

On Being African-American in Iowa

By Patricia Diggins

"Cora Unashamed" by Langston Hughes is set in rural Iowa in the early 1900's. Cora, her mother, and her daughter are the only African-Americans in the small farming community of Melton. They support themselves by washing and ironing clothes and cooking and cleaning for more affluent white families. The peace and rich beauty of the Iowa countryside portrayed in the film contrasts sharply with the sometimes bleak existence of Cora and her family. The viewer never discovers the initial reason why the family settled in this white farming community but quickly realizes just how isolated the family must often feel. Why did African-American families settle in Iowa where they were a definite minority?

In the 1800s only a very small percentage of Iowa's population was African-American. Iowa entered the Union in 1846 and quickly allied itself with the "free" states in the escalating tension of the pre-Civil War years. Although Iowa had its own "Black Codes", many citizens were fierce abolitionists who helped to establish an Underground Railroad in the state. Both Quaker and Presbyterian religious groups were involved as "conductors" in the Underground Railroad movement. Although they realized they were breaking laws established by the Fugitive Slave Act, abolitionists felt they were following "God's" law by helping runaway slaves. One such abolitionist was Reverend John Todd of Tabor, a southwest Iowa community located in close proximity to the Missouri River. Slaves from the deep South or nearby Missouri were often hidden in his house and then transported by wagon across the state to the Mississippi River. Other stations along the way included the towns of Lewis, Des Moines, Winterset, Earlham, Grinnell, Salem, Low Moor and Springdale. James C. Jordan of Des Moines was another famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. At least twice, the famous abolitionist John Brown stayed at his home. John Brown also stored ammunition at Reverend Todd's house in Tabor.

After the Civil War more African-Americans came to Iowa to farm, to work in Iowa cities or in southern Iowa coal mines. Around 1900 in the coal camp of Buxton, Iowa, African-American workers outnumbered white miners. After the mine closed down, many moved to cities such as Waterloo, Des Moines, and Cedar Rapids. The rapidly expanding meat-packing industry attracted many workers to the larger Iowa cities. Job opportunities, however, for Iowa's African-American population continued to be limited.

As in the rest of the United States, the move towards equal rights and integration in Iowa was a slow, sometimes painful process. In 1868, African-American men were given the right to vote and by 1875, schools in Iowa were integrated. In the late 1800's, George Washington Carver, a famous African-American botanist and chemist, attended Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa and Iowa State University in Ames. He later went on to do research and teaching at Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington. In recent years Iowa has made a point of recognizing the many contributions of its African-American citizens. At least three communities are currently planning or constructing museums honoring these citizens. Waterloo, Iowa, plans to build a museum that explores how and why African-Americans came to its city. A Des Moines museum will be constructed at Fort Des Moines, which was the only U.S. Army training base in the nation for African-American officers during World War II. The city of Cedar Rapids has begun construction on an African-American Historical Museum and Cultural Center of Iowa. In 1989 the Iowa Commission on the Status of African-Americans was established by the Iowa Legislature. It seeks to establish and maintain a positive climate for Iowa's African-American citizens.

We don't know when or why Cora's family came to live in Melton, Iowa. We can only try to understand and appreciate what it meant for them to be the only African-Americans in the community. Why did they continue to stay there and face the isolation? Perhaps like many pioneering people, they found it hard to leave the spot where they'd laid their loved ones to rest. Or perhaps despite the loneliness, they created for themselves an oasis of peace in an often troubled, segregated land.

This essay was submitted by Patricia Diggins, an English teacher at Logan-Magnolia High School, in Logan, Iowa.

Suggested Activity

Introduction

There are times in life that we might all feel isolated from others. As the only African-Americans in small town Iowa, Cora and her family lived with isolation on a daily basis. The word "isolate" comes from the Latin "insula" which roughly means "island". Do you ever feel like an island set apart from others? Do you think there might be people around you who might have reasons to feel set apart?

Brainstorming Activity

Have the class brainstorm to come up with ideas of how people among them in their community or school might have felt or still do feel isolated. How does color or culture often set people apart? In both multi-cultural or homogeneous communities, there are other conditions that may make people feel alone.

Examples

- female coach in a cadre of male coaches
- resource (special education) student being mainstreamed for the first time
- female student in automotive class
- the only Muslim(Hindu, Sikh, etc.) student in school or family in community
- gay or lesbian student who has outed
- a blind or hearing impaired student wanting to take part in extra-curricular activities

Project Suggestion

In pairs, students should look to their communities and the society at large to research organizations that try to bring people together. They can interview individuals who, through their actions have become role models for "crossing the lines" of differences, and embracing and celebrating them while also finding common ground. Students can research organizations that also attempt to bring people together.

Formats for presenting the information can vary:

- Audio or video taped interviews
- Mock interviews with one student representing the interviewer and the other portraying the person they actually did interview.
- Panel discussions
- Written reports
- Inviting individuals into class as guest speakers