

## VI. A Fight for Equality in Education

The struggle of black families to obtain adequate schooling for their children within the Santa Cruz County public school system is well-illustrated in the story that appears below.

The article was written by Carolyn Swift, local historian and newspaper reporter, and appeared originally in the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian of February 22, 1978. We are most grateful to Miss Swift and to the Pajaronian for allowing us to reproduce it here:

### SCHOOL FOR 'COLORED' WATSONVILLE'S STRUGGLE FOR BALANCED EDUCATION GOES BACK NEARLY 100 YEARS

by Carolyn Swift

On a summer's morning in a rural farming town, nearly two dozen black children were assembled under protective guard as they waited to start their first day at the community "white" school.

Most townfolk thought resident blacks were overstepping "the color line," with their arrogant demands for an equal, integrated education; and there was talk that morning of a riot by whites bent on keeping separate schools.

The town was Watsonville and the date was July, 1879. The confrontation (ultimately settled in court) was both a daring, successful bid for open schools and a precedent to continuing struggles by oppressed racial minorities to obtain a balanced education in the Pajaro Valley.

Sandy Lydon, chairman of the Cabrillo College history department, detailed early experiences of Watsonville's black population last Thursday during the college's observance of Black History Week. He explained the incident of 99-years-ago and told of the black families who saw education as an avenue to the mainstream of American life.

Written accounts of blacks in California during the 19th century are few, Lydon said, but it is evident those who migrated here in the 1850s came to avoid the intolerance they had known elsewhere.

"They came to make a fresh start, to get away from the hassles," he said, "Unfortunately, those hassles were already here. Intolerance had come with the immigrants, and was in some ways even intensified."

There was a fierce hostility aimed at Spanish-speaking Californians from the 1850s through the 1870s, Lydon said. Although brutal violence was later centered in the Pajaro Valley, the racism and anti-Californio sentiment initially spread from a concentrated Yankee population (including many Southerners) that first gained a stronghold on lands surrounding the Mission Santa Cruz.

For this reason, ethnic minorities tended from the start to settle southward--and more than 75 percent of the county's black population came to Watsonville.

As a farming community, Watsonville also attracted a greater ethnic mix to serve as a labor source, and these workers--the native Indians and Californios, Mexicans, Chinese, and blacks--were victims without civil rights.

Since the slavery debate was an economic and political issue in western territories, the immigration of blacks was permitted and slavery was outlawed when California became a state in 1850-- although slave owners were allowed to reclaim fugitives up to 1858. Blacks who settled here were still vulnerable as long as they were forbidden to testify in court, and they did without this privilege until 1863. It was only after ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870 that blacks could vote and serve as jurors.

Considering the near-random lynching of Spanish-speaking people and intolerance of the vigilante years, it was indeed a bold move for a black man to insist on integrated education for his children.

But Robert Johnson was a man who understood the political process as a ticket to civil rights. An illiterate black farmer from Tennessee with a large family, Johnson and his wife Sarah bought land in Watsonville in 1858--and that same year a black parent approached the school asking that his children be admitted.

From census reports of 1860-1870, Lydon said he determined Johnson was about forty in 1860, with six children ages 1-11 years. By 1870, the family had grown to 10 children from ages 2-21 years, and Johnson headed one of the dominant black families in the Pajaro Valley.

"This remarkable family will be the center of a controversy in Watsonville that will stretch over a dozen years," Lydon said.

The controversy began when two of Johnson's children were allowed to sit at the back of the five-year-old Watsonville schoolhouse in 1858. Even though the instructor, "Dr. Miller," gave his black students lessons separately from the others, white parents demanded complete segregation. When Miller refused, several families withdrew and set up a private school.

Georgiana Bruce Kirby, a suffragist and abolitionist living in Santa Cruz, recorded her reaction to this event in a diary. In July of 1858, she wrote:

"I heard last week there was a fuss in the common school at Watsonville about two colored children, nice, intelligent, well

behaved children all say, but disgraced by their skin. I understand that the children are admitted but put off by themselves, poor things, and not allowed to take places no matter how much they out-spelled those above them. The more violently pro-slavery do not permit their children to go to school at all. The ignorant white people from the slave states are the curse of California. They are so stupid and so conceited they think one man (to-wit, themselves) just as good as another, providing there be not one least drop of African blood in them."

Toward the end of the Civil War, blacks in California began to push for justice in education. The Pajaro Valley District made a move toward educational provision for blacks in 1864, when a "colored school" was established in a private home. But when the war ended and the Civil Rights Bill passed over President Andrew Johnson's veto in 1866, a black parent again approached the district and as a taxpayer demanded an equal education for black children.

An article in the "Pajaro Times," on September 15, 1866, reported that the parent wanted to enroll his children directly in the white school, on the "grounds that he was taxed for the support of the school, and, under the provision of the Civil Rights Bill, his children were entitled to the benefits of the school."

Trustees decided to raise funds for a separate school building and quickly obtained community pledges for \$1,300. But money easily promised was slowly paid. In October the district threatened to integrate the white school until subscriptions were obtained. Funds were then promptly collected.

The next month, Johnson offered part of his own land, "to be used as a school site for a school house to which children shall be admitted irrespective of color for the purposes of education..."

A deed signed November 5, 1866, contained an agreement by trustees to maintain the school at least three months a year except in times of war or invasion. There was also a provision that "should the school not be maintained for any year in time of peace then this instrument shall be void and the land and premises herein described shall revert to said party of the first part..."

Construction then began on the "colored school" that now stands as a part of the building, a private home, at 507 E. Lake Avenue.

The school served about 20 students and was open 10 months a year in the early 1870s, Lydon said, and Watsonville boasted that "proper care" had been taken of its black population.

There were about 50 black residents in Watsonville in 1870, and when the 15th Amendment was ratified that March, a celebration party was held. By April 16, some 13 black males had registered to vote--including Robert Johnson and his son Benjamin--and in May, two blacks were called for jury duty.

"By 1878, the black community thought it was time separate-but-equal was changed to just equal," Lydon said, "so parents gave a petition to the school district asking that their children be permitted to enroll at the white school."

Trustees refused, and the Pajaronian gave the following opinion on July 18, 1878:

"The colored people have hurt themselves in the town. As yet there is no common ground between the two races, probably never will be..." the editor said. "We believed in the emancipation of the slaves, believe in giving them many rights, but do not believe in allowing them to attend white schools."

In retaliation, blacks took their children out of the colored school and began a boycott. Eventually trustees closed the school. When it reopened in October, 1878, parents again asked to enter their children at the white school. Trustees refused, the boycott continued, and Johnson filed suit to bring a test case to court.

Perhaps in fear the school property might revert to Johnson's ownership, trustees surrendered to demands of black parents in July, 1879--a year after the boycott began. Whites protested with an injunction to stop the admission of black children.

"It was the school principal, John W. Linscott, who gets caught," Lydon added. "The district trustees told him to admit the blacks in spite of the court order."

Linscott obeyed, the blacks were admitted, and the principal was found in contempt for refusal to obey an injunction.

Judge Belden resolved the battle for integration with a court hearing in Salinas. He dissolved the contempt charge against Linscott and then ruled that while the district once provided a separate-but-equal school, it had been closed by the boycott, and therefore, failed to exist. And since there was no separate school to meet the legal requirement for education, the judge further ruled that black children from Watsonville must be admitted to the school for whites.

Johnson and the black families of Watsonville had won...

There is now a struggle underway in the Pajaro Valley, the instructor added, that is similar in many ways to the challenge of a century ago. The story of Robert Johnson is a reminder of a legal and moral charge to provide educational institutions open to everyone, Lydon said.

...C. Swift

About the same time Johnson was waging his battle for integration and equality of education in Watsonville, a young black man was attending Santa Cruz High School. He was in the second class ever to graduate from the school, one of four graduates, in 1880.

Joseph S. Francis is not well known locally but became well known in San Francisco, where he went after leaving Santa Cruz. He worked for many years as a clerk for the Southern Pacific railroad, but became prominent as the editor of the Western Outlook, a weekly newspaper published in San Francisco, devoted to the interest of black people on the West Coast.

In 1900 in a commemorative high school issue of the Santa Cruz Surf newspaper, Francis wrote these words:

After the lapse of twenty years let me say honestly and with emphasis that I consider those spent in attendance at Santa Cruz High School as

the three most profitable years of my life. The training there received and the daily contact and associations were such as to equip me in a way that was most valuable for meeting the many trials strewn along my pathway. There have been times when obstacles arose that seemed insurmountable. . . . The better a young man is prepared for life's battles, the easier the same are to overcome, and from a racial standpoint, the high school training has been of special advantage to me.

A residence of many years in Santa Cruz among a people who were always liberal and who never threw a single obstacle in my way on account of color, gave me no conception at all of race prejudice. But when I left there and went where I was not acquainted, I met it. In some cases, the form was acute. But thanks to high school training which gave me the ability to plead my own cause, I was able to win fellowship and recognition in social, fraternal, and business affairs, which would never have been accorded me otherwise. . . .

Education is the lever that will move aside much of the prejudice existing against my race today. . . .

... J. S. Francis

We can't leave this chapter without mentioning the contribution to the county's school system made by another black man--Louden Nelson (also known as London Nelson), who came to Santa Cruz as a slave with his master from Tennessee.

In Santa Cruz Nelson gained his freedom and turned to mending shoes and raising vegetables for a living. His cabin was located on

what is today Water Street, near the San Lorenzo River. As he sat in his cabin working on boots and shoes, he had only to raise his eyes to see the children playing in the schoolyard up on Mission Hill. The school was Mission Hill School, newly built (1857), but already having financial difficulties.

Nelson made a will, leaving all his worldly goods and entire estate to Santa Cruz District 1, for the education of children. He signed the document with an "X" because he could neither read nor write.

Nelson died in 1860 and was buried in Evergreen Cemetery. His worldly goods consisted of the lot on which his cabin stood, which sold for \$300, a note for \$35, \$7 in Santa Cruz script, household goods worth \$15, and a crop of onions valued at \$15.

The \$372 from the ex-slave's estate was used in 1875 to purchase a lot adjoining the school property. Today the property is the entrance to the administrative offices of the Santa Cruz City School District on Mission Hill.

Traditionally eighth grade students of Mission Hill Junior High School (now located on King Street less than a mile away from the Mission Hill site) go each year to decorate the grave of Loudon Nelson on the anniversary of his death, May 17.



The Santa Cruz County Rural School Band of 1934. William Morey, the county's supervisor of instrumental music, is standing at far left. The band won statewide renown.



The Rural Schools' Program at the County Fair of 1936.



Faculty of Bay View School--date uncertain, but probably late 1920s or early '30s. Janie Stocking, County Superintendent of Schools from 1935 to 1945, served as principal of Bay View from 1924 to 1935, and is pictured above, third from left.



The "Music Man"--William W. Morey, supervisor of instrumental music for the County Office of Education from 1930 to 1945. A traveling teacher, he provided musical instruction in schools throughout the county. Over a thousand students learned to play the harmonica or band instruments.



John W. Linscott became County Superintendent of Schools in 1885, and served for more than 20 years. Altogether he spent 55 years in the field of education--50 of them in Santa Cruz County. A school in Watsonville is named after him.



Edith E. Fikes, County Superintendent from 1945 to 1955, the fourth woman to serve in that post. She also was teacher and then principal at Gault School for over 30 years.