

February is Black History Month

by Faith Gray

For most people the highlight of the month of February is Valentine's Day (and Reading Week of course!) However, February is also a special month to one ethnic community in Edmonton.

February is Black History Month — a time when Black communities nationwide focus attention on the past achievements, triumphs, and struggles of Black people.

"The purpose of Black History Month is to acquaint the people of Alberta with the many contributions Black citizens have made to the Canadian community," says Johnson.

Another aim is to "provide greater recognition for the early (Black) pioneers and to provide exposure of the current generation" through their paintings, arts, crafts, and talent displays.

In addition, says Johnson, we wish to bring the rich history of Africa and the West Indies to public view through displays of hand-crafted artifacts.

On Feb. 1, 1987, Edmonton Mayor Laurence Decore officially proclaimed that February in Edmonton is Black History Month.

One major feature of Black History Month in our city is a cultural exhibit presented at the Provincial Museum from Feb. 1-28 (in Gallery 2).

Other activities throughout the month include worship services at various Black churches, banquets, gospel concerts, workshops, talent programs, a Third World film festival, and various art and literature displays throughout the city.

On Feb. 21st at the U of A, a workshop on the Future on Blacks in Canada was held as part of the month's activities. This free workshop featured themes such as "Where we were, where we are," and was held in the Tory Building with an attendance of about 50.

Several contemporary social issues facing Blacks, such as schooling and discrimination, were discussed. A few of the guest speakers were Dr. Roy Neehall, Cathy Kellman, Inette John, Nadene Tho-

mas, and Dr. Neville Chase.

One important issue addressed was "The Myth of Equal Employment Opportunities." Some people are undecided as to whether this is actually a myth, says Johnson, and she detects differences in the attitudes and interpretations of Canadian-born versus other Blacks (ie from Africa and the West Indies.)

A major goal of Black History Month is to expose the public to the history of Blacks in Canada, a history which is not presented in children's school books.

In fact, many historians argue that the accomplishments of Black people were deliberately left out of history books. This has resulted in the view that Black people have done nothing of merit in history and hence fosters negative stereotypes.

For example, did you know that the discoverer of a process for storing blood plasma was a Black Canadian doctor (Dr. Charles Drew), or that almost 50 Blacks fought for Canada in the Battle of Queenston Heights in 1812?

Many people do not realize that there were slaves in Canada. In 1628 the first African slave landed at Quebec and from then until 1783 nearly all Canadian Blacks were slaves, serving the settlers of New France. Although they had the legal position of being slaves, Canadian slaves were seen more as servants and slavery was not as extreme as in the American colonies.

The status of Blacks in Canada began to change with the arrival of 3,500 free Black Loyalists in 1783 and of thousands more Blacks who had won their freedom by fighting for the British in the War of 1812. Most of these new immigrants settled in the Maritime region.

In the mid-nineteenth century Canada became known as the "Land of Freedom" for American slaves. The "Underground Railroad" served for many years as a secret passageway to bring slaves to the free Canadian soil.

Unfortunately for the freed slaves, their arrival in Canada was

merely an exchange of physical bondage for second-class citizenship. Blacks were segregated, given inferior land, paid meager wages, and prohibited from using some public facilities.

In Alberta, the history of Blacks began in the 1860s with the arrival of Black fur traders, prospectors, and cowboys. The most famous Black cowboy in Alberta history is John Ware. Born a slave in South Carolina, Ware worked as a cowboy in Texas after Emancipation. Years later he travelled to Alberta, settled near Brooks and became a successful and respected cattle rancher.

Four main Black settlements were established in Alberta starting in the late 1900s. The most well-known community was established at Amber Valley, east of Athabasca.

The settlers came largely from Oklahoma, fleeing oppressive conditions in that state. However, the people of Alberta were not recep-

tive to this influx of Black settlers, and their protests and petitions led the government to impose severe immigration restrictions on Blacks.

The Amber Valley settlers were plagued by insects, land with poor drainage, uncertain harvests, the extreme northern climate, and isolation. Despite these hardships, the Amber Valley residents were unified by a sense of community and mutual pride. The Amber Valley Baseball team was known throughout north central Alberta and promoted community solidarity. The Amber Valley community, however, continued to decline after the Depression and World War II, and today only a handful of Black families remain in the area.

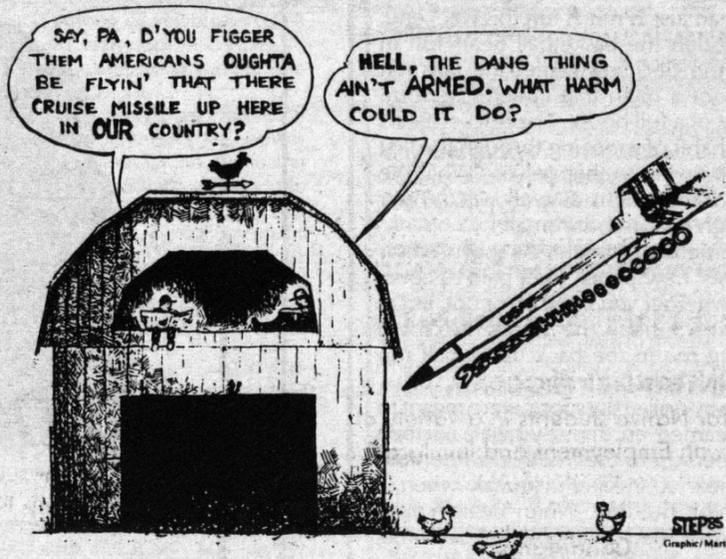
Still, Amber Valley remains a "spiritual home" for many Blacks in Alberta. In essence, the struggles and triumphs of Blacks in Amber Valley and across Canada form the heart of the celebration of Black History Month.

Black History Month has been an annual event for over 20 years, says Phyllis Johnson, a member of the Black History Month Coordination Committee. However, the past several years have seen a greater intensity in the celebration of Black History Month.

The Council of Black Organizations (CBO), an umbrella group for the 23 different organizations amongst the Black community in Edmonton, oversees the running of Black History Month each year.

Black History Month 1987 is sponsored and coordinated by CBO in association with the National Black Coalition of Canada (NBCC), and with the assistance of the Alberta Cultural Heritage Foundation.

The closing ceremonies of Black History Month will be held on Feb. 28 at the Edmonton Public Library Auditorium from 3-6 p.m. and all are invited to attend.



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