Growing Up African American in Wallowa County, Oregon

OREGON VOICES

by Pearl Alice Marsh

MY NAME IS Pearl Alice Marsh. I am a first-generation African American Oregonian, born in La Grande in 1946 to Amos Marsh, Sr., and Mary Patterson Marsh. They migrated from Louisiana and Arizona in 1939 to work in the timber industry in Wallowa County. ¹ I was raised and went to school in Wallowa until I was about twelve years old, when our family moved to Grass Valley, California, with my father’s employer. My parents were part of the first wave of millions of African Americans who left the Jim Crow South between about 1910 and 1970 in search of better economic opportunities and to flee draconian racial conditions. ² While great intellectual, social, and cultural revolutions such as the Harlem Renaissance were taking place during this period in American urban centers, African American life in northern rural communities was also changing.³ Black people who migrated to isolated areas such as Wallowa County constructed new communities based on their cultural heritage and informed by the emerging social and cultural renaissance in urban centers. Like it did for millions of other families, the move challenged my family to construct a community and family life in an unfamiliar environment in the interstices of two conflicting realities.⁴ On the one hand, Oregon offered needed work and freedom from the demeaning routines and life-threatening race hatred in Louisiana. On the other hand, Oregon had its own set of ongoing racial issues. While my parents celebrated living more freely than they had in Louisiana, they were clear-eyed about Oregon.

The Great Migration occurred in two phases — from about 1910 to 1940 and 1940 to about 1970 — with around six million African Americans migrating from the South.⁵ A majority of those migrants moved to industrial centers in the Northeast and Midwest, but some came West.⁶ My father was among African American timber and sawmill workers who arrived in the West with southern lumber companies to harvest and process Oregon’s rich forests. My parents settled in a company town name Maxville built by one of those companies, Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company. My family’s story is told here as part of the contentious history of Blacks in Oregon.

African Americans first arrived in Oregon along with European-American explorers and fur trappers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During the mid nineteenth century, when European-American migrants traveled west by the hundreds of thousands, the institution of slavery greatly restricted African Americans from leaving the southern United States.⁷ Black exclusion laws first enacted by the Oregon Provincial Government in 1844 and later enshrined in the Oregon State Constitution also heavily circumscribed African Americans’ migration to Oregon. Nevertheless, a small number of intrepid migrants came to Oregon. According to the 1870 U.S. Federal Census, 346 African Americans lived in Oregon. By 1920, that number had risen to 2,114, three-quarters of whom lived in Portland. By 1930, the population was 2,234, and by 1940, was 2,565.⁸ As attested by these decennial figures, the state of Oregon did not roll out a welcome mat.

Adventurous interstate travelers crossed into Oregon by rail, bus, and...
private cars, aided by a social network of other travelers and residents, both family and friends. Several publications guided them to safe accommodations as they sojourned from the South. In 1930, Edwin Hackley published the Hackley and Harrison’s Hotel and Apartment Guide for Colored Travelers. Three beauty parlors, a barber shop, a night club, a roadhouse, and a taxi company.10

In Oregon during the early to mid twentieth century, new arrivals found work in service and manufacturing industries, in railroad companies, and as laborers in local businesses and government agencies. Some were entrepreneurs, such as Portland’s Mary Adams, a fortune teller; Samuel Badgely, a blacksmith; barber shop owners Charles Adam and William Henderson; newspaper editor Edward Cannady; and caterer Blanche Brown. In 1920, one of Multnomah County’s deputy sheriffs was an African American, George B. Hardin, who worked at the county jail.11 Outside the city, African Americans’ skills as log cutters and sawmill workers were needed by employers in the timber industry.

The Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company owned a large sawmill purchased from Nibley-Mimnaugh Lumber Company.12 Bowman-Hicks sold the sawmill and its operations to J. Herbert Bate from New York in 1945.13 That was the year my parents and two brothers moved from Maxville to Wallowa so my oldest brother, Amos, Jr., could start school. Maxville closed in 1933 as an incorporated town, but workers and their families continued to live there until the mid 1940s. In 1945, Bowman-Hicks closed the remaining residential camp in Maxville and moved fifty-eight company houses to Wallowa. Most were sold and dismantled, but a few were set up in Wallowa in separate neat rows for African American and white workers.14 The houses for the small number of African Americans in Wallowa, including my family, were located across the railroad track from the sawmill yard, where stacks of planed lumber sat ready for shipment to building and construction projects across the country. Life in Wallowa was regulated by the sawmill whistle that blew five days a week, Monday through Friday, to signal for men to go to work, break for lunch, and knock off at the end of the day. Wallowa, however, was more than a “company town” by narrow definition, even though J. Herbert Bate Lumber Company dominated the local economy.15 Many folks in the surrounding valley worked in agriculture and cattle ranching. In
solidarity among the workers, and women bonded over challenging household conditions, making ends meet, and putting everyone’s wellbeing ahead of their own. Many African Americans lived briefly in Wallowa after moving from Maxville. My family stayed until 1958.

Life as an African American child growing up in rural Oregon was not perfect but, as Joseph Hilliard, Jr., whose family came to Wallowa County from Brookhaven, Mississippi, in the early 1940s recalls:

“We couldn’t complain about anything without hearing one tall tale after another about how much worse it was for them growing up down south. Thus, it was that we learned to count our blessings.”

In her memoir, Betty Reid Soskin, a San Francisco Bay Area resident who migrated from Louisiana, also recalled why African Americans left the South for better lives in the West:

“In Mississippi [an African American sharecropper] would have to step off the sidewalk when a white person was approaching and could be lynched for making eye contact with a white woman in a town.

The black person [migrated to the West Coast] with this huge expectation for a fuller life because those Pullman porters hadn’t been lying, things were better in the West.”

Were it not for the Great Migration, my childhood would have been spent along with my extended family in Jim Crow Louisiana. I imagine I would have learned to be deferential toward white people, diverting my eyes while saying “yes sir” and “no ma’am.” I would have been taught in a segregated school, might have played only with African American children, and attended an exclusively African American church. When going into town, I would have clung closely and quietly to my mother and stayed in my place. I would have learned the ways of dignified survival as a second-class person. But my parents moved, and I became a child of racial integration and opportunity in Wallowa, Oregon. Perhaps as a fortune of birth, I came of age during the Civil Rights Movement and, like my southern cousins, became part of our national battle for equality and justice in America. In this memoir, I recount the travails and triumphs of growing up as an African American girl in an isolated rural town and some of the challenges my family and I faced in our new home.

WALLOWA WAS MY HOME. It sat snuggled in a fertile valley below the imposing Wallowa Mountains. During the springtime, water from melted snow spilled down the mountains, channeled inside the banks of the Wallowa River and its tributaries, and provided water for the hay and alfalfa fields and millpond at J. Herbert Bate sawmill. The mountains still stand watch over the comings and goings of residents and visitors. My childhood memories of Wallowa are warm and delicious, a mixture of affection from family and friends and youthful interpretation of events through my own eyes. They also reflect hurtful encounters with racism, but thanks to family and friends, I recall my childhood with a deep sense of satisfaction and joy. These memories are part of a national story of growing up African American outside the Jim Crow South.

How does one grow up African American, or “Black,” with a strong sense of identity and self in an almost all-white sawmill town in mid-twentieth-century Oregon — a state with a century-old history of antipathy toward African Americans and other minorities? After all, biologically, I was born as just another human baby. Only when I exited my mother’s womb in America did I become “Black.” Had I been born in one of my ancestral African villages in Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Senegal, or Sierra Leone, I may never have become Black. I would have been Balanta, Fulani, Mende, Mandinka, or Yoruba — but not Black. But, I descend from West African slaves brought to the United States and sold as commodities by human traffickers in the 1700s.
Historical forces defined me primarily by the color of my skin and designated me Black, and I have been so all of my life. It became my parents’ job to shape my Blackness into a proud, African-American, little girl. Given our circumstances, they knew they could give it their best shot in a small, isolated town named Wallowa.

My parents, grandparents, and their friends worked hard to provide me with the material necessities in life. But they also understood that material striving alone would not shape the value of my identity and lead to me feel equal in a systemically racist nation. My parents knew I would need character and confidence to succeed in America and help others do the same. They were determined to instill pride in me and make my life and the lives of my siblings better than theirs had been.

As related in our oral traditions, my paternal family’s American journey began as enslaved people in Virginia and migrated through property sales to Georgia and Louisiana, where they were emancipated in 1865. When they were granted their freedom, my great-grandfather, Louis Marsh, Sr., was thirty-five years old, and his wife, Elizabeth Dunnaway, was sixteen. My mother’s enslaved ancestors came from North Carolina and Alabama, and they were sold to slave owners in Texas where they too, were emancipated in 1865. Tom Spears was forty-three years old, and his wife, Rosette Lyons, was forty-five. This involuntary migration over generations stripped my family of our original African ethnic identities, and in America, we became Black.

In 1937, they moved from McNary to Wade Siding, a railroad loading and storing camp along the Wallowa River in Wallowa County. The camp was situated below the supervisor’s house, which was located on a hill named Water Canyon. Wade Siding residents worked for the Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company. When my oldest brother reached school age in 1945, my parents moved to Wallowa, because there was no longer a school in Maxville. I was born one year later, the fourth of five children, at the Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande, about forty-eight miles away in neighboring Union County. I had beautiful, dark skin, the rich color of an eggplant.

We first lived uptown in Wallowa past Shorty McKenzie’s store. Other African Americans moving from Maxville found residences in and around the town. Then, Bowman-Hicks moved fifty-eight company-owned houses from Maxville, selling most and using some to recreate “colored” and “white” quarters for relocated company workers. I lived the first twelve years of my life, save several months, in Wallowa, a small sawmill and farm town in the Wallowa Valley.

My parents were born in Louisiana; my father in 1908 in rural Jackson Parish and my mother in 1913 in Alexandria, Rapides Parish. My father, the third oldest of eight children, grew up a poor young man. Although rich in land, his family could not make a good living on their eighty-acre farm in Jackson Parish, Louisiana, under Jim Crow laws. Daddy left the family farm during the early 1930s at the start of the Great Depression and migrated westward to Texas and then Arizona, where he could make a better living doing sawmill work. There, he met and married my mother in 1932, and in 1939, they moved to Maxville, Oregon.

In the 1920s, my maternal grandparents, Joseph Patterson (Papa) and Arie Spears Patterson (Grandma), migrated from Louisiana to McNary, Arizona, a Cady Lumber Company sawmill town. In 1937, they moved from McNary to Wade Siding, a railroad loading and storing camp along the Wallowa River in Wallowa County. The camp was situated below the supervisor’s house, which was located on a hill named Water Canyon. Wade Siding residents worked for the Bowman-Hicks Lumber Company. When my oldest brother reached school age in 1945, my parents moved to Wallowa, because there was no longer a school in Maxville. I was born one year later, the fourth of five children, at the Grande Ronde Hospital in La Grande, about forty-eight miles away in neighboring Union County. I had beautiful, dark skin, the rich color of an eggplant.

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Iowa Lake to honor their ancestors. After the multi-day celebration, they left, and we were back to the norm of being the only “colored people” in the county.

My parents refused to raise obsequious children in this small, white community in Oregon. Mama did the day-to-day parenting while Daddy was working in the woods. She was the nurturer, instructor, disciplinarian, and spiritual guide, and he was the provider and protector. Papa pampered us to great delight, while Grandma cooked favorite dishes such as chicken and dumplings, fresh breads, and baked goods. Our favorites were her peach cobbler and “heavy devil” pound cake with homemade jelly, instead of icing, slathered between layers. My grandparents also provided a retreat when Mama was looking to spank us. We would sit with Papa and sip sweetened sassafras tea while Mama stewed with irritation and finally calmed down.

Rural northeastern Oregon presented both challenges and opportunities for my parents and other African American logging families with roots in the South. They discovered they could navigate a more ambiguous racial terrain unfettered, day-to-day, by the ubiquitous shroud of racial hatred they had experienced in the South. My parents negotiated the white environment of Wallowa, a town of roughly 800 to 1,000 in the 1940s and 1950s, so my siblings and I could flourish as we grew into our essential selves. More often than not, their efforts were triumphant, aided by positive reinforcement and support from friends and neighbors, both African American and white. At times, however, this buffer was a battle against negative external forces.

I got my first real glimpse of the absurdity of racism from a very nice white lady who lived by Shorty McKenzie’s Grocery Store in Wallowa, on the truck route midway between our house and the school. When I walked home from school, she was friendly, always smiled, greeted me, and offered me treats. One day, I stopped to watch her weed a flower bed when she saw a Nez Perce man walk by. Her face gnarled into an ugly opposite of the nice visage I was used to, and her taut lips spewed venom about how much she hated Indians. I thought it odd that she could be so kind, generous, and nice to me, a little Black girl, and so violently hateful toward a man of my same color, though a different race.

My family’s interactions with white neighbors were shaped more by work, values, and faith than by hate and fear. My siblings and I went to local public schools, Wallowa Elementary and Wallowa High School. Mama was an active member of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and belonged to the Assembly of God Church, one of seven or eight churches in town. Since all of the congregations were white, the spirited “holy roller” service at the Assembly of God came closest to the charismatic style of her previous African American Baptist Church. I remember Mama getting mad one time at church when someone — believing they were being kind and theologically insightful — said that God was going to turn her and her family white when we got to heaven. Mama set that person straight, telling them that God made us just the way he wanted. With that, she set the whole church straight, too. Daddy, a trained union organizer and superior woodsman, was not intimidated by any bigotry he may have experienced in the workplace or in town.

Daddy found close friendships in the woods with the other workers, African American and white. During the winter months, on days when there was too much snow to cut logs, he hung out uptown with African American and white men at Earl Haney’s Pool Hall and Card Room. Earl was a white carpenter from West Virginia who had switched careers to work in the saw mills and in the pool hall as a card room operator. If you gave Earl five dollars for chips to gamble, he kept a dollar and gave you four dollars’ worth of chips back. To boost customer loyalty, Earl would go across the street to the liquor store, get a quart of beer, and pass it around the table.
We mostly encountered racially based offenses outside Wallowa. Once a white child in Safeway Grocery in Enterprise stared and started to say, “look, mama, a n—” before the embarrassed mother cupped his mouth and hustled him away. Another situation that hurt more was when white vacationing mothers forced their children out of the Wallowa Lake shallows onto the shore because we stuck our African American toes in the water. When we withdrew, Mama made us get back in the water and spoke loudly, “shame on them, not us.” I found childish pleasure in watching the white children cry. They just wanted to play in the water, too. These incidents amplified that I was different, enigmatically, and at times, painfully so. In spite of how egregious these incidents were, Mama and Daddy guided us and reinforced our self-worth with affection and care. My parents cultivated a fertile space where ideas of self and community were fostered, a space where our African American sense of self could thrive. Our self-confidence grew as our white friends, who were guided by a strong internal moral code, helped us test and overcome the injuries of prejudice. Our friendships fended against bigotry in the wider community.

Like immigrants from other countries, Daddy, Mama, and other transplanted Southern African Americans reconstructed their own ethnic social order and safe space. Kinship played an important part in community stability, since our community migration was built largely around extended families. Once a month on payday, Mama and Daddy drove us to the African American community in La Grande, where we would visit house-to-house and play in the streets with other kids. After dark, we piled in the car, exhausted from all the fun, and drove the forty-eight miles home to Wallowa. La Grande was residentially segregated and had a history of Ku Klux Klan activity, but the small African American community still thrived there. It had several lively African American churches, including Boyd Memorial Baptist Church (now known as Amazing Grace Fellowship) and the Church of God in Christ. Little Joe’s Café, owned by Joe and Atrice Hilliard, and a makeshift juke joint or two were places to hear African American music and get fish sandwiches on light bread with mustard and sweet tea. Men and women organized African American chapters of the Masons and Eastern Stars, secret fraternal organizations dedicated to group cohesion and civic obligations. La Grande had its saints and sinners; it had “race” men and women who exemplified excellence in the community as well as others less edifying to the race. The Torrences, Wilfongs, Hilliards, and Marshes and Pattersons over in Wallowa were some of the “race” people. Of course, there were others.

My parents made an intentional choice to live in the mostly white community of Wallowa instead of in La Grande’s rich texture of African American social and cultural life. Moving to La Grande meant my father would have to be away from home during the week to work in Wallowa, only returning on weekends. Mama did not trust “those rowdy, drinking Negroes” in La Grande and kept close watch over us when we visited. The fear of her children being raised with a part-time father and vulnerable to city riffraff sealed the decision to stay put. My parents were also well liked and respected in Wallowa. Mama and her friends visited one another’s homes, crocheted, quilted, patched work clothes, went fishing, and canned food together. Daddy would not go fishing — that was for women and old men — but went deer hunting in the fall. Like the other men in Wallowa, he and Papa slaughtered hogs in the fall to store in a rented freezer locker behind Shell’s Mercantile store.

We went to school and church with white people and were instructed that if anyone said or did something to us that was offensive or untoward, we were to report it to Mama immediately or, if we could, do something about it ourselves.
When I turned six and started the first grade, Mama sent me off to school with this instruction: “If someone calls you a nigger, don’t stop and think — ‘am I a nigger?’ No, pick up the first thing you see and hit them with it.” The first casualty of this lesson was my Sunday school friend who had known me from birth. After recess one day during rest period, my friend turned to me and shared something he had learned from some other kid: “Pearl,” he asked, wide-eyed and somewhat shocked, “did you know you are a nigger?” I leapt up, grabbed him, and with all of my might threw my friend under the table, horrifying our first-grade teacher, Ms. Hattie Fisher. When I explained to her what my Mama had told me, she listened, and then frowned at me and said, “Well, don’t do it again.” Mama and I were vindicated. Because of that instruction, I believe my parents understood the challenges of raising “colored” children in a white town. First, they laid claim to their own citizenship, self-worth, and self-empowerment, and then they empowered us. Our heritage was cultivated through Mama’s storytelling of African American life and heroes in far-off places, and she also played and sang jazz in the house and taught us how to dance the Charleston and the Lindy Hop. The Chicago Defender newspaper kept us up-to-date on the latest African American information. Our working-class home library included a complete set of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Bible, and many books and magazines that Mama bought through the mail, which we devoured quickly, particularly during the winter when below-freezing weather and long, dark nights kept us indoors. My mother was never without a story of a “colored” woman or man excelling in the world — such as educator Mary McLeod Bethune; abolitionists Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman; singers Billy Holiday, Lena Horne, and Mahalia Jackson; jazz musician Louis Armstrong; athletes Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson; African American Nationalist Marcus Garvey; and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

One of our favorite stories Mama told was about Ethiopia. According to her, God had blessed Ethiopia with all the riches and knowledge that a people could want and gave them dominion over everything. They grew arrogant with power, so God let them fall. But, there was redemption if they would find their way back to humility and grace. She taught us about Emperor Haile Selassie, a prominent figure in the country’s history, and always ended the story with: “And Ethiopia shall rise again!”

In spite of being happy most of the time, I was aware always of being physically different — my skin was dark, my hair was nappy, and my mama, daddy, brothers, sisters, and Papa were also dark, with nappy hair. Only Grandma was different — light brown skin and straight hair from her part-Irish ancestry. I enjoyed playing with my white friends and classmates, but I didn’t look like them. My mother was my sounding board for my race troubles. If I had a question, she had an answer. I would ask, “Mama, why is my skin black instead of white like my friends?” and she would answer, “you are black because God made you black. Black is the presence of all colors. And, God made all colors. White is the absence of color. You don’t want to be white.” Mama’s explanation was reinforced with a song I learned at Sunday school:

Jesus loves the little children; All the children of the world; Red and yellow, Black and white, They are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Somewhere out there, like the colored flowers in a nearby field, there were other little children whose skin was not absent of color, but colorful in their own right, I realized. And Jesus loved them — and me. And we were beautiful. That reasoning soothed my insecurities until the next time this vexing question crossed my mind.

I also found identity in my favorite children’s book Little Journeys into Storyland. Published in 1947 by the Seventh Day Adventists Church, it contained forty biographies with photographs of well-known African Americans. George Washington Carver, a botanist and inventor, was my favorite. I also loved Marian Anderson, an internationally renowned singer who in 1936 was invited by the Roosevelts to sing at the White House. In 1939, she was refused the opportunity to sing for the annual Howard University Music School concert after the Daughters of the Revolution denied Anderson access to Constitution Hall. Instead, she
was invited to sing to the nation at the Lincoln Memorial. This was a triumphal story repeated often by Mama.

I also found confirmation of my identity in a comic book feature. My older brother Amos, Jr., devoured comic books and shared them with all of his siblings. One of my favorite series was a backup feature, “Brothers of the Spear” in the Tarzan comic book. It was the story of two adopted brothers, one Black and one white, fighting, for their rightful thrones in Africa. Implausibly, the white brother was king of a lost white tribe. The Black prince affirmed my color, and the inter-racial friendship affirmed my real-life friendships. Their adventures entertained me and validated mixed-race camaraderie.

Although we were not spoiled, Mama used the rod sparingly. When we misbehaved, her preferred punishment was to give us “a talking to.” Those lectures were torture. We had to sit in contrition while she moralized about right and wrong and how we disappointed her, the gravest of all transgressions. Our breach of good behavior compelled a fleeting thought of preference for the switch on our behinds rather than the talk. Mama also raised us with instructive adages that simplified how we were to be in the world – yesteryear’s “tweets.” Our cultural training covered everything from posture to speech to attitude.

**“Don’t walk looking down; hold your head up.”**

**“Look people straight in the eye when you talk to them or they to you.”**

**“Say ‘yes’ and ‘no’; not ‘yes ma’am’ and ‘no sir’.”**

**“Keep your lips closed; don’t let your mouth hang open.”**

**“Whatever you want to do, you can do; and whatever you want to be, you can be.”**

“Only you can make yourself feel inferior.”

One of her favorites was a binary choice of being in the world:

“*You only can be one of two things — a credit to the Negro race or a disgrace to the race. There is no in-between.”*

Her most enduring advice had nothing to do with race, particularly, but responsibility:

“*When a task is once begun, Never leave it ’til it’s done; Be the task, great or small; Do it well or not at all.”*

The start of any project would invoke the recitation of this old adage. We very rarely left projects unfinished, although we may have fallen short on the “do it well” part.

I remember when Mama decided to try out for the lead of a play that the PTA decided to perform at our school. She had fond memories of starring in a school play when she was young, and now she was an active member of the PTA. It became clear, however, that someone else would be the lead. Mama was given the narrator’s part. The evening of the performance, she put on her new royal blue dress, silk stockings, high heel shoes, and a bright rhinestone choker necklace with matching earrings. With pride and her bold voice, she read from the side of the stage as her contribution to the PTA play. It was disappointing, but Mama was in the play. Our family was proud of her.

The community red line that we feared was interracial dating. My parents remembered the vulnerability of young African American men in the South. And we were aware of a shadowy racism in Wallowa that might do my brothers harm under the cloak of night. There was an incident in the early 1950s when a young African American man caught the eye of a local married white woman. They began a secret romance, although in Wallowa there were no secrets. Many unfaithful spouses met at the public water fountain midway up the canyon between Wallowa and Minam, sneaking in plain sight. One day, a group of white men came after him. He ran to my grandfather’s house and hid. When the white men pulled up in Papa’s yard, Papa met them with his thirty-ought-six rifle and told them, “There ain’t gonna to be no trouble down here.” The whites explained they just wanted to “talk to him” but eventually backed up and left. Papa told the young man that he had to leave, too.

This dating and romance issue manifested itself in our family when my brothers became teenagers. My brothers had white friends, both boys and girls, and they danced with white girls at school dances. But, as aggressively as my parents pushed us out, they also feared my brothers crossing that red line. My oldest brother, Amos, Jr., in particular, was handsome, charismatic, outgoing, smart, talented, and the star athlete in the county. He went on to
play football and run track at Oregon State College, followed by a professional football career with the Dallas Cowboys and Detroit Lions. One day, my dad brought a car home from Portland for my brothers — a 1949 Chevy. At some point, Amos, Jr., and a young white girl from Enterprise became friends. Prior to a football game, they bet each other a milkshake which school would win, Wallowa or Enterprise. He won the bet, and the two went to Lee Burrow’s café to settle up. Mama had to give him a serious “talking to” about how his life could be threatened.

At a school talent show, Amos, Jr., sang “Hound Dog” and danced around the stage like Elvis, while his female classmates screamed and swooned. When his smooth baritone voice flowed into “Red Sails in the Sunset,” the father of one of his classmates approached my mother later and asked, half jokingly, if he was singing about his redheaded daughter. Mama told him he did not have to worry about her son singing to his daughter and that he ought to worry about his daughter. My brother, Frank Wayne, had a short courtship with a local girl whose family let him visit her in their home. They were aware of the social risk to worry about her son singing to his daughter and that he ought to worry about his daughter. My brother, Frank Wayne, had a short courtship with a local girl whose family let him visit her in their home. They were aware of the social risk to settle up. Mama had to give him a serious “talking to” about how his life could be threatened.

As a child, I also encountered a few terrible moments for “not being white.” One day a friend’s mother sent us around to one of their neighbors to deliver a package. As I stepped on the porch, this wild, white-haired woman met us with a broom and screamed at my friend: “Get that little nigger out of my house!” I ran as fast as I could with my white friend right behind me. She was equally ter-

rified and confused. I remember our retreat and how we, staring at each other speechless, were frozen in fear once reaching the safety of her house.

In second grade, I learned from a classmate that some of the mothers objected to the idea of me, an African American child, being in Brownies. Mama gave me fifty cents to join, and I lingered outside the door of the meeting for a while, watching the girls and the leaders happily engaged in organizing the troop. No one invited me in. So I left, went by Shorty’s store, and bought and ate fifty cents worth of candy. When Mama asked why I was not at Brownies, I emphatically told her I decided I did not want to join. Later, Zana Peterson, a local parent, organized a 4-H sewing club for girls.34 She came to our house and personally invited Mama to let me join. She knew about some of the white mothers and the Brownies. Her daughter, my classmate Cheryl, recalled recently, I can remember my Mom telling my Dad that no one could tell her whom she could or could not have in her 4-H Club. She and I went to your home and she talked to your Mom for a long time and you and I talked and, if I remember right, we read books.35

Zana’s direct outreach to my mom settled whether I was going to be invited to join 4-H, and one of the Brownie leaders, Mrs. Zella Connor, embraced me in 4-H. Navigating the “beauty trap” with nappy hair and dark skin was a challenge, unknown to my white friends, for both African American women and girls. Some women sent for a mail-order skin-bleaching cream called “Nadinola” that still can be bought on the Internet for “discoloration.” Religiously, they creamed their faces and necks each night, hoping to bleach their skin just a little lighter. My mother ordered some and tried it once, but it was not her kind of thing. So we used Pond’s Cold Cream and Vaseline to ward off “ashy” skin and let that be.36 Getting my hair washed, straightened, and curled was worse than torture. I was lucky enough not to be tender-headed like my sister, although that did not spare the pain of the comb snapping through my knotted hair. The whole time, I would recall Mama’s personal romance story; she could have married a piano player with “good hair” instead of Daddy with “bad hair.” Daddy was a better choice because he was hard-working and responsible. But, how my fortune would have changed with the piano player’s hair.

Each year for Christmas, my sister and I got white dolls that our mother ordered from the Montgomery Ward catalog. When I turned eight and was in the third grade, I remember the catalog introduced African American versions of the white dolls and pictured them side-by-side in the catalogue. I picked out the white doll I wanted and waited until Christmas to open the highly anticipated doll box. I was horrified on Christmas morning when my doll box contained an African American doll. I cried and Mama got angry and spanked me, while saying, “What do you think? When you get married and have children, they are going to be white?” When we returned to school, I did not want to take my African American doll with me, as all the girls did after Christmas, but Mama told me I had to. So I planned to hide my doll in the bushes on the way to school and pick it up on the way home.
Mama figured it out, put me in the car, drove me to school, and watched me go in the front door. When I reluctantly unveiled my African American doll, all of my classmates squealed with surprise and said how beautiful she was. They all took turns holding her. When I walked home after school, I cuddled my new African American doll closely to my body like my future baby.

In 1958, our family moved from Wallowa to Grass Valley, California. As in Wallowa, I had white friends, particularly neighborhood kids and those in choir and advanced classes. Like my older brother Amos, I was outgoing, so I made friends. But Grass Valley was an all-white community with a history of racial animus toward African Americans brought mostly by white southerners. When my dad moved down to pick out a house for us, he was told, “no ‘nigger’ has tried to stay here overnight in a hundred years.” We moved there anyway, and Mama assured us that we would be safe and, if we endured, and when we went to college, we would live around our own people and things would get better.

After I graduated from Nevada Union High School, I went to Sacramento State College (now CSU Sacramento). My mother had promised me through my school years that, when I went to college, I would be around our people. Sacramento State was nearly all white, and I decided to go to Oakwood College (now Oakwood University), a parochial African American college in Huntsville, Alabama, for my sophomore year. While you cannot compare intragroup discrimination to interracial prejudice, there was a clear color hierarchy at the school based on internalized white beauty standards. The dark-skinned Geechee girls from the Sea Islands off the coast of the Carolinas and Georgia fared okay because of their long, straight black hair. But the other dark-skinned girls with short nappy hair, like me, were left in the dorms without dates on weekends. A popular saying at the school went like this:

*If you’re light, you’re alright;*
*If you’re brown, stick around;*
*If you’re black, get back!*  

So, with that reality, I left Alabama and returned to Sacramento State College for my bachelor’s degree in social welfare. I became a political and social activist in the local Civil Rights Movement and Black Students Union (BSU). The lesson to “never leave a task until it’s done” led me to complete a master’s degree in Public Health and a doctorate in political science, both at the University of California at Berkeley. My public life, both civic and professional, has been committed to just causes at home and abroad.

As a political scientist and foreign policy retiree, I live in California but return every summer to Wallowa to visit with old friends. I now am an active member of the Wallowa History Center, which is dedicated to reconstructing and saving the social history of Wallowa and the North Woods. The story of my family and other African American families in Wallowa and Union counties are critical to that effort.

I grew up Black, but I am so much more than just the color of my skin. Growing up in northeastern Oregon with my family and with African American and white friends created a unique individual called “me.” This label of being born Black helped guide me through a special world of highs and lows, wonders and perplexities, unique only to me. And for that, I look back and am grateful. I am grateful for incredible parents who challenged racial barriers that might have impeded my way. I am also grateful for a community that embraced us as friends and neighbors.

**NOTES**


2. Three books help us understand the relentless fight against white supremacy and its tenacity through social transformation periods in America including the Civil War, Civil Rights movement, the obsolescence of working-class African American men, and the more recent age of mass incarceration. See Richard Wormser, *The Rise and Fall of Jim* 

PEARL MARSH is pictured here in 2017 with friends from her elementary school in Wallowa County, Oregon. From left to right are: Susan Roberts, Pearl Alice Marsh, Linda Bauck, Sandee Jeffers, and Kay Landretth-McKinnis.
4. I want to thank my friend Betty Reid Soskin for sharing the concept of growing up with “conflicting realities.” Betty Reid Soskin, *Sign My Name to Freedom: A Memoir of a Pioneering Life* (Carlsbad, Calif.: Hay House, 2018), 17.
19. Ethnicity is based on DNA tests from AncestryDNA.com.
21. African Americans were designated as “Black” in the 1870s U.S. Census. Prior to that, they were listed by name in the 1850 and 1860 U.S. Census Free Schedules and enumerated by gender, race, age, and a hash-tag — not by name — in the Slave Schedules. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro*, (New York: Holt, 1915). This historic work challenges eighteenth and nineteenth century Euro-American assumptions that Africans, prior to the arrival of Europeans, had no history or culture and were thusly, “Black” or ‘negro.”
23. According to the author’s recollection, Wade Siding was a camp. It was later named Water Canyon by Henry Newton Ashby, manager of the Bowman Hicks Lumber Company operations in Oregon.
25. Chief Joseph Days is a rodeo festival initiated in 1946 by local white ranchers and cowboys. In 1990, the Wallowa Band Nez Perce Pow Wow and Friendship Potluck was organized by the Wallowa Band of the Nez Perce Band and Wallowa City Council to honor and educate locals and tourists about their history and the history of the valley. In 1998, the event name was changed to Tamkaliks Pow Wow and is held every July on the Tamkaliks Pow Wow Grounds in Wallowa.
28. Telephone interview with Zane Haney, grandson of Earl Haney, by Pearl Alice Marsh, Patterson, California, and Torrance, California, June 9, 2015.
31. The Chicago Defender was a Chicago-based African American weekly newspaper founded in 1905 and was considered the most important paper for keeping up with national and international news.
34. 4-H is a 100-year old youth development organization dedicated to developing “head, heart, hands, and health.” https://a/h/a/7gcldr-EAlalQbOChM2rrFfxtLo3yQV/DsNKh2e9GQU4EAYASSAeKNQYD_Bv8e (accessed August 31, 2018).
36. Ashy is a term used by African Americans to describe dryness on dark skin.