

“Great Migration Railroad Strike 100 Years Ago Brought an Influx of African-Americans to Waterloo” Newspaper Article, February 1, 2011

WATERLOO, Iowa --- You won't find a more enthusiastic goodwill ambassador for Waterloo than Roosevelt Taylor.

Now 83, he came to Waterloo from Water Valley, Miss., in his teens to live with his grandfather. He's spent most of his life here except for a stint in the U.S. Army.

He earned a good living at John Deere and volunteered with a number of organizations, including Disabled American Veterans, Knights of Pythias and as a board member of the largest credit union in the state, Veridian, formerly John Deere Community Credit Union.

But he knows about the old days. The bad old days. The days when being black in Waterloo was not just a disadvantage but downright dangerous.

He heard about those days from his grandfather, George Martin, who came to Waterloo from Mississippi 100 years ago. He was one of hundreds of African-Americans who came to Waterloo to work on the railroad.

“The Illinois Central went down South and asked people whether they wanted to go to the Promised Land,” Taylor said. “They got a whole bunch of people, brought them back and unloaded them in the shop yard.”

The arriving blacks found out they would be taking the jobs of striking railroad workers, who were predominantly white.

“They (railroad officials) told the strikers, ‘If you don't go back to work, they (the black workers) will be on your job tomorrow,’” Taylor related.

The newcomers had two strikes against them: They were black, and they were strikebreakers. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the beginning of that strike, and with it, the major influx of what became Waterloo's present-day African-American population.

Those early African-American railroad workers and their families were settled in a neighborhood along the tracks near East Fourth Street, having been denied housing elsewhere. Some lived in rail boxcars. When they had to venture out into the community, they didn't go alone.

“When someone wanted to go to the store, they'd go out in groups,” Taylor said. “If they got a guy by himself, you wouldn't see him no more after that.”

They could have been killed, or they just disappeared.

Despite those animosities and dangers, Waterloo's African-American population became an integral part of the community.

According to research by former University of Northern Iowa visiting professor Cliff Weston, in 1910 there were only 24 nonwhite residents in Black Hawk County. By 1915 that number had grown to 395. The population would grow to nearly 10,000 today, or 14.5 percent of the city's population according to the 2000 census.

According to the State Library of Iowa Data Center, and the Iowa Commission on the Status of African Americans, Waterloo has the second-highest African-American population in Iowa, surpassed only by Des Moines. Black Hawk County has the highest percentage African-American population in the state.

Waterloo led the way

What happened in Waterloo was part of the so-called "Great Migration" of African-Americans from the South to the North in the early 20th century. Waterloo was not only part of that migration, but on the leading edge of it, scholars said.

"Waterloo experienced African-American migration before most of the rest of the nation," Grout Museum District historian Bob Neymeyer said.

"I think Waterloo's a really great case study of the Great Migration in general," said John Baskerville, an associate professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. "Because many of the motivating factors that precipitated the migration nationwide happened here in Waterloo.

"Basically, these people were running away from some things, but they're also being pulled by other things," Baskerville said. "The South was not the best place to live in the early 1910s at all because of lynching and lack of political rights and so forth. Agriculture was in decline because of the boll weevil. Those things were social factors and economic factors that were pushing them out of the South.

"But also there was a lure in the North," he said. "Businesses and industries were needing workers."

With the onset of World War I, immigration slowed. The supply of workers slowed down. Southern blacks provided a ready labor pool.

"But also, as in the case of Waterloo, we see African-Americans being used as strikebreakers," Baskerville said.

Unskilled and semi-skilled Illinois Central workers walked out with skilled workers railroad in a show of solidarity. The railroad called in professional strikebreakers to fill the skilled positions, but still needed unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The Illinois Central had purchased the Yazoo line in Mississippi, a small local carrier that employed blacks. Many blacks left for better economic opportunities in Waterloo having no idea that they would arrive as strikebreakers.

"When they got here, they entered a very hostile environment," Baskerville said. "Any time you put someone's economic well being at risk, you're going to get this violent reaction. Sure, race relations in this area were not great to begin with, but the very fact they were now competing for these jobs with white workers with jobs they thought were rightfully theirs caused this very hostile environment.

"That's one of the reasons they had difficulty finding housing, because of the racial stereotypes that exist, but (also) just because no one wanted to be connected with the strikebreakers in Waterloo," Baskerville said. "Everyone was hostile toward them."

Settling in an unsettled time

But as black workers settled and improved their standard of living they sent for their families, or started families. The migration was regarded as an invasion by the indigenous Waterloo population.

"What do we do with this invading force? We have to keep them separated.," Baskerville said.

They settled them in what is now know as the "African-American triangle" along the IC tracks.

"That area was kind of infamous before they even moved there," Baskerville said. "That was the area they called 'Smokey Row' for a number of reasons. That was more or less the vice district, where no one else wanted to live." It also happened to be near the railroad yard where they worked.

Grout historian Neymeyer noted many white Illinois Central strikers left the area or found other work, including Italians who went to work for the Chicago Great Western in Oelwein. That left blacks to retain many of the Illinois Central jobs after the strike. While they were restricted to lower paying jobs, those positions still offered a better standard of living than their previous situations in Mississippi.

As neighborhood and families developed, so too did the black community, which began to stand up for itself.

"One of the things they tried to do was to make that neighborhood their own," Baskerville said. "They wanted those elements --- the gambling houses, the liquor houses and even the prostitution --- to get out of their neighborhoods. They were pushing the leaders of Waterloo to make changes.

"One of the first things they built were the churches."

Payne African Methodist Episcopal Church and Antioch Baptist Church, among others, became a forum for blacks to express opinions on community issues.

Ministers like the Rev. I.W. Bess, an AME minister, successfully petitioned city leaders to lift a whites-only rule at city beaches, and also to get the racially objectionable D.W. Griffith film "Birth of a Nation" removed from local theaters. An NAACP chapter organized in the early 1920s

Blacks would struggle long and hard over the balance of the century to attain local empowerment and a voice in the community. But that community took deep and lasting root in the area of the railroad.

By the time young Roosevelt Taylor came to live with his grandfather in the 1930s and '40s, Waterloo was still far from the "promised land" railroad officials had described a generation earlier. But the city offered much greater opportunity to a new generation of African-Americans, who succeeded in spite of lingering social restrictions.

"It never bothered me," Taylor said. "I always liked Waterloo. And that's why I'm still here."