to work for the formation of a school for their children. In March, 1883, the year the white community opened the doors of its first public school, the blacks established Franklin School, under the leadership of Andrew Morelock, which met in the home of Joseph Smith.³⁰ At the beginning of the school term 1885-86, Professor Morelock moved

with 16 of the 23 black school-age pupils in El Paso to a church building on Seventh Street. His salary of fifty dollars per month was paid by the city. The seven other teachers employed by the city that year were paid seventy-five dollars per month.³¹ By 1889, the school, renamed Douglass in honor of Frederick Douglass, had been adopted into the city's school system, and a four-room structure for the black pupils was built at the corner of Fourth Street and Kansas. Alfred C. Murphy was the newly appointed principal. It was a difficult year for the students and for Mr. Murphy; the school board did not recognize any of the previous classes taken by the older students and required that all of the students begin their learning at the primary levels. The children were forced to comply, but in May, 1889, when the closing ceremonies were held at the County Courthouse, there was a feeling of optimism and joy for what had been accomplished both for and by the children.³²

By the end of the nineteenth century, El Paso's black citizens had built for themselves a community in which to worship, to learn, and to promote fellowship and benevolence. Some of these citizens were employed in skilled or semi-skilled railroad jobs, but most of them continued to be relegated to menial work, either in the railroad industry or in the community at large.³³ John Woods, in service as assistant marshal, had been a brief exception to the rule. There was also another exception. His name was Henry O. Flipper.

Flipper had spent his boyhood in Atlanta, Georgia, and graduated from The United States Military Academy at West Point in 1877 with a degree in civil engineering. He was the first black to graduate from the Academy and the first black United States Army officer. His initial assignment was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where he completed a ditch that drained water off a breeding area for mosquitoes, providing relief in the fight to contain a severe outbreak of malaria. It is still referred to as "Flipper's Ditch."³⁴ In 1881 Flipper was assigned to the frontier post at Fort Davis, Texas. While on duty there, he was accused by his commanding officer of mismanagement of funds and was imprisoned at Fort Quitman. It is likely that Flipper had been careless with funds; but when the discrepancy was found, he had immediately replaced the missing money. After eight months in prison, Flipper was dismissed from the army for "conduct unbecoming an officer." He walked out of Fort Quitman a civilian, leaving behind an army career which had been his goal since his boyhood.

From Fort Quitman, Flipper went directly to El Paso in June, 1883, and began to work for the A. B. Greene Mining Company. He was first hired to find the lost mine of Tayopa. Later he spent most of his time

surveying south of the border, but also surveyed as far west as Douglas, Arizona. In 1908 he was employed by Albert B. Fall as a consultant for the Sierra Mining Company in Chihuahua, Mexico. In 1912 he was permanently assigned to the El Paso area and began to make frequent journeys to Washington, D. C., to report to the Justice Department on the political situation in Mexico. He left El Paso for good in 1919 when he took a position as interpreter and translator for Albert Fall, who had been elected to the United States Senate from New Mexico. In 1929 he was appointed assistant to the Secretary of the Interior.

Flipper was the first American black to gain prominence in the field of engineering. He also had many other interests and talents. He was a lover of history and contributed several articles to the *El Paso Herald*, as well as to out-of-state newspapers; and while he was in the Douglas, Arizona, area he had served briefly as the editor of an establishment newspaper.³⁵ He was a well educated and respected addition to the small black community in El Paso during the turn-of-the-century decades.

As in other parts of the state, El Paso's black professionals were primarily the ministers and the teachers. Businessmen in the area were few, perhaps only four;³⁶ but that was a disproportionate share of the 159 black businesses that existed in Texas at that time.³⁷ In El Paso the four businessmen were Texas John Clemons, who operated a barber shop in the Orndorff Hotel; Christopher Shelton, who owned a furniture store at 116 South Oregon; Charles W. Morrow, who owned a barber shop; and Mary Woods, the widow of John, who continued to furnish rooms and run long-term leases on her extensive property holdings.³⁸

The railroad was the hub of many black families' lives. As the families moved out of the Second Ward, they located their homes along the source of their livelihood. Their neighborhoods, which spread eastward along the tracks, were not segregated, nor were there any ordinances which designated all-black areas in the city. Blacks, Mexicans, a few Anglos, and Chinese lived side by side down by the railroad tracks. In the mornings, though, when the black children walked to school with their friends, they knew that there was a difference between them and their neighbors. They passed one segregated school and then another, dropping off playmates along the way. But after school, they all met again to share the fun and secrets of the neighborhood.³⁹

The school for black children had begun with an enrollment of seven pupils in 1883; by 1900 enrollment was eighty-seven, and by 1909 it had reached 260.⁴⁰ William Coleman arrived that year from a job as assistant principal of a Ft. Worth high school to take the position of principal at

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Douglass. One of this first concerns was with the inadequate facilities.

The school children were still meeting in the original four-room structure that had been built in 1886. Professor Coleman was able to obtain money from the school board to construct another four rooms, one of which contained a small laboratory. Graduation exercises were often held at a downtown theater or occasionally at the Myar Opera House. It was customary for a minister to deliver the graduation address, but at the exercises in 1916 a play entitled "The Pennant" was presented at the Texas Grand Theater by the graduating seniors. Following the play the El Paso School Superintendent, R. J. Tighe, delivered the graduation address, and E. M. Whitaker, President of the School Board, presented the diplomas.⁴¹ While Professor Coleman was principal, the school began to field teams in baseball, football, and volleyball. The Douglass teams competed with the Mexican schools in El Paso and in the outlying areas, as well as with other black schools which were within traveling distance.⁴² Their uniforms were those discarded by the white schools of the city. The situation with the schoolbooks was the same. The children were always learning with cast-off tools.⁴³

The location of the school became a problem as the black community began to move away from the downtown area. The Second Ward was a



Douglass School and its pupils, 1909. (Photo courtesy Southwest Collection, El Paso Public Library)

far walk for many of the pupils. No transportation was provided, and on inclement days the children had to spend a nickel to ride the trolley to and from school. Finally, after ten years of exercising his persuasive powers, Professor Coleman convinced the school board to move the school to a new location. In 1920, a new building on Eucalyptus Street opened its doors to the excited children. Although the school was next door to a foundry, it was closer to the pupil's homes. The foundry cooperated by adjusting its stacks so that the children were not engulfed in smoke. The new Douglass School was "modern in every respect." It had ten rooms, one of which was an auditorium complete with a "moving picture machine" that had been purchased from a railroad company in Kansas. Films were borrowed from the State Education office in Austin and were the financial responsibility of the principal if damaged.⁴⁴

Douglass School continued to be a source of pride for the black community. Its early principals—A. C. Murphy, William Coleman, W. O. Bundy, and Olalee McCall—had provided the children with high standards and high ideals. Many of the Douglass graduates continued their education, earning bachelor's and master's degrees. Some returned to teach at the school in later years. Blanche Henderson, daughter of one of the early pioneers, completed her education, returned to Douglass, and taught there for twelve years.

In addition to the teachers and the ministers, there were also a few black doctors, pharmacists, dentists and nurses. Two black women, referred to as nurses, had been in the area since the 1880s. The memoirs of early-day El Pasoan Mrs. Hugh S. White mention "two fine Negro nurses, Eliza Grigsby and Amanda Quarles, who...had no training," but who were tireless in helping the sick in the community along with "a few horse and buggy doctors."⁴⁵ Dr. Lewis and Dr. L. A. Nixon were El Paso's first black physicians. Dr. Lewis was one of the early pioneers; Dr. Nixon arrived in 1908⁴⁶ from Cameron, Texas, and established a practice which lasted almost sixty years.⁴⁷ Dr. Nixon purchased a house at 2031 Myrtle Avenue which served as his home and office. It was also the location of Dr. M. C. Donnell's drugstore and soda fountain. Dr. Donnell was a graduate of Douglass School, and he had returned to El Paso after his graduation from Northwestern University. He was very successful and operated two drugstores until he left the area in the 1940s.⁴⁸ Another of the early physicians was Dr. Vernon Collins, Sr., a 1913 Douglass School graduate who returned to El Paso after training at Howard University Medical School. His son Vernon Collins, Jr. was a later Douglass School graduate who also became a physician.⁴⁹

In 1910 there were 1562 blacks in the El Paso area;⁵⁰ in 1920 only 1330; and in 1930, 1855.⁵¹ From within this small population came significant political activity and interest in civil rights. The community's first political leader was L. W. Washington, who had received a degree from Alcorn A. & M. College, Alcorn, Mississippi. For a time he had worked as a school teacher, but later he took a position with the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service; in 1910 he was assigned to the office in El Paso. Washington promptly discovered that black people were not welcome in the library or in any of the city parks, including the Plaza park, which was located directly across from his office. It was with these issues that he began his career in behalf of civil rights in El Paso. Shortly after his arrival, he helped to found the El Paso branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and he served as its president for many years.⁵²

An example of L. W. Washington's dedicated service to the cause of civil rights was the encouragement and tireless support which he gave to Dr. L. A. Nixon. In July, 1924, Dr. Nixon challenged one of the rules of the white community: the all-white Democratic Primary.⁵³ With the backing of the NAACP, Dr. Nixon took the case to the United States Supreme Court, which eventually ruled the all-white primary unconstitutional. This action did not immediately result in blacks being allowed to vote, for the white establishment instituted other means to deny blacks that right in the primary elections. It was, however, an important proceeding that finally resulted in unrestricted vote for Texas blacks, and it had been initiated in El Paso's small black community.

Black families came to El Paso, built homes and a school, held jobs in various fields, and worked for their rights. In the opinion of many descendants of El Paso's black pioneers, it was a good place to call home—perhaps because the Chinese, the Mexican, and the Lebanese contributed an international flavor to the community and diluted prejudice. Color and culture differences, these descendants attest, were a way of life in the border town at the Pass. The proximity of Juarez may have been another positive social factor. Blacks, denied the opportunity to entertain in fashionable El Paso restaurants, were always able to take their friends across the river, where dining establishments in Juarez encouraged their patronage. Also, El Paso was a gateway to the West. For the black people it was where the "Jim Crow" coach disappeared and where forty miles to the west a college education was a possibility. Many of the Douglass teachers made the trip in the afternoons to the college at Las Cruces to

work on advanced degrees.⁵⁴ This educational opportunity may help to account for the high literacy rate of El Paso blacks as compared with that of other Texas cities. In 1920, blacks in Austin experienced an illiteracy rate of 11.5 percent; those in Dallas were recorded at 12.5 percent rate of illiteracy; San Antonio blacks were recorded at 7.5 percent. El Paso's illiteracy rate for blacks was only four percent.⁵⁵

In El Paso the lines of segregation were not always strictly enforced—a few examples will illustrate. Mrs. Bruce Taylor remembers vividly an incident that happened many years ago. She had gone into the drugstore across the street from the post office, where her husband worked, to order take-out ice cream. She was mistakenly given a place-setting and a menu; she was so taken by surprise that she ordered and ate while her husband waited outside the store. It was an opportunity she was not about to pass up and one which did not cause a scene in the drugstore.⁵⁶ Viola Strait remembers days when she met her father at the San Jacinto Plaza and went with him to the segregated library, never experiencing unpleasantness there.⁵⁷ Further evidence of the relaxed attitudes toward blacks in El Paso is reflected in the fact that some state laws were often ignored, especially those concerning mixed marriages. Early attempts to control the area's



L. W. Washington, left, with his daughter (Viola), his wife, and his son (LeRoy, Jr.), as the family posed for a snapshot c. 1935. (Photo courtesy Viola Strait and Dr. Sara Watley-Beal)

marital relationships were thrown out of court.⁵⁸

However, black El Pasoans did experience discrimination and segregation.⁵⁹ At the train station, there were signs that designated separate waiting areas, separate drinking fountains, and separate restroom facilities. The school, as has been pointed out, lacked modern equipment and current materials for its students. Further, Douglass teachers were sometimes paid less than the other teachers in the El Paso School System. For example, on June 1, 1932, Blanche Henderson Grundy signed a contract for the coming scholastic year which required her to accept a 25 percent reduction because she was black. She earned \$625 for the 1932-1933 year.⁶⁰ The Ku Klux Klan tried for a brief time in the 1920s to establish its organization in the city, but its efforts were defeated. It should be noted that at the height of the Klan's activity in the area, Catholics and Mexicans were the focus of its interest, not the blacks.⁶¹

On the whole, black El Pasoans were "happy with the balance" they found in a town in the South which was not Southern.⁶² El Paso resident Leona Washington states that she always had the feeling that El Paso was only waiting for the laws to be changed. There was no one who would fight to keep the signs in place and the laws in force. The law would be repealed, and "that would be that. It would be easy." It very nearly was.

Blacks had come to a desert land and they had stayed. They had made a home, a place where they could rear their children and where life could be lived in relative safety—important considerations in the turn-of-the-century decades. The names and accomplishments of these black people have largely been ignored in the recorded history of El Paso. But let it be emphasized that their presence on the far frontier of Texas helped to shape and build a thriving, multi-racial community.☆

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was initiated in 1985, and in December of that year its original version was submitted to Dr. David Hackett in partial fulfillment of the requirements of History 3410 at The University of Texas at El Paso.

A large part of my research for the article consisted of interviews with El Pasoans who are either natives of the area or who came to the El Paso region in the early 1920s. I gratefully acknowledge all of those people who were so gracious and helpful, not only by giving me their time for interviews, but also by giving me leads and ideas: **Grant Berry, Bea Bragg, Sara Watley-Beal, Giles Bundy Grimes, Frances Hills, Ruth Nash Kling, Bruce Mathis, Ralph Smith, Viola Strait, and Bruce and Lula Mae Traylor.** I am deeply grateful to **Leona Washington.** From the beginning of my research, she encouraged my efforts, and for several months she withstood many telephone calls to help me learn the facts. I owe a special debt to **Rebecca Craver** of the University's Oral History Institute. She helped to make the interviews successful and assisted me in locating pertinent material in the Institute's library.

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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

1. A. Title of publication: *Password*
B. Publication No. 931760
2. Date of filing: October 3, 1988
3. Frequency of issue: Quarterly
A. No. of issues published annually: 4
B. Annual subscription price: w/\$20 membership
4. Location of publication: 603 W. Yandell, El Paso, TX 79902
5. Location of headquarters of publisher: 5159 Sterling Place, El Paso, TX 79932
6. Publisher: El Paso County Historical Society, 603 W. Yandell, El Paso, TX 79902; Managing Editor: N/A
7. Owner: El Paso County Historical Society
8. Known bondholders, mortgages, etc.: none
9. The purpose, function, and non-profit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal Income Tax purposes have not changed during the preceeding 12 months.
10. Extent and nature of circulation:
A. Total no. copies printed: average no. copies each issue preceeding 12 months, 950; actual no. copies of issue published nearest to filing date, 1,000
- B. Paid Circulation
1. Sales through dealers, carriers, etc.: average, none; nearest filing date, none
2. Mail subscriptions: average no. copies preceeding 12 months, 858; issue preceeding filing, 901
- C. Total paid circulation: same as B/2
- D. Free distribution by mail, carrier, etc.: average preceeding 12 months, 57; issue nearest to filing, 60
- E. Total distribution: average no. copies preceeding 12 months, 915; issue nearest to filing, 961
- F. Copies not distributed
1. Office use, left over, unaccounted for, spoiled after printing: average no. copies preceeding 12 months, 35; issue nearest filing, 39
2. Return from new agents: none
- G. Total: average preceeding 12 months, 950; issue nearest to filing, 1,000
11. I certify that the statements made above are correct and complete.

Lillian Collingwood, Editor