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Lewiston/Auburn Oral History - Margaret T. Nichols

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THE GRIOT

Preserving
African American
History in Maine
University of Southern Maine

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Fall 2003

African American Collection of Maine

During 2003-2004, the African American Collection, part of the Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity, will prepare to relocate to the USM Glickman Family Library in Portland. During this time, use of the Collection will be by appointment only.

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Calendar of Events

The "Home Is Where I Make It: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn Maine" exhibit is scheduled to open at the University of Southern Maine at Lewiston-Auburn in February 2004. Exhibit information and details concerning the opening reception will be provided in the Winter/Spring 2004 issue of the *Griot*.



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From the Editor's Desk

In the previous issue of the *Griot*, I announced the donation of two Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) seals for Augusta and Bath, Maine, by Stephen Flynn. Since that issue was printed, individuals from Portland to Houlton have sent me letters and e-mail messages on the topic. Some *Griot* readers expressed disbelief at the WKKK finding, while others registered their intrigue with the women's organization. While I have not yet seen an impression of the seal in question, I have been told by a curator in Aroostook County that there is also a seal for a WKKK chapter in Houlton. The donation of the WKKK seals has encouraged other gifts to the African American Collection of Maine which will be profiled in a future issue of the *Griot*.

The subject of this issue of the *Griot* will



Maureen Elgersman Lee

be the most recently completed phase of the African American Collection's "Home Is Where I Make It" oral history project: "Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine." The project explores the roles African Americans have played in the labor history of Lewiston and Auburn, a history deeply tied to its mills. The profiles below are drawn from the "Home" project and represent some of the salient points of each interview. This project was funded by a second Collaborative Heritage Research Grant by the University of Maine System in collaboration with the Maine Humanities Council.

Please note: The WKKK seals for Augusta and Bath were found at Scarborough's Higgins Beach, and not at Old Orchard Beach as indicated in the previous issue. Also, the official name of Mr. Flynn's company is S. F. Flynn-Z Co., Inc.

Maureen Elgersman Lee is an associate professor of history and faculty scholar for the African American Collection of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library

A PLACE IN TIME

Margaret T. Nichols:

"I'm very proud of that part of my years."

Except for the years that she spent attending school in Massachusetts and working in Connecticut, Lewiston native Margaret T. Nichols has lived in Auburn and Lewiston. For 40 years—from 1952 until her retirement in 1992—Margaret Nichols worked in the registrar's office at Bates College. She began as recording registrar and later became registrar by faculty vote. Regarding her work at Bates, Nichols reflected:

"I'm very proud of that part of my years. It gave me a chance to grow...I think it gave me a sense that I could accomplish things that, perhaps, if I had been in some other job, I never would have."

When asked about Blacks in the local mills, Nichols could only recall her son, Jim, as having worked there. Her father, Lewis Garfield Nichols, had worked at the DeWitt Hotel that stood on Park Street.

Nichols also remembers having gone to George Ross's Elm Street ice cream parlor as a young girl. Years have passed and many local Black families are gone, but Margaret Nichols remembers some of their names, including Murray, Ferguson, Howard, and Ross.

A remarkable woman of eighty years, Margaret Nichols volunteers much of her time to a variety of local organizations and charities including the Franco-American Center, Maine Public Broadcasting, St. Mary's Auxiliary, and the Women's Literary Union (WLU).

From: Interview with Margaret T. Nichols, Lewiston, Maine; June 3, 2003. "Home Is Where I Make It: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine" Oral History Collection. African American Collection of Maine.

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Reverend Albert and Clemmie Jackson:

“I can see the whole of our congregation reaching out to...those less fortunate.”

Born in West Virginia, and in Alabama, respectively, Albert and Clemmie Jackson are leaders of Christ Temple Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in Auburn, Maine. Albert Jackson has lived in Maine for more than 40 years while his wife, Clemmie, has lived here considerably less. Formerly the assistant pastor for many years, Reverend Jackson was installed as

pastor of Christ Temple after the passing of the church's pastor, Reverend Isaac Jackson, his brother. In the past, Albert Jackson worked at Quality Heels, which specialized in heels for women, and he also graduated from culinary school. Clemmie Jackson, who graduated from Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama, worked at Miles as a counselor, and an assistant to the dean

of students. When asked if she continues to work, she replied: “No ma’am. I’m married now. I have a sweet husband. I do not have to work anymore.”

When the second phase of the “Home” project was being conceptualized, Isaac Jackson’s name was on the list of ideal participants. In the interview, Albert Jackson was asked to say a few words about his brother. Jackson remembers his brother, Isaac, as “a man of vision” and conviction, who converted a small storefront into a church, and moved it to its current location on Turner Street. Isaac Jackson worked for “quite a few years” in one of the local shoe factories. According to his brother, he worked his way to manager before retiring in the 1980s. When asked about his vision for Christ Temple, Reverend Albert Jackson replied, thoughtfully:

“I can see the whole of our congregation reaching out to the public...[R]eaching out to those that are less fortunate than we are.”

From: Interview with Reverend Albert and Clemmie Jackson, Auburn, Maine; May 5, 2003. “Home Is Where I Make It’: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine” Oral History Collection. African American Collection of Maine.

Jim Taylor:

“It really wasn’t that glamorous a job.”

Born in Lewiston, Maine, Jim Taylor has lived the majority of his life in the cities of Lewiston and Auburn. He attended Maine Central Institute (MCI) and the University of Maine. A former Marine who served in Vietnam, Jim Taylor is also part of the local mill history. Taylor admits that he only worked at the Bates Mill for a few months in the time between leaving college and entering the service, but he recalled the laborious work

of a “cloth doffer” at Bates Mill.

“I was a cloth doffer, which means I took the cloth off the machines and took it up to the sewing room where they fitted it all together. It really wasn’t that glamorous a job.”

Taylor worked in various commercial positions in Maine and New Hampshire, but his more enduring positions have been in Lewiston’s educational institutions. A Title I teacher at Jordan Elementary School

and Lewiston Middle School for a total of 19 years, Taylor was also a popular athletic coach. He coached football at Lewiston Middle School for 2 years, at Lewiston High for 5 years, and at Bates College for 7 years. He currently works at Bates College as the head athletic equipment manager.

From: Interview with Jim Taylor, Lewiston, Maine; May 15, 2003. “Home Is Where I Make It’: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine” Oral History Collection. African American Collection of Maine.

Joanna Boley-Lee:

“I’m on a lot of committees that deal with race and gender.”

Joanna Boley-Lee was born in Newark, New Jersey and came to Lewiston, Maine, almost nine years ago to work as Bates College’s director of affirmative action. Joanna Boley-Lee attended Morgan State College in Baltimore, Maryland, and graduated from California College of Art in Oakland, California. A former art teacher, graphic designer, and flight attendant, Boley-Lee also worked on the Black Panther Party’s breakfast program.

In what she described as “perhaps, my last career as an affirmative action officer,” Boley-Lee has worked hard for

Bates College and in the Lewiston and Auburn community:

“In the state of Maine, because people are not used to seeing a lot of people of color, they tend not to do some of the things that we identify as discriminatory because they don’t know about that. But they do things that can be considered as insensitive. . . . Examples would be saying “oriental” instead of “Asian,” “colored” instead of “African American” or “Black.” . . . Terms of endearment, like “dear” and “honey” and “sweetheart,” they are used

frequently, but are not meant to be offensive. . . . So I’m on a lot of committees that deal with race and gender.”

When asked to identify what she considered her greatest success or greatest impact in her work in Lewiston, Boley-Lee cited two things: her work with “marginalized workers” and faculty diversification. Joanna Boley-Lee retired from her position at Bates College this summer.

From: Interview with Joanna Boley-Lee, Lewiston, Maine; June 4, 2003. “Home Is Where I Make It’: Race and Labor in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine” Oral History Collection. African American Collection of Maine.