

Nebraska Blacks in Nebraska Blacks in Nebraska Blacks in Nebraska Blacks

A.B. 'Buddy' Hogan

Thomas Jefferson was President of the United States when the first black man was brought to the Nebraska territory. York was a slave owned by Captain William Clark. Little else is known about him.

Today, there are nearly 43,000 blacks in Nebraska. Only one in a thousand lives outside Omaha or Lincoln. Eighty percent of the state's blacks live in an eight-square mile area in North Omaha, sequestered from Nebraska's "Good life."

From appearances, it would seem blacks play a strong role in the state's welfare: Ernie Chambers is a vocal member of the state legislature; Fred Conley sits on the Omaha City Council; Gene Crump occupies a high position in Gov. Bob Kerrey's administration, as did Harold Peterson before him in the Charles Thone administration. Surely blacks are not the "minuses" they once were. At least, that's the country club and county co-op view.

Buddy Hogan has a different opinion. "Black Nebraskans have never been worse off," said A.B. "Buddy" Hogan, president of the Omaha chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"White people generally think black people have progressed greatly," Hogan said. "A Lou Harris poll said that white people think black people have never had it better. You would think they were talking to people who lived on a different planet."

Blacks are a minority that is so minute in Nebraska that whites may find racial discrimination an easy problem to ignore.

American Demographics magazine studied minority numbers in U.S. cities with populations over 100,000. Though most cities



Mark Davis/The Sower

Matthew Stelly

Matthew Stelly, director of the Malone Community Center of Lincoln, holds no illusions about the black minority's place in Nebraska.

"Nebraska may be the good life," Stelly said, "but blacks have been forgotten in it."

Stelly won't let blacks forget their role in the struggle either.

"The biggest problem we have in Lincoln is the lack of an effective arena



to voice our concerns," he said. "We have no real avenue to express the things that disturb us."

Stelly thinks the answer goes beyond eliminating institutional racism. Nebraskans need to increase their cultural awareness — a problem for Lincoln blacks, in particular. Stelly says he is a man true to north Omaha, but he is willing to give his all to Lincoln's black community. But first, he says, "we have to find ourselves."

"If we could do that, we would win

"I thought a hundred-pound hail stone or lightning bolt would come through the ceiling," Dahl said of the first time he went to an MCC service. "I didn't happen, and I've been going to MCC ever since."

Dahl is not an ordained minister. He works for the Lincoln-Lancaster Commission on Human Rights.

The MCC does not belong to the Lincoln Fellowship of Churches. Steve Evans, executive secretary for the LFC, said he was unaware of any opposition to the new gay church.

But some local pastors don't want a gay church in town. "I think it's a farce," said Kenneth Baker, pastor of the Fellowship Baptists Church. "I think it's a disgrace. I think it's an insult . . . It's totally of the devil."

God loves homosexuals "just like he loves all sinners," Baker said. "But for them to say they're starting a Christian church is a perversion of everything that's right."

Father Peter Gadiant, pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church, also is against the MCC.

"I really am not in favor of it. Why would they want to have a church? We can work with these people in other ways to help their problem," Gadiant said.

Roger Sasse, pastor of the Lutheran Student Center at UNL, said he supports the MCC, but thinks "it's a real tragedy that there has to be a separate church."

"What I wish is the gay and lesbian folks would help us change the churches that are, instead of separating," he said.

Besides the MCC, Dahl said he belongs to another fundamentalist church. He said he considers himself a "conservative and evangelical" Christian. He said he knows the Bible.

"Whatever their sexual orientation, a Christian is bound to live in a responsible manner, he said.

—Ann Lowe

showed rapidly growing minority populations, Lincoln ranked at the bottom with a 5 percent minority population. Only seven cities had lower percentages.

Nebraska statistics portray a dim picture of the states largest minority — blacks. The black unemployment rate is four times higher than the white rate. The infant mortality rate among blacks is 31.9 per 1,000 births, compared to 13.9 for the rest of the state. In Lincoln's Malone community, 39 percent of the blacks live in poverty.

It's not that blacks choose to remain uneducated, or aren't motivated to move out of their lower social position. Hogan said the problem, as always, is racism.

Today's racism is institutional racism. It doesn't allow overt acts such as segregated restaurants and drinking fountains, lynchings and name-calling. Hogan said today's racism is built on the trained belief that blacks are inferior. Hogan calls this a "laid back" racism.

"When white people think of racism, they think of a bunch of white people getting together and conspiring to kill a black man," he said. "But what we have today is more insidious."

Blacks in Nebraska

Stories by Ward W. Triplett III



Hogan, Stelly and Stith agree that Nebraska may be as good a place for blacks to live as any state in the country.

But even if there are worse places to live there is still room for improvement in Nebraska. Education, cultural awareness and legal approaches used by the NAACP are all viable avenues. But the black community's problems can only be solved if white people in power believe in those problems, understand them, and then try to solve them.

"We've got to quit faking with each other," Stelly said. "It will be a good life for blacks when the white man doesn't feel he has to prove he's still the master."

They've got us down — they always have. Stith said. "But if we can get young people the training and the skills they need for jobs, we'll be all right. I've always said that if a man can beat you thinking, he's your master."

It's almost nightmarish to have to deal with people who don't think there is still a problem. Hogan said. "But the violence done to black minds today is more damaging than when they used to sick a dog on you. It hurt for awhile, but then it went away."

But now, you're dealing with something that destroys a man emotionally. As the Bible says, you should fear the enemy that can harm your spirit — not your body.

the respect of those who have the power. Instead, we're always coming up begging. No one respects you when you have your hand out."

But Lincoln lacks a cohesive black neighborhood, and Stelly said that blacks self-identity. Traditionally, blacks lived in the Malone area, bounded by 17th, 27th, T and R streets. But UNL began to buy property there to make room for city campus growth. Black people are moving out.

Lincoln's subtle racism prevents

blacks — particularly college graduates — from staying. The best black minds stay four or five years and get out as fast as they can, Stelly said.

A rift between Lincoln's 1,100 blacks and Omaha's 40,000 prevents cohesiveness between the two communities. The Malone Center is trying to bridge the gap by sponsoring a "get-to-know-Malone" trip for Omahans. But problems remain.

"The bloods in Omaha think the bloods in Lincoln are either backward,

or bourgeois Uncle Toms," Stelly said. "The bloods in Lincoln think the ones in Omaha are savages."

But Stelly said Nebraska does offer minorities better food prices, housing and job opportunities than many states. He said many blacks feel a traditional commitment to Nebraska — but they don't hope to get "a piece of the rock."

"We can only be comfortable in this state when the white man doesn't have to fake liberalism and we don't have to shuffle and sing to belong," he said.

— to his face. However, at the same time, most of Lincoln's blacks were content with janitorial or shoe-shining jobs.

In his guest preaching appearances at Lincoln churches and schools, Stith tries to explain the black situation in a practical sense. Such as a baseball game.

"Being black in this city, in this country, has always meant getting up to bat with two strikes," Stith says. "The white man has three chances. But by the color of your skin, you've already got a strike against you."

Stith said the worst times for black people came after the Civil War, during the Reconstruction. Worse times may be ahead, Stith said, with the re-election of President Ronald Reagan. He said Reagan has proven he doesn't care for those "without."

"We really haven't seen anything yet," Stith said, in an ironic twist of the President's victorious proclamation. "For those blacks who are able to make it on their own, they may be all right. Those who don't have the jobs are really going to suffer."



The Rev. Forrest M. Stith

Nebraska attracted newly released slaves because of the growing Union Pacific Railroad and the possibility of owning cropland. The nation's first black farmer set up just outside of Wilbur.

Most blacks settled in the cities to work on the railroads. When the railroads began to die out, blacks suffered the most.

The Rev. Forrest M. Stith of Lincoln remembers those days through the memories of his father and grandfathers. One grandfather, William P. Walker, was one of a handful of farmers given land in Cherry and Dawson counties. All eventually sold out.

"They talk about what the white men did to the Indians," Stith recalls, "Look at what they did to us. My father had to sell our land in Cherry County for \$1 an acre . . . for 650 acres."

Stith was born in 1910 in a home on South Ninth Street in Lincoln. He is one of the few blacks to graduate before 1960 of the University of Nebraska. He used his family's keepsakes and memories to write two books. The second, *Orange Morgan's 38, 325 Mornings*, recounts his great-grandfather's days as a black soldier in the Union Army during the civil War.

His own military career ended in 1948 when he returned to Lincoln. Stith became an ordained minister in the Methodist Church and studied for his master's degree in the evenings.

In 1955, Stith became the first black teacher in the history of the Lincoln Public Schools, teaching history at Millard Lefler Junior High. He stayed there until 1975 when he was forced to retire. His time there wasn't easy.

"It was touch and go for a while," he said. "You really had to keep your eyes open and hope you didn't make mistakes. I had a principal there . . . who really stood behind me. She was very, very liberal for those days."

Stith said he was paid the same as other teachers with master's degrees and that he encountered very little racism