

## **I Remember When....Growing up in the Inkwell**

*By James Bell, 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue*

My family arrived in Seattle in the 40's from New Orleans. My father came first, living in Bremerton and working at Bethlehem Steel. He soon sent for my mother and me and before long my mother gave birth to my brother Charles, then my brother Louie, and a couple of years later our sister Carol. Around 1948 our family moved into the High Point housing projects in Seattle. But we didn't stay there long because my folks soon bought a house in the Central Area.

The Central Area or "The Inkwell," as we called our neighborhood, was as diverse a community as you could find in Seattle in those days. My next-door neighbors to the south were Jewish. I remember going with my Jewish friend Michael to another class he had to attend after we'd already spent all day at school at Madrona Elementary. It was rather strange to me because the book was read from back to front, as I recall. Our neighbors to the north and across the street were white and of no particular ethnicity. In between we had Filipino and Asian neighbors. It was there on 29th Avenue and Spring Street that my brothers, sister and I were raised.

Nobody in the neighborhood wanted for food and you could get any food commodity you wanted right there. Bread came from one of the bakeries on Cherry or Union streets and vegetables from the gardens that most everybody had in their yard somewhere. In those days people hunted on Whidbey Island, Skagit Flats, and the White and Blue Mountains and fished all along Lake Washington and at all the other lakes. My favorite was Moses Lake in central Washington. I cleaned and ate so much rabbit and deer meat that I thought there was none left in the woods. In hunting and fishing seasons we sold or traded all kinds of wild game and still had a full freezer.

The cobbler on Cherry Street repaired our shoes until tennis shoes made him move to the U district to try and make a living. "You can't resole tennis shoes," he said, and after a couple of years he had to leave there too. Other black business thrived and some have managed to survive to this day. Dr. Larry's Ophthalmology office is still open on 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, as is a long-standing eatery on Martin Luther King and Cherry that is now

called Catfish Corner. Prior to the current incarnation it was named Soul Burger and it was the best burger place in town until a speeding car ran into the front of the business early one Sunday morning years ago.

Many newspapers and professionals served the Central Area community over the years. Two of the papers, the Medium and the Facts, continue to bring important issues to the attention of the Central Area with a focus on African Americans. Most of the pharmacists like the Jordans, or medical doctors and dentists who had Central Area offices have retired or moved on. The black teachers I knew, including Mrs. Lewis, the only African American teacher at Madrona, and the other educators who had to take legal action to be allowed to work in the Seattle school district, have moved on too.

The diverse racial makeup of the community remained until the early 60's when it started changing dramatically. The Jewish neighbors moved out, and leaving their religious structures and selling or leasing their businesses to the African Americans moving into the valley along Madison Street between 31<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> avenues. This period also saw an increase of Blacks in the Jackson area and soon the Central Area **was** the Black Community.

Today, those residents of the Inkwel would be pleased to see the many teachers, doctors, and lawyers who live and work in the Central Area community. In fact, some early African American residents of Madrona now spend time volunteering their professional services through the Central Area Senior Center in Leschi. Some even belong to the Black Heritage Society (BHS) of Washington, an organization dedicated to preserving the history of the contributions of African Americans. The BHS accomplishes its goal through its oral history project, a commitment to see a Black History Museum open in the former Coleman School, and an association with the Museum of History & Industry (*MOHAI*) to preserve and display artifacts of the first black settlers in Seattle. For more information about the Black Heritage Society, visit [www.blackheritagewa.org/](http://www.blackheritagewa.org/)

*James Bell is retired from the Department of Employment Security and president of the BHS. On February 11, the BHS presented "Speaking Out! Voices of Seattle's Black*

*Community” at MOHAI. The script was created from oral history interviews and performed by local African American luminaries.*