Oral History Collection

A Live Document Curated by Grants Pass Remembrance

But first, why remember this history?

“If memory is kept alive in order to cultivate old hatreds and resentments, it is likely to culminate in vengeance, and in a repetition of violence. But if memory is kept alive in order to transcend hateful emotions, then remembering can be healing.”

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

A Human Being Died That Night

"Memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair,” the theologian Walter Brueggeman noted. It’s an extraordinary statement, one that reminds us that though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past. We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope.”

Rebecca Solnit

Hope in the Dark

Oral History Collection Begins Here:

“We moved to Oregon – there’s no Black people. This was in ‘51. No Black people. In fact, some of the things I remember hearing was, “No, they can’t stay in Grants Pass overnight. They have to be out of town by the time it gets dark.” And I don’t know how much truth there was to that. But I heard it a lot. And I took it as the truth.”

White Grants Pass resident

Quoted in In Timber Country: working people’s stories of environmental conflict and urban flight, by Beverly A. Brown (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995)

“In the early 1940s, when Lare was 12 or 13 years old, the Cotton Blossom Singers, a Black male quartet from the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, came to sing at his father's church, Newman Methodist Church, in Grants Pass, Ore. When they tried to book lodging at local motels, however, there was not a room to rent. It seems, that unknown to them, there was an unwritten law that no Black person could stay in town after sunset. So the Cotton Blossom Singers stayed at the parsonage attached to the church with Lare's family.”

Lawrence Aschenbrenner’s obituary, White Grants Pass resident

“There are things I would not care to go back to. For one thing – it still is not all that common to see a Black person in Medford or Grants Pass, but it hasn’t been all that long ago that there were actual sundown laws for them. They just plain had to be out of town by dark. My husband’s parents were stationed at Camp White during the war, and they had a troop train come in with Black soldiers on it. And they actually had the curtains drawn, just so that people wouldn’t know that they came through town. I wouldn’t care to go back to that.”

White Grants Pass resident

Quoted in In Timber Country: working people’s stories of environmental conflict and urban flight, by Beverly A. Brown (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995)

“I remember when they first set up the Fort Vannoy Job Corps, which is now the Rogue Community College campus. The town went completely nuts. Because they were going to be bringing in people from big city ghettos, and they knew that they would be black and brown and whatever. The town went totally crazy. They would not let any of the young men come into town without a person in control of them. They weren’t allowed to go into the stores unless they were in a group with someone in control of them. George Foreman was one of the boys. You know, the boxer? I remember seeing him a couple of times … You know, every one of them were polite when you would encounter them on the street.”

White Grants Pass resident

Quoted in In Timber Country: working people’s stories of environmental conflict and urban flight, by Beverly A. Brown (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995)

“When I was about 8 years old,(about 1962) an aunt and her black friend came from California and stayed with us, (outside the city limits) while they went to the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. That is when i learned that Grants Pass had been a sundowner community. My parents were very careful to protect the friend from unfriendly neighbors and family, (one uncle in particular). It was the first time my youngest brother had seen a black person, and I remember being a little embarrassed when he touched the friend’s skin to see if the color was real, or came off.”

Debbie Dorn Brownell, White Grants Pass resident

“I didn’t understand sundown laws, and I didn’t realize Grants Pass was like that till I left. Got to rapping with some Black guys that was my age or older. They said, “Hey, man, we heard about that place.” And I says, “What about it?” “Hey. People like us ain’t welcome there.”

White Grants Pass resident

Quoted in In Timber Country: working people’s stories of environmental conflict and urban flight, by Beverly A. Brown (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995)

“You could ride downtown on a bicycle when Sixth Street was two-way. Back when the Caveman Bridge was a two-way bridge. And on both ends of that bridge - now this is something I remember from a little teeny kid … and it’s strictly prejudiced. Which, I’m not that way. I believe everyone has their own space, and I’ve got a lot of colored friends. But you remember the old signs on the bridge? “N—-, don’t let the sun set on you here. And it meant it. It was a nasty town in some ways. And in other ways it was real mellow.”

White Grants Pass resident

Quoted in In Timber Country: working people’s stories of environmental conflict and urban flight, by Beverly A. Brown (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995)

“In the 50's and 60's Blacks were not very welcome in city limits. ... I guess it was fine for singers to come, as long as they were always in the company of white people or out of sight except for their performance(s). Pearl Bailey and her husband were housed in the Redwood Hotel. He stayed in his room the entire time they were here ...Pearl Bailey was escorted around town. ... [Her husband] seemingly was "afraid" to venture out and escorting a married Black couple around town did not happen.”

Joan Momsen, White Grants Pass resident

“A former resident of Grants Pass told me that when he was a kid (in the 60s) the KKK was still marching in the Boatnik parade. They were last, and he remembered that the crowd would get silent when they were passing by. He sensed that people were uncomfortable with their presence and that things were starting to change.”

White Grants Pass resident

“My father in law, lifelong Grants Pass resident, told me a story of how the Harlem Globetrotters came to visit in Grants Pass in the late 60s, and the Baptist

church he attended was discussing how this would affect the community and where they would stay. He volunteered to transport them to a place they could stay (outside of city limits), which is now Merlin, to make sure they were safe. They stayed several days and he transported them in and out of town for the event. Many had concerns as to how this would affect his reputation, but ultimately he decided the only opinion he valued was God's."

Bree Petty, White Grants Pass resident

"I moved here in 1968. I remember my neighbor told me about it, that coloreds weren't allowed to stay in Grants Pass. I was shocked."

Lou, White Grants Pass resident

"In the late 1970's a music group was hosted in GP and the couple were of the impression that they had to go down to Weed, CA after the gathering in order to find lodging that would be accessible to them."

Larry Forsgren, White former Grants Pass resident

"I have lived here since 1971 and I didn't know my community was this way [a Sundown Town]. It breaks my heart! [tears are running down her face] I'm so glad you all are doing this work and came to share about it."

Dolores, White Grants Pass resident

"I remember when I was 6 years old … must have been fall of 1976 … my family was coming back from my Aunt and Uncle's house in Phoenix at night. We drove by Phoenix High School and we noticed FLAMES on the front yard of the school.

It was a burning cross and there were quite a few KKK members around the flames in the dark. White sheets and hoods. I can remember my dad saying that they were people who didn't like black people and then we drove away very quickly. I don't think I had ever seen a black person … except on TV … until I

was in High School at Phoenix in the mid 1980's and we had one guy … Marcus … whose family had moved to Talent from the LA area."

John Jackson, White former Josephine County resident

"I returned to my hometown of Grants Pass Oregon in 1992 to raise my children in a beautiful and safe community. Prior to moving back, I was a San Diego police officer, so applied and was hired as a police officer for the Grants Pass Department of Safety (now named Grants Pass Police.)

I was assigned as a patrol officer initially, but then was later assigned to the newly formed Community Resource Team (CRT), which was a small team of officers assigned to meet the growing needs of the community in a more preventive and proactive way, rather than just responding reactively to calls for service.

In early 1995, our department, and I as a CRT Officer, began receiving numerous calls reporting that there was a white supremacist group planning to set up shop in our community and that they were actively recruiting for members. We received reports from local schools, teachers, parents, businesses, and were shown flyers that were being handed out for an upcoming rally to learn more about this hate group.

I was immediately concerned that this could forever change not only the trajectory of our beautiful small town, but its safety and security. So, I approached our police chief to get permission to get actively involved as a representative of our department. I received that permission and reached out to numerous community, business, school, and church leaders, and joined with them to collaborate on building a campaign against hate and violence. Signs and bumper stickers were created and posted all over our community that read, "We Stand for a Hate Free Community."

Through these efforts, our community was mobilized and took a stand together to let the organization know that we would not support their activities in our community. Our voices were heard loud and clear on Feb 23 rd when more than 1,500 community members, from all different backgrounds and walks of life, came together for a rally in front of the courthouse. I was so proud of my

community for taking a stand, without hesitation, that hate would not be tolerated in our town!

Subsequently, the hate group's rally was cancelled, and the recruiting efforts stopped. I never did hear where they went, but I was just thankful they left our beautiful community."

Julie Thomas, White Grants Pass resident

"About 1,500 people rallied Saturday at the Josephine County Courthouse to protest plans for a statewide recruiting drive by white supremacists. The state leader of the Aryan Nations, Dennis Hilligoss of Merlin, had announced earlier that the racist group was planning to make Josephine County the base for its recruiting drive. However, Hilligoss told county officials he was postponing a downtown rally to kick off the drive. Instead, demonstrators gathered to protest the white supremacists, carrying signs, banners and balloons. "How great it is to see so many residents of Josephine County who are willing to stand up against those who would create fear and violence," said Mayor Gordon Anderson. Sgt. Logan Calvo of the Josephine County sheriff's department said it was the largest rally he had seen in his 14-year career."

News article, Sunday, Feb.26, 1995, *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington)

"I remember how my friend, who is Black, was so afraid when she came to visit. She wouldn't even get out of the car. It got easier after she visited me more"

Charlotte, White Grants Pass resident

"Over time, the number of racial slurs barked at me when I visit Lawnridge Park has declined dramatically. Whereas I heard at least one or two every month during my first full year in Grants Pass, the last time I can recall hearing "n___" shouted at me from a passing car was in 2011. ...Probably the main reason I hear fewer epithets than before, however, is that I have significantly lowered my racial antennae. Today, I no longer try to hear every little thing said by white passersby."

Robert L. Jackson, Black former Grants Pass resident

Quoted in Racism in America: My Personal Stories and Insights by Robert L. Jackson, PhD

"Even in the South, I don't recall people scrutinizing me like an otherworldly alien...the jury was still out concerning the scope and depth of white racism in Grants Pass. One thing for sure, my new town certainly didn't feel like home."

-Robert L. Jackson, Black former Grants Pass resident

Quoted in Racism in America: My Personal Stories and Insights by Robert L. Jackson, PhD

"Because I'm one of only a few people of color in Grants Pass, I feel I have to be especially attentive to environmental threats at all times. Concern that some racist white person(s), on a whim or a dare, might decide to make me the centerpiece of a white supremacist ritual never exits my thoughts."

Robert L. Jackson, Black former Grants Pass resident

Quoted in Racism in America: My Personal Stories and Insights by Robert L. Jackson, PhD

“My biggest fear is that someone would act out their hate against me in a violent way and everyone else will stand around watching, without intervening, because they would assume I did something wrong.”

“It’s so tough to navigate these spaces where you don’t know if you’re welcome or not.”

“I had good experiences when I visited Grants Pass - living here is a whole different ball game.”

“My experiences are more good than not - though it doesn’t feel like this is “my home” or “my community” yet.”

Danielle Puller, Black Grants Pass resident

“On two different occasions I was told the same rhyme to inform me of Grants Pass’ history as a Sundown Town. This was the rhyme: “If you’re brown, get out of town, before sundown.” They were not trying to communicate that I should leave - but I don’t know why they felt the need to share this information with me and sing that rhyme.”

Black Grants Pass resident

“I moved here in 2019. I remember my neighbor [in Stockton] asked me if I moved here because it was a white town.”

Em, White Grants Pass resident

"...I was shopping [at a local grocery store]. This was during the Black Lives Matter [movement] when emotions were running high, [and I] almost bumped into another customer with my cart. I humbly excused myself apologizing, "I’m so sorry!" We didn’t bump into each other, [but] we almost did. And I was called a racial slur. Next thing you know I’m face-to-face, chest to chest with his wife who’s so close to me I could feel the spit from her mouth on my face, telling me I’m not welcomed here and said it wasn’t that long ago that N___ were slaves and if we aren’t careful, and if Trump has his way, we will go back to being slaves again.

At this point, I’m done. I’m just trying to shop for my family as everybody else is. Neither she nor her husband were understanding that I too have rights and continued to harass [me] as I left the store. One person came and offered a gesture of compassion."

Erika, Black Grants Pass resident

Question posed to local realtor in YouTube Comments in 2021:

“So my girlfriend and I are going to be moving to Grants Pass March 1st so that she can work at the hospital there as a traveling nurse. I earn money through the

Internet through various sources our reservation is that I am an African American and she is a white woman and based on some of the research I've done it's not the most inviting place for a gentleman such as myself. Can I ask your opinion on whether or not it's safe for me to be there for 3 months”

Response from local realtor:

“My heart breaks that you even have to ask. You are welcome in my home, in my community, and with my family. Give me a call and I’ll connect you with some people in a similar social dynamic that can answer that question for you. I hope you decide to move here, and I look forward to showing you some cool places!!”

Feedback from Sunrise Project Podcast with Rachel Boettner in October 2023:

“I'm impressed with the idea of tangible and intangible feeling/projections. Intangibles are so real and more common than the tangible. Someone told my daughter that she has never actually experienced racism. Which is wrong of course. This person refused to believe that racism exists in GP. Ironically people who are unaware of these things are usually just scared of being labeled as racist so their response is to "pretend" that it doesn't exist. Tangible is more scary of course especially when children are exposed, however it's critical to be able to recognize the intangible. Unfortunately I have to teach my children how to recognize those things and remove themselves from certain situations. Thank you for what you are doing.”

Black Grants Pass resident