

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

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Reflections on Black History, Part 2

**BLACK LIFE IN THE
SACRAMENTO VALLEY
1919-1934**

(Part 2 of Reflections on Black History)

*By Thomas C. Fleming
Edited by Max Millard*



INTRODUCTION

The Sacramento Valley is the northern part of the Central Valley, a rich and fertile agricultural region that runs for 450 miles down the center of California. The Sacramento Valley derives its name from the mighty Sacramento River which provides its lifeblood, flowing from the mountains of Northern California to San Francisco Bay.

The valley played a pivotal role in the settlement of the West. In 1848, gold was discovered in the American River, a tributary of the Sacramento River, triggering the California Gold Rush and sparking a population explosion on the West Coast. Many towns in the valley trace their origin to that period.

Sacramento, on the southern end of the valley, became the state capital and the western terminus for the transcontinental railroad. Chico, the setting for most stories in this volume, lies near the geographic center of the valley. In a sense, the story of Chico *is* the history of the West.

Thomas C. Fleming was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1907. He lived in Chico from 1919-26, and again from 1932-34. In 1944 he became founding editor of the *Reporter* newspaper in San Francisco, which later merged with another black weekly, the *Sun*, to become the *Sun-Reporter*. The oldest working black journalist on the West Coast, he continues to write editorials for the newspaper each week from his home.

Thomas Fleming's *Reflections on Black History* first appeared in the *Sun-Reporter* during Black History Month of 1996. The enthusiastic response from readers led to its continuation as a regular weekly column.

The original series began with Fleming's memoirs dating back to 1926, when he graduated from high school in Chico, California, moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and got his first full-time job, as a bellhop on a ship of the Admiral Line.

In 1997, in collaboration with Max Millard, a former copy editor and staff writer for the *Sun-Reporter*, Fleming started recording his memoirs on tape, going back to his earliest years. In more than 100 hours of interviews, Millard probed for details missing from the original columns. Then he transcribed the tapes and blended Fleming's writings with his spoken words. This volume is the result.

Fleming's other historical writings can be found on his web page at

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Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Sacramento Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Dedicated to Carlton B. Goodlett, a good friend

CONTENTS

1. **Arrival in Chico**
2. **One Family's Story**
3. **First Impressions**
4. **The Agricultural Life**
5. **Black Society**
6. **Race Relations**
7. **Newspaper Days**
8. **Bootleg Booze and Early Radio**
9. **California's First Black Politicians**
10. **A Boxing Match**
11. **Racial Tension**
12. **Job Opportunities**
13. **Goodbye to Chico**
14. **Back Again**

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

1. ARRIVAL IN CHICO

In the spring of 1919, when I was 11, I boarded the train in Jacksonville, Florida for Chico, California to rejoin my mother and younger sister Kate, whom I hadn't seen for seven years.

My parents had divorced in Jacksonville in 1912, and my mother had moved to the town of Chico in north central California. She wanted to take me with her, but my paternal grandmother hid me, so my mother had to leave me behind. From 1916 to 1919 I lived in Harlem with my father. Now I was coming to an entirely new situation.

It was 11:30 at night when the Southern Pacific reached the depot in Chico. Mama smothered me with hugs and kisses, then introduced me to my stepfather, a genial giant named Moses Mosley. We walked from the depot to the first house where I would sleep on the West Coast.

Katie had lain awake waiting to see her older brother, of whom she had heard a lot but had no memories. I guess I had become a sort of myth to her. In Chico, Kate felt left out, because she had no other siblings to stand up for her.

Before Mama left for the depot, she put a lot of water to heat on the stove and placed a galvanized washing tub—very fashionable then—in the middle of the kitchen floor.

When we came in, she fed me. Then she poured the hot water in the tub, added some cold water and tested it with her index finger. When she thought it had reached the proper temperature, she began to undress me.

After four days and nights of travel without changing any of my clothing or even taking off my shoes, I smelled very gamy. I tried to resist out of bashfulness, and she gave me a gentle slap on the head and told me that she was my mother and that I did not have to be ashamed in front of her.

I wore long black stockings and knee pants, which were the vogue for boys then. A boil on one of my feet had burst, and the stocking was stuck to my foot. As my mother was placing me in the tub, she examined the sore, then put both stocking and foot in the water, and finally worked the stocking off.

That was perhaps the most exhilarating bath I had taken in my short life. The warm water made me drowsy, and I suddenly felt very tired. Mama took me into the living room and placed me in the bed alongside my sister. I did not think too well of sleeping with my sister, and she thought likewise. She informed me that it was her bed, and to keep on one side, which I did.

Mama was a very decent person. She never took anything that didn't belong to her, and she always gave you a straight answer. She would keep her mouth shut and not say anything, rather than tell a lie. She had the greatest influence on me, to be honest in your relationships with other people in the world. She was the most wonderful person I have ever known.

2. ONE FAMILY'S STORY

The story of my family's migration to California from the Deep South was a typical one.

My mother's maiden name was Jackson, and her family came originally from Montgomery, Alabama. Thomas M. Jackson, one of my mother's older brothers, volunteered in the Spanish-American War in 1898, probably as a way to get out of Montgomery. They shipped him to the Philippines, and he fought in one of the all-black infantry units. After the Americans defeated the Spanish forces, the U.S. Army stayed over there for occupation purposes for a while, and my uncle came back around 1901.

San Francisco was a point of embarkation, and after the war, like a number of black soldiers, he decided to stay. He got a job as a clerk in the post office right away, and made San Francisco his home. This pattern would be repeated on a bigger scale following World War II.

The next to arrive in California was my step-grandmother, Annie Powers, who always regarded us as family, even though she wasn't blood kin. She was my maternal grandfather's last wife, who had married Grandpa Jackson while my mother was still a little girl. She stayed with him until he died. Annie became a maid for a wealthy white family in Montgomery, and when they went on a trip to New York, they took her along. She had never been out of the South before. She went with them on a cross-country trip by train to San Francisco, then to Hawaii. When they returned to San Francisco, Granny met with Uncle Tom, and he told her she'd be a fool to go back to Alabama. So she left the white family and stayed behind.

In San Francisco, she met a black man named Peter Powers, who was much older than her. He owned quite a bit of land in Chico and was looking for a wife. So she married him and moved up there. When my mother got divorced in Florida, Granny invited her to come to Chico, and sent her a train ticket, because my mother had no money.

Like almost every black woman in Chico, Mama worked as a domestic for a white family. It was very tiring, because she had to keep the house clean, do the laundry and cook the meals. She worked 10 hours a day, easily. Domestic workers received such low wages. I don't think Mama ever earned over \$45 a month.

Moses Mosley, Mama's second husband, was a nephew of Granny Powers. By the time I came out, Kate was calling him Papa, because she didn't get to know her real father. Moses seemed to be genuinely fond of her, but he looked at me with suspicious eyes, because I called him Mr. Mosley. Or we both would look directly at one another and just start talking. It was a strange thing. I couldn't call him Dad, because I had just left my father in New York.

Our relationship was always wary toward one another. We had a sort of truce between us. He would tell my mother if he wanted me to do something; he wouldn't tell me directly. He handled me very gingerly, because I guess he didn't really know what to do about me.

Kate and I had dinner off quite a few leftovers that Mama brought from the white folks' kitchen. They weren't going to eat it the next day anyway. It was customary all over the country for black domestics to cook enough food so that they could bring some home for their families.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Refrigerators were just coming into being, and could probably be found in restaurants and soda fountains, but they weren't yet popular in homes. The ice man would traverse the streets every day. Most of the wagons were horse-drawn until about 1923, when they started to become motorized.

My world was much bigger than Mama's. She read until late at night—mostly the Bible, or literature about her church. She belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Chico, but she would sometimes go to the Pentecostal Church—also called the Holy Rollers—in Oroville, about 20 miles south.

I always looked at the Pentecostals with cynical eyes. When they got to that stuff about speaking in tongues, I'd be laughing out loud. The members would go to one another's homes practically every night of the week, and the only time I was forced to attend was when it was in our house.

Mama never complained. She died when she was 57 from kidney failure. I always felt it was because she worked hard all her life, and was not a big person. She was very short but determined, standing at 4 feet 11 inches with high heels.

3. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The night I got off the train, I was not too impressed with Chico, from what I could see in the dark. It was simply not New York City, nor did it seem in a class with Jacksonville. Chico had 65 or 70 blacks out of a total population of about 10,000.

The next morning, I looked around at the acres and acres of empty land in the neighborhood and told my mother, "I want to go back to New York." But I began to like Chico better as the time rolled by.

My sister helped me identify peach, apricot and fig trees in the yard of our home, plus almond trees, gooseberry vines, raspberries and blackberries, which were all still green.

My mother enrolled me in Salem Street School, which was for students from first to third grade. My father didn't send any records out with me, so I was put in the same class with my sister. My teacher's name was Virginia Wright, and we took to one another right off. I became sort of special, because in geography class, I was the only student who could talk of Florida and New York from first-hand experience.

The school had an old-style bell in a dome, and Miss Wright gave me the job of ringing the bell every morning to call students to their classes. She also arranged for me to beat the drum, so that everyone would form a line in front of the door. I had to get downstairs quickly every day after ringing the assembly bell, and start drumming out the one-two cadence.

While at Salem, I encountered my first experience of anti-Semitism. The Korn brothers, a pair of Jewish twins, whose father operated a dry goods store in Chico, were always thinking up pranks. Some of the students did not appreciate their humor and would attack them physically, calling them "dirty Jews" and "kikes" in a tone that upset me, even at 11 years old.

I had seen how the Jews lived in New York; the ones in East Harlem were just as poor as the blacks. I'd heard people calling them names there, and it had stayed with me. Whenever I heard it, I realized that the name-caller felt the same negative way about me, because of my color.

Neither of the twins was handy with his fists, nor was I, but I would wade into the fight. Whenever they started getting embroiled, they would run towards me. I finally announced that anyone who hit "Korny"—that was what I called them—would have to hit me.

I met Henry Herriford, another young black boy, my first day in Chico. Mom brought me to the house of Granny Powers, who had invited a number of people over to meet the new arrival to the tiny black community. Henry and I struck it off right away, and were together every day from then on.

Henry was a natural outdoorsman. He didn't care anything about school—he dropped out after fourth or fifth grade—but he was a superb student of nature. He knew plant and animal life better than anyone I had ever met, and we formed a tight friendship that lasted until we both left Chico.

He began to teach me things like fishing, hunting and going to the creeks to watch tadpoles develop. He taught me about blue gills—an excellent pan fish—plus carp, suckers and catfish.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

When it became warm, Henry and I would go swimming, along with some other youths, mostly white. I could not swim at all, but Henry furnished me some water wings, and I lost my fear of the water. When I saw him dive in, I dove in right behind him, using the dog paddle style at first, then doing the overhand stroke, as he did.

Henry and I used to fish in a backwater of the Sacramento River that was named after Sam Childers, a black man who had lived in the area years before. People called it Big Nigger Sam's Slough.

He showed me a lot of tricks he had learned from the Indian village outside Chico. When he wanted to cook some fish, he would cover them with mud, dig a little pit and make a good fire, and put the fish on the live coals. The steam from the mud would poach the fish. We always brought a loaf of bread to eat with the fish.

Henry had a way to guarantee that whenever he went out fishing, he would not come home empty-handed. The first time I witnessed his emergency fishing strategy was a day after three hours of trying, when none of our gang had attracted even a nibble. Henry took a metal can—the kind used for Crisco vegetable oil or Karo syrup—and wrapped bailing wire tightly around it, then attached a piece of heavy metal, like the lead sinker on a fishing line.

Inside the can, Henry placed some carbide, a white powder chemical used in the headlamps of automobiles. He sprinkled a small amount of water on the carbide; it started fizzing, and a mist began to rise. He quickly replaced the top, then dropped the can into the slough. In about five minutes, when the gas had built up, the can exploded under water. Large numbers of stunned fish floated to the surface, so we rowed out to the middle of the slough, picked them up and put them into a gunny sack.

We all got enough—in fact, more than our families could use—so we took the rest to Chinatown and sold them.

Many of the things we did were illegal, but fishing and hunting licenses were unknown to us, and we never saw a game warden. We all looked at hunting and fishing as a means of supplying food for the table.



Chico Fire House on Main Street between 4th and 5th, next to the City Hall, ca. 1925.
(Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico, and Chico Fire Department)

4. THE AGRICULTURAL LIFE

Chico is located in the middle of the Sacramento Valley, an agricultural region which starts in Sacramento, the state capital, and goes about 160 miles north, as far as Redding. The farms have rich soil and require a lot of irrigation, because it doesn't rain for about seven months out the year.

The valley is fed by the Sacramento River and its tributaries. In 1848, gold was discovered in one of those tributaries, the American River, which set off the California Gold Rush. Many towns in the valley date back to that time, and have had a black presence for nearly 150 years. Chico's black residents have been documented back to the 1850s.

Every house in Chico had at least one citrus tree in its yard—orange, grapefruit or tangerine. I also became acquainted with persimmon, quince and loquat, all of which grew in Chico. My mother canned peaches and apricots every year. And we always had eggs, because my stepfather raised chickens on the side, to add to the income. Just about everybody in Chico grew vegetables in their backyard—string beans, tomatoes, lettuce, collard greens and mustard greens.

The streets were lined with stately black walnut trees. In the fall, we would gather the walnuts, crack them and pick out the flesh, then pour a mixture of walnuts and figs in one of those hand meat grinders and make patties to eat in the winter. We would sell some of the walnut meat to confectionary stores which made their own ice cream, or used it in their soda mixtures.

Our family ate well, but we didn't have money. I had to start working when I was about 13. Summertime brought summer work harvesting the varieties of crops which are synonymous with the name California. You got 5 cents for picking a 40-pound lug of peaches. Henry and I would go out early and work until we knew we'd earned \$2. Then we'd knock off and go swimming. It would be 90 degrees every day, from around June until September. Other times I harvested prunes, olives and oranges, or worked in the rice fields, loading 100-pound sacks of rice onto a wagon.

There were a lot of ranches in the Chico area. In my early years there, I would see cowboys on horseback, driving herds of cattle down Main Street, or shepherds and their dogs coming through the middle of Chico with whole flocks of sheep.

In Red Bluff, about 40 miles north, I watched the performance of two magnificent black cowboys, Jesse Stahl and Ty Stokes. They competed throughout the West, wherever rodeos were held, because there weren't separate rodeos for blacks and whites.

Stahl was so good that none of the white competitors wanted him to enter any events, and he was paid just to give exhibitions of his skills.

Stokes became the comedian of the rodeo. Like Stahl, he could probably do anything better than the other bronco busters, but he wanted to make sure that he made some money. He would try to antagonize the bulls; they would come charging at him, and he'd do all sorts of funny flip-flops to get out of the way. He was entertaining, and he knew what he was doing all the time.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Henry knew everyone in town, and one of his close friends was a white boy named Tommy Stewart, whose father, Bob Stewart, owned a spread of land in which he had built a slaughterhouse. Henry and I frequently went out to their ranch, where we could ride a donkey, horse, or goat, or attempt to bulldog calves, as we saw the cowboys do. We always had a meal at the home with the family and with some of the young males who worked in the slaughterhouse.

The senior Stewart used to let Henry and me clean up after the livestock was killed. Our job was to hose down the cement floor and sweep it of all entrails except the liver, heart and other edible portions. This experience turned me against eating pork, for we swept everything to the hogs in the yard, and I noted that they ate everything, including fetuses which tumbled out of the stomach of a sow as she was gutted.

A word about blacks in the ranching business: Chico had none. But in Red Bluff, the Williams family had about 3000 acres, most of it in grain and the rest in beef cattle. The founding father of the Williams clan came to California during the Gold Rush days in a covered wagon. I never learned whether he was a slave or not.

Two railroads stopped at Chico, the Sacramento Northern and the Southern Pacific. One day, Henry and I were eating some fruit near the depot when a passenger got off and offered us money for our peaches. We got an idea to become youthful entrepreneurs.

We loaded up baskets with apricots, figs, peaches, and apples, and starting that very evening. When #14 arrived, we paraded up and down, exhibiting our wares.

We did this for a couple of weeks or so, and usually sold out. Then the vendors of candies, magazines and beverages noted that we were interfering with their captive buyers on the trains, and complained to the Southern Pacific about our being on their property. They in turn notified the local police, who told us to stop. We were just trying to pick up a few honest pennies.

Hadwick Thompson, the only black to farm rice in Northern California, lived in Willows, 25 miles west of Chico. He had attended the University of California's College of Agriculture at Davis, and was a veteran of World War I, who had served overseas in France.

When he came back, everybody in that little town loved him. He was invited to join the Willows chapter of the American Legion, and they named an athletic field after him. Some white people never let him know that he was black. He owned a lot of acreage up there, and stayed in Willows until he died.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Main Street, Chico, California, circa 1928. A familiar sight to Thomas Fleming, who lived in the town from 1919-26, then returned to attend Chico State College from 1932-34.

Courtesy of Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.

5. BLACK SOCIETY

The house that we rented in Chico was owned by Mrs. Johnson, a middle-age mulatto widow who took great pride in the fact that she was very light-skinned. Although she had been blind for a number of years, she never failed to ask about pigmentation or lack of the same, whenever she met someone new.

The morning after my arrival, she began to question about other people: what was their color and hair texture? She didn't ask me about myself. I answered her questions, but I understood this sort of pathology even then. I felt sorry for her, because she depended upon other people to do just about everything for her.

Most fair-skinned blacks of that day were very much like old lady Johnson—frustrated individuals trying to find themselves in a racist society, while looking down on their darker-hued brethren.

The majority of blacks in Chico were natives of the town, who had not gone to school beyond 5th grade. They were a variety of shades. Some were the offspring of an interracial liaison, and you couldn't tell whether they were black or white. Many of them had that color complex: they tried not to get too close to people of my color. Some of them got by passing.

During those years, people who were light-skinned would sometimes talk about my being "black," but I never let it irritate me too much, because they were treated by the white world the same way I was.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, the only black church in Chico, had a steady membership of 25 or 30. Church was held every other week because the congregation shared a minister with Red Bluff, and he preached there on alternate Sundays. I never heard of a white person attending the services. But I let church alone early.

In 1919, I don't think there were 60,000 blacks living in the whole state of California. Blacks in most small towns in the Sacramento Valley constantly saw one another, because people had cars, and they thought nothing of driving from one end of the valley to the other. The roads were all two-lane, but you didn't have nearly as many cars as you do now.

Besides the black churches, Chico and other towns had branches of black fraternal organizations, which were national in origin. Blacks throughout the country were not admitted to any of the white-run fraternal orders, such as the Masons, the Elks and the Knights of Pythias. So they formed their own chapters, patterned after the white ones.

These fraternal orders were an important social force in areas of the United States with a small, widely dispersed black population, such as the Sacramento Valley. Less than 1 percent of the valley was black, but there were two black-run chapters of the Knights of Pythias—one in Chico, and another in the much larger city of Sacramento.

These organizations planned a lot of social events. Chico had a big dance every year on January 1, Emancipation Day. That was the day the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. You used to see things about it in the national black press, but it's no longer publicized.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Everybody came—all black people. They'd get a band of black musicians from Sacramento, of about eight pieces—piano, two trumpets, a trombone, two saxophones, a drum, and a tuba for the bass line, because the string bass hadn't come in style yet.

Generally, whatever blacks were doing in high school in any of those towns, you'd eventually hear about it. In Chico, Oroville, Marysville, Sacramento, Red Bluff and Redding, black youths on athletic teams in the high schools played against one another at track, baseball and basketball. And there were the band meets, which were held annually in the small town of Princeton. The bands competed against one another, and included blacks from many towns throughout the Valley.

Marysville, 45 miles south of Chico, fielded a black semi-pro baseball team, the Marysville Giants, who played ball every Sunday, and blacks within a radius of about 100 miles would come to the games. They were great social gatherings. Sacramento had a black baseball team also, and there were Japanese teams in Marysville and Sacramento that played against the black teams.

By the time I was 14 or 15, I was well aware of the activities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has waged the battle for first-class citizenship longer than any other civil rights organization in the country.

It was still a fledgling organization at that time, whose membership was perhaps 150,000 nationally. It never did achieve a million members, even though the dues were only a dollar a year. I thought that was terrible, when you consider the work it did.

The Sacramento Valley had three branches of the NAACP—in Sacramento, Marysville and Redding—and people from the surrounding area would come in to attend the meetings, maybe two or three members from each little town.

At the meetings, the NAACP looked at racial problems as being national. I just went to listen. At that period, I hadn't made my mind up that I was going to leave Chico, so I accepted things the way they were. It was not until after graduation, when I left Chico and moved to Oakland in search of a job, that my dislike of Jim Crow became an obsession to me.

Now and then I would run across a stray edition of *The Crisis*, the journal that was the editorial voice of the NAACP. Robert Bagnall, a field organizer for the NAACP from New York City, would come to Marysville each year to speak. News of his visits always spread to other towns in the Sacramento Valley, and sometimes my mother, my sister and I would go down there to hear him.

Marysville was a little smaller than Chico but had triple its black population. Just outside of Marysville was the Smith ranch, owned by a prominent black family of that name, who had about 40 acres along the Feather River. It was the site for an annual Fourth of July picnic. They would have a barbecue out on the beach, and blacks from all over Northern California would gather to swim, play games, eat and have a good time.

After the picnic, there would be a dance in a rented hall in Marysville. If blacks did not have a friend or relative to stay with, they were out of luck. The one good white-owned hotel in town would not cater to them. The Japanese operated one inn, which was always clean and

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

served blacks, and both the Japanese and the Chinese operated eating houses where blacks could get good meals.

In the 1920s, Jim Crow practices still existed in some public accommodations throughout California, such as certain hotels and restaurants. Unlike in the South, where the police power of the state was used to enforce discrimination, it was not official in California.

In most cities in the state, you couldn't get a room in the better hotels; you'd have to stay in the fleabags in the lower end of town. The best hotel in Chico was the Hotel Oaks. But blacks couldn't rent a room there. It wouldn't even hire black chambermaids.

All over California, one never knew what to expect if one was black and entered a white-owned eating place. Most of the time, restaurants that catered to middle- and upper-class whites would not serve blacks. Some places in San Francisco and Oakland refused to serve blacks as late as the 1960s.

When I would talk to the white kids at school in Chico, I'd find out about all the things they could enjoy that I couldn't. Chico had a fancy soda fountain called Price's, where all the students went after school. But they wouldn't let blacks in. They had a sign in the window: "We have the right to refuse service to anyone." And blacks all knew what it meant. If you went in, the waiter would say, "Didn't you read that sign?"

I didn't like it at all. And some of the whites that I went around with resented it. If I were with them, they would tell people off and say they weren't going in there if I couldn't go in too.

There was another soda fountain in Chico that looked just as good as Price's, owned by two guys from Greece. Everybody called it Greek's. We could go in there and get the same things. The owners were always nice to us. They must have been first generation, because they spoke with a very heavy accent.

It didn't make too much difference to me if I couldn't stay at the Hotel Oaks or eat at Price's, because I didn't have the money to go into those places anyway. But I just didn't like the idea of being stigmatized in that manner. It was a hell of a lousy way to live, to have that staying with you all the time.

I knew Price well—used to talk to him out on the street. Other than his policy, I always found him to be a very pleasant fellow. But I think he was suffering from the same disease as a lot of people who practice discrimination: he thought it was good business, that's all.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Insignia for the Knights of Pythias, a national fraternal organization that had a black chapter in Chico during Thomas Fleming's boyhood. The letters FCB stand for Friendship, Charity and Benevolence.

6. RACE RELATIONS

In Florida and New York, I had never had any solid contact with whites outside the classroom. But in Chico, I mingled with all the boys—Asian, black, Latino and white. I did all the things they did: hunting, fishing, and getting into mischief. There were about six guys that I ran around with all the time—two whites, two blacks and two Chinese. Their parents sometimes invited me to dinner at their house, and my mother invited some of the boys to ours.

But the black girls didn't mix with the white girls. The white parents might have forbidden it—I don't know. Not until years later did I realize how deeply that wounded my sister.

Because I was black, the other students—including the white kids—seemed to look upon me for leadership, which was a new experience for me.

Chico had no black section; you could live anywhere that you could afford to buy or rent property. I think most white people in the town were quite open-minded about race because any neighborhood you lived in, there would be nothing but whites all around you, and you became acquainted with everybody. It was a very gossipy little town, and whatever gossip there was about the white families, we heard it too.

But sometimes I'd be walking through different neighborhoods with Henry, my constant companion, and kids would start yelling, "Nigger, nigger, nigger!" If we chased a boy up to his front porch, the mother might come running out and say, "What are you doing to my child?" We'd say, "He called me nigger." And then she'd turn beet red and tell her son, "You shouldn't do that to people." But he had heard it at home; that's why he was doing it.

On the outskirts of Chico was a little Indian settlement. A few Indians lived in town and associated with black or white people, but most of them stayed in their village, by choice.

I was reading a lot of American history then, and my sympathy was on the side of the white settlers, because it told how they were always attacked by the Indians. But I started to question that literature when I saw the conditions in which those Indians were living in their village in Chico. It was frightful.

The Chinese segregated themselves, because they seemed to have a desire to live together for cultural reasons. Nearly every town in California had a Chinatown. Chico had two—both of them just one block long. The smaller one had mostly old men, living in red brick buildings that had been built especially for them. The bigger one, a block from city hall, was where the Hai family lived. Three of the brothers, Hong, Wing and Wong Hai, were part of our gang. The oldest brother, Kim, associated more with white kids. Some people asked me, why did I run around with those Chinese boys? I said because they were fun, and they were friends.

Their father, Chung Hai, was called the mayor of Chinatown. When he died, the family had one of those big Chinese-style funerals and put a lot of food on the grave. Then Hong went over and put a \$10 bill on there. We heard it was a Chinese custom to do that so it would pay the dead person's fare into heaven. Well, as soon as Hong got out of sight, Henry and I grabbed that \$10.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Right alongside the railroad tracks, as in other towns, they had what they called the jungle, where the hobos lived. They observed what was happening, then came over and got the food and ate it.

On Memorial Day, one of the Hai brothers put that money down on the grave again. We were waiting. But he put it right back in his pocket; he was going to make sure we didn't get it.

Chico had some Mexicans; we didn't use the word "Latino" then. Most of them worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad as section hands; they took care of the tracks so the trains could run smoothly. The company took wheels off some old boxcars, laid them alongside the tracks, and converted them into two-room cabins where the Mexicans lived. They had a lot of kids. The ones at my school took a lot of abuse, that the black kids wouldn't take.

There would probably be four or five families living together, in several boxcars. You found them right outside of most towns in California; it was part of the landscape. They might have been the only ones who wanted to do the job, because they got the lowest pay of any railroad workers.

In the 1920s, you saw whites and blacks married to one another in California, even in some small towns. But if two people from different racial groups wanted to get married on the West Coast, they would have to go up to Washington, where it was legal. California did not repeal its law against interracial marriages until 1948. In 1967, the Supreme Court ruled that all such laws were unconstitutional.

In Los Molinos, a small town located midway between Chico and Red Bluff, there was a black businessman named Ross, who operated one of the early stores that was a combination gas station and grocery store. Ross was well liked, and the people of the community did not seem to resent that he was married to a white woman.

I didn't date anyone during my four years at Chico High School, because there was no one for me to date. There were five black girls in Chico in my age group—all sisters of my friends. But I wasn't looking at them, because I saw them too often. I don't know whether there was any taboo against interracial dating at the high school, but it just never happened.

Just because there wasn't segregation in California doesn't mean there wasn't discrimination in hiring. Most professions in California were closed to black people, no matter how light they were. Apart from the blacks who owned their own businesses, I never saw a black person in the Sacramento Valley who was hired as a sales clerk at a store.

The only job that a black woman could get in Chico was as a domestic. The one exception was a woman named Tina Owens, who took two rooms in her home and opened her own beauty parlor. All of her clients were white. She had operated the same type of business in Philadelphia, where she came from.

There was a girl in Chico named Stella Edwards, who was fair-skinned and very pretty. Her mother was a maid in the home of Dr. Daniel Moulton, one of the best-known surgeons in the Sacramento Valley, and the rumor whispered was that he was her father.

Both Stella and her mother lived with Stella's grandfather, Cornelius Daily, who helped support them. He was one of the most respected black men in Chico. He had the only

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

black-owned barbershop in town, and most of his customers were whites, principally farm or ranch hands.

Stella was his oldest granddaughter, and she had brains. When she graduated from Chico High School, Cornelius had high hopes for her to become more than a domestic worker in the home of some white family. He enrolled her at Heald Business College in Chico. She took shorthand, typing, and all the other courses for preparation to be a clerk in a business office.

When Stella finished her courses, Cornelius heard there was an opening for a clerk typist at the Diamond Match Company, which had the biggest industrial plant in Chico, employing several hundred persons. Only one employee was black.

Stella went by herself and applied for the job. Because she had all the qualifications, and looked like she could be a Latin type, she was accepted.

Cornelius was so proud of his granddaughter that he accompanied her to work on her first day. While he was thanking the company officials for hiring her, they were shocked to find that Stella was a black. They promptly informed her that they had made a mistake and could not hire her.

She was as prepared as any of the other females who were going in there. But that was the policy.

Dr. Moulton probably could have helped her get into Diamond Match, because he was on the board of directors of the Sacramento Northern Railroad, and he had a lot of influence in the town.

Stella remained a domestic until she married a young black who held a civil service job with the state of California. She left Chico and moved to Sacramento.

7. NEWSPAPER DAYS

In the 1920s, Chico had two daily papers, the *Record* in the morning and the *Enterprise* in the evening. I had been reading newspapers ever since I learned to read, and felt at a loss without them. Even today, I'm very uncomfortable until I get a newspaper in my hand every day.

In August 1923, I read that President Warren G. Harding was visiting the West Coast. His train was coming down from Portland to San Francisco, and we learned it would pass through Chico about 1:00 in the morning. So all of us went down to the depot that night.

There must have been a hundred people standing there, hoping the president would show up so they could say they saw him. The train arrived; it slowed down, but it didn't stop. Of course, Harding was asleep then. He got into San Francisco early the next morning, and I think he died that evening.

I was home that night, and the next thing I knew, the circulation manager for the Chico *Record*, Charlie Deuel, was pounding on my door. "Thomas! Do you want to sell some papers? We're putting out an extra. The president died."

I was in my clothes in no time, and ran over to the *Record* office. They had assembled about 20 kids, and as the papers came off, they were giving them bundles. So we fanned out all over the town, yelling, "Extra! Extra! President dies! Extra! Extra!"

Lights were turning on; people were running out to buy a paper. Everybody wanted to see it, because there weren't any radios in the homes then. I had to go back twice to get more papers. I sold all that I got, and I made about \$6 that night, which was good for a teenager.

Harding was a Republican, and it was Republican country up there, but I didn't see any grief over his death. With President Kennedy, it was different. Kennedy was butchered. Harding died in bed, from illness. And then Kennedy was far more popular than Warren Harding was.

Harding was just a political hack. All he liked to do was play poker and drink bourbon whisky. He was a figurehead for the Republicans, because nobody knew whether he was intelligent or not. He never said anything. He went along with everything the party's leaders told him to do, and didn't make any ripples.

* * *

Another news event I remember was the World Series of 1921, when the New York Giants played the New York Yankees. I favored the Giants because my father had taken me to see them play at the Polo Ground in Harlem, which was their home park.

I was going by the office of the Chico *Enterprise* when I noticed a crowd standing outside. I stopped to see, and a person was putting the score up in the window as soon it came over the wire from Associated Press. The sportswriter would describe it very graphically, just like you'd read it in the paper—every ball thrown or fielded. He made it so realistic, it was almost like you were there.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

They posted it twice per inning, every time a team came up to bat. Those who were closest and could read the story passed the word back, and there would be discussions about the game. Many people stayed there for the whole nine innings, which was about three hours.

* * *

When I moved to Chico, I was already aware of the existence of the black press. I knew that there were both local black papers, such as the *New York Age* in Harlem, and national black papers that were sold in black neighborhoods all over the country.

I never saw a black newspaper in a store in Chico, but people subscribed by mail, and I would sometimes see them in homes. The biggest of the national black papers was the *Chicago Defender*, a crusading weekly founded by Robert Abbott. He came up from the South, and was the first black journalist to get a big name nationally.

In the *Defender*, we used to read about A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen and the other young rebels who were attempting to bring reforms in race relations. The news section was filled with fiery editorials denouncing discrimination and segregation, plus lynchings and other forms of brutality.

Many blacks throughout the nation bought the *Defender* for its advertisements. The pages were filled with ads from herb doctors and fortune tellers. Those who designated themselves as seers would tell hapless blacks about unfortunate love affairs, or how they would someday come into huge sums of money. They would appeal to the very poorest members of the population, because it was easy for the entrepreneurs to convince these people.

A substantial number of advertisements came from the company of Madam C.J. Walker, who made a fortune in processing the hair of black females, as most blacks felt that so-called nappy hair was a sign of degradation, or too much of a reminder of their slave period. Most of them aspired to make their hair look like that of whites. The processing was done with the use of hot metal combs manufactured at Walker's plant.

The Sacramento Valley had no black newspapers, but some were published in the San Francisco Bay Area, about 180 miles to the southwest. During the early to mid-1920s, I knew of one black paper in San Francisco and two across the bay in Oakland—which always had a much larger black population.

The oldest black newspaper on the West Coast still published today is the *California Voice*, founded in Oakland in 1918. In the 1920s, it carried only news of Oakland, and didn't have much vision. The owner was more interested in his small print shop. Then there was the *Oakland American*, which lasted about as long as it takes for me to say the name. I've seen a lot of them come and go.

The only black paper to carry news of Chico was the *Western Appeal*, published in San Francisco by George Watkins. Watkins used to come north, hitting each town and soliciting subscriptions, all the way up to Redding. He had a correspondent from each of the small towns. I don't think any of the writers were paid, because he didn't have any money for that. The columns were just chitchat; most of the items were about churches, fraternal organizations and parties held by blacks who wished to see their names in print.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Watkins, a conservative black, had no editorial page in the strict sense. He got ads from sympathetic small businesses, all white-owned. He did well enough to gain respect as a black spokesman, and acquired some property. I believe his paper went out of business during World War II.

Mama bought the *Negro Yearbook*, which was edited by Dr. Monroe Work and published at the Tuskegee Institute, the Alabama school founded by Booker T. Washington. It came out yearly and furnished a wealth of information about American blacks. I would peruse every issue several times, and it gave me a tremendous interest in reading every history book that an adolescent could understand.

I always found it easy to write, because I read a great deal. Besides the two daily papers in Chico, we got the *Sacramento Union* every morning, and I read two San Francisco papers every day, the *Chronicle* and the *Examiner*.

While attending Chico High School, I wrote a few humorous columns in the *Red and Gold*, the school newspaper. A lot of my fellow students made comments about it, and I said, "Maybe this isn't so bad." It gave me a feeling of importance, because it seemed that more people were aware I was there. But I discovered it cost more money than I had, to even go to college, and I didn't yet have any serious thoughts about going into journalism.

The only daily paper in the Bay Area to use a black writer then was the *Oakland Tribune*, which had a weekly column, "Activities Among Negroes," written by Delilah Beasley, who was paid \$10 a week. That ended in the mid-1930s, shortly after she died. In 1962, the *San Francisco Examiner* became the first daily paper in the Bay Area to hire a full-time black reporter, Ben Williams.

8. BOOTLEG BOOZE AND EARLY RADIO

Prohibition, known as the great experiment, became the law of the land in January 1920, when Woodrow Wilson was president. It lasted until 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt took office and kept his campaign promise of bringing alcohol back to public consumption.

I was 12 years old when Prohibition came in, and of course I soon found out about the many ways people could avoid the law.

The only place where you could legally buy whisky or other hard liquor was at the pharmacies. I don't know what ailments it was supposed to cure, but people would go to see their doctor and get him to write a prescription. That way, they could get all the booze they wanted.

Under Prohibition, the thirst of the nation increased. Even teenage girls were openly drinking alcohol. In Chico, some people had stills in the hills outside of town, where they distilled whisky from grain. A place that sold bad booze was called a blind pig.

All over the United States, people were trying to make wine and other alcoholic beverages. They gave it all sorts of names, depending on where you lived. In the valley they called it jackass, because it was supposed to have a kick like a mule.

You were taking a chance on your life with that stuff. Some people were buying five-gallon cans of wood alcohol, cutting it with something and drinking it.

In Sacramento, which had the largest black population in the valley, there were a number of cabarets or nightclubs where patrons danced and bootleg booze was sold discreetly to seekers of after-hours pleasures. Throughout the nation, their business boomed during Prohibition.

Everybody knew who the bootleggers were in Chico. They kept getting arrested, but it must have been a misdemeanor, because they always got out quickly and were back in business.

Bootlegging was one of the few professions in the 1920s that were open to all races. The biggest bootlegger in Chico was Mrs. Chung Hai, an immigrant from China who had to raise six sons by herself when her husband died. She made so much money she was able to buy her eldest son a brand new Hudson automobile when he was in high school. All the kids would hang around him.

Crystal sets came in around 1922 or '23, but I didn't know any blacks in Chico who had a radio. In Oroville, the biggest bootlegger was a black woman who was in what we called the "sporting life." Her son was a friend of mine. She always gave him lots of money to spend, and one day she bought him a big console model radio. Around 1925, I would visit him in Oroville, and we'd listen to the bands playing from the big hotels. All over the nation, they booked dance bands in rooms called supper clubs.

Radio provided a medium for jazz devotees to hear bands playing from many cities. Count Basie first played piano with the Bennie Moten band in Kansas City, which was one of the hot spots where jazz was heard nightly over the radio. Earl Hines' band was broadcast for a long time from the Grand Terrace in Chicago, a big nightclub with lavish floor shows.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

In Chico, the fashionable homes had player pianos, which played a roll that had been recorded by some very good musician.

My first year in Chico, I bought a saxophone with money I earned from harvesting peaches and prunes. When I got to high school, I began practicing with a group of friends several times a week, playing popular tunes that we heard on the thick, 7-inch 78 rpm phonograph records. Mom had one of the old Victrolas, which you had to hand-wind whenever you played each side of a record.

Most of the dance bands played the same style of music as Paul Whiteman, a white musician and bandleader who was very famous at the time. The white world called him the King of Jazz. At first I thought he was the greatest thing in the world. Then I heard Fletcher Henderson, a black bandleader and pianist who was more spirited than Whiteman, and I liked him much better.

The music stores had postings of new records every month. You told the clerk your choice to hear; he would conduct you to one of several enclosed booths, each with a phonograph. You played the records, picked out the ones you liked, then made your purchase. The stores also sold sheet music.

The Okeh label made a lot of what was called race records, by such people as Fletcher Henderson and his big band, Ethel Waters, Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds, Bessie Smith, and the comedy team of Miller and Lyles, who presented hilarious dialogues. The record shops everywhere sold them—not just in black neighborhoods.

Chico had two outdoor dance arenas, one on the north end of town and the other about 12 miles south. Sometimes a big-name band would come through there, and now and then they would bring in a black group. The town also had one theater for stage acts, the Majestic.

In 1924, *Struttin' Along*, a musical revue that starred Mamie Smith, the great blues singer, had a long run in San Francisco. After closing, it toured some cities in the Sacramento Valley, including Chico, where it appeared at the Majestic for two nights. I attended both nights, fascinated with a show of that size playing in the hick towns. Most of the audience was white.

The cast, which was all black, included Smith, an orchestra of about eight pieces, a chorus line of maybe six girls, all good-looking, and a number of comedians. One I recall with pleasure was Frisco Nick, who staged a hilarious dance while he sang "Three O'clock in the Morning," a great waltz hit, with a broom as his partner. Except for Smith, the entire cast was hired in California.

Mamie Smith was about on a level with Bessie Smith. She played the black circuit theaters in the Middle West and the East Coast. There was no black circuit on the West Coast, because they didn't have separate theaters for blacks and whites, although in some places, such as Portland, Oregon, blacks could sit only in the balcony.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds. 1920 photo, from cover of the sheet music for her hit song "Crazy Blues."
(Courtesy of Scott Alexander)



Enloe Hospital, Chico, ca. 1925. Then the only hospital in town, it was founded and run by Dr. Newton Enloe Sr. During the Prohibition period, he frequently wrote prescriptions for alcohol for his personal use.

Fleming recalls that his son, Newton Jr., "worked on his old man and enjoyed that also."
(Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico, and Department of Transportation, c/o Fleet Irvine).

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Record label for 78 rpm by Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds
(Courtesy of Dave Fowler, Museum of the City of San Francisco)

9. CALIFORNIA'S FIRST BLACK POLITICIANS

California politics has always been controlled by big money. At one time, the Southern Pacific Railway held immense political power, and it was said that members of the legislature could be bought like sacks of potatoes.

The California state legislature has two branches—the state Assembly, with 80 members, and the state Senate, with 40 members. The first black politician to hold statewide office in California was Fred Roberts, who was elected to the Assembly in 1918 and served until 1934. He represented a district in Los Angeles that included Watts. A majority of the people in his district were black.

Like nearly all black politicians of his time, Roberts was a Republican—the party of Lincoln. He was a party regular who did what the party leaders dictated. I don't think he ever initiated a piece of legislation. Apparently he was a very conservative man, or he wouldn't have been elected in the first place. He was a businessman who had a very successful mortuary business, and had been involved in civic affairs in Los Angeles, which was probably the reason he ran for office.

Roberts was very careful to never differ with the Republicans, who controlled the state and permitted some blacks to share in the spoils—just enough to keep a few black Republicans happy, who in turn would come to the black communities and extol the virtues of being a Republican.

Roberts was a symbol of pride to blacks in California, and when the legislature was not in session, he would constantly travel all over the state, visiting every town of any size where one found black people living. He would come to the upper Sacramento Valley quite often, including Chico, and would speak at churches, or at the homes of those who wore the mantle of being the number one black in the community.

I met him in Chico when I was about 13, but he didn't speak on that occasion. Another time, when Roberts was coming to Marysville, the blacks in Chico heard of his appearance, and those who had transportation went down to meet the good man. I went by way of the Sacramento Northern Railway; you could get a round-trip ticket for 75 cents. He spoke at a black church, and was warmly received. He wasn't campaigning, because people couldn't vote for him outside his district. He was going as the sole black in the state legislature.

Roberts made quite an impression on the simple people who lived in the small towns, because they could not figure how he had won an election in a world which seemed dominated by white power.

Roberts would tell us of some things that blacks were doing in Los Angeles. The city had black schoolteachers, policemen and firemen, and blacks working for other city departments. In San Francisco, the nearest big city to the Sacramento Valley, no blacks were hired for any of these jobs until the 1940s or later.

Franklin Roosevelt's election to the presidency in 1932 brought many changes in both national and state politics.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Before Roosevelt, most black voters were Republicans. Democrats held all the political power in the South, and most Southern congressional members stood firmly opposed to any legislation that would provide first-class citizenship to blacks. They used the floors of Congress to spew out their blatant racism. Some even called blacks "niggers" on the floor.

But many of the black spokesmen for Republicanism, I later discovered, were just Uncle Toms who received a small sum of money during election times, which their white masters assumed bought the black vote. Perhaps it did, until Roosevelt was elected.

It was in 1934, during the Roosevelt reform time, that Fred Roberts was unseated by a liberal young black Democrat, Augustus Hawkins. There was a big difference in the Roberts and Hawkins style. Roberts played a very low-key role, but Hawkins, the first black Democratic member of the state legislature, fought hard on the floor of the Assembly for full enfranchisement of blacks and others who suffered from discrimination.

Hawkins, a pharmacist who owned his own pharmacy on Central Avenue in Los Angeles, was an undiluted New Dealer who was concerned about the role he played in politics. He remained in the state Assembly until 1960, when he was elected to Congress, and had a long and successful career there. His former seat is now held by Congresswoman Maxine Waters.

In 1949, Hawkins was joined in the California Assembly by W. Byron Rumford, also a pharmacist, who owned a pharmacy in Berkeley. Rumford was the third black candidate elected to the state legislature, and the first from Northern California. He left the Assembly in 1966.

In 1963, Rumford and Hawkins together pushed a bill through the California legislature that was the state's first law prohibiting racial discrimination in housing, which became known as the Rumford Act.

Hawkins was born in 1907, the same year as me. At the time of this writing, he is living in the Washington, D.C. area, where he has remained since his retirement from politics.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Fred Roberts, the first black politician to hold statewide office in California, served in the state Assembly from 1919 to 1934.

(1925 photo, courtesy of Northern California Center for Afro-American History and Life Collection)

10. A BOXING MATCH

Henry Herriford was well respected by all the students in our peer group. Some light-skinned black kids tried to impress whites that their families were as good as theirs, by imitating whites and holding themselves to be the upper class. But Henry and I always attempted to prove that physically, we were the equals of everybody.

Our fights always developed out of someone striking us first, or calling us nigger or some other derogatory name. We of course referred to ourselves as colored or Negroes. If someone called us black, and the detractor was in our age group, he had a fight on his hands. The racial insults were plentiful until Henry and I established ourselves as warriors who fought cleanly and with a sense of purpose.

Boxing was a popular sport in Chico; it attracted most of the male population, and some women. We would always try to find some way to crash the gate, because we did not have the tariff charged to the boxing devotees.

One night when I was 17, I was standing around the entrance when the boxing promoter, Eddie Mead, came up to me. One of the fighters for the opening bout had gotten sick, and he was desperate. He said, "Hey, Thomas, do you want to make some money?" He had probably seen me fight in the street and thought that I handled my hands pretty well—a view which I shared with him.

He offered me \$10 to fight the four-round curtain raiser against Harold Lightfoot, a white boy who attended high school with me. I'd seen Harold a lot, and thought I could whip him. I didn't know that he had been training to be a professional fighter.

Henry, who was standing with me and yearning to get in to see the fights, said, "Take it, Thomas. You can lick that guy." I agreed, with the stipulation that Henry would be admitted as my second.

Mead hustled us into the dressing room, where he found some dirty trunks and a jockstrap slightly cleaner, and I changed my clothes. Henry and I marched down the aisle to the ring.

The referee was an educator from Oroville who judged fights on the side. He was the brother of a former world lightweight champion, "Battling" Nelson, who had knocked out the great black lightweight champion Joe Gans. Gans was sick with tuberculosis at the time, and had no business fighting, except for the pride of being champion and the need for money.

Nelson explained the rules to Harold and me, and then the bell rang. I charged him, and was greeted with a number of sharp left jabs as he danced away from me. I tried to land a roundhouse right, but Harold continued to dance, jab and retreat. Soon I found that lack of training was causing me to run out of gas.

In the second round, Harold stopped dancing and went to work. He landed a right in my belly, and I went down. Being both arm-weary and heavy of foot, I decided to stay down.

Nelson began to count. Leaning over me, he snarled, "Get up from there! You're not hurt." The crowd was booing and shouting, "Kick that nigger in the shins! Niggers can't take it in the shins! Kill the coon!"

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

I felt mortified, as the crowd continued to shout all of the racist remarks that came into their minds. But it didn't surprise me, because I had heard it a lot of times.

I struggled to my feet, only to meet my tormenter, so I grabbed him and clinched as much as I could. I did manage to throw one roundhouse punch that drew blood from his nose, and I finished the four rounds. It was the first and last time I ever fought for money.

11. RACIAL TENSION

The biggest black-sponsored event held in Chico up to that time took place in June 1925, when a janitor named Al French and several other black men in town lobbied successfully for the Black Knights of Pythias to hold their annual state convention in Chico. I was 17 that summer, and working at a bootblack stand.

The Chicoans realized they would have to find housing for the delegates, their wives and families, and other people who had no real affiliations but liked to attend conventions.

Several hotels in Chico which did not ordinarily cater to blacks were persuaded to admit the out-of-towners and set aside a number of rooms for the three-day convention. The black organizers also secured the use of a hall owned by whites.

One event on the program was a big dance that would be held outdoors, in front of the post office. They couldn't find a black band to perform, so they hired a white band—mostly students from Chico State Normal School, the two-year teacher training college.

On the night of the dance, blacks from all the towns within about 100 miles poured into Chico. There might have been 200 blacks who attended. Hundreds of whites stood around on the street to watch the dancing and hear the music. The Charleston was the dance craze then, and I was pretty good, but my friend Ted Johnson was even better, as people said that all of Ted's brains were in his feet.

I think the whites enjoyed being the spectators at the dance. Some of the bolder ones got out on the street and started doing their versions of the Charleston also.

When the dance ended at 1 a.m., I made my way to Max's Cafe, which was open 24 hours a day, and was generally conceded to be the best eating place in town.

On one side of Max's was a dining room, with white linen table covers, very good silverware and dishes, and waitresses. On the other side was a long counter with stools, which served the farmhands, others who were not dressed to go in the dining room, and blacks. Instead of waitresses, the cooks served the food directly to the customers. A wall separated the two sides of the restaurant.

When I walked into Max's, I saw several other blacks on the counter side. Sitting down there, I put in an order for a hamburger steak. While I was waiting for it to arrive, three male students from Chico State came in. Apparently they had been drinking and were very noisy.

When they passed by, one of them snarled, "There's another one of them black boys." I recognized him as the banjo player who was in the band that night.

I gave him a hot retort. He said, "What did you say?" and I swore at him again. He rushed at me. I jumped off the stool and faced him with the steak knife. He stopped his movement then, and told me about all he was going to do to me.

I was five feet 7 and weighed about 135 pounds. My opponent was about six feet tall, maybe 180 pounds, and several years older than me.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

Many eyes were focused on the tableau, and I could feel the tension in the room, as the black out-of-towners sat eating a late supper.

Al French, one of the spokesmen for Chico blacks, happened to be making his nightly rounds of turning out lights in businesses and making sure the doors were locked. Passing by the cafe, he overheard the argument. He quickly walked inside, grabbed me by the arm and said, "Thomas, Thomas! We don't want no race riot starting while this convention is here. You come along and go home."

I was very riled by now, and somewhat surprised by his actions, so I said, "I ordered a steak and I'm going to stay here and eat it." French walked away shaking his head.

At that moment, a bootblack who was called "Buffalo," a husky 200-pound black man, walked in to eat. Seeing what was happening, Buffalo stepped in front of me and confronted the young male adult, challenging him to fight. The bully seemed to sober up quite fast. He told my rescuer that he had no beef with him.

Who knows whether a race riot would have started? I didn't know how many of those rednecks were living in Chico, but I was surprised at this guy, because I used to see him in town all the time.

Buffalo sat with me at the table, and the bully walked out with his companions. As he was leaving, he growled, "I'll be waiting outside." I snarled back that I would be ready for him, although my knees felt so weak that I almost fell down.

Buffalo and I stayed in there and ate, and when we came out together, the bully and his friends were gone.

* * *

When I was about 15, I got a chance to visit another area of California for the first time. The minister of the black church in Chico persuaded me to drive with him to a church convention in Santa Barbara, 500 miles south, in his sputtering old Model T Ford coupe.

I found that Santa Barbara, a winter colony for wealthy white Easterners, had quite a sizable black community in comparison to anything I had seen since leaving Florida. Most of the blacks worked as cooks, chauffeurs, maids and other servants in the huge mansions. They received good pay, and most were homeowners themselves—some having homes as good as those owned by the upper-class whites in Chico. One enterprising black owned a thriving grocery store in Santa Barbara.

I had heard vaguely about the Ku Klux Klan from the old folks, and suffered from the delusion that they were active only in the Southern states. I was very wrong, for while passing through the city of Stockton en route back home, we saw a Klan parade of about a dozen hooded, sheet-wearing, 100 percent Americans, marching in formation, down the middle of one of the main streets of the town. Some people stared at them, and some ignored them.

About three years later they marched down the main street of Chico. I read about it in the paper before it happened. Chico had a round auditorium called the Hippodrome, which was

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

used as an indoor skating rink. I think the Klansmen used it for their gathering, following their march.

I had no occasion to go downtown that day, and I didn't feel I wanted to watch the bastards anyway. My stepfather was so mad that he sat out on the porch with a loaded .30 caliber rifle, and I sat beside him with a loaded 25-20. Plus we both had loaded shotguns. I don't know until today whether either of us would have fired if the Klansmen had decided to march on the street where our house was located.



Chico State Normal School, 1915. Built in 1894, it served as the main building on campus during Fleming's boyhood years in the town. It was destroyed in a fire in 1927.
(Special Collections, Meriam Library, California State University, Chico)

12. JOB OPPORTUNITIES

I think most black people in the Sacramento Valley were quite contented with their lot in life, even if they had to work at jobs that whites did not want. Many of them owned their own homes, and some blacks had successful careers in the valley, in spite of job discrimination.

One source of pride for Chico blacks was the George Martin family in Red Bluff. Every time we visited the town, we would go by Martin's department store, which was owned and operated by a black man, although Red Bluff had a smaller black population than Chico. Martin prospered there; the whites patronized his store, and his family was listed among the leading families in town.

Hydie Davies was probably the richest black man in Chico. He had the city contract to collect all of the trash and debris that households no longer had use for. Hydie had two horse-drawn wagons, and with the money he made, he bought a lot of land in the area, some of which had houses, which he rented.

While a teenager, I used to shine shoes on Saturdays for two black men in Chico, George Daily and Arthur Williams. Daily had a bootblack stand at McClellan's smoke shop in downtown Chico. He was a very pompous man, whom the white hangers-on at the smoke shop humorously called "Lord George." He took it all in a manner which disgusted one as a young as I, for he was looking for the small tip plus the 25 cents he received for shining the shoes.

George thought he was black society in a town that had only 65 black residents. He bought a home which he let everyone know had hardwood floors. It was a much better place than any other black owned, but Hydie Davies could perhaps have bought George out many times.

Arthur Williams, the other bootblack, was a sort of celebrity, as he was the only Chico-born black who had been drafted into the Army in World War I. Arthur had gone to France with the American Expeditionary Army under General Pershing.

The white folks had welcomed Arthur back, and he had attended high school, but the best he could do in employment was a bootblack stand, and it was not on a very good street where a lot of people were walking.

Arthur was very bitter, and used to talk to me about his Army stint and the way he was ignored when he came back. He said that a black man was appreciated far more in France than at home in the United States.

Moses Mosley, my stepfather, was a jack of all trades, a native of Alabama who had attended about three years of school. He had followed his aunt — Granny Powers—to California, probably under cajoling from her. He was a widower, and was looking for a wife.

Mama told me years later that she married him because she had a child to raise, and needed help. But Moses didn't turn out to be very much help.

Moses worked on the Phelan Ranch right outside of Chico, a 12,000-acre spread owned and operated by James Phelan, onetime mayor of San Francisco and at that time a U.S. senator

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

from California. Moses was a master in mixing and laying cement. He was the foreman of a crew of men who were building irrigation ditches on the ranch.

Other times he would go in the timber sections of the ranch and cut enormous amounts of firewood. When he wasn't working at the ranch, he cleaned houses, washed windows in a few stores, and did other janitorial work. He could do carpentry work, and was a good mechanic who knew how to work on motors. But he was totally unsophisticated, and could barely read and write.

Moses and Mama had started to purchase a home after their marriage. They probably could have bought one for \$600 at that time. But Moses would always forget that he had to make the payments, and would default, so he and Mama and Katie would have to find new lodgings. Mama may as well not have been married, as far as contributions he was making in her home. Most of the time she had to pay for the rent and food.

My stepfather could do a lot of things, but he never kept a steady job. When I got to be 16, he turned some of his window-washing jobs over to me. He wanted me to drop out of school and work, but Mama said, "Thomas is going to finish high school."

You could always find seasonal work from about April to October, going from crop to crop. As a black person, that's about all you could get. The same was true for the working-class whites.

In grammar school, many of the guys in our little gang were white. When we got to high school, most of our white crowd drifted away and went with whites. Some stayed with us, but it was different, and we began to realize even more so that we lived in a white-dominated world.

When I was a child, the discrimination never bothered me very much, because I kept occupied, and I didn't have to go out and earn a living. But Chico had its limitations, and I didn't intend to stay there after I finished high school.

If you wanted to see a few hundred blacks living in one place, you'd have to go to Sacramento, about 90 miles south. Well, Sacramento never did impress me too much either. As in many other towns, blacks had their own barbershops, plus one or two pool rooms and at least one restaurant. But when I went down to the Bay Area for the first time, I could see there was much more in Berkeley.

I had heard a lot of talk about working on the railroads, and I thought that would be a way out for me. Henry's parents were divorced, but he knew that his father worked on the railroads as a waiter out of Los Angeles. His father sent him a saxophone and a brand new bicycle, but I had to get my own. I felt sort of left out, as I did not have a father who bothered to correspond with his son and daughter.

Henry and I both began to long to leave Chico, particularly after we started to meet the northbound train that came through every evening. We would position ourselves near the dining cars, and the cooks and waiters—who were all black men—would shout out to us while the train was stopped.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

I knew what I'd be doing in Chico for the rest of my life if I decided to stay up there—shining shoes or working as a janitor. Nothing disgraceful about that, but my aspirations went to a higher level.

13. GOODBYE TO CHICO

By the time I got to high school, automobiles were becoming very popular, and one seldom saw horse-drawn vehicles in town, although they were still widely used on the ranches for specific chores.

My stepfather had an obsession for automobiles. Moses first bought a secondhand open-top Model T Ford, and became the first black in Chico to own a car. It was a damn good car for those times, because it was simple to operate and would take you anywhere. And you could use it for so many other things besides conveying people. In those small towns, they'd jack up the wheel on one side, put on a belt, and attach it to a power saw.

The first new car he bought was a Cleveland sports model—a soft type, with the spare tire on the rear. He only kept it for about 10 months, then traded it in and bought a new Chandler sedan. The Chandler was up in the league of a Cadillac then. The payments were big. That's when Moses got in trouble.

The car cost \$2200, which was a lot of money in 1924 to pay for an automobile, particularly for a black man whose income was largely derived from the janitor's jobs he was able to get.

When he bought that car, it irritated the white folks whom he worked for, because it was a better car than they had, and they thought he was trying to be bigger than they were. They decided to punish him, and he began to lose some of his work in town.

* * *

In 1926, the year I graduated from high school, necessity made it that we had to leave Chico. There was a disastrous fire which burned our house to the ground. We lost everything.

We had made one of the many moves that we had to make, not because of an inability to pay the rent—Mama worked in some of the best homes in Chico as a domestic—but because my stepfather was trying to make the payments on his new car.

Early one morning I heard him shouting, "Kate! Kate! Wake up! This place is on fire!" My sister's bedroom was next to mine.

I opened my eyes and saw a red glow in the ceiling. I got out of bed, slipped into my shoes, put my feet into both legs of my trousers and came out through the kitchen. I heard my mother saying, "Where is Tom?" I ran to the front of the house and shouted, "I'm here!"

Henry Herriford, who lived across the street, ran up to me and asked, did I get my saxophone? I gruffly told him that I did not have time, as I was more interested in saving my hide.

Our neighbors took us in that night. The clothing store where I traded let me have some shirts and underwear, a hat, and socks and a suit, which cost \$20. Mama found an old house in town and moved us into the place. We did not have much more than the beds we slept in, a stove, and a table with a few chairs in the kitchen.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

We did not get another phonograph, and I have often thought of the records we lost—Mamie Smith, Paul Whiteman, the Mound City Blue Blowers and a host of others who were very popular.

The furniture was insured. My mother and I always suspected that Moses started that fire for the insurance money, because he was the first one to wake up. I guess he got the money. My mother didn't get any of it.

Moses kept his beloved car for several months longer, but inevitably lost it.

* * *

When I graduated from Chico High School, I knew that there were no job opportunities for me in the town. None of the native-born blacks went to college, but even with a college degree, they would have had to leave Chico.

It was about this time that we started to talk about moving to Oakland. Mama decided she'd had enough of up there. Her second marriage had soured by then, and both she and my sister were probably more anxious than I was to get out of Chico. I thought that in the San Francisco Bay Area, I could possibly get a job for the postal service, or on the railroad as a Pullman porter or cook.

My mother was still in her twenties when she came up there, and she never had any reason to become fond of Chico. I had fun, but my mother was isolated.

Mama said that she and Kate would leave first, as I worked at a bootblack stand and earned between \$18 and \$20 a week. I was doing my share at home for an 18-year-old.

The bootblack stand was in front of Tom King's smoke shop on Main Street. In the back room, King conducted a big poker game, plus other games of chance. It was all illegal, but the cops never bothered the operation.

Mama and Kate left for Oakland in June. I made a promise that I'd follow them in about a month, and I did. At the time, it was a wise move for all of us to get out of there.

But Chico was a very nice little town. I think it was one of the best things that happened to me, after coming from New York. Many times I look back on those happy free years, and think of how it was then. I never had any regrets about growing up there.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Thomas Fleming in Berkeley, California in 1929 at age 21, when he worked as a cook for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Three years later, he would return to Chico to attend college. This is the only known photo of Fleming taken during the 1920s.

14. BACK AGAIN

From 1926 to 1932, I held a series of jobs on the ships and railroads on the West Coast. First I worked as a bellhop for an intercoastal passenger shipping company that stopped at ports from Victoria, British Columbia, to Ensenada, Mexico. Then I was a waiter on a train ferry in the upper part of San Francisco Bay.

In 1927 I was hired as a cook by the Southern Pacific Railroad. I worked for the Southern Pacific until the Depression came along. Then I encountered the seniority system, in which those who have been the longest on jobs are the last to be released in periods of decreased economic activity. If your seniority was less than 10 years, your chances of working every day were not good. Plus, the railways had started canceling some routes, which meant fewer crews in all categories.

Before the end of 1931, trips on the railway had become so infrequent that for long periods I did not go near the commissary. That's when I decided to go back to school.

In Berkeley, across the bay from San Francisco, I had become acquainted with "Ma" Francis, whose son, Robert Coleman Francis, had earned a doctorate in economics at the University of California at Berkeley. He did this in the 1920s. UC Berkeley was founded in 1868, and he was the first black to get a Ph.D. there, in any field. Robert went on to teach at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, a state-supported segregated school.

Joe Francis, Ma's late husband, had been the editor of the Pacific Outlook, one of the few black weekly newspapers published in San Francisco at the turn of the century. It was founded in 1894, and continued until World War I or later.

After I met Ma, I would stop by quite frequently when I passed their home. There was always a lively bunch gathered there. On one such occasion, Ma said, "You've got a good head on you. You ought to go to college." I told her I hadn't given it a thought. My mother and sister needed my support, and the only job Mom could find was a domestic, where the pay was almost nothing.

Ma asked me that question every time, but I always answered that I did not know how I could do it without some source of income. One day she said there was a four-year college in Chico, California, and that since I had been raised there, I should explore the possibilities of going back.

California's state colleges had not been defined as universities then, although they offered some graduate courses. When I attended high school in the 1920s, there were eight of those schools located in the state. They were then two-year teacher training colleges, called normal schools. In 1930, they were made into four-year liberal arts schools, but remained heavily oriented towards education and the turning out of teachers.

The first black student to attend Chico State Normal School was a girl from the nearby town of Red Bluff named Irma Williams, who enrolled there in 1921. I never heard of any other blacks who attended until I enrolled myself in the fall of 1932, when it was Chico State College. Out of a student population of about 1400, there would be four black students on campus, and two were friends I brought with me.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

I was very close to the Baker family, whose best-known member was Charles Baker, one of the two black morticians doing business in Oakland. The other was a company called Hudson and Butler. Butler, people said, got all of the "society blacks" and Baker the working-class blacks.

Baker's nephew, also named Charles Baker, had just graduated from high school in Oakland. I mentioned to him my idea of attending Chico State, which interested him, as well as my friend Kenneth Levy, who had attended the University of California at Los Angeles for a year.

I convinced both Ken and Charles that we would have a bed to sleep in, since I knew that my grandmother would be glad to see me come back to further my education. Our only problem, I informed them, was how we could feed ourselves, since Granny was then in her seventies, and was receiving a very meager assistance from the state.

In July 1932, Charles, Ken and I made the trip up north to Chico to scout the layout before registering at Chico State. When we arrived, we got a big welcome from Granny. She was very proud that I was going to college. I was 24 years old and had traveled all over the nation quite a bit, but I saw no future as a cook, even if I'd had enough seniority to keep my job.

The campus was much larger than it had been when I was in grammar and high school. I took the guys around town and went to the municipal swimming pool, about a city block in length, located in Bidwell Park. The pool was created when I was a kid, by building the One Mile Dam across the Big Chico Creek. Before that, it was just another swimming hole. There were many hot nights when several white boys, one Chinese boy and I—our regular crowd—would go there and swim in the buff.

Another place where you could swim was the Five Mile Dam, outside of town. It was a tourist attraction, because right near the dam was the Hooker Oak, named after Sir Joseph Hooker, an English botanist. He had come through there before I was born and taken the tree's measurements, and there was a sign identifying it as the largest oak tree in the world.

I enrolled and took 12 units, and hoped that I would find some means of earning some money. In 1932, tuition was \$10 a semester at all the state colleges, and an additional \$2 a semester for student body fees, which admitted you to athletic events and other social activities. There was no cafeteria, and only one dormitory, which was just for women. I didn't join the student body because I had to do everything I could to find work.

I had one advantage in my favor: a lot of folks knew me from my adolescent years, which helped me in securing odd jobs, like washing windows in homes, polishing hardwood floors and working in yards. I did everything I could to earn, because I had to eat. I couldn't ask my grandmother to feed me.

One time when I was passing a supermarket, the manager stopped me and congratulated me on my return. He asked me, what was I doing for money, and told me that when one of the big supply trucks arrived, he would give me a job unloading.

He gave me and my companions each 50 cents an hour. That was a lot, with the price of food being down. Ribs were 20 cents a pound, a loaf of bread 12 cents, a pound of red beans 10 cents. The beans became a very steady diet. Once we ate beans for 30 days. On Sundays we

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

had raisins and bread, and I would make a bread pudding. Then there were always fresh vegetables, some donated by people who had gardens at home, and some from my friend at the supermarket—frayed vegetables, but still unspoiled and edible.

When I returned to school, Moses Mosley was still up there. My stepfather was then managing a hog farm on about 30 or 40 acres up in the nearby town of Paradise, owned by a Cadillac dealer named Sanford.

He had four or five hundred hogs on that place. In the winter of 1932-33, you couldn't get 5 cents a pound for hogs. So Moses killed some, and Sanford smoked some hams for him. Every Friday after class, Ken, Charles and I would go up there and stay, and we got so sick of eating pork. Moses was glad to have company, because there wasn't even any electricity. He had lanterns that burned coal oil.

The outhouse was quite a distance from the house, and when you went out there at night, you had to take a lantern and a shotgun, because there were so many rattlesnakes. They didn't go into the pig pen, because the hogs would eat them. Moses stayed up there until he died.

There were a lot of nice white families in Chico. It always struck me as odd that when I came back to become the first black male raised in Chico to enter college, the white people appeared more delighted than the blacks. I think the blacks were a little bit envious, because very few of them had even gone as far as high school before my time. They'd usually get to about the 5th grade, and then start working. When I returned, some of them told me to my face that I would not last long as a student.

At that time, everyone who entered college had to write an essay to show whether you could compose a coherent description of any given subject. Those who failed had to take English X; in the student world, it was known as Dumbbell English. My composition was very poor; in the six years since I had been out of school, I had retained only a vague memory of how to use a noun, verb and adjective. All you did in that class was to write a composition every week, and the teacher pointed out your mistakes. Time has erased her name from my memory, but she helped me a lot.

In 1933, at the height of the Depression, whole families were riding the freight trains in search of nonexistent jobs. That fall, Charles, Ken and I were coming back up to Chico on a freight train with about a hundred other people, and they did not harvest the peaches in the Sacramento Valley, because the growers weren't getting anything for them. They were falling off the trees.

When the train passed through Yuba City near Marysville, the engineer stopped the train. Everybody got off, ate all the peaches they could, and stuffed their pockets. If they had some sort of containers, they put more peaches in them. When everybody had done that, they got back on board, and the conductor signalled the engineer by hand. The engineer then gave two answering toots on the whistle, and the train started north again.

John Howard Angell was my economics instructor. I became friendly with him because his wife had attended Chico High School when I was there. Angell proved to be a good friend, and we spent many hours off campus engaging in conversations about the world. When I came back to school in the fall semester of 1933, I had not been successful in finding work that

Reflections on Black History, Part 2

summer, and had absolutely no money. The first person I saw when I came back was Angell. I informed that I did not even have tuition, and he promptly loaned me the fees.

An event occurred in November 1933, when "Sunny Jim" Rolph was governor of California. In San Jose, the son of a wealthy department store owner was seized by two kidnapers, who demanded a heavy ransom, which the distraught family paid. But when the money drop was made, the victim was murdered.

The police found the suspects, and they were placed in the San Jose County Jail. But the brutality of the crime inflamed the so-called law-abiding people in the city. Vigilantes stormed the jail, took the prisoners out and hanged them. Governor Rolph gave a public speech, in which he called the mob "fine, patriotic citizens" with pioneer blood in their veins, and said that California should be proud. Of course I was shocked, along with many others, because this appeared to be an encouragement to hoodlums to take whatever action they deemed necessary.

As I walked to school that morning, I read of the incident in the big bold black headlines of the Chico morning paper. Although the kidnapers were white, I was aware that this type of mob rule was common in some Southern states, where the victim was always a black person. By the time I reached the campus, I was very angry.

Groups of students, primarily males, were standing in small groups discussing the lynching. I brushed aside students and walked into the center of the largest group, stating very loudly that I hated lawlessness no matter who committed the acts, and that if I had been sheriff in San Jose the night before, there would have been some dead members of the mob blocking the jail doorway.

There was some hooting and jeering directed at me, and some keeping their mouths shut. Only Glenn Smith, a big, burly fullback on the varsity football team, stood beside me and said, "Fleming is right."

I was very much surprised at Smith, since he was a senior and still taking Dumbbell English, which he had failed every year. I thought he was attending college simply to play football.

Glenn and I started shouting back at the crowd, when Dr. Taylor, who was head of the geography department, walked up and told me that he thought I should come inside before I got myself into trouble. I left with Taylor, who shook his head in disbelief that such a thing as a lynching had taken place downtown in a large California city.

I dropped out of Chico State in the spring of 1934. I guess I got tired of it all—wondering how you were going to pay your bills and how you were going to eat. There were other things: the social activities were very limited for me. I never sought to become involved in socializing with whites per se, and after being down in the Bay Area for six years, then going back there, with nothing to do but study all the time, I didn't want to be bothered with it any more.

I should have stayed up there and graduated. No need of crying over that now, because during the Depression, there weren't many job opportunities, especially for a black man. But Chico State was all good for me, as far as I could see. I have not been back there too often over the last 65 years, but a lot of Chico will always stay with me.

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Now an administration building, this was where all the classes on campus were held during Fleming's days as a student at Chico State from 1932-34.

(1998 photo by Max Millard)

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Thomas Fleming during a February 1998 visit to California State University, Chico, when he gave a historical talk to a large crowd at Bell Memorial Union and was honored as the campus's old black alumnus.

(Photo by Byron Fountain)

Reflections on Black History, Part 2



Audience members line up at the book-signing following Fleming's talk at Bell Memorial Union, California State University, Chico, on February 18, 1998.

END OF BOOK

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