

THE  
SAINTS  
AMONG US

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# The Saints Among Us

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## CHAPTER TWO: The Ann Arbor Black Community

The small community of African Americans into which I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the year of 1930, was already suffering from the woes of the Great Depression. Poverty was severe and ever-present especially in the lives of the Patterson family. By 1936, we moved to a dwelling, only slightly more commodious than the apartment on Detroit Street. This move was into a house on Fifth Avenue on the north end of the city. We occupied an upstairs apartment which contained one bedroom, where the two girls slept, a fairly sizeable living room/master bedroom in which the parents slept, and a larger kitchen/bedroom in which the two - and on some weekends, three - boys slept. The kitchen contained a coal-burning cooking stove that provided additional heat during the night for the house, especially for the boys. Though there was a furnace in the house, it was seldom in working order. The main source of heat for the apartment was a pot-bellied stove located in the middle of the living room/bedroom. There was one bathroom to service the needs of both the family living in the downstairs apartment (the Jimmy "Tootsie" Jones family, which then had two adults and four young children) and the Patterson family in the upper apartment. The oldest boy in the Jones family - Ernest - and I developed an early, close friendship that lasted until his untimely passing in 2006.

The head of our household, Preacher, earned his living by shoveling and delivering coal, a bit of which was used, when he could afford to pay for it, to provide heat for our apartment. The rest of his income went to purchasing food, paying the rent, and buying his alcoholic drinks, which he insisted was the only thing that kept his throat clear of the coal dust in the midst of which he often worked for twelve hours per day. I now believe he was probably quite accurate in this assessment and that his work with coal was, indeed, a leading cause of his increasing alcoholism. This, with the other bitter frustrations that daily impacted the lives of adult black males of that day, combined to make him abusive to the one closest to him, his wife, and to be lacking in the needed indulgence and tolerance required to raise a stepson along with his own children.

Though Preacher often shoveled and delivered as many as twenty tons of coal a day - - sometimes more - - to various households and businesses in the city, there were many days during the hard winters of the depression when his earnings were insufficient to afford the cost of a "gunny-sack" (burlap bag) of coal to take care of the needs of his own family. He once told me that he earned the sum of twenty cents per ton of coal. This sum was always the same and without regard to how often he might have to shovel each ton of coal - - from the coal-car on the train, to the ground; from the ground to his truck, from his truck, to the location of delivery. He was paid the same twenty-cents for this "one" ton of coal!

Many were the days each winter when it became the chore of the two older boys in the house - - of which I was one - - to take a wagon or sled, or merely a gunny sack, down to the railroad tracks one-and-one-half blocks away to "ostensibly" pick up lumps of coal which had fallen from the coal cars onto the side of the tracks and bring them home to provide the needed fuel for the stoves. I use the word "ostensibly" because we often found it to be more practical, easier, and less freezing to our bodies, which were very usually poorly covered by inadequate clothing, to steal the coal from local coal companies. The coal company yards were usually located right next to the railroad tracks. We would break into the wooden bins and steal a full sack of coal more quickly than it would take to pick up the coal alongside the railroad tracks. We then returned home to "feed" the fire in the pot-bellied located in the center of the living-bedroom and enjoy the heat it provided for most of the apartment.

The mailing address of our house was 708 North Fifth Avenue, and its location was just one-half block from the Peter's Sausage Company and the holding pens and slaughterhouses for the pigs and cattle that were trucked in from various area farms to be sold to local grocers and butchers. These animals had been slaughtered, skinned, and butchered into quarters at this slaughterhouse just down the street from our house. African-American men who lived in our neighborhood most often performed this work. The butchered and dressed meats were then sold to the citizens of the area who could purchase this luxury. Very few African Americans were numbered among those who could afford the better "cuts." They were most often confined to buying cheaper portions of the

slaughtered animals, i.e. the entrails, aka chitterlings, hog cracklings, pigs feet, cow tongue, etc., to which their fore-parents had long since grown accustomed during the difficult days of slavery. (Ironically, these items are now considered to be delicacies by many in the majority population of the country!) Surviving the discomforts of such experiences during times that were physically and socially inhospitable, and facing the severe winter weather in Ann Arbor, in poorly heated, and thinning insulated housing, was an especially daunting and dangerous challenge. (Of course this was also the case in many other communities of the Northern and Midwestern areas of these United States during the depression.) Overcoming these challenges was possible in no small part because of the presence of THE SAINTS AMONG US!

Many in the minority community showed the signs of disconnection, dejection, defeat, and worthlessness. They sensed an inability to successfully cope with the realities of their harsh existence. Unable to find sufficient work to maintain themselves and/or their families at even the bare minimal level of their white fellow sufferers, they were often able to survive only by the monthly issues from the welfare programs sponsored by the federal government and its allotments of powdered milk, eggs and salt-pork from the local commissary. This was supplemented by the timely and welcome efforts of charitable community organizations such as the Salvation Army and the local Kiwanis Clubs that distributed clothing and furniture. The difficulties of the tasks of survival for those who were the poorest in the community during the Great Depression were so disabling and disheartening that many of them often felt little incentive to pursue basic levels of education or skilled training. Instead, they became discouraged and often took to petty crime such as stealing. More than a few became alcohol and/or drug victims. The children in their midst became pictures of dejection and frequently felt themselves to be "outcasts."

Since the community was so small and too lacking in the financial means to support even a few black persons who were professionally trained within their midst, they had almost no models of success among them. There were few persons among them who might have otherwise provided some vision and/or incentives for overcoming the prevailing plight. This

was especially true for the youths in the community who, in those days, did not even have the advantage of teachers who looked like them and who might have provided much-needed inspiration and aspiration. This stark scenario was reality for many of those who were the poorest in the African American community of Ann Arbor and who had been among the new arrivals in the very early 1930s, as the most difficult days of the depression were making their most severe impact. The Gulleys and the Pattersons were numbered among this group of strugglers. With the aid of the Saints Among Us, they sought to create a haven, and a sense of community.

Those Saints consisted of individuals in the African American community (and a few whites as well) who openly displayed a commitment to be helpful and to encourage those most severely weighted down by these heavy realities of life in Ann Arbor. Against these realities, the Saints helped to create a caring community and a sense of belonging for those who were most severely affected by these overwhelming conditions.

Many of the Saints Among Us were active in the churches and in the Community Center, which was named in honor of the creative work of that African American Man of Letters in the region - - the poet, and literary genius Paul Laurence Dunbar, who had been a native of Dayton, Ohio. Of course there were other Saints who were not actively affiliated with either the church or with the Dunbar Community Center. I will mention some of them later in this writing, for they too, had strong positive impacts upon others and me in our community. It is, however, of real significance to note that African American heroes such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, George Washington Carver, Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, and others, were not brought to the attention of the youngsters living in our community during our public school days. It required self-initiative and independent inquiry into sources that were unknown to us as pre-teens and teen-agers for us to benefit from the valuable experiences of those heroes and the inspiring stories of their "overcoming." With the exception of the timely and wonderful accident of my interaction with one of the leading male actors/singers/all-American athletes of my youth--the great Paul Robeson, these benefits

came much later during my post secondary and graduate study years, well after the so-called "formative" years. It is important for me to note that the written record of the experience of those heroes might have provided important incentives and motivations early in my life and in the lives of my peers had we only been exposed to them. The near-ideal time for this exposure would have been during our pre-secondary public school days.

My unlikely interaction with Mr. Paul Robeson came about as a result of a most unimaginable, coincidental, and fairy-tale like happening. Mr. Blackburn (I have forgotten his first name) lived on Beakes Street and worked as a cook in the Pretzel Bell, which was a favorite restaurant/drinking establishment located in downtown Ann Arbor. Many University of Michigan students frequented this spot. It was, in fact, such a favorite "hang-out" for those students that it became a well-known and honored tradition for them to celebrate their turning twenty-one years of age by drinking their first "legal" beer(s) in the P-Bell, as they named it.

Mr. Blackburn, one of my important Saints, was a man of very slight stature, who shared a fate similar to my mother, in that he also suffered from very severe attacks of asthma. Despite this, he served for several years, as one of the favorite cooks in the P-Bell. He knew of me because one of my favorite early jobs was a shoeshine boy. Mr. Blackburn also knew me because I frequently sang solos in the churches and in the Dunbar Center where he often attended. As a shoeshine boy, I was considered one of the best in town, and on football game weekends, when the P-Bell was filled to overflowing, I often set up a shoeshine box in the men's restroom of that establishment where I earned generous tips from the fairly-well-inebriated students, and other patrons, in town for the football games.

Mr. Blackburn also knew me fairly well because the house in which he rented a room was accessible to our house on Fifth Avenue by a short walk through the back yard of his dwelling, which led immediately to our backyard - - we had no fences! He would often come to our house to share a drink with my stepfather, Preacher, and to commiserate with my mother on the subject of their mutual sufferings from asthma.

One day, Mr. Blackburn came to our house and asked my mother if he could take me to see the Shakespeare play Othello. A student who was a fan of Mr. Blackburn's cooking had given him the tickets. The student figured Mr. Blackburn would appreciate this play since one of the stars appearing in the play was black, as was Mr. Blackburn. He was referring to the singer/actor Paul Robeson. Responding enthusiastically to this offer, Mr. Blackburn accepted the gift and came immediately to ask my mother if he could take me to see this important singer/actor. He believed that I could definitely benefit from witnessing Mr. Robeson in his performance of the title role of this play.

On the day of the performance, I accompanied Mr. Blackburn to the Majestic Theater which was located just off the center of the main campus of the University of Michigan. (This theater, which no longer exists, was located in the same spot as is Dooley's bar, ironically, one of the current favorite student pubs.) Mr. Blackburn and I entered the theater, sat in the balcony, and witnessed what I thought was, at the beginning, a fairly uninteresting and boring presentation of a play, spoken in hard-to-understand English with exaggerated hand and body movements and meaningless facial expressions. That was until Mr. Paul Robeson - - he of booming bass-baritone voice and large, imposing stature - - came on stage and virtually dominated every scene he was in. I still did not totally understand all of the words, but that no longer mattered. I was witnessing a powerful black male actor, and for the first time during that evening, I began to notice that the other main actors, Jose Ferrer, and Uta Hagen, were interacting with equal dramatic effectiveness with Mr. Robeson. I was, from that point on, swept up in this amazing play and mesmerized by the histrionics of these three world-class actors!

Close to the end of the play, just after Othello dramatically takes the life of Desdemona, Mr. Blackburn snatched me up from my seat and insisted that it was time for us to go. I was by then utterly entranced and wanted to resist our leaving but I didn't because Mr. Blackburn, though slight of stature, was overpowering in his insistence that we leave. He hurriedly led me down to the stage door entrance. We were first in line as an

attendant opened the door and said we could come into the backstage area and meet Mr. Robeson. The great Othello came out of his dressing room. Mr. Blackburn proudly introduced me to him as "Ann Arbor's own little Paul Robeson," causing me one of the greatest and most memorably embarrassing moments of my youth! That experience fairly well sealed my aspiration to become a singer. I went back to the Jones School Library and read all the books it contained on this Paul Robeson. I learned that he was a Phi Beta Kappa scholar, a superb actor on the stage and in movies. He was also an All American football player, a graduate of Rutgers University, and of the Law School at Columbia University. He was a leading concert singer, and a civil rights activist of international fame! From that moment on, I was never quite the same student in Jones school after witnessing the tremendous presence and artistry of Paul Robeson as Othello!

In fact, many of the most inspiring and insightful examples of African American successes first became known to me decades later. This was a welcome and totally unexpected "bonus" resulting from my being hired to teach music in two institutions of higher learning, after completing my Masters of Music Degree at the University of Michigan. These institutions were Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia, both historically African American Institutions of higher Education. In both environments, I found myself among learned scholars, artists, and intellectuals - - all African American! These were the very first times for such environments to influence my learning and, more importantly, my self-image. In important ways, I was prepared for this cultural experience by the intervention of Mr. Blackburn and his insistence on my not only seeing Paul Robeson's portrayal of Othello, but also on my learning of Robeson's many varied accomplishments.

The Saints Among Us included males and females, young adults, and senior citizens. They possessed no special material means and very often, had received no formal or special training. They were endowed, however, with a special sense of commitment to the adults and youths whom they could influence. They were determined that the youths should be encouraged to achieve greater success in and contribute greater value to

the community than had ever been possible for them before. They tended to include in their focus even those who seemed least likely to attain special success in life so that they could be urged and pushed to achieve their maximum potential in spite of the limitations and difficulties facing them in the schools and in the larger society. No matter how seemingly inconsequential their acts of encouragement, no matter how meager the offerings of material assistance they were able to provide, the Saints freely gave to the youths and adults being served a sense of fervor, commitment, and determination to succeed and overcome. They were not always successful, but they were there, urging and pushing, and not always in the most gentle of fashions.