

**IN THE SHADOW OF MYRT'S MOUNTAIN:
GROWING UP IN NEW MILFORD, CONNECTICUT
AND BEYOND**

A Memoir By

OWEN F. PEAGLER

Edited by Teresa Rose Balough



"Myrt's Mountain" (Guarding Mountain), Fort Hill, New Milford, CT.

IN THE SHADOW OF MYRT'S MOUNTAIN
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Editor's Foreword

When Owen suffered a severe hemorrhagic stroke in the fall of 2007, we were originally told that he would not survive. He did survive, however, and graced us with his presence for another eight years. Although he had some deficits accruing from the stroke (loss of peripheral vision in both eyes and a slightly weakened left side of the body) his mind, though somewhat slower than it had been, remained wonderfully intact. After the initial recovery period, he undertook, with my encouragement, the writing of his memoirs. Recalling a rich and varied professional life in education and political affairs seemed to give him great pleasure, but he specially cherished the memories of his childhood and youth growing up in the rural Connecticut town of New Milford in a snug little house situated at the foot of Guarding Mountain, known to the family as "Myrt's Mountain." He never tired of retelling the stories of his youth, and we never tired of hearing them. The stories of his involvement with major figures from the Civil Rights era so fascinated his co-workers at Eastern Connecticut State University that they begged him to write them down, and many of these he remembered also in great detail.

What follows is the unique history of a Black man who came from a "charmed" childhood, safe in the protection of a loving family and caring neighbors, largely protected from the racial strife that affected so much of the nation during the 30's and 40's. It tells the story of how this child grew to manhood and returned to his hometown to become the first African-American teacher in his own school; travelled to White Plains, New York to become a junior high school guidance counselor; served on the boards of various public service agencies, such as the Urban League and Community Chest; received numerous public service

awards, including the New York State Junior Chamber of Commerce Young Man of the Year; went on to become the Deputy Director of the New York State Department of Economic Opportunity, Chairman of the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children, Dean of Evening Studies and Continuing Education at PACE University in New York City, Secretary of Community Affairs for the State of Delaware, and Dean of Continuing Education at Eastern Connecticut State University. Some of the material will be found to be repeated more than once, particularly the sections on the Civil Rights Movement, but from a slightly different perspective. It is an amazing story and one that I have edited with something akin to awe.

Owen completed the writing of these memoirs during the summer of 2015, shortly before his second, fatal stroke in November of that year. Although I had encouraged him to fill in a few of the gaps in the narrative, he seemed ready to disengage and had lost the desire to write further. I have taken the liberty of adding pertinent information in each of these cases, indicating my words with brackets. I hope that he would approve.

During the last eight years of his life, Owen deepened spiritually and was grateful for every day that occurred. He would often say to me at the end of the evening, "thank you for a wonderful day." I would like to reiterate what is expressed in these memoirs by saying, "thank you, Owen, for a wonderful life."

Teresa Balough-Peagler

August 1, 2016

Old Lyme, Connecticut

FOR CATHY, ROBBIE AND KIRIN¹

Perhaps you will get an idea from these writings of why I loved growing up in New Milford with a warm loving family and wonderful supportive friends and neighbors. The Peagler family experiences in New Milford were very positive, nurturing experiences which have stayed with me to this day. This is my attempt to share those times with you.

¹ *Ed.* In addition to Owen's three children, the editor would like to dedicate this work to his brother Phil, to whom Owen always hoped to read this account.

Author's Foreword

I have chosen to share my memories and experiences motivated not by vanity but a desire to at last let my children know why New Milford, Connecticut became a large part of their lives. From toddler days to college days, they were off to New Milford for family holidays and family reunions. Over the years they listened to continuous stories of the old days in New Milford and never seemed to have tired of the stories. But then maybe I just didn't notice.

To Cathy

To Kirin

To Robbie

I have tried to share more of my life with you. I wish you had been there.

PRELUDE

In 1956 a local writer thought that the young Black teaching in the almost all White town of New Milford, Connecticut would be a story that he could sell to a national magazine. Jack Denton Scott wrote the article and sold it, after several rejections, to *Look Magazine*. He wrote of a racist-free life and acceptance in New Milford. *Redbook*, in their rejection letter, called the article “naive.” That was how the description of my early years might be conceived.

Why is one motivated to write down an account of his life experiences. For me it's not ego or fame or possible monetary gain. My motivation, as far as I can tell, is to recall a wonderful life. Everyone's life is unique and sure to have some interesting, thoughtful, even adventurous aspects. My motivation for writing these pages is to relive some wonderful experiences and share them with family and friends, many of whom shared significant parts of my life. I would be pleased if this chronicle is of interest to a wider audience, but that is not important to me. This is not just an account of my life. It is also a story of how a Black family thrived in a small, rural Connecticut town isolated from the virulent racism of the pre-civil rights era and the perils of the Great Depression. How is it that this Black family came to this isolated, rural town in Connecticut; and what was it like for a Black kid to grow up in isolated, rural Yankee Connecticut? Well, it was interesting, nurturing, and sometimes exciting. This is autobiographical, but it is also my tribute to New Milford, Connecticut and the significant influence that town has had on my life.

My story really begins in the rural, backwater crossroads called Palmyra in Alabama in 1886 and in a rural Virginia hamlet called Croaker in 1900. My father, Robert James Peagler, was born in Palmyra, Alabama in 1886. He had two sisters and one brother, who through some benevolence received rare educational

opportunities as children. By some means, my father obtained acceptance at Hampton Institute in Virginia, where he graduated with a degree in agriculture in 1915. (Only in later years did I notice that William Howard Taft as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Hampton signed his graduation diploma.) That year he accepted a teaching position in the rural crossroad of Croaker near Williamsburg, Virginia where he boarded with the well-known Gary family. I have always wondered how my dad propelled himself out of the rural, oppressive, racist Deep South to become a college graduate, school teacher and the loving father of a family of ten. I do not have the story of how his siblings, two sisters, accomplished the feat of escaping the oppression of Alabama by migrating to Detroit, Michigan. (Once when attending church services in Virginia with my grandmother, Georgia Randall, when I was thirteen years old, an elderly man hobbled up to me leaning heavily on a cane. With an enthusiastic squeeze of my hand he said, "Your daddy was my school teacher!" I was overcome with emotion by this personal connection to my father whom I never knew.) The young college graduate took room and board with the Charles E. Gary family where he met Gary's oldest daughter, Myrtle. My mother, Myrtle Elizabeth Gary, was born in Croaker, Virginia on July 1, 1900. (This is an estimated date since no birth records were recorded for Blacks at that time. She and each of her siblings chose their birth month and each chose the first day of the month.) He fell in love with my mother, Myrtle Gary, who was a teenager recently divorced with a baby girl. Myrtle was the oldest of five siblings: Myrtle, Edyth, John, Charles, Jr. and Celestine.

After marrying, the young Peagler family sought new opportunity in the big city of Baltimore, Maryland, where Robert Peagler Junior was born, and remained there for several years. What Dad did in Baltimore and how long he stayed is not known; but we do know that he had three children, Mabel, Robert Jr. (Dick) and Frances when he accepted an offer to manage the Mitchell



Robert James Peagler, Sr. Graduation Photo, Hampton Institute, 1915.



Myrtle Elizabeth Gary Peagler, date unknown.

Dairy Farm in Washington, Connecticut. The family settled comfortably in Washington where they were warmly welcomed and another child, William, was born. Mabel was beginning school at this time and local girls would escort her to and from school every day. "They would treat me like a doll," Mabel recalled. I can only guess how this Black family from Alabama and Virginia felt about the change from the segregated, repressive South to the dignity and welcome of Washington, Connecticut. The years in the little white farmhouse in Washington were happy ones according to Mabel. After several years, the family would move to New Milford, where Robert Sr. began a job with Paul Richmond as a teamster delivering coal and feed. In 1920 he bought a house on Fort Hill Road three houses down from the Catholic Cemetery. Six more children would be born to him on Fort Hill

Dad was drafted into the army on July 31, 1918 and became a corporal with Company A, 443rd Regiment, R.L. Battalion. The war ended soon after, and he returned to Washington and his family in the little white farmhouse. To this day, his name is engraved on the base of the flag pole in front of the Bryon Town Hall along with the other veterans from Washington who served in the Great War. (The name of Robert J. Peagler, Jr., killed in action during WWII, is on a plaque at the base of the flagpole on the south end of the green in New Milford, Connecticut.) Soon after returning from the army and the addition to the family of son William, he moved his family to New Milford and was employed at the Robertson Bleachery & Dye Works until hired by W.L. Richmond and Son. Paul Richmond offered Dad a job delivering coal and feed. In 1920 most heavy deliveries were made by horse and wagon, and Dad accepted a job as a teamster with an increase in income.

A small house next to the cemetery on Fort Hill was the first New Milford home. Soon after the move to New Milford, Frederick was born, followed in almost two-year intervals by

Charles, Wilbur (Wassie), John, Philip, and last, number ten, Owen. As more children were born, the family moved two houses down to a larger house, where I was born in November 1931. Robert and Myrtle Peagler raised ten children in that house that remains in the family to this day. At the house on Fort Hill the Peaglers settled into a happy family life. As new children arrived, the modest four bedrooms absorbed the new arrivals. Dad had a job that allowed the purchase of a car. The large family would take weekend rides and excursions to visit friends. A large garden in a field on Fort Hill Road near Sunny Valley Road provided fresh vegetables that Mom canned and stored in the cellar along with apple sauce and apple butter made from abundant apples from the orchard adjacent to the mountain that rose directly behind the house. Chickens were raised in the back yard, and a pig was slaughtered each year to feed the growing family as well. An apple tree and a cherry tree bore fruit in the back yard. Wild berries were made into jellies and jams and were added to the larder in the cellar.

The Warner and Disbrow Grocery Store was the source mostly of staples because the Peagler family was close to self-sufficient. Mom was an accomplished seamstress, and many of the children's clothes were handmade. All of the shirts that I wore from grade school through high school were home made. Myrt added to the family income by making clothes for people in town such as Gladys Lynch, who could not find clothes to fit her in stores. The Great Depression began in 1929, but the effects were not widely visible in New Milford in the fall of 1931 when I was born, the tenth child in a stable and loving family. The house on Fort Hill was bursting with children, and nothing was in the air to foretell the disaster that was about to plunge the family into dire straits.

On a chilly fall day in 1931, around the time of my birth, Dad was leaving work at the Richmond Stables and passed local volunteer firemen attempting to control a fire. He pitched in to help bring the fire under control and in the process became soaking



Robert Peagler, Sr. Family, 76 Fort Hill Road, New Milford, CT., Summer 1931. Top Row (L to R): Myrt (pregnant with Owen), Robert Sr . Middle Row: Mabel, Robert Jr. (Dick), Frances, Bill. Bottom Row: Philip, John, Wilbur (Wassie), Charles, Frederick.

wet. He came home cold, wet, and exhausted and soon became ill with pneumonia. Despite all of the efforts at the New Milford Hospital and lacking the then undiscovered antibiotics, he died in March 1932 at the age of forty-five, leaving a widow and ten children with no means of support. I never knew my dad; I was four months old at the time of his death. During my childhood I heard from his friends and admirers that Robert J. Peagler was honored by the largest funeral that any had ever seen in town. His funeral service was held at the St. John's Episcopal Church on a chilly, rainy day. The church was filled to capacity and, as one New Milford old-timer described to me, "Those who couldn't be seated in the church stood in the rain outside. I looked out from the front stairs of the church, and there was a sea of umbrellas extending across Main Street and onto the green." Bill Peagler in later life remembered his father's funeral this way: "There was a large crowd at the full military funeral. The casket was taken from the church and placed on a caisson pulled by the horses that he drove at work. A large crowd followed the caisson in the rain to the cemetery." Burial was in Center Cemetery on a prominent knoll near the entrance. Myrtle Gary Peagler refused to allow Dad to be buried in the sandy area in a remote part of the cemetery traditionally reserved for Blacks. On March 10, 1932 *The New Milford Times* reported the death and funeral of Robert J. Peagler as follows:

Funeral of Robert Peagler

With 500 or more townspeople in attendance and the dignified pageantry always provided when full military honors are given in tribute to a departed comrade, the earthly remains of Robert J. Peagler were brought to St. John's Episcopal church Sunday afternoon at one o'clock where Rev. Culbert McCay conducted the regular ritual for the dead. Then a long funeral

cortege formed in Main Street and the march to Center cemetery was begun. It did not matter to the scores who were marching that sleet was falling and a bitter wind chilling them through.

They had a service of loyalty and section to perform and it was beautifully done.

Legionnaires from several Litchfield County towns augmented the large delegation of Peagler's comrades of Ezra Woods Post, local unit of the American Legion. Among the officers there were State Treasurer E.P. Armstrong of Waterbury and State Senior Vice-Commander Joseph Treadwell of Danbury.

The bearers were J. Charles Meloy, a Department Vice Commander; Howard D. Mock, Commander of Ezra Woods Post; Harold D. Pulver, County Adjutant; B. Boynton Ferriss, Russell Drumm and Lynn N. Deming.

The colors were borne by James Hastings and Raymond Hine. The color guards were Claude B. Morehouse and J. Leo Murphy. Following them in the line of march were Mr. McCay and M. Joseph Lillis, who had the funeral arrangements in charge. Next came the caisson, on each side of which marched the bearers. Following was the firing squad in command of Lieutenant Henry J. Brant. Members of this group were Harold Olson, Carl Nelson, John Douskey, Howard Smith, Arthur van Duzee, Frank Baldwin, Julius and Watts Wojciochowski. With the squad was the bugler, William Jensen.

In back of the firing squad marched single files of legion men at each side of the street, there being more than seventy of them. Then came automobiles, scores of them carrying relatives and friends of the deceased and townspeople who had respected and admired him.

Robert James Peagler was born in Palmyra, Alabama, September 15, 1986, the son of Hampton and Caroline (Fair) Peagler. Information concerning his boyhood is not available but it is known that he was a graduate of Hampton Institute. He came to

this section in 1916 or 17 entering the employ of the Mitchell Dairy Company in Washington. Later he worked at the Robertson Bleachery and Dye Works. Seven years ago he began work for W. L. Richmond and Son, local coal and grain concern. He had remained in the employ of that concern ever since.

The military service of the deceased began July 31, 1918. He became a Corporal with Company A 443d R. L. Battalion. After the war he received his honorable discharge and returned to New Milford. He was always interested in the work of the American Legion and was one of the party from here in attendance at the last National Convention at Detroit, Michigan.

Besides his wife, Myrtle Peagler, ten children survive. They are Mabel, Frances, Robert, William, Frederick, Charles, Wilbur, John, Philip and Owen Peagler. Two sisters also survive. They are Mrs. Lee Zeigler and Mrs. Haywood Crawford, both of Detroit.

M. Joseph Lillis, director of the Lillis Funeral Home had the funeral arrangements in charge.

An editorial tribute appeared in The New Milford Times the next week:

"Bob" Peagler: A Man

It must have been gratifying to the many friends that Robert Peagler made during his life in New Milford to note how many gathered Sunday afternoon to pay their last respects to him. St. John's church was filled by persons in all walks of life, and his former companions-in-arms, the members of the American Legion, turned out in full force.

A stranger who might have seen that funeral procession passing along Main Street would have been inclined to ask what important man had the community lost; who could this outstanding

citizen be who was receiving civic and military honors that would befit a high public official; what man of wealth could have attracted so many friends in life?

As far as worldly honors and rank went, "Bob" Peagler in life had few. He was a hard-working and industrious man, in very moderate circumstances, and with a numerous progeny that precluded the possibility of his being a wastrel. Further than that, he was of a race which a white civilization tries to set apart on the assumption that it is inferior.

To the possible prejudice in life, "Bob" Peagler was indifferent. He was fairly well educated and also intelligent. At all times, he was polite and kind, with not a trace of servility. In other words, he was a gentleman. During the war, he served his country and his fellows, bravely performing the duties that were assigned to him, and on his return to civilian life, again assumed his place as a useful citizen.

"Bob" Peagler was a good soldier and a gentleman, and a worthy member of any community.

New Milford on Sunday honored him. He had rank—for he was a citizen of the highest type. He had honors—for he served his country well. He too was rich—for there are no riches greater than the love and respect of those with whom one daily associates.

"Bob" Peagler had therefore rank, honor and riches. But, above all, he was a man, and that large gathering of friends did well to honor him.

A young widow with ten children with no means of support at the beginning of the Great Depression presented bleak prospects for the family. Many town people with sincere concern and the best of intentions urged my mother to break up the family and place the older children into foster homes. This she emphatically refused. They were convinced that a widow with ten children and no means of support could not adequately provide for

the family; but this she did courageously and successfully for the next seventeen years. By working many low-level jobs she kept the family together with the help of many people in the community. She maintained the house that my father had purchased, provided food and clothing for ten children, and provided love and support for each of us as we proceeded through school. She did all of that with a high level of dignity and strength that engendered respect and admiration in the New Milford community.



76 Fort Hill Road, New Milford, the house where Owen was born.

Chapter One: New Milford

The town of New Milford lies in the beautiful Housatonic River Valley in northwestern Connecticut. The town lies along the river on its eastern side with Fort Hill above the river valley in the west. U.S. Route 7 bisects the valley along the river girded by farmland and a cluster of small businesses. Route 7 proceeds north past Boardman Bridge toward Kent and Route 34 to Sherman. From the east, Bridge Street leads to the Town Bridge and Route 7. From the west Fort Hill Road intersects Route 7 directly opposite the Town Bridge. [When I was a youngster] pasture land abutted Route 7 to the north except for a small white cottage sitting alone. To the south of the intersection of Route 7 and Fort Hill Road stood Pierson's Diner. Along Route 7 were landmarks such as the Schaghticoke Diner, Milt Osborne Garage, Sherwood's Stand and a cluster of small businesses in between. On the other side of Route 7 south was Bob Ferry's Cider Mill and Chase's Tavern. Beyond Chase's, Sherwood's Stand and the intersection of Sunny Valley Road were scattered houses and pasture land.

The town sits above a scenic river in a valley surrounded by low hills. The tall graceful steeple of the First Congregational Church, the gleaming white icon of every New England village, rises above the tree line. Yes, there is the requisite town green or common that splits Main Street in the center of town, surrounded by vintage colonial and Victorian homes. Tall, stately elm trees line the green, like giant sentinels at parade rest. Near the south end of the green in front of the colonial redbrick town hall sits the green and white bandstand. Stately old colonial Victorian homes line the western side of Main Street which drops sharply west down Bank Street to Railroad Street past [in my day] Nobles' Drugstore, the A & P, Kramer's Department Store and Bassett's Drugstore. The 20th

Century Movie Theater sat at the crest of Bank Street amid the friendly small markets, clothing stores, Hart's 5 and 10, the Moos and Baum Department Store and, of course, the soda and ice cream fountains, Hipps and Nicholas'. From Bank Street across the tracks and down the embankment to the west lies Young's Field next to the river. Raise your eyes a little and you can see lush pastures along the river and the State Highway 7. The vista rises to a plateau with a stately mountain and open pasture and orchard in the background. Bank Street is a steep incline, ending at Railroad Street, which runs north and south along the railroad tracks. Along Railroad Street were the *New Milford Times*, The New Milford Restaurant, Travaglioni's Variety Store, the Warner and Disbrow Market and, my favorite place, Bona's Ice Cream and Candy Store.

The population of New Milford in the decade of 1936-46 was c. 3,500. There were the usual town leaders, wonderful people, and local characters. Ralph Dodd was First Selectman during my entire childhood. Franklin D. Roosevelt was President during the same period. I believed these two were "leaders forever."

Fort Hill

This was my home town of New Milford, Connecticut when I was a child: the quintessential New England rural town in a valley surrounded by fertile farmland and mountains. I was born on the plateau across the river called Fort Hill in a little house at the foot of Guardian Mountain ("Myrt's Mountain"). Lore has it that Fort Hill was an ancient Indian burying ground, and Guarding Mountain was used by the Indians to look up and down the valley for approaching enemies. Here in the shadow of Guarding Mountain was a small cluster of houses on Fort Hill Road.

The Fort Hill Plateau extends north to south parallel to the Housatonic River Valley that separates Fort Hill from town. Tree-covered Guarding Mountain hovers over the hill and was so beloved by my mother that we called it “Myrt’s Mountain.” In the 1930’s neighborhood teen-aged boys undertook the construction of a cabin on the mountain. The boys were Bob Clark, Dick Peagler, Johnny Boltram and Charlie Freeman. Though not as young as the others, Curt Ferris was involved, as was nearby dairy farmer Henry Chapin. They were responsible for building a classic fieldstone fireplace in the cabin.

Farmland along Fort Hill Road was owned by either Will Clark, Boynton Ferris, or George Pratt. Along Fort Hill Road south of our house was the Catholic cemetery, Ferris Pond, and two large tobacco barns overlooking an “inactive” sandbank. Farther south off Fort Hill Road lived Joe Drapeau with his truck garden and Henry Chapin who farmed land in the area. The Chapin house later became the home of the Kallenbach family. The fields were dotted with long tobacco barns used by farmers for what was called their “cash crop”.

There were two Fort Hill Roads. The actual Fort Hill was a steep incline leading to town, and Fort Hill Road intersected at a ninety degree angle north/south along the plateau. (This confusion of names lasted until July 2000 when Fort Hill #2 was renamed Peagler Hill Road by the New Milford Town Council.) Guarding Mountain rose steeply from a field behind our house. Fort Hill was a plateau west of the river along the base of Guarding Mountain. The Fort Hill neighborhood was what we call today integrated. No one thought this unusual at the time. All of the families were friends. It was the home of the Peagler family, the Clayton Reed Family, the Ed Reed family and the Obediah Freeman family, all Black. Also living in the shadow of the mountain were the Sheldon Ferris family, Grandma Ferris and Curt Ferris family, the Charles

Boltrom family, the Steve Ferris family and further up the road were the Will Clark family and the Lester Leviness family, all White. Fort Hill had at that time well over a dozen children growing up together, playing, hiking, ice skating and finding adventure together.

An open pasture bordered the north end of Guarding Mountain and bordered an apple orchard. Our favorite apple tree here produced what we called "pound apples" the size of softballs. The firm, crisp meat of the apples would be devoured as we looked down at the old New Milford Fair Grounds which still had a very dilapidated grandstand standing by an oval racing track. Brother Philip and I would gather bags of apples that Mom would use to make apple pie, apple sauce and apple butter which were preserved in canning jars stored on a shelf in the basement beside the jars of stewed tomatoes, succotash, green beans and other produce from the garden. This store helped make it possible for Myrt to feed ten children during the depression.

When I was born at the end of 1931, the Great Depression was in its infancy and its affects were not evident to me during my early years. The numerous tobacco and dairy farms that surrounded New Milford provided jobs for many. The largest employer in town, the Robertson Bleachery and Dye Works, was housed in a large brick building similar to those seen in many old New England towns. The building was located at the end of West Street along the banks of the Housatonic River, south of the town bridge. It seemed to me as I grew older that everyone that I knew worked for either the Bleachery or on one of the numerous dairy farms in the area. At least three of my older brothers worked at the Bleachery at one time or another, and we all did farm work. The Bleachery produced bolts of beautiful cloth that many people obtained and brought to Mom to sew dresses, shirts and other garments from. She was also given Bleachery cloth from which she made garments for the family.



Owen's schematic drawing of what Fort Hill looked like when he was growing up: Myrt's Mountain is in the background with Clark's Farm in front of it where at one time tobacco was grown, later corn and alfalfa. At the front left of Clark's field stand three houses next to the Catholic cemetery. The third one from the cemetery is 76 Fort Hill Road, Owen's childhood home. To the left of the cemetery is a lot where vegetables were grown. Down from the lot but not visible in the drawing was the Upper Pond. To the right of 76 Fort Hill a road leads down to an ice house and spring at the bottom of the hill and what was known as the Lower Pond (not visible on the map). Further down was the Stewart's horse barn. At the top of Fort Hill Road to the right is a cluster of houses and the Boynton Ferris lot.

The house on Fort Hill Road (simply called Fort Hill for many years) was the source of my earliest memories. Fort Hill, New Milford, Connecticut was our mailing address. House numbers and zip codes would come decades in the future. Actually, any letter or package with the name "Peagler," or a reasonable facsimile, would be delivered.

Ten children were snug in four bedrooms with Mom downstairs in the small former pantry. The two girls, Mabel and Frances, shared a room; Robert, Jr. (Dick) had a small room to himself; and the remaining seven boys occupied the other two bedrooms in various lineups and configurations. There was no running water or indoor plumbing. A water pipe connected to Will Clark's field irrigation system snaked through the field to a hand water pump in our kitchen. An old tar paper outhouse was a short walk away (a very long walk in the winter). The water pipe through the Clark field was cut off in my early years, and we were forced to get water from a spring which was located across the field in front of the house at the bottom of an embankment. "Whose turn is it to get water from the spring?" was a question that reverberated constantly through the house; and at times, in desperation, Mabel would go to the spring for water when the older boys were arguing about whose turn it was. After she gave water to the youngest children, she would empty the excess in the yard. After several of Mabel's lessons, the boys got the message.

My earliest memories of the family home on Fort Hill are of the beehive of activities, closeness, and security of nine older siblings. Philip and I were toddlers; and John, two years older than Phil, was curious and amused himself by disassembling any article that was handy, such as toys, clocks, and mechanical objects which he spent hours attempting to reassemble. Electricity became an interest that he pursued for years. He obtained an electric train

transformer and hooked up wires in series to activate small bulbs and other objects. He once held two bare wires up to me and said "Hold these." I grabbed the shiny ends of the wires, and he turned the transformer on and delivered a mild shock to my surprise and anger. John was a tinkerer and occasional practical joker. He once held out two small chocolate squares and asked, "Want some chocolate?" Again I was the unsuspecting foil. I enthusiastically ate the small squares. John broke out laughing and opened his hand to show me the package of Ex-lax. No harm done: no reaction.

Sister Frances upset me one day because she took exclusive use of the radio to listen to popular disk jockey Martin Bloch. I had to forgo my daily broadcast of "Jack Armstrong: All American Boy." In retaliation, I ran to her bedroom and hid her jewelry box on the attic stairs. After a frantic search by everyone in the house, I ran to hide on the attic steps, where Frances found me and the jewelry box. To my relief, she was happy to find the box rather than angry.

Along the road from the bottom of Fort Hill to Route 7 was a large white dairy barn which was unused for many years. In the mid 1940's Don Bourem rented the barn to raise, train and sell horses. The business was later taken over by the Stewart family from Bridgewater. Buster Ferris, Eddie Ferris, Philip and I hung around the barn riding horses whenever we could and earned a few cents of movie money by cleaning stalls and adding to the manure storage pit. For several years the barn, the horses and gathering hay and other chores dominated our free time. A drifter named Frank Windover hung around the barn and helped with chores. He had many cowboy outfits and was something of a drugstore cowboy. He often went to the Saturday matinee which featured cowboy pictures, short subjects, a cartoon, a serial and a B movie. For 12 cents you spent most of the day at the movies. Most of your friends from school were there. I looked forward to

seeing my favorite cowboys: Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, Tim Holt, Tim McCoy, and Randolph Scott. I liked Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. One Saturday Frank Windover was sitting near us at a crowded Saturday matinee. Jean Ferris asked me “who is that guy over there?” I answered, “That’s Frank Windover. He hangs around the barn.” Jean’s prompt reply was, “I wish he would turn his wind over in another direction!” I’m still laughing.

Fort Hill Kids

Eddie Ferris was my constant playmate, and we hung out with his older brother Buster and sister Jean, my brother Phil, Frannie and Alice and Madeline Boltrom, and Eleanor Ferris. Because of our proximity to Ferris Pond, ice skating was a major group activity for the Fort Hill kids. We learned to skate at an early age and were the first to test the ice in the winter. It was a tradition for all of the kids to trudge down to the pond after supper on cold winter evenings, build a fire with tobacco laths from an old nearby tobacco barn, and skate until bedtime. Often the Pond would be crowded with people of all ages from town. On mild, moonlit nights the pond would be crowded, and Fort Hill Road next to the pond would be lined with cars. The moving skaters and the large bonfire created a festive scene in the moonlight, reminiscent of a Currier and Ives print. When it was time to go home, the boys (Eddie, Buster, Philip, Frannie and I) would send the girls home first and would put the fire out with pent-up body fluids. The sickening smell would send us running for home!

A ritual for the kids in the spring was hunting for the first flowers such as hepatica, jack in the box and pussy willow. A group of us would hunt wild flowers in all of the marshes and meadows from Fort Hill to Sunny Valley. Summer brought the opportunity for new adventures. We played softball in the fields, hiked past Sunny Valley Farm and up Jerusalem Hill to Candlewood Lake,

swam in Candlewood Lake at Lynn Deming Park, built huts in the “gingerbread” swamp (called that because of its soft and springy texture), rode horses and cleaned stalls down at the barn, made soap box derby cars, picked strawberries in “strawberry valley” near Sunny Valley Road or large shiny blackberries in the old New Milford Fairgrounds, went dump picking at Howard Maloney’s dump, played softball and football in the fields, attended ritual Saturday movie matinees at the Twentieth Century Theater on Bank Street, and rode the hay wagons and tobacco riggings at Clark’s or Chapin’s farms. We played marbles, kick the can, and bingo at each others’ houses with everyone bringing prizes. We peeked at couples parked in the sand bank (we called this “sniping”); in the evening we watched the lights of cars from the bank overlooking Route 7. Often we would just sit around and watch clouds of fireflies light up the fields or sit around the cemetery and hide behind stones when cars appeared. On evenings when we were sitting around bored, Helen Bolstrom would often pile us into her car and take us for frozen custard at Carvel’s near the New Milford/Brookfield border.

Pooch

Memories of the house on Fort Hill would not be complete without inclusion of the adventures of the best dog ever. His name was “Pooch,” a healthy, active beagle with the standard black, white and brown makeup and big floppy ears. Pooch just appeared at our doorstep. No one knows from where. He immediately became a part of the household of ten siblings. Phil and I as the youngest of the household accepted Pooch as our own playmate who shared our bed at night to the dismay of Myrt. Pooch was not confined to the house and ran free outdoors, joyfully chasing rabbits and woodchucks in the field at the foot of the mountain, and announced his return and desire to come into the house by

loud scratching and barking at the kitchen door. When the desire to return to nature came to him, he would bark sharply at the back door. Pooch was proficient in making his needs for outdoors and indoors clear to anyone in hearing range. Those were the days before commercial dog food, and Pooch thrived on leftovers and dinner plate scrapings, including vegetable, meat, bread, bones and other detritus from meals. Pooch loved to accompany Phil and me on hikes across the back fields and up the mountain when he would dash vigorously ahead and back to urge us on. I was just past toddler age when Pooch joined the family and just about to become a teenager when Pooch, crippled and suffering in pain, died and left a void, a hollow space inside that was my first experience of the death of a close loved one. Whenever I see a classic beagle to this day, the memories of Pooch return along with our adventures growing up together.

Blacks in New Milford

Many Black families who lived in or near New Milford were close friends of the Peagler family. Close neighbors on Fort Hill were Obediah Freeman, the long-time caretaker of Lynn Deming Town Park; Ed Reed and wife and daughter; next door neighbors Clayton and Bud Reed; Fielden Ritchie family and sons Fielden Jr. and Gorden; Harry Johnson family and daughter Shirley and son George; Mutt Bland and his wife Teresa who comprised a band that played at events in Danbury and New Milford; and Ed Heacock and family who were Schaghticoke Indians but generally considered by the locals to be Black. New Milford was home to Black families and Schaghticoke Indian families related to the nearby Indian reservation in Kent. The large Ben Randall family lived in nearby Bridgewater. I remember their youngest children, Pauline and Donald; their oldest children were boys and girls closer in age to

Fred, Bill and Dick Peagler. The Jim Smith family (Jim Smith and Ray Smith) were from nearby Brookfield. Our closest interactions were mostly with the Ritchies, Johnsons and Randalls; but all of the Black families in New Milford were friends.

Harry Johnson worked at several dairy farms in the area. Fielden Ritchie worked for Milt Osborn at the Park Battery Garage Oldsmobile and Cadillac dealership. Mutt Bland delivered lumber as truck driver for lumber dealer and contractor H.H. Taylor and Son. Sterling Heacock and his father Ed operated a garbage pickup and disposal company. I am unaware of the occupation of Ben Randall. James Terry moved to New Milford in the 1930's and became a fixture in New Milford through his entrepreneurial efforts. James Terry operated Terry's Garage in New Milford and did landscaping and maintenance of many of the summer homes of wealthy nonresidents. He and his wife Ethel later worked for the author William Styron in Roxbury. Styron, Terry and Ethel maintained a friendship rather than an employer/employee relationship. This is evidenced by Styron's dedication of his book *The Confessions of Nat Turner* to James Terry.

Hilton Todd

Many Black women, men, and couples were employed in service at estates in and around New Milford. Their common day off was Thursday, and they often used their day to seek out and visit local Black families. Mom was a friendly hostess to many of the in-service people over the years. Hilton Todd worked for the Newcomb family at their estate Holly Farms in New Preston. He visited Fort Hill often, usually every week. During the mid-1930's Hilton became a regular visitor, and Philip and I looked forward to his visits when he often took us for rides in the big new limousines that he drove for the Newcombs. Hilton and Myrt often went to social events and to visit friends together. He soon became like a

member of the family. He acquired his own car, a 1938 Oldsmobile; and Fred, Wassie and Bill would use Hilton's car and were able to visit friends as far away as New York City.

Hilton drove Philip, Myrt and me to Danbury for shopping. Visiting Danbury, the nearest city to New Milford, was an exciting event for Philip (six years old) and me (four years old). We drove to Danbury in one of Newcomb's long cars and parked in one of the diagonal parking spaces on Main Street across from the Hotel Green. Myrt and Hilton left Philip and me in the car as they joined the large crowd moving along the sidewalk in front of the car. Phil and I sat in the large back seat of the car watching the unfamiliar pageant of the big city. A man came up to the car and stood by the open window. He spoke in an odd manner and rubbed his hands together. Today I would describe him as "oily." He said "Hello" in an oily, unctuous voice and said, "How would you like to see my car?" Without waiting for an answer, he pointed to a car parked half a block away and urged us to follow him. Phil and I had no inclination to follow him or to see his car. While he stood by the car intent on luring us away, Hilton returned and angrily confronted the man. "Leave these kids alone!" Hilton pushed the man away with both hands and said, "Get out of here!" The man literally slinked away without uttering a word. Hilton followed him down the crowded sidewalk until he disappeared. Hilton became the father that I never knew. From the time I was a toddler, Hilton affectionately called me "Puddin." He became a regular member of the family during the following years; and when Phil and I were pre-teens, he and Myrt married. We were delighted! Myrt was no longer alone.

After Hilton and Myrt were married, he often found upkeeping chores around the house such as cutting the grass and repairing the front porch screens. On one occasion he decided to tidy up the large attic at the top of the house which was choc-a-block with old trunks, toys, and the residue from when Philip and I

played indoors on rainy days. Hanging high on the front wall of the attic was a large, framed college graduation portrait of my father, Robert James Peagler. Hilton was alone in the attic at the time, and Myrt and I were downstairs in the living room when Hilton burst into the room and shouted, "That big picture in the attic just fell on my head!" To Hilton's surprise, Myrt burst into laughter. This incident would become the source of the legend of the ghost in the attic.

Hilton kept his job in service to the Newcomb family in New Preston, sharing his time between New Preston and with us on Fort Hill in New Milford. After Harry Newcomb died, Hilton found new employment in service to a family in Brookfield, where he passed away in his sleep in December 1948.



Myrt and Hilton Todd, 1940's

The Black Barbershop

The first haircuts that I remember were given to me by Hilton Todd. Hilton undertook the task of giving Philip and me our first haircuts until we were older and able to travel to Danbury for haircuts. From late childhood to adulthood, getting a haircut at a Black barber shop was a regular experience for me. In each shop usually four or five barber chairs would face a row of chairs along a wall, and a barber would step forward and say "Next." Customers would jump forward in order of their arrival. Usually there was a barber down the line who had few customers; and when he said "Next," no one came forward. Only those who were anxious to get away or those who didn't know any better chose this barber. Over the years I found that reducing waiting time was not worth the price of a shaggy, off- center hair cut. Certain scenarios were played out regardless of which barbershop you chose. The owner usually had the middle chair and maintained a steady dialogue with his customer or with all of the customers in the room. Snippets of local gossip and street chatter continued non-stop, interrupted only by the entrance of regulars such as the numbers runner who announced the day's number and remained awhile to joke and chat. Next to make a grand entrance was inevitably the street person who would provide comical diversion and reduce all to hilarious laughter. Occasionally a woman would step in through the door bringing the admonition of the owner to everyone to "watch your language!" The conversation back and forth was toned down and the woman would have her hair trimmed and straightened, and the steady flow of conversation would continue. The scenario would play out over several hours, more on Saturday. The scenario was the same from barber shop to barber shop; only people changed.

Chapter Two: Memories of Early Years

The Bleachery Whistle

Time was paced in New Milford by the daily 5 o'clock whistle from the Robertson Bleachery. It had a special meaning for me. Myrt wanted Phil and me to start for home and expected to see us home for dinner in a few minutes. On occasion we would linger in town with friends after the 3:15 p.m. school dismissal, but the 5 o'clock whistle was our summons not to be ignored. No matter where we were, in town or on the hill, Philip and I would head home as expected. Further incentive to get home was felt as we hurried to catch the 6 o'clock radio broadcast of *Jack Armstrong the All American Boy* sponsored by Wheaties, "Breakfast of Champions," followed soon after by *Little Orphan Annie* sponsored by Ovaltine, and *Captain Midnight*. After dinner came the evening shows of Jack Benny, Fred Allen, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, *The Inner Sanctum*, *Lights Out*, *The Shadow*, and *The Green Hornet*.

Jack Armstrong's Breakfast of Champions, Wheaties, we found to be delicious; and it promised us that we would be good at sports. Little Orphan Annie convinced us to try Ovaltine, and we hated it. We tried Ovaltine to get the box top in order to send away for Annie's secret decoder ring. Annie's special offers required submission of ten cents and an Ovaltine box top and provided the excitement of waiting for your own mail. After weeks of anxious anticipation, the ring arrived in the mail. It was surprisingly sturdy, with a moveable ring that aligned letters and numbers. At the end of each broadcast Annie sent a secret message in code which could be deciphered with the ring. All of

the secret messages concerned drinking Ovaltine, but the reward was that no one else could get the message! In addition she offered a container with a top so that milk and Ovaltine could be shaken vigorously together into a milk shake. When the plastic container arrived, I followed Annie's directions and placed the small Ovaltine pellets and milk in my new container and shook vigorously. I expected a smooth thick milk shake like Bonas'. I was profoundly disappointed! It tasted awful! Thus ended my exchange with Annie and Ovaltine.²

The *New York Mirror* Sunday comics were a highlight of the week. Spread out on the living room floor, the colorful comics were an exciting escape, especially on a snowy winter Sunday or rainy day. My favorite comics were *Dick Tracey*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and *Prince Valiant* for adventure. The *Katzenjammer Kids*, *Toonerville Trolley*, *Blondie*, *Alley Oop*, *The Timid Soul*, *Major Hoople*, and *Nancy* were also favorites. *Smilin' Jack* was an adventure about airplanes. For comedy, watching the character of Fatso with the button snapping from the shirt wrapped around his beer belly into the open mouth of a waiting chicken always got a laugh. Sunday breakfast of pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon and/or sausage or cinnamon buns from Bruner's Bakery made Sundays fun from the start.

² Ed. When *A Christmas Story*, the film based on a semi-autobiographical novel by Jean Shepherd, came out in 1983, Owen was immediately captivated by the similarity of some of the scenes, such as the obtaining of the Little Orphan Annie decoder ring, to his own memories of childhood. Watching *A Christmas Story* became an annual holiday tradition.

Movies

In the late 1930's and early 1940's, Saturday matinees at the 20th Century Movie Theater on Bank Street were the highly anticipated highlight of the week. It was a festive reunion of all of my school friends. Eddie Ferris, Buster Ferris, Jean Ferris and Phil Peagler and I would walk to town together in anticipation of an afternoon at the movies. If we had some money, we would buy some Cheez-it tidbits or a candy bar to snack on. The program would begin with a western followed by a cartoon and short subjects such as *Fox Movietone News*, *Our Gang* comedy, and a serial that *The Three Stooges* always interrupted at a critical point in the action, which would begin again next week to lure you back. The program was topped off by a grade B feature film, possibly one of my favorites, *Sherlock Holmes* with Basil Rathbone; an airplane picture with Tailspin Tommy; or an exciting and scary haunted house mystery with secret passages, sliding panels, a portrait on the wall with live eyes, a suit of armor that moves, a very windy, stormy night and people stranded in the house because the bridge on their escape route has been washed away.

All of the western movies had similar plots that I looked forward to. The opening scenes were often of a gang of rustlers riding hard in pursuit of a stagecoach. Up above, our hero and his sidekick watch the action and ride down to save the day. Our hero is riding a big white horse with saddle and stirrups decorated with shiny metal. The hero has two pearl-handled pistols in holsters and a finely trimmed shirt and a neck bandana that flutters in the wind as he rides into action. In town in the middle of the day the saloon is packed with the usual card games in progress. At the bar there is a group of tough guys drinking hard. They go as a group to a door to the side and slip into an office where they confer with a rich-looking guy who is obviously their boss. They discuss the next stage holdup and gold shipment. No one knows who the rustlers



Awnings on Bank Street, 1947 by Woldemar Neufeld. Reproduced by permission of the Woldemar Neufeld Estate. The 20th Century Movie Theater, about midway down the street, is showing "I'll Be Yours" with Deanna Durbin. Fort Hill is visible in the background.

are, but they do nothing. Saloon hangers-on arouse no suspicion. The bad group takes over the town, the sidekick is sent to round up the ranchers, and they ride en masse to the rescue with the hero and his white horse in the lead. The bad guys are vanquished. The boss grabs the loot from his office and in the confusion runs to his horse and rides out of town; but the hero sees him go and rides after him, catching him. Jumping from his speeding horse, he pulls the villain to the ground at an embankment that is the scene of the final fistfight; and the townspeople crowd around the victorious hero. His sidekick then does something stupid, and everyone laughs at his antics as the film ends. At the climax, Buster would open his box of Cheez-it tidbits and Eddie would break open his box of Good N Plentys, often sharing them around, which I appreciated as I had used all of my money for the 12 cent admission earned by turning in six bottles for their deposit.

Cowboy movies every Saturday at the matinee were action-packed and predictable, but the cowboys became old friends and the action was exciting. My favorite movies, however, were the occasional haunted house secret passage epics, usually with similar plots: a group of people are stranded in a large isolated house during a stormy night. The roads are flooded and no one can leave. A portrait on the wall above the fireplace has moving eyes that survey the room; a suit of armor stands in the hall with an arm raised; book cases swivel to reveal a secret passage. Everyone has their own bedroom with panels which silently slide open to reveal secret passages that a malevolent person passes through from room to room. People disappear into the maze of passages and secrets are revealed. The best movie of this kind that I have seen stars Kay Kyser and His Orchestra [*You'll Find Out*, 1940, also starring Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi] who become stranded in an old house populated by a weird housekeeper and butler. The movie contains many of the scary scenes that I enjoy: the hands emerging from secret panels, the

portrait with moving eyes, the chair that flips and swallows the occupant, the sliding book cases hiding extensive secret passages, the moving arm of the suit of armor. Abbott and Costello, the Bowery Boys, Topper and Vincent Price have made haunted house movies, and there must be others that I have not discovered yet.

Fall in New Milford

Fall was my favorite season. Each year I was dazzled by the blast of foliage colors. The giant maples marching on both sides of the road past the Catholic cemetery exploded into color each year. I would get a strong, awesome sense of beauty and thankfulness that I was privileged to witness such natural beauty. Guarding Mountain rose in shimmering majesty behind our house, and everywhere the mountains and trees were a tapestry of color. I felt lucky to live in such a beautiful place.

Elm trees marched like tall, flaming torches along both sides of the long green on Main Street. Their leaves were brilliant from the sun setting over the mountains west of town. Residents along Main Street would rake long rows of leaves to the gutter and set them ablaze from two directions. The haze of the smoke would blanket the town as far away as Fort Hill with a woodsy smoke. The pleasant smell of burning leaves was a fall ritual that is engraved in my memory. The Fort Hill kids would rush home after school every day, eager to change clothes and go to the nearby Catholic cemetery and jump from the fence into large leaf piles. Often we would hike up to the apple orchard on the mountain. The steep part of the mountain below the orchard was clear pasture, and we would sit somewhere near the old water pipe gushing water into an old barrel and eat our apples while looking at the town, the river and the valley below. Our favorite apple was the large pound apple generally about the size of a softball but the largest of which could be five to six inches in diameter. The flesh

was firm, white and tart. Mom turned them into outstanding pies. Local farmers called them “pound apples,” and I have heard no other name for them since.

Late fall was tobacco stripping time. Stripping tobacco was the process of taking the tobacco leaves from the stalks and placing them in brown paper-lined crates. When the paper was full, the tobacco-filled paper was removed from the crate and tied into a neat bundle. Often whole families would help a farmer strip tobacco, including my mother. This was one of the few opportunities for a kid to earn some money.

Halloween in New Milford

Halloween was a festive time in New Milford observed by decorations and drawings in elementary school classrooms. Merchants along Bank Street hosted window decorations by children, and elementary school classroom Halloween parties and the big party in the Episcopal Church parish hall were anticipated events for me. Halloween parties always offered fresh cider from Bob Ferry’s Cider Mill located on the western side of the town bridge, a short distance south along the river, in later years the site of the popular hamburger stand, Fab’s. Buster, Eddie, Phil and I often stopped at Bob Ferry’s on the way home from school. Bob was the ex-husband of Buster and Eddie’s Aunt Kate; and we knew that if we hung around the mill to listen to Bob talk about Kate, we could drink all of the free cider that we wanted. We would place a long glass mug under the flood of fresh cider as the apples were squeezed; and Bob would always ask, “How is the old so and so? The clean mugs are over here!” The cider was served at most parties and events in town along with large, fresh, powdered doughnuts from Bruner’s Bakery. Activities at the children’s

Halloween parties included the popular dunking for apples, which I tried as a kid and found meaningless and impossible.

The Fort Hill kids got together and went from house to house in the neighborhood. We made our own costumes from whatever we could find around the house. Philip and I raided our copious attic and often found old items that we turned into creative costumes which we wore with colorful, thin paper masks purchased at the 5 and 10 on Bank Street for 25 cents. We all met in costume near the top of Fort Hill and went from house to house for treats and no tricks since we were visiting each other's houses. The group was composed of Buster and Eddie Ferris, Jean Ferris, Madeline Boltrom, and Frannie and Alice Boltrom. After counting our loot, we discarded our costumes except for the masks and set out for Sunny Valley Road to mine new territory, especially to visit Ruth Kronwitter at Sunny Valley Farm because she gave out ice cream cups and bars in addition to candy. On the way to school the next day we passed the green in the center of town; and many years, trickster work was evident. Sometimes toilet paper decorated trees, and one time there was an old outdoor toilet resting near the band stand. Many tricks were evident around the outskirts of town but usually nothing more than designs drawn on screens with soap.

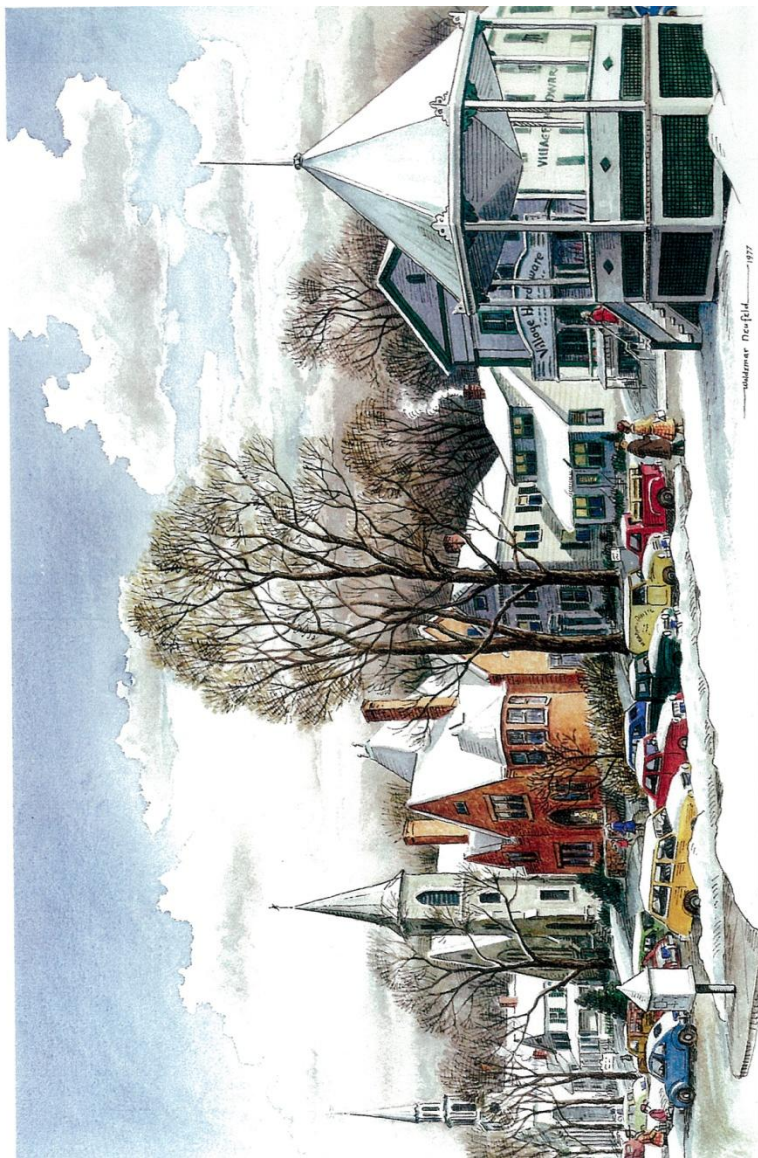
Winter in New Milford

Fort Hill was a winter wonderland for the neighborhood kids: the Boltrom family, three Ferris families, the large Peagler family, and, over the years, kids from the rented house above the upper pond, Anna and Buddy Tez, Barbara and Dorothy Wadon, Walt Golembeski and his sister and many others. Fort Hill seemed steeper in those days: perfect for sliding. (The more common name is "sledding," but that term was not familiar to us.) Heavy snow would bring all of the kids to the top of Fort Hill with every

sled that could be found in barns, attics and garages. Boys would run with a sled and fall onto the sled with what we called a “belly flop” to get a fast start. The hill dropped at a greater angle halfway down, which we called the “josie.” When you hit the josie, you picked up speed along the flat past the lower pond on the right and the swamp on the left. Hard-packed and icy snow would provide a fast ride that provided momentum past the horse barn almost to the intersection of Route 7.

On a particularly icy surface I almost reached Route 7, a milestone reached, as legend has it, by my brother Dick and Steve Ferris in years past. Buster and Eddie got new, sleek flexible flyers; but Phil and I found ours on Howard Maloney’s dump, damaged but repairable. On several occasions after a big snowfall, the whole neighborhood, including Mom, would congregate at the top of the hill and join the kids on Steve Ferris’ toboggan and extra large sled. It was a rare treat to have Mom join in neighborhood activities. On one such occasion a town sand truck appeared to plow and sand the hill. After some discussion, Curt Ferris and the other adults persuaded them to move on and come back later, to the cheers of the kids

[As mentioned before] the lower pond and the upper pond were crowded on weekends with ice skaters from town. Neighborhood kids would meet at night after supper and walk the short distance to one of the ponds. The boys would gather wood and hay from a small barn near the pond and start an open fire which was fed steadily with wood torn from the barn walls or with old tobacco laths (thin wooden boards similar in size to yardsticks used to hang tobacco in barns) stored inside.



Winter in New Milford by Woldemar Neufeld, showing the gazebo on the town green and St. John's Church (third building from the left). Reproduced by permission of the Woldemar Neufeld Estate.

Christmas in New Milford

Christmas was an anticipatory, glittering, colorful fantasy world when I was a small child. The Peagler family faithfully and joyously enjoyed the tradition of holiday rituals that made the holiday exciting for weeks before the special day. The older brothers took turns over the years climbing the mountain across the field to the rear of the house. They would start off with an axe and return with a shapely tree and then construct a wooden stand and place it in the traditional corner of the living room. Raising the tree was confirmation that the excitement and fantasy of Christmas had begun. Myrt would bring the tree decorations from the attic, and everyone joined in placing the ornaments and tinsel icicles. We gathered around the living room and sang traditional Christmas carols. Multicolored lights on the tree reflecting off the ornaments and neatly hung icicles created an exciting fantasy world in the living room. Myrt hung stockings for Phil and me from the mantel shelf which would later be filled by Santa Claus with oranges, candy and small treats.

The Christmas Eve Service at St. John's Episcopal Church continued the festivities. There was a huge colorfully lit Christmas tree in the sanctuary. The sidewalks were busy with shoppers that added to the excitement prior to the distribution of brightly wrapped gifts to each Sunday school child. Bank Street was decorated with lights from side to side; the merchants created a fantasy land in the center of town. Phil and I shared the excitement visiting Parton's Toyland in the basement of their Bank Street store, an area crammed with colorful toys such as the wind up battle tank with rubber treads that could crawl on a small pile of books or magazines and, most exciting of all, the windup railroad train with three feet of circular track made of sturdy metal all for \$1 down and 98 cents after Christmas. Gifts were opened on

Christmas Eve. Toys were a luxury Myrt could not afford; but Mabel, living and working in Philadelphia, mailed gifts for John, Philip and me. As an example of her gifts, one year she sent John a toy filling station with pumps that were lighted by battery, Philip received a toy two-car garage with four toy cars, and I received a toy truck with headlights powered by battery. Those toys were not only exciting but also magic.

Christmas morning was set aside for playing with toys, and excitement and pleasure were enhanced when big brother Bill would sit and play with my toys with me. Bill was from my early childhood a calm, supportive presence. I recall many Christmas mornings beginning when I was a toddler: the family would open gifts and I would play with my new toys on the living room floor and amid the hubbub Bill would join me on the floor and we would play with the fire engine, the truck and the tank with rubber treads. In the morning Myrt would stuff the large 20-pound turkey with corn bread dressing and place it in the oven so that the smell of roasting turkey filled the house until Christmas dinnertime. At around 3 p.m. the golden browned roasted turkey and all of the trimmings were placed on the dining room table before the assembled family.

Christmas Day was an anti-climax even with the big turkey dinner and the new toys and candy. The doldrums days of winter and school were about to begin.

New Milford School Days

My first school experience occurred when I was six years old, what we would call a preschooler. My sister Frances was in high school, and each girl in her home economics class brought a young brother or sister to school for one day as part of a unit on childcare. It was an exciting new experience for me because I was now going to school like all of my brothers and sisters, and it was

the first time that I would meet children from over town since all of the children that I knew lived on Fort Hill. The day began with story reading by our sisters and meeting each other. The first boy that I met became my immediate best friend. His name was Archie Golden. Thus began a long and close friendship that continues to this day. The next year I began first grade. I looked in anticipation for Archie, but different birth dates gave us different starting dates. Archie remained two years ahead of me through graduation from high school. Archie went on to medical school at the same time that I attended Danbury State Teachers College. During our summer vacations, he was player coach of our softball team called Well's Chicks because Mr. Wells, owner of the large chicken hatchery on Wellsville Avenue, sponsored the team. After we graduated Archie practiced medicine in affiliation with Johns Hopkins Medical School Hospital in Baltimore and was one of the founders of Project Hope, the hospital ship that cruised the world to bring medical relief to areas of need.

I entered first grade at the Main Street School in 1938 with very high interest and anticipation based upon years of stories about school experiences brought home by nine older brothers and sisters. I yearned to learn to read, fueled by my desire to read like Myrt and Mabel read to Philip and me. My first grade teacher was Miss Hansen from the Hansen family of the Adams and Hansen Lumber Yard on Housatonic Avenue. My second grade teacher was Mrs. Treat, daughter of Superintendent of Schools, John Pettibone, followed in third grade by Miss Shanley. Miss Shanley was younger than all of the other teachers in the school and, in my eyes, slim and pretty. The fourth grade teacher was Miss Worthington; fifth grade, Miss McGarr; and the sixth grade teacher was the principal, Miss Nelson. I did have Miss Piper during those six years, but time has erased how she fit in. Miracle of miracles, all of my elementary school teachers were to become colleagues in the future when I



Center School, New Milford, CT., c. 1940.

returned home to teach the fifth grade after college, except for Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Treat who had retired.

We walked to school, down Fort Hill, across Route 7 and over the bridge, then up Bridge Street through town. Fort Hill was considered too close to the schools for bus service. All of the neighborhood kids walked to school in all weather. Frigid north winds and snow were the norm in the winter. Every day school buses from Sherman and Gaylordsville passed us as we crossed Route 7. Only once during elementary school years did the Sherman bus stop and give me a ride to school. The temperature was frigid and snow was falling in a strong north wind. I remember how warm and comfortable the kids were on the bus. It was a similar day while walking down Bank Street on the way home from school that I passed the steps to the offices above Dolan's Store. Dr. Fitch, a kindly podiatrist, came down the steps from his office. He asked me if I had any gloves; my fingers were stiff from cold. He said, "My gosh!", and took me by the arm; and we marched back up Bank Street to the Moos and Baum Department Store where he outfitted me with a pair of warm gloves. I've never forgotten Dr. Fitch. His act of kindness was an example of my experience growing up in New Milford.

My world in New Milford was school, the St. John's Episcopal Church, and the Fort Hill neighborhood. In those settings I was seldom reminded of my racial identity and seldom thought about it. I had many friends in school; and starting in the 6th grade, I was a class officer through the senior year of high school. Each year of grade school when the decorated valentine box was opened, my desk was always overflowing with the most valentine cards. The teachers were kind and very competent and never treated me differently, even when occasionally provoked!

New Milford was not completely immune to racism, however. On several occasions on the way home from school in 2nd

grade, kids who lived on Middle Street, a very depressed area, would meet me on Railroad Street and shout “Nigger! Nigger!” as I chased them past Bona’s Store and Warner and Disbrow Market and across the street past Lindsted’s Buick Showroom up to Middle Street. On occasion one of the older ne’er-do-wells hanging around downtown would yell “Hey, Snowball.” Such incidents were rare, however. In elementary school, a boy aptly named Winters, lived in New Milford except for a few weeks in spring and Florida in the winter. I can recall meeting him in the crowded school hall one day and he said, “If you were in Florida you would have to get off the sidewalk to let me pass.”

Life in small, quiet New Milford was not without racist influences seeping to the surface. The difference between New Milford in the 1930’s and other places was that racism was not at all apparent or tolerated in the everyday life of the Peagler family. My first recollection of racism occurred when I was in Miss Worthington’s third grade class. I didn’t recognize it as racism until years later, but I sensed unfair treatment at the time. The incident happened on a class field trip to the public library. All of the children were exploring books and choosing titles to take home. I was particularly excited because I was an excellent reader and had read everything that we had at home; and the elementary schools did not have libraries in those days. As I was selecting some exciting books, a librarian rushed to Miss Worthington and loudly proclaimed for all to hear, “No Peaglers can take books!” I was shocked and humiliated in front of my classmates. Miss Worthington looked at me with a surprised and hurt look on her face. After a pause while looking at me she replied, “Well, I guess he knows that.” From that time on I never took a book from the New Milford Library; and although the library was to be an alien place for me all during my school years, my love of reading and skill at reading grew anyway.

Eddie Ferris and I usually walked home to Fort Hill together after school. One day Eddie asked me to wait for him in the barber shop while he got a haircut. I sat in the waiting area of the shop, Hulton's Barber Shop on Railroad Street. While waiting, a man rushed in and hurriedly offered me a dollar for my turn in the barber's chair. Hulton said in an aggrieved tone, "He's not getting a haircut in here!" A few minutes later he came over to me and in a very kindly way said, "Peagler, wouldn't you like to wait next door in Bona's Store." I understood that a racial concern was involved, but I sensed a respect for me and my feelings.

I also remember an incident when I was in grammar school; and it relates to the Canterbury School, a very exclusive school on the hill overlooking the center of town. It was a boys' school at the time. Often the boys would be allowed to come downtown; and fifteen, twenty, or thirty young students would come down and hang around the drugstore. One day I was on my way home from school, and I passed a group of them in front of Noble's Drugstore. A couple of them came up to me and one said, "Hey, where's your father?" I said, "My father's dead," and he said, "Oh, he was killed by a razor, right?" I did not know what he meant. I know the inference now, but at that time I didn't know what he meant. I went home and asked my mother, "What did he mean that Daddy was killed by a razor?" My mother said, "Oh, that is ignorance on his part. Don't pay any attention to it." And so there was racism, people who would call you "Snowball." But what was unique about the place is that those people would not say such things openly because it was not an acceptable mode of thinking and behavior in that town. I always felt secure because of the respect that my father and my mother had in that community.

My most memorable racist incident took place in 11th grade history class. The teacher, Pop Kelly, spoke in a lethargic monotone and lost the attention of the class. When the class became unruly, he angrily exploded with a reprimand, "You people

are not acting in a civilized manner. That's especially true of you, Owen Peagler!" My closest buddy from 1st grade, Hughie Nuremberg, jumped up from his front row seat shouting in a verbal tantrum, "No! No! That's not fair!" He opened the classroom door and continued his loud objections in the hall. Hugh Nuremberg was incensed by the implied racism and wouldn't stand for it. Hugo stood tall for me that day and cemented a friendship that has grown to this day.³

We were aware in my family of the hardships that other Blacks faced. We read it in the newspaper. We often had copies of the Black newspapers. *The Amsterdam News* out of New York and *The Chicago Defender* would make their way to us. But we did not face any of those problems on an everyday basis, and so we didn't think about it that much. On occasion in New Milford, we would run up against a person who would make racial remarks; but such people were not tolerated in the town. They were not the major voice. Most of the people in the town would not accept any kind of racial slur.

Throughout my years in the New Milford schools, I walked in the footsteps of the seven brothers who preceded me. My teachers knew them all and used them as models and standards for me to maintain. Brother Phil was only two grades ahead of me throughout school and set a high standard of scholarship, in sports and in extracurricular participation. He was elected to the position of Editor in Chief of the school newspaper, *The Chanticleer*, as a freshman. He had the honor to represent New Milford High School at Connecticut Boys State. I was very proud of Phil. Teachers held him up as a standard that I should meet. He was very popular, an honor roll student, and a good varsity basketball player. Guidance counselors were not available in New Milford at that time, and high

³ Ed. Hugh Nuremberg passed away on July 5, 2012, in New Milford, Connecticut at the age of 80.

school graduates had to plan their future on their own. Phil chose a small college in Vermont for higher education. The school, Rutland Junior College, came upon hard times and closed its doors before Phil graduated; and I have long despaired that his excellent mind and ability did not connect with higher education opportunity. My oldest brother Dick, on his own initiative, enrolled in Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia to follow in the footsteps of our father Robert J. Peagler, Sr., a graduate of the same college. Brother Fred, on his own initiative, researched higher education options and chose Wilberforce College in Ohio where he graduated to go on to Howard University Dental School. After practicing dentistry in Williamsburg, Virginia for several years, he attended the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry for an advanced degree in oral surgery. He then became a professor and chairman of the histology department of the Howard University Dental School.

Miss Worthington

Outstanding teachers demanded effort, regardless of how mischievous you were. That same Miss Worthington of the library incident epitomized the dedication of the excellent teachers in New Milford during my school years. I remember clearly one day just prior to Mother's Day, Miss Worthington had the class make oven mitts with a cat face with whiskers. The mitts were to be completed that day so that they could be taken home in time to be presented on the big day. For some reason, which I have not been able to understand to this day, I refused to make my project. All of the entreaties and prodding by the teacher would not move me to complete my project. At the end of the day, Miss Worthington dismissed the class but said to me, "Owen, your mother is going to have a Mother's Day present and you and I are going to stay after school until you complete the project." She then placed all of the

material on the desk next to me and went to her desk and began to correct papers. I remember that she calmly ate an apple while I sat defiantly in my seat, determined to outwait her. School was dismissed at 3:15 p.m. Time passed very slowly. At 3:30 I was cocky. At 3:45 I was beginning to wonder what Eddie Ferris was doing over on Fort Hill. At 4:00 I began to get restless and squirm in my seat. Miss Worthington showed no impatience and looked as if she was in no hurry to leave. At 4:30 p.m. I could stand it no longer, and Miss Worthington kindly helped me as if nothing had happened. At 5:00 p.m. my project was finished and we went home. My oven mitt was beautiful, and I was very proud to present it to Mom on Mother's Day. Miss Worthington was an inspiration to me with that act of caring and commitment, and I sensed this same commitment and support from my other teachers in New Milford. I am sure that there are teachers out there today who have that kind of caring and commitment. Perhaps times have changed so much that that kind of act is impossible; but the compassion, caring, and determination exemplified by Miss Myrna Worthington is possible. I learned a lesson that day that I've never forgotten; the lesson is obvious, but it took many years for me to realize that I had witnessed an outstanding teacher. I have since taught for many years, and I have worked with many teachers but few who would have the patience and the commitment to work with a negative child. My attitude toward teachers and school changed forever that day.

Runaway

One afternoon in Miss McGarr's 5th grade classroom I acted out in an unprovoked, negative way. My behavior was enough to provoke even the unflappable Miss McGarr to send me to the principal, Miss Nelson. Banishment to the principal's office was embarrassing and considered a harsh punishment and was utilized

for only the most serious offenses. I don't recall what actions on my part precipitated the censure, but bad language must have been one of the offenses. At the time I was prone to blurting out some of the language that I heard in the hayfield and around the farm. These expletives would leak out of my mouth with no restraint. I don't remember the incident; but after I had reported to her office, Miss Nelson took me down to the basement and washed out my mouth using a bar of soap and a paper towel and then placed me in a small, dark storeroom across from the boiler room used to store cleaning materials. She closed the door, creating immediate stygian darkness. After thirty minutes of waiting, feeling chastised and repentant, I managed to disengage the door lock and walked up to the side door of the school, went out and walked down the curved sidewalk in front to Main Street. Then I decided to run away: I couldn't go home and face my mother. The school day was not over, and I couldn't go back in. I was alone with no place to go. I decided not to go home, and running away was the only option. It was a strange feeling to be walking down Main Street and then down Bank Street to Railroad Street while school was in session. I walked down Bridge Street and across the bridge and across Route 7 to Fort Hill Road. A farm road intersected at the foot of Fort Hill that ran parallel to the lower pond and along a brook past the spring which supplied water for our house and our neighbors. The road led uphill to the small house above the upper pond then rented by Bill Worden and his family. The road connected with Fort Hill Road at the Catholic cemetery just down Fort Hill from my house.

I was determined to continue my runaway with no destination in mind. I just had to keep walking. I followed Fort Hill Road away from the house parallel to the upper pond. At the junction of Fort Hill Road I turned south toward Sunny Valley Farm and followed the road past the farm. The farm kept a milk can immersed in cool, running spring water next to the road. A dipper



Sunny Valley Farm by Woldemar Neufeld. Reproduced by permission of the Woldemar Neufeld Estate.

was hung in the wooden enclosure, and passersby could get a drink of milk, which I did. I continued along the road to the foot of Jerusalem Hill Road and entered the woods at the foot of Jerusalem Hill and walked up the hill along old wood roads (where lumber had been cut) past the clearing for the electric high tension wires. I had no destination in mind and walked in unknown territory. It was a crisp, warm autumn day; and the fragrant smell of the woods was familiar and comforting. After cresting the mountain, I came to Candlewood Lake Road, which I followed north along the lake past a new housing development called Ferris Estates. The lake road was raised above the lake, and vacant pasture land lay between the road and lake. I passed the old houseboat owned by the boy scouts moldering half out of the water. Then came the large millstone marking the entrance to a housing development called Millstone Ridge. The large millstone stood at the entrance to Lynn Deming Park, the town of New Milford's access to the lake.

The sun was beginning to set, and shadows grew longer. I walked down the incline into the park and sat in one of the bathhouses. Hunger was beginning to grow, and I thought of everybody at home sitting down to one of Mom's delicious dinners. I refused to give up but sat in one of the bathhouse booths as sunlight disappeared and dusk turned to darkness. The temperature grew cooler but still comfortable. A bright, white moon appeared in the darkening sky. The park was quiet and the woods were dark and still as my hunger grew, and my thoughts of dinner at home squelched further thoughts of running away. As the night grew darker and the surrounding woods became more quiet, I suddenly got up and started out for home. I was comforted and relieved after the decision.

I walked up the incline out of the park to the lake road and under a bright moon, dark woods on all sides, started the walk back home. Not after long I saw a dark form walking toward me. My

name rang out in the darkness: "Owen! Is that you?" There was my big brother Fred. I found later that Mom had sent all of my brothers out in search parties when I was hours late from school and missed supper. When Fred got me home, the house was in turmoil. William, Wassie, John, Phil and Charles were still out scouring the countryside. I'll not forget the look of concern and relief on my mother's face. There was no reprimand, just her welcoming arms and a hearty supper.

Bill Griggs

[Ed. Myrt worked long hours and was often not at home when the kids left the house for school on weekday mornings.] Early on school mornings, Bill Griggs, the milkman, would place as many as six bottles of milk in the icebox and then shout at the top of his lungs, "Ok you kids! Get out of bed. It's time to get up for school!"⁴ One morning when in the third grade, I decided that I didn't want to go to school. I left the house and hid behind the hedges in front of the house where I thought that I was out of sight. Bill Griggs arrived with the milk delivery and spotted me. He shouted: "What're you doing down there? Why aren't you in school?" He picked me up, placed me in the seat of his old Model T truck, deposited me at the Main Street School, and waited until I entered the door.

Our vegetable garden beside the house was lush with tomatoes, lettuce, peppers and other good things but also lush with weeds. On several occasions Bill Griggs, after making the daily milk delivery, would inspect the garden. After several Griggs admonitions, he would pay us to "weed the damn garden!" This is

⁴ Ed. Owen also spoke of often being awoken by the sound of Sousa marches played on the radio. Whether this technique was one used by his mother or by Bill Griggs or both is not clear.

the same Bill Griggs who would stand on the bank overlooking Young's Field with his old cronies, including Charlie Durland, loudly cheering the New Milford Townies baseball team. The old guys would keep up an incessant chatter throughout the game. The Townies players included Doug Spargo, a left-handed home run hitter, and Norbie Mitchell, a diminutive, scrappy second baseman. Whenever Norbie Mitchell came to bat, Bill Griggs would shout from the bank, "Here comes Shorty with a tooth pick."

Bill Griggs lived on Housatonic Avenue, and he had to cross the New York, New Haven, and Hartford railroad tracks which ran directly in front of his home to reach his house. On at least two occasions, he lost a truck to an oncoming train. During the summer between high school graduation and beginning college, I worked for Griggs hoeing tobacco in the big field next to his house. My recollection of that tobacco field haunts me to this day. It was a long, narrow rectangular field with rows of tobacco that seemed to stretch to the horizon. The rows were so long that they seemed to merge to a point in the distance. My pay was 75 cents an hour and a quart of milk to drink with my lunch.

Adalaid Strong and Wes Travers

Adalaid Strong (Addie) was an elderly matron native of New Milford. Her picture is in a volume of *History of New Milford* as Adalaid Buck. From my earliest years in elementary school, Addie Strong came over to Fort Hill in August and drove my mother and Philip and me to the Greenhaus Markoff Shoe Store on Bank Street and bought us new shoes for school. She drove a large black, boxy, old-fashioned four-door sedan. She dressed in black dresses of the 1930's period and wore a small black hat trimmed in millinery netting and a white artificial flower on top. She was kindly and energetic. Her purchase of new shoes for school was a yearly event repeated at times such as Easter and for church.

Brother Phil shared a recollection of Addie Strong recently that I had not heard before. When in an early grade, Phil was walking home from the Main Street School. While he was walking down Railroad Street a man and woman approached him and ordered him off the sidewalk so that they could pass. It happened that Addie Strong was walking nearby, and she confronted the couple with the words, "He can walk anywhere he wants to! His family has lived in this town longer than you!"

I also remember as a child that a man in the town named Wes Travers, who had been a friend of my father, came over to the house often to see how things were going. He saw to it that there was food for the kids and helped my mother in any way possible around the house, fixing things and making sure that anything that was broken down around the house was fixed.

James Terry

On Father's Day, June 17, 2012, at the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, during the after-service fellowship hour, Eunice Mahler alerted me to an article in the day's *New York Times* about a Black man from New Milford, James Terry, written by the daughter of author William Styron, for whom Terry and his wife Ethel had worked. Terry was a father figure for the Styron children, especially Alexandra, as she wrote in the article. Terry was a familiar person in my childhood. From the time I was a five-year-old I recall my mother, Myrt, ironing James Terry's stripped pants after cleaning a stain with a damp cloth. It was Terry's wedding day and time was running out. After Terry was back into his wedding clothes, his bride-to-be came into the living room. Ethel Parker, to this five-year-old, was a beautiful woman with very light skin and long dark hair. For years I shared this memory with Terry.

Years later I learned that Terry couldn't read or write, but his handicap was very well hidden by his energy and entrepreneurial

acumen. Terry's garage down an alley off Railroad Street beside Bona's Store and in back of Young's Hotel was his first business venture. Washing and simonizing cars at Terry's Garage was my first opportunity to earn my own money, and his enterprises continued that opportunity for years.

Many New Yorkers had summer homes in New Milford, and James Terry was busy with yard maintenance service for several houses, especially leaf removal in the fall. One fall Terry hired brother Wassie to help rake and carry away leaves from several properties. They would fill a stake truck high with leaves and proceed to sell the leaves to farmers for bedding. To this day I am awed by their feat of acumen in selling truckloads of the leaves that they collected to farmers to use as mulch and bedding, a feat more impressive because there wasn't a farmer in New Milford who didn't have tons of his own leaves on his property. I equate that to selling snow to Eskimos!

Terry's energy and hard work and thrift provided the means for him to build a house with a two-car garage. He continued his garage business and purchased a well-outfitted tow truck. James Terry is the best example of intelligence overcoming lack of education that I have ever seen.

St. John's Episcopal Church

After the move to New Milford from Washington, Ct. [around 1920] for the Peagler family, the family worshipped with other Black families at the Advent Christian Church on Brookside Avenue until Dad was insulted by the comments made by other church members. I was told by my sister Mabel why our family became members of the Episcopal Church. It seems that before I was born, my father took the family to the Black Christian Advent Church in New Milford. My father was a teamster who delivered

coal for Paul Richmond. As my sister tells the story, the communicants of the Advent Church would ridicule him because he carried the smell of horses into the church. My father was insulted and took the family to the Episcopal Church, where we remained members as long as Peaglers were in New Milford. He left the Advent church and was invited to join the St. John's Episcopal Church by his employer Paul Richmond and the pastor, Rev. Culbert McCay. I can remember from early childhood regular attendance for Sunday school and church functions at St. John's Church. The church was a significant influence in my life. I remember attending Sunday school and the nice gifts that each Sunday school child received at Christmas. After I graduated and returned to New Milford to teach, I was elected a church warden.

While in college, Don Woodin and I co-taught a Sunday school class together; and Paul Richmond, a lay leader of the church, hired me as sexton for several years at the princely salary of \$80 per month, which helped me finance my last years in college. My duties were to vacuum the sanctuary and wipe down the pews weekly on Saturday, start the furnace early on Sunday morning to warm the church prior to services in cold weather, and ring the church bell by pulling the ropes located in the entrance foyer. I was so appreciative of the salary largess that every Saturday I would work hours more after completing regular duties, cleaning and putting in order the parish house adjacent to the church. I found boxes and debris decades-old in storage areas behind the stage and made the area orderly and spotless. Then I went to the small church on Canterbury Hill that St. John's used as a summer church, dusting and cleaning nooks, crannies and small closets and unearthed very old items that revealed a very old history. The most revealing were the old newspapers dated in the 1860's. It felt like discovering buried treasure, and I was rewarded for my decision to undertake the additional work.

Town Spectacles!

New Milford was the quintessential small New England town. It was quiet, and any form of excitement aroused a gathering of townspeople for free entertainment. I recall once when Phil and I were about eight and ten years old an old biplane came flying very low over the house on Fort Hill. He circled low several times over the large cornfield which surrounded the side and back of our house. The corn had been harvested, and the field was clear except for the stubble of the harvested corn. The pilot came down very low, skirted the field and made a wide circle back over the cemetery. When he came within a hundred to two hundred feet off the ground, he looked over at Phil and me standing in the yard and gave a hearty wave! It was the most exciting thing to see an airplane at all in those days, but to have the pilot low enough to wave to you was!! The pilot then landed on the rough field and bounced along the corn rows up to the Clark's house at the far end of the field, where he got out and greeted the Clark family. All of a sudden there was a kind of a roar as automobiles burst upon the scene. Car after car loaded with people from town were coming to see the airplane. Many thought that it had crashed. Many people were lined up along Fort Hill Road to catch a glimpse of a real airplane. It was a festive occasion. Soon the pilot jumped into the airplane, waved to the Clark family, turned his plane around, bounced toward us as he gained speed, and rose steeply over the cemetery and disappeared over Sunny Valley Farm to the cheers of the townspeople. And we had what we thought was the best seat in the world sitting in our yard watching this spectacle unfold!

Another example of the small town gathering for a local spectacle occurred when the wild horses from South Dakota arrived by boxcar at the siding near the railroad station. Each year for several years, the Stewarts would go out to South Dakota and

purchase wild horses to be resold at their barn and corrales at the foot of Fort Hill. The arrival of the horses at the railroad station was a major happening in New Milford. The horses were unloaded from the boxcar, and those kids who worked around the barn (Buster Ferris, Eddie Ferris, Donnie Stewart and myself) and people who worked with the horses (Millard Stewart, Don Boerum, et al) would lead them down Bridge Street and across the town bridge to the horse barn along the road which was later called Peagler Hill Road but at that time was Fort Hill Road. Crowds of townspeople would line the tracks and Bridge Street to view the spectacle. I recall a jovial, festive crowd getting much pleasure from watching the beautiful horses being led off the boxcar and down the street. I felt very proud that I was one of those leading the horses and being the center of attention and knowing well that I would have the pleasure of riding many of these new horses in the weeks ahead.

Summer Days

Summer days were often hot, humid and languid. There was little to do on the hill; but to escape boredom and find some excitement, I spent many days hanging around the barn, the large white dairy barn situated on the flat below Fort Hill beside the lower pond and now used to house horses for sale by the Stewarts. There was always the possibility of getting to ride horseback and the possibility of earning a few cents for admission to the Saturday cowboy matinee at the Twentieth Century Movie House on Bank Street. Millard Stewart was usually at the barn working at chores such as feeding the horses, cutting hay, and meeting occasional customers. One hot, stagnant August day, Millard was energetically cleaning stalls and placing the manure in a large manure pile that was about six feet high and eight feet wide and had been aging in place for months. Millard hitched up a pair of mules to a flatbed wagon and parked it by the manure pile. He

asked if I would like to drive the mules and wagon to a field up on Fort Hill near the Catholic cemetery, where he planned to plant corn. I was delighted to have the opportunity to break the boredom by driving the wagon alone for a distance of close to two miles along back farm roads. Millard loaded manure from the pile into the wagon; and I drove to the field, tripped a mechanism that opened the flat bottom and dropped the load, and drove back to the barn for another load. Driving the mules turned a turgid summer day into an exciting new experience. After completing six loads, the mules were placed in stalls and watered; and I was off to town with money in my pocket.

The Fort Hill kids developed their own ways to pass the time on long, quiet summer days, such as helping at Sunny Valley Farm up Jerusalem Hill to Candlewood Lake Road, climbing the mountain to the cabin built by our older brothers years before, also visiting the apple orchard in a pasture near the top of the mountain. Cows grazed among the apple trees and ate the ground apples which lay fermenting below the tree. One day a group of us, Buster Ferris, Eddie Ferris, Fran and Alice Boltram and brother Phil, were picking apples in the trees above the grazing cattle who were ravenously devouring fermenting ground apples and staggering about from the effects of the fermenting alcohol. The cows looked menacing to us, and we became trapped in the apple tree branches. Buster was brave enough to jump to the ground and walk past a group of cows who turned their heads in his direction; and a few moved menacingly in his direction as he ran away. It is unlikely that we convinced anyone that we told about our experience of the truth of being chased and marooned in apple trees by drunk cows!

Sniping was a frequent pastime of the Fort Hill kids. Sniping was sneaking up on lovers in parked cars on the sand bank down the road past the Catholic cemetery. The sand bank was an amphitheater-shaped cul de sac with steep, almost vertical sides of

sand and gravel rising to level pasture land around the western rim. Lovers would park in the sand bank, and the steep sides around them provided the illusion of privacy; but high above them on the western rim they were being watched unseen by a group of young kids. We couldn't see into the cars, but we knew they were doing the "nasty." Buster Ferris, the bravest of the group, sneaked up to a parked car once and looked into the back window. He never said what he saw. So sniping remained an innocent clandestine peep show, a group activity for the Fort Hill kids.

Bucking Broncs

August 1945 was the usual quiet, hot and sultry days of late summer; and Eddie and Buster Ferris and I hung around the barn down Fort Hill near the lower pond where the Stewart family raised and trained horses for sale. We were in our early teens and hung around the barn waiting for an opportunity to ride and the opportunity to clean stalls and other odd jobs to make movie money, which didn't have to be much because admission to the Saturday afternoon cowboy matinee at the 20th Century Theater was only 12 cents. For two weeks the *New Milford Times* had been carrying an advertisement for a traveling three-ring circus that was coming to town. The ad depicted a fierce- looking bucking horse and offered \$1.00 a minute for any volunteer who could stay on the horse. Millard Stewart managed the horse barn for his father and often let us ride the horses. Millard saw the circus ad and made an offer I couldn't refuse. He offered to buy my ticket to the circus if I agreed to ride the bucking horse. I could keep any money that I won. With fear, I agreed. Millard allowed us to ride horses, and I felt obligated to accept the offer.

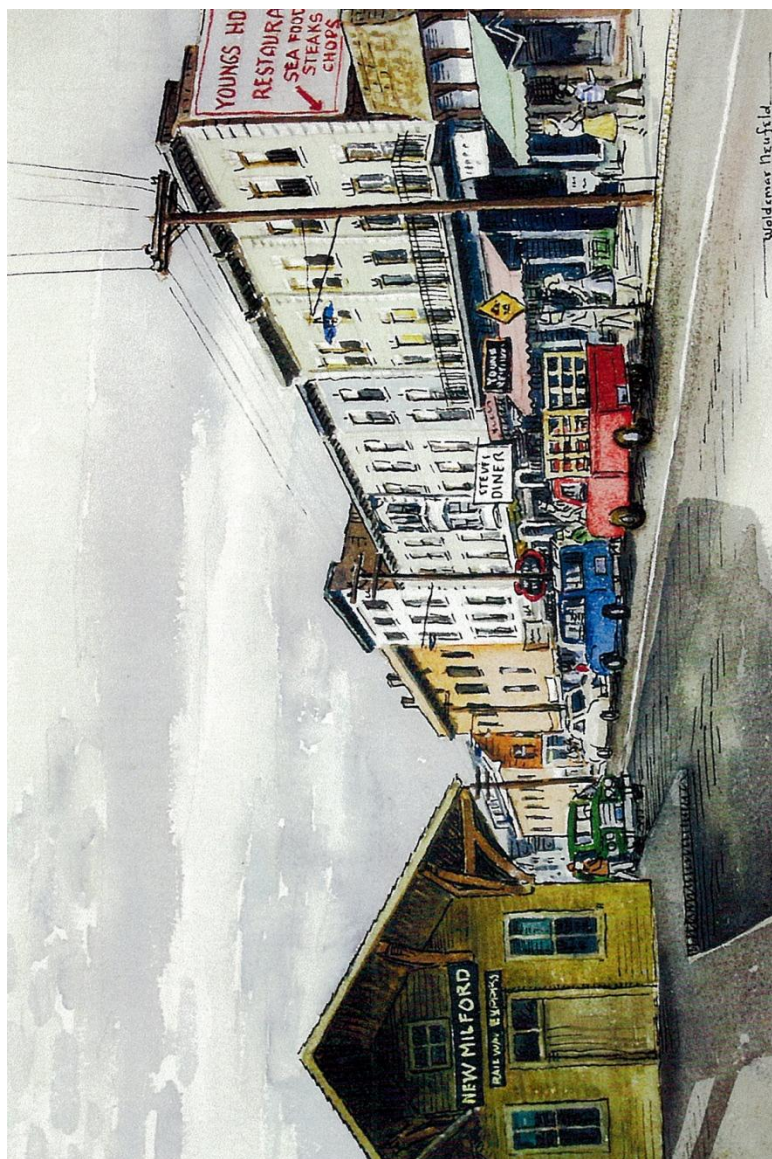
The circus arrived and set up in a field across Route 7 from Milt Osborn's Garage. The big day came, and Millard escorted me to the evening show and purchased our tickets. The bleacher seats

overlooking the 3-ring show were packed. After some preliminary acts, a pony was led into the center ring and volunteer riders were invited to come forward. I leaped into the ring, my fear repressed because of the small size of the pony. The ringmaster led me to the pony, and I mounted bareback. He returned with a small whip after I had mounted and began to whip the pony's hindquarters. The pony began violently bucking and making sharp moves to get me off his back. He took several short steps and stopped short, and I continued forward over his head to the ground. I got up to the background of hilarious laughter from the audience. I quickly mounted again, and the ring master continued with the whip. I was thrown to the ground again, and the audience went wild with laughter. The ringmaster handed me a dollar bill and whispered "You've earned this!" I should have been humiliated, but one dollar was big bucks and had much purchasing power in those days.

[Ed. One of the most interesting stories that Owen did not include in these early memories but often spoke of was an incident which occurred when his Grandmother Georgia Gary Randall⁵ (Myrt's mother) from Virginia was visiting with them in New Milford and he and Phil were perhaps four and six years old. It was winter; and Grandma Randall, Phil and Owen were walking to town and preparing to cross the traffic bridge at the foot of Fort Hill Road. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Grandma Randall told the boys to stop and wait a few minutes before stepping onto the bridge. Owen recalled that nothing happened at first, but after awhile they could hear the chugging of a car starting to cross the bridge from the other direction. When it was perhaps halfway across, the car hit an icy patch and skidded to the side of the bridge directly into the path where they would have been walking. Owen

⁵ Georgia Parker Gary married Henry "Buck" Randall following the death of her first husband, Charles Gary, Sr.

never forgot that his grandmother's intuition had saved them from certain death or injury.]



Railroad Street by Woldemar Neufeld. Reproduced by permission of the Woldemar Neufeld Estate.

Chapter Three: World War II and the Post-War Years

World War II

Myrtle Gary Peagler, “Myrt” to the older brothers, “Mom” to Philip and me, kept the family close together for years until the older siblings moved on and World War II separated the oldest boys. The first to leave home was Mabel who moved to Philadelphia to live with her father, joined there by sister Frances, who died shortly after from tuberculosis. Frederick Douglass Peagler enrolled in Wilberforce College in Ohio and then went on to dental school at Howard University, where he was later to become a professor and chairman of the department of histology. He had been deferred by the draft board to complete dental school; and after graduation he was drafted to pay back his deferment time and assigned to the air force with a commission of the rank of captain, serving in Alaska. On Fred’s visits home he told of his lack of funds and at times being hungry. At the time I was earning one dollar per week from neighbor Clate Reed for doing odd jobs. Often I would place a dollar bill in an envelope and send it to Fred at college. He told me years later that often the money that I sent was the difference between eating or not eating. When I was in college myself years later, Fred had graduated from dental school and was in practice in Williamsburg, Virginia. During that time he faithfully sent me twenty dollars a week with the stipulation that I use the money for activities to enhance my enjoyment of college.

Robert Peagler, Jr. (“Dick”) enrolled in Hampton Institute in Virginia, the alma mater of Robert Peagler, Sr. and Myrt’s brother Charles E. Gary, Jr. Dick graduated from Hampton around

the start of WWII and was drafted into the army and assigned to Officer's Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. He returned home within a year as a freshly minted 2nd lieutenant before being posted to Fort Eustis in Virginia and then to Hawaii. I recall as a nine-year-old walking proudly up Bank Street with my big brother who was resplendent in his uniform with shiny brass and Sam Brown belt which I had heretofore only seen in movies. He walked long and tall in his officer's uniform. As we walked up Bank hill, everyone we passed stopped to greet him enthusiastically and look him over. Small groups gathered as we moved along past Kramer's Store, Twentieth Century Movie Theater, Barton's Store, Moos and Baum Department Store, the 5 and 10, past Noble's Drug Store, crossing the street at Schipecasse's Store and returning to Railroad Street, causing a stir on the busy sidewalk as we passed.

Wassie (Wilbur) joined the navy in anticipation of the draft; and after basic training and interim assignments, he was sent to a small island in the South Pacific, Espiritu Santo, a large naval supply base. John left high school before graduating to join the navy; but in less than a year he contracted tuberculosis and soon died in the navy hospital in Queens, New York.

Brother Charles had left New Milford as a teenager to live with Dad's sister Aunt Matilda and her husband Rev. Hayward Crawford⁶ in Detroit, where he stayed until drafted into the army. Charles was sent to England, arriving after D-Day. Bill was posted to the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland, then to a camp in the South, and soon transferred to England and the Pacific area of operations. While he was in the army overseas, his wife Connie lived with Myrt's close friend Louise Linton in Harlem.⁷ Phil and I

⁶ Ed. The Reverend's name can be found variously spelled as "Haywood," "Heyward" and "Hayward;" but "Hayward" is the spelling his wife used so is retained here.

⁷ Ed. Sometime after the war was over Louise became unwell; and her teenaged daughter, Sandy, came to Connecticut to live with Bill and

visited her there several times. Connie took us to a movie theater on 125th Street where we saw our first and only all-Black cowboy movie. We then went next door to the Apollo Theater to see the big band of Jimmy Lunceford.

World War II households with family members in the armed forces displayed a flag in the window with a blue star for each family member in the service. During the war five Peagler brothers were in the service, and no flags with five stars were available. The flag was 10" to 12" square with a broad red border and blue stars inside the red border on a white background. Some multi-star flags were available but none with five stars. Ethel Prince, whom I would describe as a local activist, and Myrt were close friends. One day Ethel came to the house and inquired why we did not show a flag honoring our men in service. Mom responded that no flags with five stars were available. Within a short time, Ethel Prince returned to the house and presented a five-star flag and hung it in a living room window. To this day I believe that she had it specially made.

I will not forget the day when the telegram informing Myrt that Dick had been killed in action came. It was a sunny summer day, and Myrt and I were home alone. Myrt was placing our lunch on a small table on the front porch, and we noticed that Grandma Ferris and Kate Ferris and Betty Ferris were clustered behind their hedges at the corner talking excitedly to the owner of the local taxi. They stood talking a long while, often looking anxiously at our home. Slowly the taxi, an old four-door touring car, drove to the front of our house and the driver got out and nervously stood by the front hedges looking distinctly distressed. After what seemed a

Connie at their home in New Haven. Sandy had spent much of her childhood in New Milford, growing up with Myrt's grandchildren (Mabel's David (Buddy), Jimmy, Linda and Karen; Fred's Douglas (Butch); Wassie's Wilbur; and Charles' Richard) and was always considered to be a member of the family.

very long interval, he walked up the front sidewalk with a telegram in his hand. He appeared deeply distressed as he handed the telegram to Myrt. "Telegram, Mrs. Peagler." I noticed we were being watched by a cluster of neighbors in Mrs. Ferris' yard at the corner. The taxi driver left, and Myrt opened the telegram and burst into deep sobs. In all my life I had never seen my mother cry. Much of my security growing up came from her strength. I read the telegram which began "I regret to inform you." I will never lose that feeling of despair that I felt at the time, watching the person that was my strength dissolve before my eyes. But Myrt eventually rallied and moved on.

[On July 4, 1945 Dick's commanding officer wrote to Myrt as follows:

My dear Mrs. Peagler:

I take this opportunity now to write you concerning your son Robert of whose death you have already been notified by the War Department. Details as to his place of burial have been forwarded you by our Chaplin.

Though such a loss must be for you a heavy cross to bear we his friends can only say that since the Lord willed that "Peag" (as we affectionately called him) should go from us there could not have been a more fitting way than the manner in which he died. A sniper's bullet felled him as he was leading his platoon against the enemy. He did not suffer.

The finest tribute an officer can receive is the unstinted admiration of his men. As a battery commander I have been proud to know that the soldiers of your son's platoon considered him to be of the finest type of leader.

One of Robert's assignments was that of laying and inspecting mine fields, a hazardous job. Always when there was doubt Lt. Peagler would order his men back to a point of safety and proceed to investigate on his own not allowing them to come

forward until their safety was assured. The men still talk about this and other examples of his devotion to duty.

"Peag" had served under my immediate command for a considerable length of time. Throughout, he was a hard working, unassuming officer, valued in friendship by us all. A few days before his last he was promoted to the rank of 1st Lieutenant.

The men and officers of the battery join me in expressing our profound sympathy. Alive, your son was a credit to you, to his fellow soldier and to his homeland. Dying, he gave us inspiration to endure and a determination to carry on as long as we are needed.

Yours very truly,

Alder F. Watts

*Capt., 870th AAA AW Bn
Commanding]*

Lt. Robert Peagler (Dick) was killed in action on an island near Okinawa. Brother Bill was on Okinawa, but he did not learn of Dick's death until months later when he received a letter from the New Milford Serviceman's Club which met weekly at the New Milford Library to write to New Milford servicemen overseas and bring them up to date on news from their hometown. Bill was shocked to read in the letter that Dick had been killed in action. That was the first that he heard the news, and the shock was even greater since it had been only weeks since they had been together. While he was stationed in Hawaii, Bill met and spent time with Dick, who had been stationed there for months. Dick had acquired a run-down Ford automobile, and together he and Bill toured the island. Bill asked his sergeant for time off to spend with Dick, and the sergeant refused permission. Bill was proud as his brother pulled rank on the sergeant and firmly said, "I out-rank you and this man is to be released to my custody." They were soon separated, however, when their units were moved to the volatile Western Pacific. Bill's unit saw action in the 2nd wave of the invasion of

Leyte in the Philippines, and later the unit was in the 1st wave of the invasion of Okinawa. Fate intervened again when the island of Okinawa was secured. Dick and Bill met again and shared time together shortly before Dick was killed in action. Dick's unit was on a nearby island that the invasion bypassed, and he told Bill that his unit was securing the island from lingering Japanese resistance. He was killed in action by a sniper's bullet while covering his men. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart, which are now on display in the New Milford Historical Society.⁸

After World War II ended in 1944, my brothers returned from military service overseas. Bill was the first to return from the Pacific theater, followed soon after by Wassie from the island of Espiritu Santo in the South Pacific. Bill returned to his wife Connie in New Haven, and Wassie returned to New Milford after completing an automobile body repair training program in Detroit and did autobody work for Lee Motors in New Milford and other garages in the area before establishing his own business, *Peagler's Autobody*, on Route 7. Fred was in dental school during that time, deferred from military service that would soon be repaid by being drafted upon graduation. Charles returned to Detroit from England where he was stationed during the entire war. He

⁸ Ed. In 1996 *U.S. News and World Report* featured an article in which it reported that of the 1.2 million Black Americans who served in World War II, not a single one received the Medal of Honor, the army's highest combat award. In an attempt to redress the slight, a nominating committee put forward the names of nine African-American soldiers to receive that honor. Robert was one of nine, but his name along with that of one other was cut from the list. When the family questioned why Robert's name had been removed from the nomination list, it was reported that he had not killed a certain number of the enemy but had only saved his troops from being killed! Proceedings have been underway for nearly twenty years, spearheaded by New Milford historian Fran Smith and the New Milford VFW with copious letter writing by Owen, to have his name restored and the Medal of Honor posthumously awarded to First Lt. Robert J. Peagler, Jr.

returned to Detroit where he had lived with Dad's sister Aunt Matilda and her husband Rev. Hayward Crawford during his teen and high school years. He returned to New Milford from Detroit in 1952 with his wife Orel and son Richard and lived with Myrt and me in the family home on Fort Hill. I enjoyed observing young Richard transform from a city kid to a New Milford country kid.⁹ After Myrt's death, Charles would purchase the homestead on Fort Hill from the family, and it became a mecca for special family occasions.

Even after the trauma of combat, Bill still recalled some humorous times. During a very quiet time, while engaged with Japanese troops, members of Bill's unit found a large supply of prunes; and some members of the squad decided to ferment prune juice into alcohol. They obtained several gasoline drums, which they filled with prune juice and buried to ferment not far from their position. Time passed and all was quiet at the front. Late one night weeks later, the unit was shocked awake by loud explosions; and everyone grabbed their weapons and raked the area in the direction of the sounds. They were sure that the Japanese were attacking. A close survey of the area later revealed that the prune brew had fermented and blown the covers off the buried jerry cans! When Bill's unit received word that Japan had surrendered, they were guarding a large ammunition dump on a hill overlooking a harbor with numerous large navy ships at anchor. When the ships received word of the Japanese surrender, they opened fire into the air with every gun and rocket available. It was a great fireworks display which Bill's unit viewed beside tons of ammunition!

After high school Philip attended Rutland Junior College in Vermont; but when the college closed its doors due to financial

⁹ *Ed.* Owen and his nephew Richard were roommates until Owen's move to New York State in 1957, setting the stage for a lifelong close friendship.

difficulty, Phil joined the navy and was stationed at Norfolk Navy Base in Virginia and deployed on the USS Dionysius. After receiving his discharge, he worked in New York for a time and saved his money for a European tour. He liked Europe so well that he decided to return a second time and ended up living and working in Paris and Berlin for a number of years, eventually returning to New York where he worked for the state until his retirement.

When I graduated from college in 1954 and accepted a teaching position in New Milford, I faced the possibility of being drafted. George Devoe of Devoe Real Estate Co. in New Milford was a member of the draft board in Watertown. I went to see Mr. Devoe in his office, a small white cottage on Rt. 7 north of the town bridge, and asked him to draft me right away to remove the uncertainty about being available for the teaching position. I remember his response clearly: he reached up and adjusted his hearing aid and after a thoughtful pause he said, "Your family has given enough in service. You will not be drafted." True to his word, I received an exemption and never served in the armed forces. I heard that the draft board received some negative feedback for that decision. Because of George Devoe, my working career was able to progress uninterrupted.

New Milford Post World War II

Picture it: the small Connecticut town of New Milford. World War II had recently ended. Very few cars were on the streets in the center of town or on Route 7 or the local roads. The town was quiet and there was nothing to do for junior high boys Bill Jones, Hughie Nuremberg, Eddie Ferris, George Lee and Owen Peagler. Bill Jones' family owned the New Milford Restaurant on Railroad Street, Hugo lived in an apartment on Bank Street, George Lee lived in a neighborhood that bordered the back of South Main Street and Grove Street (Bostwick Place), and Eddie Ferris and I

lived on Fort Hill. We began to meet in the center of town after school and often in the evening. After the war was over, new cars began to arrive at dealers. The new models would arrive on trucks, hidden under covers. New models could only be viewed at a dealership. Bill Jones' father purchased one of the first of these post-war new cars, a sleek Hudson Hornet. Bill's father, Gus Jones, worked at night at the family restaurant; and on quiet evenings when we had no diversions, Bill would back the new car out of the garage onto Bridge Street; and the five of us would joyride around town. It's difficult to share the excitement of riding around in a new car after years of wartime driving restrictions. Riding around the dark trafficless streets was exciting because Bill Jones not only didn't have a license to drive, he wasn't old enough to drive! We were fourteen and fifteen years old. It was a euphoric experience! We forged the friendships that became "the old gang" and created our pick-up basketball team named by Hugo "The Whiz Kids," with uniforms hand-made by Hughie's mother. We were sports fanatics and played varsity sports in high school. Hughie Nuremberg, Bill Jones and I carry on the friendship and memories to this day.

Hanging around town with the old gang was not always without incident. One Saturday afternoon we were hanging out in the drive behind the New Milford Restaurant and began to explore around the alley that ran alongside the Twentieth Century Movie Theater to Bank Street. As we were walking along the alley, Hugo found a large stone and threw it against one of the metal exit doors of the theater. The sound was deafening, and we could hear it reverberating inside the auditorium. The five-some immediately took off in a fast run down the alley to Bank Street, then at a faster pace ran up Bank Street across Main Street and onto the Green, coming to a rest on a park bench along the diagonal sidewalk across the park toward the library. We sat down exhausted on the bench, and I heard Hugo shout, "It's Pete." The others bolted from the bench and ran toward the library. I looked toward Main Street,

and the theater manager, Pete Lafare, was running full speed toward me. I was alone to face his fury; and as he huffed and



Owen at Lake Candlewood in Lynn Deming Park, c. 1948

puffed to a halt by the bench, I got to my feet and ran away just as he turned to talk. The next Saturday I went to the Saturday cowboy movie as usual, expecting to be refused entry; but Pete asked me if I was on a bench on the Green last week. I said "No," and he dropped the subject and let me enter. To this day I don't know why. He must have seen me, and I was the only Afro-American kid my age in town.

Williamsburg and Uncle Charles

In the summer of 1944 Myrt's brother, Charles E. Gary, Jr., visited at the house on Fort Hill. Uncle Charles was in the army, stationed in Boston. He was on furlough and on his way to his home, Williamsburg, Virginia, where his business, The West End Valet Shop, 607 Prince George Street, Williamsburg, was fully functioning in his absence. Uncle Charlie, like my father and oldest brother Dick, was a graduate of Hampton Institute and was a skilled professional tailor. He asked Myrt if she would permit me to travel to Williamsburg with him, and he would drop me off on the way back to Boston. I was exultant. I had never been farther from New Milford than my sister Mabel's house in Philadelphia and never south of the Mason Dixon Line.

We began the journey from the New Milford Railroad Station by train to New York Grand Central Station, then by subway shuttle to Pennsylvania Station for Pennsylvania Railroad Train South. We changed trains in Washington D.C., and my introduction to the Jim Crow South began. The Chesapeake and Ohio train from Washington D.C. was segregated. Black passengers were herded into a car directly behind the coal-burning steam engine. The seats were made of hard, unyielding rattan. It soon became apparent that smoke from the steam locomotive would stream directly back, enveloping our coach and seeping in through the ill-fitting

connecting door at the front and through windows opened by passengers. The ride to Richmond was hot, noisy and gritty. At one time I walked to the rear of the coach and looked through the window in the connecting door into the coach behind us. It was a shocking sight! My first view of segregation: the White passengers were lolling comfortably in soft blue upholstered seats with white doily headrests. The Black passengers in my coach were in stark contrast, fanning themselves and cleaning faces with handkerchiefs or whatever was handy.

The train arrived in Richmond, and there was time to enter the station before departure. Uncle Charles and I approached the station for a rest stop, and I felt him grab my arm and pull me to the left. "We have to go in here," he said; and then I noticed signs over two doors: "White. Colored." We re-boarded the train and continued on to Williamsburg.

The train slowly came to a stop at the Williamsburg Railroad Station, and from the train window I spotted two women in spotless white nurses' uniforms in the waiting crowd. When Uncle Charlie and I stepped from the train, the two nurses rushed over to greet us. The two nurses were attractive, and one was beautiful. The beautiful nurse gave me and Uncle Charlie a warm welcoming hug. This was the first time that I met Aunt Zelda. She and a colleague left work in Dr. Blayton's office to meet our train. Dr. Blayton's office and clinic was housed in the same building as Uncle Charlie's dry cleaning and tailoring business. Aunt Zelda DeBerry was his head nurse, and Dr. Blayton's clinic provided the only health care option for Negroes in Williamsburg.

Uncle Charlie drove us to his house on Ironbound Road. It was a modest wood frame house with a broad lawn bordering

Ironbound Road.¹⁰ The land extended to the rear of the house many acres into the woods. I later learned that Uncle Charlie inherited the house from his grandfather, William Parker, my grandmother's father. Not far from this property William Parker's brother, Wallace Parker, still lived on Ironbound Road on several acres of his land. I would spend hours with Uncle Wallace Parker when Uncle Charlie was at work at the shop. Uncle Wallace was over ninety years old and alert and active. We talked for hours, and he told me that he was a slave. He remembered the Union army arriving at the farm when he was a child. He recalled that the master was a kind man. He was fascinated by my description of the stone walls made by New England farmers when clearing farmland. He asked me to tell him about them over and over. Every Saturday I would accompany Uncle Charlie and Uncle Wallace as they went to stores to stock up provisions for Uncle Wallace.

Uncle Charlie and Myrt were born in a tiny rural crossroads called Croaker not far from Williamsburg. Croaker is not a political entity; it is an area near the York River where the Gary family lived and the Gary children grew up. Myrtle Elizabeth was the oldest child, then came John, Edyth, Charles Edward, Jr and Celestine. When Robert James Peagler graduated from Hampton Institute, he accepted a teaching position in Croaker and found lodging with the Gary family. He later married Myrtle Gary, and the rest is history. At the time of my visit, Grandmother Georgia Gary operated a small restaurant at the Croaker crossroad. When I stayed overnight with Grandma, I would listen for her question, "Are you hungry?" I could look forward to her savory Brunswick stew and hot biscuits and fried chicken.

¹⁰ *Ed.* Not long after this Charles and Zelda had a house built to their specifications on the adjoining lot, which was also owned by Charles, 1002 Ironbound Road.

Grandma took me to her church when I stayed over, and I remember one service clearly. The preacher, Rev. Jones, gave a lively sermon, "Dry Bones." I had never seen such a lively service with the congregation giving spirited feedback as the sermon rose to a climax. After the service Grandma and I stood in front of the church as she greeted friends. It was as we stood there that I encountered the man who knew my father. Supported by a cane he hobbled over and asked me a question, "Is your name Peagler?" "Yes, I'm Owen Peagler." In response he said, "Your Daddy was my teacher!" My heart skipped. I could have, should have hugged him, a connection to the father who I never knew!

My first trip to Virginia expanded my world. At age thirteen I was in contact with my roots, my extended family, first cousins Audry and Juny Piggott, Aunt Celestine's (Myrt's youngest sister's) children, cousins who I did not know existed, and the large Tabb family cousins whose mother was Grandma's sister. That summer of 1944 was the first of decades of visits to Williamsburg to spend time with my best friend, Uncle Charlie, and his wife Zelda.¹¹

¹¹ *Ed.* Throughout his adult life Owen would spend a good portion of each year visiting the Garys. After his mother died in 1953, Charles and Zelda became immediate family to him and attended his college graduation in Danbury, Ct. the following year. As a youngster he had accompanied Charles on his delivery rounds in Williamsburg each summer. As a college student he did his practice teaching at Bruton Heights School in Williamsburg while staying with Charles and Zelda. After he began teaching, he continued to visit as often as possible. In the 80's when he was working in Delaware with Pete duPont, he was close enough to Williamsburg to visit almost every weekend. After the birth of his third child, Kirin, to whom Zelda insisted that she be "Gamma," visits were even more frequent, on an average of three or four times a year. The Gary household was close knit; and since they had no children of their own, Owen was in many ways treated like a son, though he preferred to think of Charles as his best friend. Their extensive "family" of friends, especially Shade and Carletha (Ran) Palmer, both educators and best

Junior High School and High School

Promotion from 6th grade to 7th grade brought tremendous changes. We moved from the Main Street School to the high school building with the big kids. Instead of sitting in the same classroom with the same teacher, we would now move from room to room, from teacher to teacher. All the classmates and friends who had been together for years, Hughie Nuremberg, Bill Jones, Don Woodin, Bob de Zafra, Dick Cavirus, Eddie Ferris, George Lee, Pat McHan, Elsie Ellman, Janet Richmond, Gertrude Corna, and Eleanor Ferris moved together. We all looked forward to new teachers and the new class format. “Goodbye” to the teachers that we had known since the early grades: Miss Hansen, first grade; Miss Treat, second grade; Miss Shanley; Miss Anderson; Miss Piper; Miss McGarr; Miss Nelson; Mrs. Miller; Myrna Worthington. We were destined to meet new and exciting teachers who would change forever our concept of education. Junior high school teachers Mary Hayde, English; Margarite Peterson, History; Catherine Lillis, Mathematics; and Alice Northrup, Science, treated us as mature kids. (Fate would be kind to me: all of those elementary school and junior and senior high school teachers were still teaching when I returned to New Milford to teach. Then they became gracious and welcoming colleagues.) We loved them. We were no longer pupils; we were students. Miss Hayde was tall and

friends of Charles and Zelda for over forty years, became like a second family to Owen. It was Shade and Ran who did the most to look after Zelda and who handled her financial affairs after Charles' death in 2001 until her own passing in 2010. After Charles passed away Owen continued to visit Zelda and help her and spent six weeks with her in May and June of 2007 following a fall she sustained in the driveway, just two months before his own stroke in September of that year.

attractive, with long black hair. All of the boys, including the old gang, were mesmerized by her. Miss Peterson was a very attractive blond who gained our affection with her down-to-earth demeanor. Mathematics teacher Catherine Lillis was from a well-known New Milford family. Miss Lillis was also attractive, with a low key very supportive persona. I hated math, and her teaching skill helped me shed my math phobia forever. I remember her supportive and personal teaching style. The general science teacher, Alice Northrop, inspired me to teach junior high school general science. She completed the very fortunate coincidence of excellent teachers that propelled us into high school. Alice Northrop had such a profound impact on our class that when we were in high school, we chose her to be the class advisor for the NMHS class of 1950. She would continue to guide the class through our numerous class reunions into the 1990s.

Moving to the 9th grade, the first year of high school, was an exciting transition. We entered high school with confidence. Those of us who went through the 8th grade together were joined in 9th grade by new students from the towns of Bridgewater, Sherman and Warren and St. Francis Catholic School, who sent their high school students to New Milford High School. We made new friends quickly. We were the class of 1950, a year that seemed a lifetime away. Bill Jones, Hugo Nuremberg, George Lee and I (the old gang) were in the same freshman homeroom. Our first high school home room teacher was a very young new hire, Rosemary Matriciano. When she first came into the room and introduced herself, all of us boys gasped with delight. She appeared very close to our age and was very pretty, slim and petite with shiny black hair. She looked as though she could be one of the upper class high school girls. Bill, Hughie, George and I were fascinated by how pretty she was. Most of the boys ended up in her Spanish class. Although she was very young (age nineteen she told us years later), she talked to us as mature adults and never

talked down. She was easy to talk to, immediately became our friend and our teacher and soon became "Miss Matrish" to us all. In later years she would become a regular feature at our class reunions. After the passing of English teacher Barbara Weaver, Miss Matrish is the only NMHS teacher that remains in contact with the old students after all these years.¹²

As a Junior, I was honored and proud to be elected president of the class of 1950, and Bill Jones was elected vice-president. As Seniors, Bill Jones was elected president and I was elected vice-president. Sally Huston was secretary and Jean Meddauh was elected treasurer.¹³ During high school the old gang did less hanging out around town and participated in varsity sports instead. The old gang became varsity athletes. All of the gang were sports enthusiasts, you might even say fanatics; and we all played on varsity teams. We would go to evening basketball practice early and enter the gym through an unlocked window to extend our practice time. George Lee was a basketball star, followed closely by Hughie Nuremberg and Bill Jones. I was a mediocre player, and Eddie Ferris, who was somewhat shorter, played junior varsity. Once we were playing an away game at Bethel and the game was stagnant with Bethel having the upper-hand. New Milford had difficulty moving the ball, and the score was close. Near the beginning of the 2nd half, Coach Wiser put Hugo into the game. Hugo took a pass on the sidelines and dribbled energetically past opponents to the top of the key. Opponents swarmed to guard him, and he dribbled in and out of them back to the top of the key and threw up a one hand push shot

¹² *Ed.* Rosemary Matriciano Jejer passed away on June 17, 2015 at the age of 90.

¹³ *Ed.* Owen also participated in Hi Y, of which he served as vice president and president, was a member of the "Chanticleer" staff and a "gym captain," and served on the student council. He would be given the superlative "Best Sport" in his senior yearbook.

Swish; it went in. The rebound was relieved to Hugo. With a few dribbles to get free, he threw up another one hand push shot: swish! After sinking two more long shots, Hugo was taken out. It was his finest hour. He singlehandedly turned the game around.



Varsity Athletes: Bill, Eddie, Hughie and Owen

Bill Jones, Hugo and I made the varsity football team as freshmen. We were scrubs, but we were proud when we marched out of class when the football team was dismissed early on game days. The coach drove the team to games with help from some students who drove. One game day Bill, Hugo and I, the scrubs, went out to the cars preparing to drive the team to the game. Coach Richard Williamson's car, an old Ford V8, stood with the doors open; and we noticed all of the upper class players passed quickly by Coach Williamson's car and rushed to the students' cars. We piled into Coach's car and were off. All of the car windows were open. Hugo sat in the back seat behind Coach Williamson, who as usual was chomping on a big cigar; and we were off up Park Lane on the way to play Washington. As the shaky rattletrap car picked up speed, Coach Williamson let loose a mouthful of tobacco juice out of his front window. The liquid went out of the front window and hit the wind and was blown back through the open back window where Hugo sat. He let out a howl! Coach never noticed, and we later realized why the older players avoided this car!

In our senior year we were the big guys on the football team. Bill Jones was the quarterback, Hugo was a running back, Bill Cuddy was the fullback, and I was an end. The high schools in the Housatonic Valley Schoolmen's League were small, and the football teams had six players. The field was eighty yards long, with downs of eight yards. The games provided all of the action and excitement of eleven-man football. In our senior year Joe Wiser had joined the faculty as P.E. teacher and took over as coach of the football team. Joe was from Newtown, one of our competing schools, and completed plans for a night football game against them under lights. We practiced under the softball field lights. Several months previous, I was sitting in Geometry class when the sight in my left eye became dark and blurry. Before long I was taken to the Yale/New Haven Hospital Eye Center and remained in

the hospital for two weeks because of my eye problem. No further problems were found with my eye, but I continued to be examined at the eye clinic. My vision improved to slightly cloudy condition, and I hardly noticed the difference. Football season came; I yearned to play, and my eyesight seemed normal. It was then that I made a foolish and dangerous decision that ultimately turned out ok. On a visit to the Yale/New Haven Eye Clinic I noticed that a doctor had left a prescription pad on the table near me. I placed a blank page in my pocket. That evening I went into New Milford to find someone who could write a prescription that I had in mind. While walking along Main Street near the top of Bank Street, I met a guy who usually hung around town and asked if he would do me a favor. I took out the prescription sheet and a pencil and dictated as he wrote: "Owen Peagler is permitted to play offensive football." He signed a fictitious name. I was afraid that the hard body blows of defensive football might be too rough. I gave the note to Joe Wiser the next day; and I began football practicing right away, in time for the big night game with Newtown.

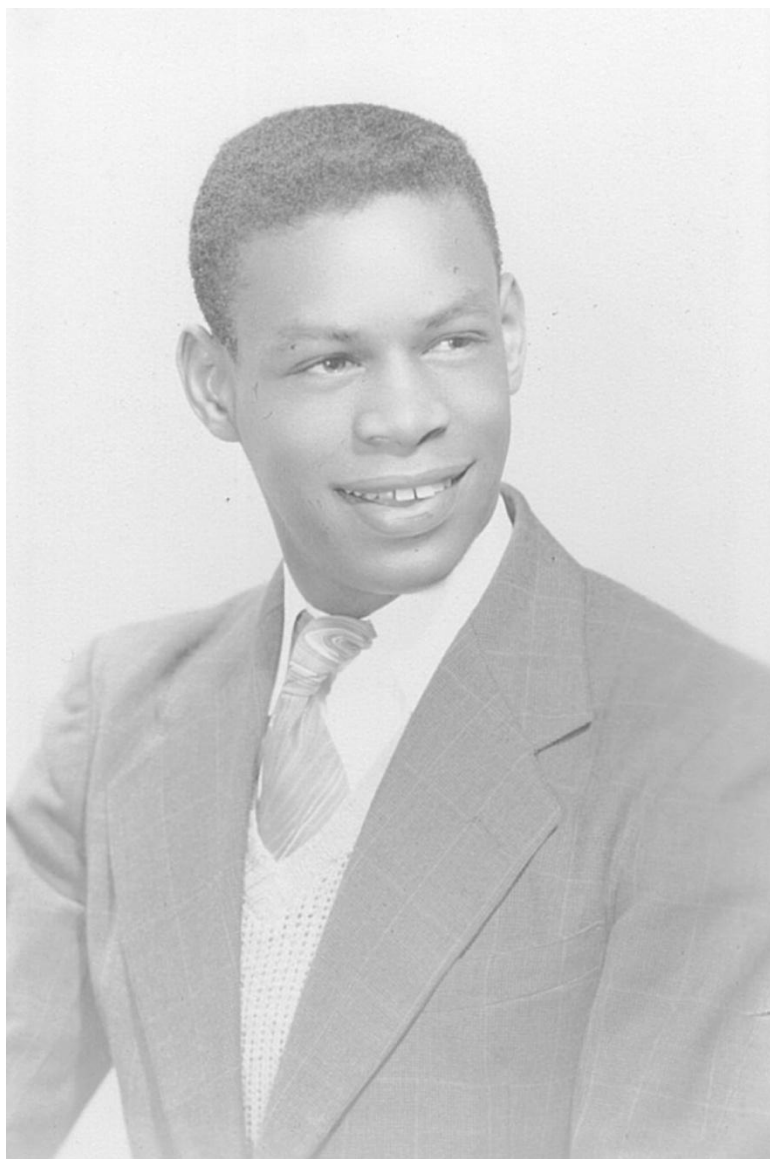
It happened that my big brother Fred, who was a dentist in the Air Force, was home on leave on the day of the game. He wanted to attend the game and drove me to Newtown. I was very pleased that he was coming to see me play. We arrived at the field; and the stands were full, mostly with New Milford people. I was proud as I walked along with brother Fred, an Air Force captain in the very new blue uniform of the Air Force. New Milford received the kick off; and in the first huddle Bill Jones, our quarterback, called the first play, P5, a reverse running play with the quarterback running to the right, hiding the ball and then throwing a long pass to the right end. I was the right end, and I ran straight down the field through the defense. The reverse ball deception was so good that some of the deep defense were moving toward the line of scrimmage as I ran past them and looked back to see the football seemingly floating toward me. I extended

my arms toward the ball, and it fell into my hands as I ran toward the goal for a touchdown. The crowd went wild. On the next play Bill called for another pass. After running downfield I ran back toward Bill, but he did not see me and could not find a receiver. Bill was running to his left, looking for a receiver; and I called, "Bill! Bill!" He suddenly saw me and threw a short, wobbly pass that I caught on the run. I outraced the defense for the second touchdown. We won the game and went on to win the League Championship our senior year.

Bill, Hughie and George played varsity baseball as well, while I was on the varsity track team.¹⁴ During our junior year, Dick Cavoness and Bob de Zafra on their own initiative organized a large science fair in the high school auditorium which drew a large attendance. Nothing like it had ever been attempted in New Milford. Dick and Bob were buddies, and both were brilliant students. Bob would go on to become a well-known scientist and an expert on the ozone layer of the atmosphere and would have a ridge named after him in Antarctica where he did much of his research.

High school was enjoyable. We continued old friendships and made new friendships, friendships that last to this day. After graduation in June, 1950 we all moved on with our lives, but a tradition of class reunions every five years was begun.

¹⁴ *Ed.* Owen excelled in the high jump and the broad jump, winning numerous medals at local, state and regional meets, and set the state high school record in the high jump for his time.



Senior Picture, New Milford High School, 1950.



Ed. One of Owen's favorite stories on himself involved being asked while still a high school student to take a young out-of-town relative of next door neighbor Gordie Ritchie to her senior prom. When they arrived at the prom, his date proceeded to introduce Owen to her friends as what sounded like "Orange from Connecticut." When Owen reported this to Gordie, Gordie never let him forget it; and the story became a source of amusement to the entire Peagler family for years. Here he is many years later wearing a commemorative t-shirt made for him by daughter Cathy.

Danbury State Teachers College

After high school graduation in June 1950, I had no plans for the future; and few jobs were available in New Milford. Our milkman, dairy farmer Bill Griggs, raised tobacco; and for four or five weeks after graduation I hoed tobacco. I was slow to realize that I couldn't do this for the rest of my life. I met classmate Don Woodin downtown one day, and he told me that he was accepted to Danbury State Teachers College for the fall. I decided to make an effort to apply. It was well into August and almost too late, but I went down to Danbury and enrolled. I was accepted immediately and met the college president Dr. Ruth Haas, whose sister had been a teacher in New Milford and taught my older brothers. Tuition was \$10 per semester. I had saved about \$75 working for Bill Griggs, and I had a scholarship from the New Milford Teacher's Association.

Danbury was fourteen miles away. I had no means of transportation, and the college had no living facilities for men. Don planned to drive the fourteen miles from New Milford to Danbury and offered me a ride at no charge. For the next three years Donald Woodin drove us to college. When we graduated from DSTC in 1954, Don and I had been classmates since first grade.

I majored in elementary education at DSTC, which I was proud of because my father had been a teacher. In the spring of our freshman year, I emerged as president of the sophomore class and treasurer of the Men's Athletic Association. At the start of the sophomore year I held two prestigious elective offices and felt much like "Big Man on Campus!" The Men's and Women's Athletic Associations sponsored a cookout on the athletic field to welcome new freshmen. I was sent to the women's dorm to get some cooking utensils. When leaving the dorm, I saw sitting on the dorm entrance steps the most beautiful Afro-American girl that I had ever seen. We introduced ourselves; and that is how I met Joyce

Hancock, who was later to become my wife and mother of our children Cathy and Robert.

In addition to Don Woodin, several people from New Milford were enrolled at DSTC: Janet Brudis, Pauline Randall, Howard Lane, Andrew McGatt, and Bob Casey. Mae Sherwood, a native of New Milford, was Director of Student Teaching and taught the History of Connecticut course. Many New Milfordites were enrolled in the Connecticut History class, and often classroom discussion was centered on New Milford topics to the extent that one day in class Ralph LaStocco was moved to shout, "Is this class about the history of Connecticut or the history of New Milford?!"

A sociology class in college shocked me into the reality of racial attitudes prevalent in the 1950's. My growing up years brought me into few overt racial slurs and no day to day evidence that my color was of significance to anybody. I was just one of the kids in the class who went to the other kids' homes for birthday parties, met at the 20th Century Movie Theater for the cowboy matinees every Saturday, swam in the lake at Deming Park, went ice skating at Ferris pond together and visited their homes, always warmly welcomed by parents. Danbury State Teachers College enrollment was small and similar to New Milford High School. The transition between schools was [smooth]. I made friends at Danbury quickly and easily. Soon I knew almost everyone on campus and became immersed in college activities. Sophomore year I was elected to the position of treasurer of the Men's Athletic Association and also president of the sophomore class. This was the status of my life at Danbury when I was shocked back to the real world to face my own naivety.

Merrill Walrath was the professor who taught the sociology class. Out of the blue, with no introduction, he distributed a questionnaire to the class about racial attitudes. In a later class he read the results to the class. The questions were: Would you marry a Negro? Results of the poll: All No. Would you live next

door to a Negro? Results: All No. Would you be friends with a Negro? Results: All No. I was physically shocked! I looked back into the faces of my classmates. They were all my friends. How could they hold onto such negative views and look me in the face and claim to be my friend?! Not one of them then or later exhibited any sense of the contradiction of their beliefs to their relationship to the Negro sitting in class with them. I thought deeply about the significance of this knowledge in the weeks ahead. I examined closely every friendship and questioned every statement of my classmates and finally came to believe those attitudes reflected the widespread beliefs of society as a whole. They were unaware that their attitudes were as damaging and cruel as the overt actions of racists currently being faced down by Negroes in the South.

The sociology incident was a learning experience that launched me into my future without the naive unquestioning demeanor that I carried from my life in New Milford. I often berate myself for not speaking individually to each classmate in that sociology class and forcing them to verbally express the feelings that they expressed in the questionnaire. I believe that had I the courage to do so, the learning experience would be as deep and lasting for them as it has been for me.

Myrt

One afternoon in March of 1953, I was summoned from a class at Danbury State by the Dean of Men. I sensed no problem as I sat across from him as he said nothing for a long interval. Finally he asked, "Has your mother been ill?" I thought it a strange question but remained unmoved. He went on, "Your mother had an accident this morning." I was suddenly shocked to attention and shouted, "Did she?" He responded quietly with a breathless whisper, "Your mother died." Before he finished the breath, I burst

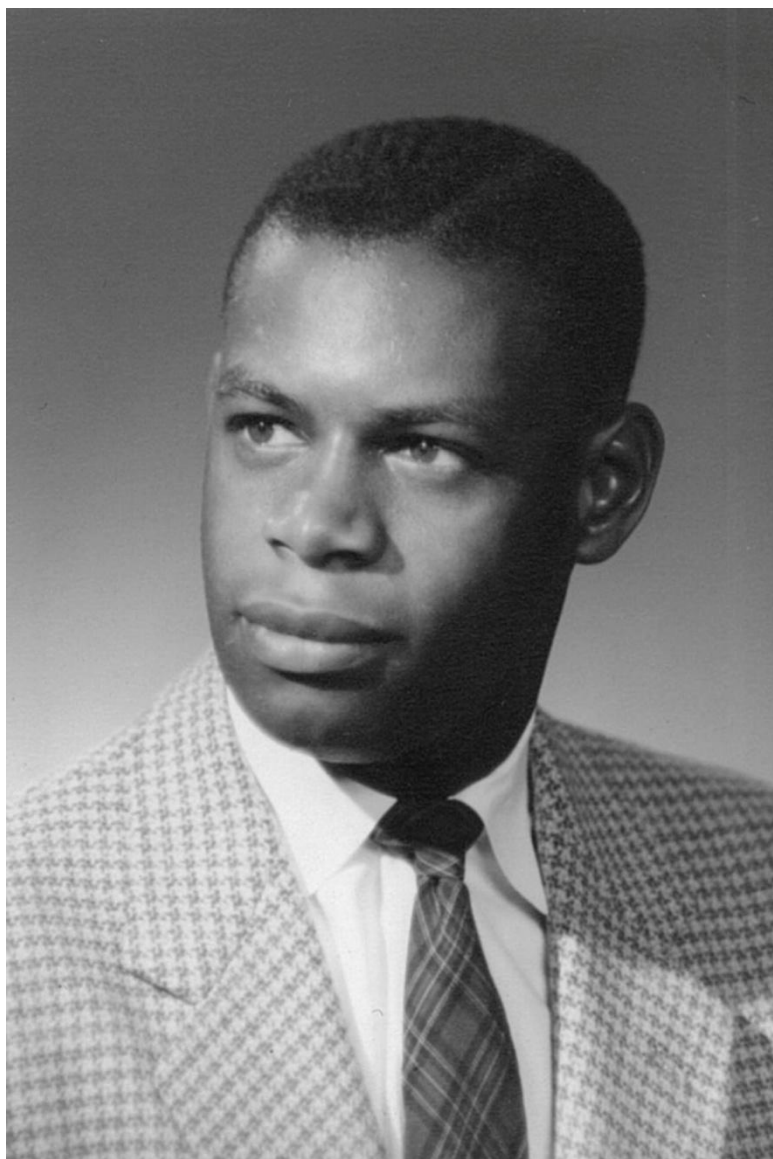
into uncontrollable tears and sobs. Just the night before, Myrt, Richard and Myrt's close friend Laura Hoy had attended a musical production of my junior class at Danbury State. That evening had ended with no forewarning of the tragedy that would occur the next day, but it was the last time I would see Myrt. Someone drove me home to New Milford, where I learned the story of her passing. That morning she drove into town and did some shopping. On her way home she stopped in front of the railroad station, got out of the car, and collapsed and died on the spot from a heart attack. From that day until long after her funeral, I felt a physical sense of loss. Part of my body was missing and left a hollow feeling that filled with grief. The feelings remained intensely for months into years.

Myrt's personality was energetic, compassionate, loving, protective, nurturing. After Dad's death and suggestions that she break up the family, Myrt refused and held the family together by working many jobs: in-house work for Dr. Stevens and McGatts, cook at the New Milford Hospital, et al. She worked from dawn into evening most days. She was adept at creating delicious, filling meals out of nothing. She was an avid reader. She was deeply loved by her family and was highly respected in New Milford.

[Ed. Owen often spoke of Myrt as the "most intelligent, nurturing woman" he had ever known. Although on limited means, she was able to make each of her children feel deeply loved and special. As an example, Owen and brother Phil had birthdays only two weeks apart, on November 14 (Phil) and November 28 (Owen). Myrt always had a combined celebration for the two boys between the two dates, baking two birthday cakes, coconut for Phil and orange for Owen. Owen remembered that she would leave the cakes out to cool overnight and how hard it was for them to resist taking a sample. In later years he created a bedtime story for his youngest daughter, Kirin, based on an imagined overnight

conversation between these two cakes! ¹⁵ He always spoke of Myrt with such love and admiration and expressed a wish to be buried at the foot of her grave in New Milford Center Cemetery, where she was placed next to her husband Robert, a wish that at the end of his life would be fulfilled.]

¹⁵ Collected in *Robbie Raccoon and Other Stories* by Owen Peagler, undated manuscript.



Senior Picture, Danbury State Teachers College, 1954.

Chapter Four: Return to New Milford

At the end of our senior year at DSTC, most of the towns in western Connecticut sent recruiters to campus. The highest salary offered was \$3,400 a year in Stamford. I met New Milford Superintendent of Schools Weldon Knox on Bank Street one day and told him I was graduating in a few weeks. He was enthusiastic when he asked me to visit him after graduation. Weldon Knox hired me to teach the 5th grade in New Milford beginning fall 1954 at a salary of \$3,400/yr, which at the time was the highest salary being offered by college recruiters.

Main Street School

Who says “You can’t go home again?” My response is “Yes, you can!” I did return to New Milford as a teacher to work with many of my own teachers as colleagues. I began teaching 5th grade in New Milford in September 1954 at the Main Street School. My classroom had been the nurse’s room when I was a child. Most of my elementary school teachers were still there, and they gave me a gracious warm welcome. Miss Morgan, my 5th grade teacher, welcomed me on my first day with a bundle of classroom decorations that I remembered fondly from my days in her class. I was also welcomed by my former teachers Marion Piper, Myrna Worthington and Anita Shanley. At the end of my first day I received word that my former 6th grade teacher and former principal, Miss Nelson, now Mrs. Miller, was bedridden and asked me to visit. I also received an invitation to visit from my former 2nd grade teacher, Miss Treat, the daughter of former Superintendent of Schools John Pettibone.

John Pettibone School

New Milford completed a new elementary school in 1955. After my first year of teaching I was moved to the new school, the John Pettibone School, to teach 7th and 8th grade science and English. It was an exciting experience to move into a bright, new classroom in the new school. But most exciting of all was the opportunity to teach with former junior high school teachers Mary Hayde, Margarite Peterson, Catherine Lillis, and Alice Northrup whom I held in awe.

Look Magazine

While I was teaching in New Milford, a local writer from Roxbury, Connecticut decided to write an article about a Black teacher working in a practically all-White community and doing very well. *Look Magazine* bought the article and did a layout. They spent three days taking pictures and interviewing people in New Milford and created a beautiful article. The week that it was supposed to appear, the Little Rock, Arkansas confrontation occurred where they would not admit Black students into White schools.¹⁶ Because of that and because of the slant of the *Look* article, it was canceled. I am very grateful that it was canceled because if it had been published, I would be very, very embarrassed. It was not a good civil rights article. It would've been embarrassing to this day.

¹⁶ Ed. The Little Rock school integration took place in September of 1957, but Jack Denton Scott began writing the article in 1955.



Look Magazine Photo , Center School, New Milford, 1955.

Community Activities

Teaching was an exhilarating experience, enhanced by my involvement in community activities. Murray Glassner invited me to meetings with several other town guys, including Walt Conn, to make plans to start a chapter of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. We met regularly in a room in the bank building block and obtained a charter which was bestowed at a Charter Night dinner at which I was Master of Ceremonies. I was chosen as a Warden of the St. John's Episcopal Church, and I was elected to the New Milford Republican Town Committee without knowing who put my name forward. Political party membership in our town was not based upon ideological differences but upon local issues. At that time the Republican Party had a strong progressive (liberal) stance and the conservative/liberal line between the two major parties was fuzzy and not as clearly defined as it would become. During summers from high school through college and during the teaching period, I continued to serve as head lifeguard at Lynn Deming Town Park on Lake Candlewood, a position that I held for eight years beginning when I was in high school. (I believe that I held the position longer even than Al Herring, the lifeguard that I remember from my youth.)¹⁷ And I continued as a member of the Wells Chicks softball

¹⁷ *Ed.* Owen was an excellent swimmer, an activity which he enjoyed right up to the last week of his life, and served not only as a lifeguard but as an aquatics instructor. One of the stories which he used to tell was of his first day as a lifeguard at Lake Candlewood while still a high school student when a man died in the water. Owen went out to bring the body up and then found himself questioned and detained by the police until it was determined that the man had died of a heart attack rather than by drowning. A favorite story was of sitting bare-headed on the lifeguard chair in the broiling sun and being approached by New Milford Chief of Police Bruce Neering, who looked askance at the situation, left, and returned with a large umbrella for the chair. He also spoke of being

team managed by Archie Golden. Archie was at the time completing studies at the University of Vermont Medical School.

I was a member of the New Milford Civil Defense Police. When the great flood of 1955 occurred, the level valley between Fort Hill and along Route 7 was inundated by the overflow of the Housatonic River. Several houses floated down the river and became jammed up with the other debris at the town bridge. It was a repeat of the flood following the 1938 hurricane. Access to town could only be made by way of Boardman Bridge and along Housatonic Avenue or south on portions of unflooded Route 7 to Pickett District Road, Lovers Leap Bridge and along Grove Street to town.

Around this time the Congregational Church on the Green in the center of town decided to play recordings of ringing bells over loudspeakers in their bell tower. Every day at 5 p.m. a record machine automatically played ringing bells amplified over the center of town. One quiet spring afternoon at 5 p.m. the amplified, jarring voice of Elvis Presley blasted from the church bell tower "Please don't step on my blue suede shoes!!" It blasted across town at full volume. Someone had entered the church and changed the bell recordings with Elvis Presley's latest hit. Townspeople found the incident hilarious for months and perhaps even to this day. There is much speculation about who changed the recordings. I knew immediately who had the diabolic minds and sense of humor to pull this off because I was aware of some of their previous schemes. I believe that the statute of limitations has expired for the incident and Robert Osborn and Andy McGatt are safe!

Evenings in town were quiet, with little activity and less to do. A group of young teachers got together most evenings around

offered delicious food by picnickers at the beach and of meeting and talking to the occasional celebrity such as Frederick March and Ring Lardner Jr., both of whom owned homes near Lake Candlewood.

the big dining room table at Mrs. Chalmer's house on South Main Street to correct papers and socialize together. These included Hilda Salvio, Russ Devin, Theresa Krupinski, Carl Sachs and, on occasion, Eleanor Smith. Often when the hour grew late, we would drive out of town and go to a pub where we were unlikely to run into high school students. On Halloween we drove our cars out of town to avoid student tricks and usually caravanned up Park Lane to the Marbledale Inn. The woman who owned the inn heard our story about avoiding students, and she invited us to have drinks upstairs in her personal quarters away from the public bar area.

Winnny Erwin, the custodian at the Main Street School, gave me a key to use my desk after hours. Bob Casey, a close high school friend of Bill, Hugo and me, would bring his friend Chinck over to the school several nights a week; and we would play basketball for hours in the small gym on the top floor of the school. We were non-drinkers, and this activity provided some enjoyment in the quiet, clean town rather than just driving around.

Chapter Five: Life Beyond New Milford

After three years in New Milford, I began to wonder if I could be successful somewhere else. Was I doing well in New Milford because I and my family were well-known and respected? I decided to look around for other opportunities to test myself. I shared those feelings with Weldon Knox [New Milford Superintendent of Schools]. He was very understanding and offered his help in exploring other opportunities. He set up the connection that opened new opportunities and changed my life.

Eastview Junior High School

Weldon Knox set up an appointment for me with Dr. Carroll Johnson, Superintendent of Schools in White Plains, New York. They were friends because Carroll Johnson was a rural superintendent of schools for the towns of Bridgewater and Roxbury before moving to White Plains, New York. I was hired by White Plains as a teacher of 7th and 8th grade general science at Eastview Jurnior High School. After completing a masters degree in counseling and pupil personnel management at New York University, I would be moved to the position of Director of Guidance at Eastview, which at that time had an enrollment of 1,200. Compared to John Pettibone School in New Milford, this school was a small city.

As an aside, when studying at NYU, in one of my classes I met a woman named Rachel Robinson who happened to be sitting next to me in class. We chatted and talked, and I never made a connection to Jackie Robinson. It wasn't until years later, when

Jackie was being given an honorary degree at Pace University where I was Dean of Evening Administration, that I was asked to escort Jackie's wife, Rachel, to the ceremony. We recognized each other, and it was then that I realized I had been sitting next to Jackie Robinson's wife at NYU! She was the most gracious, winning person and still is to this day.

When I first arrived at Eastview, the custodian for my section was George Washington, whose eldest son was in my homeroom and first science classes. George became my guide in assimilation to the White Plains community. Here began a friendship that was deep and rewarding. George was shrewd and intelligent. Later he was given the job of running the school supplies warehouse for the school district and did a brilliant job of organizing and delivery of supplies. He would later be appointed chairman of the White Plains Housing Authority; and as a former resident of public housing, he was excellent. We continued our close association. When I was Assistant to the New York Republican State Chairman, George was my trusted assistant at many meetings around the state as we organized and supported Black Republicans. George was one of my closest and most esteemed Black friends along with fellow White Plains teacher Herb Freeman, political colleague Sam Singletary and close personal friend Nat Williams of Hartford, Bloomfield and Windsor, Connecticut. I will always be grateful for their friendship and support.

The transition from teaching in New Milford to teaching in White Plains, New York began with my marriage to Joyce Hancock, my college love, on July 27, 1957. Joyce resigned her teaching position in Stamford, Connecticut and accepted a teaching position in White Plains also. After a short time living with Joyce's uncle and commuting daily from East Norwalk to White Plains, we sought housing in White Plains and ran headlong into rigid segregated housing. Dr. Johnson had chosen a staff member to help us find

housing and called us and assured us that there was plenty of housing available in White Plains. His assistant was not informed that we were Afro-American, and the plentiful housing became unavailable. Our search for housing was unsuccessful until someone suggested that I consult Grant Reynolds, a prominent Black lawyer. The timing was fortunate because Reynolds' neighbor, a retired Black doctor, was planning an extensive world-wide trip and wanted to lease his house furnished for the duration of his trip. Thus we found our first residence in the White Plains area, 27 Joan Avenue in the town of Greenburgh. It was while in Greenburgh that our first child, Catherine Ann Peagler, was born on December 8, 1959.

I chose the name Catherine Ann for our first born child because it was a pleasing sounding name and perfect for a sweet little girl. She was born on December 8, 1959 in the White Plains Hospital. Joyce went to the hospital, and I sat out the birth in the guidance office of Eastview Junior High School. I remember waiting anxiously for word of the birth since in those days fathers were excluded from the birthing experience. I didn't see Cathy until she came home from the hospital. For several weeks she cried continuously until it was determined that she was lactose intolerant and milk was the cause of her distress. I remember sitting by her crib admiring the beauty of my daughter and wondering what she would be like, her personality?, her voice?, her character?. I was proud and ecstatic that this beautiful child was my daughter!

When I began teaching at the Eastview Junior High School in White Plains, the school system was purchasing houses along Kensico Avenue in order to expand the school grounds and playing field. As a result of the appeals of our friend Harry Jefferson, a teacher and football coach at White Plains High School, after our year in Greenburgh we were allocated a solidly built frame house on Kensico Avenue in White Plains, near Eastview Junior High

School. I continued to put pressure on the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Carrol Johnson, for help to obtain permanent housing. Again, timing was good.

I sought membership on the Board of Directors of the Urban League of Westchester and the Carver Center for Black Teenagers, and in the meantime we continued to look for a home of our own. I sought the help of real estate agents in my search for a house to purchase. Housing was strictly segregated, and most of our inquiries were met with the response "This property is no longer available." At the time the Civil Rights movement was raging with freedom rides in the South. I discussed my problems with real estate agents at an Urban League of Westchester Board of Directors meeting, and a plan was developed and implemented to use testers to follow up my meetings with the agents. After being told the property was not available, a White man or woman would look at the same property; and in all cases the property was available for sale. After gathering evidence against the agents, a formal complaint was made to the New York State Human Rights Commission, which ruled that there was probable cause for discrimination. The local state human rights official was a lethargic, disinterested bureaucrat who brokered agreements with agents not to discriminate. All of this got widespread newspaper coverage. I was angry and convinced that the State Human Rights Commission was totally ineffective and protected the status quo, not the rights of minorities. I could not possibly envision that in the future Governor Nelson Rockefeller would offer me the position of Commissioner of Human Rights.

As I said, real estate agents would not show us all available properties; and all that we were able to see were always under contract or otherwise not available. We circumvented the real estate segregation roadblock through the Urban League. A home owner in Hartsdale listed his home at the Urban League office with a request for help in selling. We learned later that the owner was

at odds with his neighbors and decided to sell to Blacks in revenge. As a member of the Board of Directors of the Urban League, I learned of the sale and purchased the very attractive three bedroom, two bath house on a generous landscaped lot in an attractive cluster of houses at 27 Shaw Place, Hartsdale, New York. This became our first permanent home. We heard that another Afro-American family had attempted to buy in the area in the past, causing much opposition. Our immediate neighbors were friendly, and several on the street welcomed us warmly. It was in Hartsdale that our second child, Robert Gary Peagler, was born.

Robert was born six years after his sister on October 29, 1965. There was no question in my mind that his name would be Robert, named after my father, Robert James Peagler, and my oldest brother, Robert James Peagler, Jr., and Gary for Uncle Charles Gary. His nickname quickly became Robbie. He was an energetic and curious infant and toddler and had an early proclivity to take toys and other objects apart. As he matured, Robbie exhibited exceptional ability and a large, sophisticated vocabulary for his age. (As Robbie and Cathy matured, my time at home with them would be limited by my evening hours as Dean of Evening Administration at Pace College, extensive travel as assistant to the New York Republican State Committee Chairman and as Chairman of the President's Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children, and as an Office of Economic Opportunity consultant to the Virgin Islands. Most of Cathy and Robbie's developing years and school years were in the hands of Joyce. I shall ever regret that I did not share more time with my family.)

About four months after we moved in to Shaw Place, we awoke to find the words "Nigger, Go" and "Nigger, We Don't Want You" painted on our garage door and on our mail box. I was so angry that I refused to paint over any of the signs. I wanted the world to see and the neighbors to be embarrassed. Finally, after three days, one of our neighbors came over, painted our garage

and painted the mail box and apologized for the incident having happened in the neighborhood. That was the last of the racist experiences. Many of our Shaw Place neighbors became close friends; and our children, Catherine Ann and Robert Gary (Cathy and Robbie), became friends with the neighbor children.

[Ed. Owen would remain at Eastview Junior High School, first as teacher and then as counselor and director of guidance, until 1966 when he joined the staff of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity. In 1964 he received the New York State Junior Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Service Award, named as one of five New York State Outstanding Young Men. The official statement by the Jaycees read in part as follows:

His field of outstanding achievement has been in counseling, youth incentive, and the problems of underprivileged children and adults.

When appointed Chairman of the Urban League Youth Incentive Committee, Owen F. Peagler took over a completely inactive committee and with the help of a group of volunteers he set up evening study and tutorial groups for children from crowded homes and apartments in six Westchester communities. Over the last six years under Mr. Peagler's leadership thousands of deprived children have been provided tutorial help and a quiet place to study which has provided the incentive and the help needed by many to complete high school and go on to College. In cooperation with the Men's Council of the White Plains Jewish Community Center, Mr. Peagler organized the Urban League's Cultural Trip Project which provides monthly trips of a cultural and educational nature for 48 boys who might not normally have such experiences. He conceived the idea, presented it to the Men's Council, recruited the children, and personally goes on each trip.

The National Urban League utilized Mr. Peagler's wide experience with young people by selecting him as planning

consultant for the youth meetings at the Urban League National Conference in Louisville, Ky. He organized youth delegates from 40 cities and was moderator and adult consultant for their business sessions. He also served as moderator for the main Youth Incentive session and served in the Delegate Assembly of the National Urban League Conference which is the top policy making body for the 665 Urban League locals around the United States. Mr. Peagler has continued, at the request of the National Urban League, as advisor to the National Steering Committee of the Urban League Youth Community.

As active worker for the Community Chest, Mr. Peagler served two years as chairman of the public schools division.

In 1960, Mr. Peagler was very influential in having the White Plains Schools utilize a State Education Department grant for a research demonstration project to discover methods to motivate disadvantaged children. As one of the three counselors chosen to conduct the study, he set up a plan whereby a selected group of children were given extra counseling, home visits, and cultural trips. He set up an evening study period for the group since most of them had no quiet place to study at home and few had books, encyclopedias or dictionaries. The requests for permission to attend the evening study became so demanding that it was opened to all students and the attendance was very high. As a result of his research, the need for evening study facilities with adequate research materials was clearly shown and three such centers were set up in White Plains schools which are currently giving hundreds of young people from crowded homes an opportunity to have quiet, supervised study and free tutorial help.

The White Plains Board of Education chose Mr. Peagler to plan and administer one of the first Adult Welfare-Education programs in the State of New York. It was his administrative skill, feeling for people and knowledge of the community that took the program from depths of possible failure to a point at its completion

where it was an outstanding success winning praise from state, county, local officials and citizens. Mr. Peagler faced several crises during the program, two of which indicate his skill and dedication. At one point due to misunderstanding about recruitment responsibilities, the program was in danger of closing because the minimum number of adult students were not enrolled in the classes. The State Education Department gave him a weekend to build up the class roles to a minimum level. Mr. Peagler led his staff of four teachers on a search for new students over the weekend which resulted in raising the class size large enough to save the program. As a result 49 adult functional illiterates received 200 hours of basic instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic and civics in a curriculum with many novel features conceived by Mr. Peagler. Another crisis occurred when all child care facilities in the community closed before his program was complete, leaving some of his adult students with no place to leave their children during class time. Mr. Peagler, determined that all of the students have the opportunity to finish the program, set up and supervised a child care program at the school and all parents with children were able to complete the program, secure in the knowledge that their children were well cared for.

Perhaps most indicative of the respect that Mr. Peagler has in his profession was the invitation from the State Education Department, Bureau of Guidance, to serve as a consultant on counseling disadvantaged students. Because of his outstanding accomplishments as a counselor and his wide knowledge and experience in the area of disadvantaged youth he was asked by the Bureau of Guidance to co-author a booklet on counseling techniques for the disadvantaged. The booklet, due to be completed in the late fall, will be used by professional counselors throughout New York State and the country.

Owen Peagler very often works beyond the normal duties of a junior high school counselor to lend a helping hand to

young people. For example, a high school senior of excellent ability but with immense home problems adversely affecting her grades, was in danger of missing out on going to college. At the request of a high school staff member concerned that his student might be passed over in the college rush, Mr. Peagler arranged for the girl to meet an official at a top college in the area and explain the students' abilities and problems with the result that the student was accepted with full scholarship and is today a college freshman.

The New York State Junior Chamber of Commerce proudly recognizes Owen F. Peagler as a recipient of the distinguished Service Award for 1964.]

[In an editorial dated October 27, 1964, The Reporter Dispatch of White Plains, New York wrote:

Winning a state Junior Chamber of Commerce distinguished service award is a well-deserved honor for Owen F. Peagler of White Plains. Like Dr. Martin Luther King and Roy

Wilkins, whose respective winning of the Nobel Prize and citation by Manhattanville College were noted in these columns last week, Mr. Peagler is a symbol of the leadership which is being supplied by members of the Negro community.

But Mr. Peagler and men like him are particularly to be noted for two reasons: They represent a new, young, but thoroughly responsible leadership apart from the equally responsible but older captains who have been fighting the civil rights battles for many years. It is necessary for the Negro community to continue to develop dedicated young men who know what they are working for but who also can do so without inflammatory incitations.

And men like Mr. Peagler also represent intelligent leadership at a local, community level, where it is relatively unsung but is none the less vital than that on a broad scale. Just as

a national election campaign is won at the precinct level, so the nationwide struggle for equal opportunity for all people is dependent on a large number of individual and small-scale efforts.

Mr. Peagler's valued involvement in the community is reflected by work for the Community Chest, the Jaycees, the Young Men's Republican Club, and the Presbyterian Church. But it is through Mr. Peagler's training and experience as a guidance counselor, and his devotion to the cause of youth opportunity, that his value both to his own people and to all of us is perhaps best to be realized. Through his responsible position in the school system, his association with the Urban League and the Carver Community Center, and his work in setting up adult education classes, he is doing much more than his part in seeing to it that, at least in basic qualifications, there will be an increasing number of Negroes prepared to take advantage of opportunities for better jobs.

In the new and challenging program to reduce the so-called cultural gap, Mr. Peagler is a leader in the effort to provide Negro children with experiences in arts, recreation and the graces which many white children accept as a matter of course. The fruits of this quiet diligent effort may not show up this year or next, but they are bound to come.

We are glad that the State Jaycees have seen fit to recognize Mr. Peagler and to act in such a tangible way to encourage further efforts by him and, indirectly, by others. Every citation along the way gives greater promise of eventual success.]

New York State Office of Economic Opportunity

The Economic Opportunity Act ("War on Poverty") was passed in 1964, and each city wanted to form a task force of citizens to draft a proposal for funding local programs. Committees

were invited to submit applications to the federal government for funding which, according to the legislation, must include “the maximum feasible participation of the poor.” White Plains set up a task force of citizens to prepare an application for funding. I attended the task force meetings, and they ultimately voted to have me pull their recommendations together in a formal proposal for funding the White Plains Public Schools. I was granted a leave of absence of six weeks by the school district to write the proposal, which was completed and submitted to the Federal OEO office and also submitted to the State Office of Economic Opportunity for the Governor’s approval. We had prepared an action plan for the City of White Plains which included neighborhood centers, job corps and Head Start programs. I recall a critical reaction from the local newspaper in an editorial that stated the effort should have more qualified leadership; but the White Plains proposal received big praise from the NYSEO, “the best proposal we have received,” and received funding at a very high level. White Plains was funded for Head Start, Neighborhood Youth Corps, and neighborhood centers.

Within weeks I was approached by Geoffrey Weiner on behalf of the Community Council of Greater New York, which received the OEO funding for New York City; and I agreed to serve as one of six consultants to begin implementation of the New York City programs. Several months later, I was invited to meet with Ersi Poston and Jack Sable, Director and Deputy Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity. At a meeting in their offices at 504 Madison Avenue in New York City, I was asked to accept the position of education consultant on their staff. I accepted the offer and resigned from the White Plains school system to begin working at NYC OEO at 504 Madison Avenue on

March 17, 1966.¹⁸ I met Sam Singletary, head of the Rural Task Force of the State OEO, and through Sam I became involved in higher levels of state Republican politics; and, more importantly, through Sam I met Jackie Robinson, who was to become a close friend. About six months later Governor Rockefeller appointed Ersa Poston to the position of Commissioner of Personnel for the State of New York. Jack Sable, Deputy Director of NYSOEO and the New York Metropolitan Area Director moved up to the position of Director vacated by Ersa. In the shake up, I was appointed by the Governor to replace Jack Sable as Deputy Director and Director of the New York Metropolitan Area with offices at 342 Madison Avenue. Sam Singletary left to become Assistant to Jackie Robinson in the Governor's Office on 56th Street.

It would be from the position of Deputy Director of New York State OEO that I would be recruited by Dr. Edward Mortola, President of Pace College, to be Dean of Evening Administration. *[Ed. Owen stayed with the OEO until 1969, working on plans to make "more state resources available to community action groups and funds to get more training for nonprofessional aides in higher learning." The White Plains Reporter Dispatch reported in an article published June 10, 1967 that: "[his] other plans include coordinating community agencies and expanding neighborhood action groups to include their own public relations committees. His work has much depth and scope. He coordinates the efforts of state and local community projects and his office provides technical assistance and help to action groups aiding low income people through plans such as Manpower and Headstart.]*

¹⁸ *Ed.* As Education Coordinator, among other things Owen arranged and presided over the opening session of a highly successful state-wide Head Start Conference in Albany which was the first of its kind in the country.

ROBERT F. KENNEDY
NEW YORK

110 EAST 45TH STREET
NEW YORK 10017

United States Senate

June 10, 1967

Mr. Owen F. Peagler
29 Shaw Place
Hartsdale, New York

Dear Mr. Peagler:

I was pleased to learn that Governor Rockefeller has appointed you Deputy Director of the State Office of Economic Opportunity.

I would like to join with your family and friends in congratulating you and to extend to you my very best wishes for your continuing role in community service.

With kind regards,

Sincerely,


Robert F. Kennedy



Joyce, Cathy, Owen, and Robert, *The Reporter Dispatch*, White Plains, New York,
June 10, 1967.

Pace College

[In the early months of 1969] Dr. Edward J. Mortola, President of Pace College, hosted a meeting of African-Americans which I attended to advise him about the Higher Education Opportunity Program. Two weeks later I received a telephone call from Dr. Mortola inviting me to join him for an early morning coffee at the Pace Westchester campus. We met in the deserted cafeteria at around 8 a.m. His first words, with no introduction, were "How would you like to be a Dean?" My response was shock. I could not answer. He noticed my perplexed look and explained the circumstances which prompted his question. Pace College had a large evening student enrollment numbering around 6,000. The evening students presented a complaint to him that when they came to class everyone else had gone for the day and no one of responsibility was around to handle their needs and concerns. In response to my question "Dean of what?," he thought for a short minute then replied, "You will be Dean of Evening Administration." Then he said, "Maybe Assistant Dean;" and I stopped him there and said, "I would like to be Dean. I have been assistant this and assistant that." He responded quickly, "Ok. It's Dean!" We agreed on a salary, finished our coffee and set an early starting date.

Transition from the position of Deputy Director and Metropolitan Area Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity to the position of Dean of Evening Administration at Pace College was very smooth because of the support and warm welcome of Pace President Edward J. Mortola and Executive Vice President Jack Schiff. As one of six deans, I reported to Jack Schiff, who became a strong supporter and role model. Jack was an outstanding administrator; and soon after I arrived, the position of Vice President of Academic Affairs was eliminated and the duties were assumed by Jack Schiff along with his supervision of the academic deans. He held regular meetings of

the Deans of Arts and Sciences, Education, Business, Nursing, Graduate School, and Evening Administration. Later on the group became known as the “Inner Six” and was responsible to the President for all academic decisions.

On my first day at Pace College [April 10, 1969], President Mortola met me at the entrance of the Park Row building, which served as the main building of the college. He led me on a tour of the building and chose an alcove near the main entrance for the site of my new office. He then summoned the head of buildings and grounds and asked him to turn the alcove into an office according to my specifications. Within a few weeks a comfortable, moderately spacious office with new furniture and carpeting was in place. The college police and the admissions office shared the main floor. A cafeteria was on the second floor, with classrooms on the floors above; and the president’s office occupied the entire top floor. The new Pace campus was under construction at this time. Pace College was housed in only two buildings, the Park Row building overlooking City Hall Park and the Nassau Street building across Nassau Street directly to the rear of the Park Row building. The new Pace College campus with an outdoor campus space occupying the roof of a large raised classroom building and a high rise dormitory building capped by administration offices was under construction. When completed, the office of evening administration moved into the new complex.

Hundreds of part-time students attended evening classes, and my first effort on their behalf was to have the cafeteria area cleaned after finding the detritus left by day students was left to greet the evening students. This was my first experience of a problem widespread in colleges and universities during this period of increased enrollment of part-time students, usually adults attending evening classes. Most colleges and universities are programmed to serve the traditional full-time students; and the needs of part-time students are easily overlooked unless, as in the

case of Pace, someone is made responsible to see that all students, day and evening, receive services.

Several incidents occurred during the evening session that supported the wise decision to have a responsible administrator on duty. Two students burst into my office in Pace Plaza one evening in a state of near hysteria. They were able finally to blurt out that there was a dead man in the men's room. I ran to check the scene and found a man in badly stained trousers on the floor in one of the booths. Every indication was that he was dead. I called the police. The police arrived promptly and, after reviewing the situation, determined that the man was indeed dead and that he was a street person who wandered over from the nearby Bowery and found a warm place to die. Another incident brought a delegation of students to my office long after classes had begun. They reported that their professor was drunk and acting strangely. I accompanied them back to class and found the professor incoherent and unstable in front of the class. I took him by the arm and led him out of the classroom and told him he was fired loud enough for all to hear. Although I had no right to fire him, I was convinced that the students should see the incident handled forthrightly to counter the negative rumors that would certainly ensue. I escorted him back to my office and sent him ploddingly toward home. The next day he was officially fired.

On another evening a delegation of students again came to my office in a high state of anxiety. They repeated almost in unison that their professor had become really sick and wasn't coherent. I returned with them to the classroom. The professor was barely maintaining balance and emitting incoherent noises. I asked some students to stay with him and keep him from falling and returned to my office and called for an ambulance, which arrived in minutes from Beekman Downtown Hospital, which was just next door. I called President Mortola, who joined me at the hospital after the transferral. President Mortola arranged to call the family as the

professor was led off of the new campus for treatment. Unfortunately, the professor did not survive.

One evening during my first weeks at Pace, we received a bomb threat at the peak of the evening class schedule. Bomb threats were common at this time during the height of the Vietnam War protests. Someone called the police, I assume it was Pace security, and ten to twelve policemen converged on the Park Row building. All of the many bomb threats around the city up to that time were hoaxes. After police searched the building, I asked the sergeant in charge, "Should we evacuate." President Mortola had made it clear that evacuation in response to a threat was not good policy. The police recommended evacuation and made it clear to me that it was my decision to make. Here I was with the lives of hundreds of students and faculty resting upon my decision and facing the strong recommendation of the police. I gave in to the pressure and ordered the building evacuated. I got word later that President Mortola was not pleased, but there were no repercussions.

During this time, the Lower Manhattan, Wall Street, City Hall area was beset with daily unrest caused by long lines of marching construction workers voicing loud support of the war in Vietnam. President Mortola and I were visiting a nearby Wall Street firm discussing education possibilities for their employees when a secretary rushed into the meeting room with an urgent telephone message for Mortola. The meeting was ended immediately. We rushed the several blocks uptown to the newly completed Pace College campus complex. As we approached the campus we noted the front entrance guarded by a multitude of police officers and the glass windows and glass doors of the new campus building smashed and broken. We later learned that the construction workers, while marching along Broadway across City Hall Park from the college, saw a large white sheet with the dove's foot design painted in the middle. Students in the Pace College

dormitory tower hung the display from a window, and the demonstrators rioted and wildly raced across City Hall Park to the Pace building and smashed the large glass windows.

Within a year of my starting at Pace, the Dean of the School of Continuing Education was transferred to the position of Assistant to the President, and I assumed his position while retaining the duties of Evening Administration. A review of Pace College Catalogues will reveal that the Deans were shown as officers of the college. While at Pace I found many opportunities to enlarge the scope of programs. With the help of my new Associate Dean Geoffrey Kneedler, I developed credit courses especially for Wall Street businesses such as large investment companies and the American Bureau of Shipping. Geoff, the Director of Admissions and I sketched out the outline of a new degree program for adults on a napkin at lunch, and the *Bachelor of Professional Studies Degree* (BPS) was developed and guided through the New York State Department of Higher Education for approval. It was a degree designed for adults returning to or beginning college. We noticed that our adult part-time students included accomplished professionals who brought extensive knowledge from many experiences to the classroom. We developed a plan to award college credit to adults who had accumulated knowledge that was taught in credit classes. We obtained the support of academic departments and faculty to evaluate the experience and knowledge of the adult students. The new *Credit for Life Experience Program* combined with the new BPS degree provided improved access to college for adults and reduced the time to complete a degree. Part-time evening enrollment increased steadily, and faculty reported that the BPS candidates were their strongest students. The first BPS graduates included the president of a bank across City Hall Park from the college, the president of the National Bank of Westchester, and numerous professionals in other fields. Similar programs, Bachelor of General Studies and

Credit for Life Experience, would be established at Eastern Connecticut State University when I became a dean there years later.

One unpleasant incident occurred shortly after I was appointed Dean of the School of Continuing Education. At the beginning of the year, the President hosted a reception for all faculty and administration at the suburban campus in Pleasantville, New York. I arrived at the suburban campus full of excitement. I was just beginning my new position. I drove onto the campus and drove along until I saw a parking area with a sign saying “faculty and staff only.” I found a spot at the end of that parking lot and locked my car. As I was walking away, a man approached me and told me that I could not park there. I asked him why? He said this parking area was for faculty and staff only, and he was very belligerent and very arrogant and told me I had to move my car. At this time I had not had an opportunity to answer. His attitude was one of condescending contempt. I told him that I was a dean, a new dean at Pace University, and I was going to park in this space. He looked at me skeptically and said, “are you sure?” I was so angry, clenching my fists in anger all the way to the President’s reception.

Several days later, in conversation with the President of the university, I recounted the incident with the guard in the parking lot at the Pleasantville campus. The President’s face turned red with anger, and he went on talking about the subject about which we were meeting. It was only a week later, upon visiting the Pleasantville campus, that I found the guard that had challenged me was no longer in the employ of Pace University.

Not long after I had been appointed Dean of Evening Administration at Pace College, Governor Nelson Rockefeller offered me the position of Commissioner of Human Rights. President Mortola strongly urged me to stay with Pace. After several weeks of thought, I came to the conclusion that a deanship

at Pace College was a far superior career to a high political position that would expire at the end of the Governor's term. For decades I thought deeply about the great service I could have provided in reforming the New York State Commission of Human Rights. Time has proven that I made the best decision for my career, but I still have pangs of regret about the path not taken.

President Mortola learned that Baruch College of the New York City University system was seeking permission to move into an under-used high rise office building in the Wall Street area right in Pace's backyard. Baruch was a tuition-free public college with curriculum very similar to Pace. Mortola was very concerned about how a nearby tuition-free college with similar offerings would affect Pace enrollment. Mortola learned that a master plan that called for Baruch College to move to Brooklyn was in effect. He called me to his office to make a request. He asked if I would talk to the Governor and request that a change in Baruch's master plan not be approved. I called the Governor's Office and made an appointment with his Executive Assistant at the Governor's Office on West 56th Street. It was a hot, humid August day; and I was warmly greeted at 56th. The Executive Assistant got us both an ice cold Fresca, a soft drink new to me; and I explained the reason for my visit. Pace College would like the Governor not to approve the change in master plan that would allow Baruch College to move to Wall Street. His response was immediately positive. He said that he had been a dean at Cornell University and believed that Pace, like Cornell, was a private college and should not be placed in competition with public colleges. He ended our meeting with these words, "You can rest assured that the Governor will not approve the master plan change." I reported the essence of the meeting to President Mortola, and he was ecstatic. His immediate response to me was, "You are now my political advisor."

Dorothy Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women, came to me when I was Dean of the School of Continuing

Education at Pace to request co-sponsorship of a clerical upgrade program primarily for Negro women. We developed the program at Pace which lasted for two and a half years. She was one of the most broadly creative people that I have ever met, with a great ability to motivate people. She was an inspirational leader whom I had the privilege of nominating for a Pace University honorary degree.

White House Interlude

During this time I received an invitation from President Nixon to attend a state dinner in honor of Nicolae Ceausescu, President of Romania. I am sure that the invitation was instigated by a Black assistant to the President who formerly served as assistant to Governor Nelson Rockefeller. One week before the event, I received a special delivery letter from the White House stating that the affair was informal and requesting business clothes, no tuxedo. We found out later that the last minute change in dress code was precipitated by the fact that Ceausescu did not have a tuxedo, so protocol decided since he could not dress formally everyone else would dress informally.

On the evening of the dinner, Joyce and I checked into the Hay Adams Hotel and took a taxi to the White House, where we were waved into a line of sleek limos. We waited with others at an entrance, and a major domo escorted us up the stairs through an ornate white door. He escorted us through the door and up a short staircase at the top of which we presented our invitation and received a warm welcome. An army officer in full formal military dress stepped forward and with a warm greeting took Joyce's arm and led us to a nearby door that opened onto a small landing overlooking the Blue Room, which was crowded with guests. We stood on the landing overlooking the crowded room as a majordomo produced a microphone and loudly announced our

arrival: "Ladies and gentlemen, Dean and Mrs. Owen Peagler." The military officer escorted us down the short flight of steps into the room toward a couple standing alone with their drinks. He proceeded to introduce us to them, "Dean and Mrs. Peagler, may I present Ozzie and Harriet Nelson;" and he glided away. They were very gracious. We were immediately at ease with Ozzie and Harriet; they were down to earth, at ease and spontaneously humorous. We chatted and laughed together until the announcement of the President's arrival sent us into gales of laughter.

The door into the Blue Room burst open and four men dressed in ridiculous white uniforms and hats stood on the landing at the door, each holding a long bugle with a flag hanging down. They then put the bugles to their lips and blasted away the opening notes of "Hail to the Chief." They then retreated through the door as to the very loud strains of "Hail to the Chief," Nixon came through the door followed by Mrs. Nixon, Ceausescu and Mrs. Ceausescu. Joyce, Ozzie and Harriet were in hysterics; and we spent several minutes getting ourselves under control. A receiving line was formed with Nixon at the head. The guests were escorted to the head of the line, where they were introduced to Nixon. Nixon introduced guests to Ceausescu. An attendant introduced me to Nixon in a whisper "Dean Peagler of Pace University." Nixon whispered to Ceausescu "This is one of our leading educators." I continued along the line until reaching Mrs. Nixon. An aid whispered something in her ear; and she in turn whispered to Mrs. Ceausescu, "This is Dean Pace."

This all occurred at the crest of the Watergate scandal and a short time before Nixon's resignation. I will not forget the appearance of Nixon's face, which was bloated and splotchy. His eyes showed signs of heavy strain. To this day I believe his resignation saved his life.

New York Republican State Committee

During my early years at Pace, I continued to attend political rallies with Jackie Robinson and Sam Singletary, who was an assistant to Governor Nelson Rockefeller and often involved in inner circle activities; and they often included me. On many occasions the three of us drove to Albany for political meetings, some of which involved meetings of Black Republicans. Jackie was continually asked by reporters and many others, "Are you Republican, Jackie?" I heard this question asked numerous times; and Jackie's answer was always the same, "I'm a Rockefeller Republican!"

Rockefeller appointed New York Republican State Chairman Chuck Lanigan. Jackie immediately became concerned that the Republican State Committee had no minority staff. He and Sam Singletary met with Chuck Lanigan and received warm reception to their recommendations. Two special assistant positions were immediately created, one for a Hispanic and one for a Black. Jackie and Sam put my name forward for the Black position, and that is how I got to be Special Assistant for Urban Affairs to the Chairman of the New York Republican State Committee. To this day I find it amusing that this small town yokel from New Milford, Connecticut was now an urban affairs advisor. Chairman Chuck Lanigan included me in all of the Committee activities and staff meetings. My duties as Dean of Evening Administration allowed time to attend State Committee staff meetings every Monday in Albany. I traveled extensively around New York State, visiting upstate county chairmen and around New York City to provide recognition and support for Black district leaders who were forgotten people in Party activities. I was in a position to support some patronage appointments and recommend

some. I discovered that the patronage system provided jobs for young people at state beaches, state parks and other venues. Black district leaders had no knowledge of those opportunities, and I went from one to another with information and contacts so those opportunities would be available in their districts.

An American Express credit card came with the position of Assistant to the New York Republican State Chairman for Urban Affairs. In those days the term "urban affairs" was a pseudonym for Blacks and minorities who were predominantly clustered in urban areas. I was free to carry out my belief that political activities were public service. I traveled widely around New York State to organize Black Republicans into statewide organizations. Two young men from Harlem were active young Republicans and recruited like-minded young men to form a Republican club which they named the Liberal Independent Republican Club of Harlem, LIRCH. I decided to join them and provide support from the Republican State Committee with the full support of State Chairman Chuck Lanigan. My State Committee credit card supported the rental of a storefront on 7th Avenue near 134th Street and furnishings of desks and chairs from a downtown used office furniture store. Membership grew and regular meetings were held. My goal was to establish a positive Republican presence. I arranged a professionally made sign with the colorful red Republican elephant and blue stars and the name of the club in large letters.

The members of the club supported my goal to make the club a service center for the neighborhood and to establish a political foothold in concrete Democratic Harlem. We decided that a full-time employee was needed to develop a service program for the club, and this was done. Paid leadership was not successful in creating the kind of activity that was needed, however. Since I was providing the financing through the Republican State Committee, I took steps to change the paid staff person. A friend from Harlem

suggested that I offer the job to a well-known, popular Harlem street person and what was called a "hustler" named Bumpy Johnson. I approached Bumpy with the offer, and without hesitation he refused. There is no doubt that Bumpy Johnson would have made a big presence for the political club. I have long since wondered whether his other hustlers would have had a negative effect.

My political buddy Sam Singletary was promoted to Assistant to Governor Rockefeller after Jackie Robinson had resigned to avoid embarrassing the Governor by actively opposing the candidacy of Richard Nixon for president. Sam and wife Inez and their children were residents of Harlem, where Inez taught school, for years. Sam regularly returned to Harlem on Wednesday nights, the night that Jock's Bar served chitterlings (more commonly called "chitlins") and champagne. Jock's on 7th Avenue was a social and political hub of Harlem. On one occasion Sam was enjoying his meal and I was enjoying a drink, attempting to avoid the smell and look of Sam's dinner. Jock's was small, about the size of a storefront store, and very popular. On this night it was very crowded because of the chitlins special. Later in the evening the door opened and Adam Clayton Powell stood framed in the doorway. The wall to wall crowd parted to make way as he was loudly greeted by name. He was relaxed and at home as he worked the room to high fives and jovial greetings.

The NYSRC position led to many other experiences. I had regular contact with Richard Nixon's Black assistants and, to a lesser extent, his Black appointees. The Pace Department of Political Science conducted a yearly political science conference through the School of Continuing Education. Leading political figures on the state, local and federal levels attended and lectured. The program was very popular and attendance was large. I recall an invited speaker named Leonard Garment, a member of Richard Nixon's New York law firm. He was impressed that I was Assistant

to the Republican State Chairman. We talked about Republican politics, and he strongly urged me to consider going to work for the Committee to Reelect the President, the Nixon reelection committee. I asked the New York Republican State Chairman, Chuck Lanigan, about Leonard Garment's invitation. Chuck's forthright answer, "Don't get involved with that bunch!" Over the years it became clear to me that Chuck Lanigan was aware of the murky activities of CREEP.

President's Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children¹⁹

While in my State Committee Office on 56th Street one day, I received a telephone call from a member of the Albany staff. Marcy Wilson informed me that she was working on federal patronage openings and she had a presidential appointment that was perfect for me. She submitted my name; and in a short time, after the usual FBI background check, I was appointed by President Nixon to the President's Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children with offices in Washington, D.C. [October 1972]. I would later [1974] be appointed Chairman of the Council by President Ford while Nelson Rockefeller was Vice President. Each year new members would be appointed, and I served as chairman until President Jimmy Carter abolished all Presidential Advisory Councils [in the late 70's]. Because of the turmoil in the presidency, and with the help of Vice President Rockefeller, I served several years beyond the end of my term [a three-year term starting in 1972 and then renewed in 1975], as did most of my council members, a distinguished group among whom were Dr. Will Lewis, School Superintendent Tucson, Arizona; Carol Schwartz, Washington, D.C.; former Congressman Ben Rife, South Dakota; Ken Smith, Wilmington, Delaware; and Sarah Moore, Knoxville, Tennessee. During my tenure as chairman, I appointed Will Lewis, Carol Schwartz, and Ken Smith as Vice Chairmen.

During the 70's while I was Chairman of the Advisory Council the Council took trips to various parts of the country to view aspects of education for our report to the President and

¹⁹ The Council was established for the purpose of reviewing the administration and operation of provisions of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, including its effectiveness in improving the educational attainment of educationally deprived children.

Congress. We made a trip to South Dakota under the direction of one of our council members, Ben Reifel, a member of the Sioux tribe who was a former Congressman from the state of South Dakota. Ben had arranged with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to fly us in two small planes up to North Dakota to view some isolated Indian reservations.

We got onto small planes with Bureau of Indian Affairs employees who were pilots. We flew off to the north, and I sat up in front with the pilot of my airplane. We chatted and talked as we flew north over the wasteland that is interior Dakota, and I was amazed at the vitriolic racism against Indians that this Bureau of Indian Affairs staffer had. He thought they were no good; he thought that they were a drain; he thought they were not worthy people. He so amazed me that if I were not ten thousand feet up in the air and he piloting the airplane, I would have had a vitriolic response. I was so amazed that a person working for the federal agency responsible for the welfare of Native Americans was a racist anti-Indian. I thought about the Civil Rights Movement, and I thought about the Indian Rights Movement which was going on at that time in Washington, D.C. with various demonstrations; and I realized that the Civil Rights Movement was a movement for all minorities in the country and the Indians had just the same fight that we had and the same racism to overcome. It was an eye-opener for me.

Project 70001

Ken Smith [who was a member of the President's Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children] was an active, connected young Republican who was at the time serving as education advisor to U.S. Representative Pete du Pont of Delaware.

Ken was developing a non-profit organization to help high school dropouts find and hold jobs. The name of the program was Project 70001; the name came naturally from a file number assigned by a Delaware state agency to a grant made by the Thom McAn Shoe Company in the year 1970. The file number referred to the year of the grant and the 001 referred to the file number, so the program was known by its file number, "Project 70001." Ken was president of the organization and was organizing a new board of directors, which he asked me to join. This began my thirty-year association with the organization as member of the executive committee, President of 70001 Foundation, and Chairman of the Board of Directors at the time the name of the organization was changed to "WAVE," an acronym for Work, Achievement and Values in Education. The first board of directors included Pete du Pont, Dr. George McGorman and attorney Ben Cotton.

[Ed. A brochure published by 70001 Ltd. in 1981 described the work of 70001 as follows:

70001 Ltd. is a national non-profit youth employment company that helps 16-21 year-old high school dropouts work toward their high school equivalency degree or diploma and find unsubsidized jobs in private business. It is a program of employment, training, education and motivation.

As of May 1981 there were 70001 programs serving thousands of dropouts in 52 communities in 20 states, and the program is expanding rapidly.

The typical 70001 enrollee, who is called an Associate, immediately receives pre-employment training and is placed as soon as possible into an unsubsidized job in private business, primarily in retailing or distribution. During off-hours, he or she works toward a GED high school equivalency degree or diploma and also participates in activities of the 70001 Career Association (SEVEA), which is designed to help the Associate develop job and social skills.

While 70001 is under contract with the U.S. Department of Labor and our programs usually are funded through local Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) agencies, 70001 Ltd. is a private non-profit corporation. In 1976, the rapidly growing 70001 program formed a private, non-profit corporation - 70001 Ltd.

*The Business Associates of 70001 is comprised of representatives from 44 major business firms, including leading retailers such as J.C. Penney and the Walgreen Company, who provide suggestions and recommendations on training and other key segments of the 70001 program. The Congressional Associates is made up of 66 Members of Congress who have agreed to help provide advice, counsel and support to the national program and to the young adults who belong to the 70001 Career Association (SEVCA).]*²⁰

WAVE would continue to expand into a nationwide program for high school dropouts and in-school pre-dropouts, with programs in major cities such as New York, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Dallas, San Antonio and others.²¹

Nelson Rockefeller

Republican State Committee Chairman Chuck Lanigan resigned after several years to accept an executive position with Metropolitan Life Insurance Company; and Richard Rosenbaum, an upstate county chairman, was appointed to the position by

²⁰ *Ed.* This group included Senator Joseph Biden, Jr. of Delaware.

²¹ *Ed.* WAVE would be dissolved in 2009 following the death of its president of thirty-one years and close personal friend of Owen, Lawrence Brown, and its loss of federal funding. By the time of its demise, however, WAVE/70001 had served over 700,000 schools and community-based organizations.

Governor Rockefeller. Dick Rosenbaum was gregarious and upbeat and a brilliant political planner. I had been an assistant chairman for three years, and I offered to resign so that Dick Rosenbaum could choose his own assistant. It was clear that he wanted me to stay on, however; and I remained another five years.

After Nixon's resignation from the presidency on August 8, 1974, the two top executive positions of the government were vacant because Vice President Spiro Agnew had resigned in disgrace months earlier. Speaker of the House of Representatives Gerald Ford assumed the presidency and quickly filled the vacant position of Vice President with Nelson Rockefeller. During that time I was serving as assistant to the Chairman of the New York Republican State Committee and as Chairman of the President's Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children. My term as Chairman of the Advisory Council was due to end; but through the intervention of Vice President Rockefeller, I was reappointed to another term.

As the presidential elections of 1976 approached, Gerald Ford sought the Republican nomination. Nelson Rockefeller did not seek nomination as Republican candidate for Vice President, and the New York Republican State Committee supported Ford and his choice for the vice presidential nomination, Bob Dole. I worked with Dick Rosenbaum in the selection of New York delegates to the 1976 Republican National Convention. Dick Rosenbaum included me in the convention delegate process; and with full support, I included many active Black Republicans. Dick was very supportive of my efforts to choose active Black Republicans that I was organizing around the state. As a result, the New York delegation to the 1976 Republican National Convention was composed of more Black and Hispanic delegates than ever before or since. I was proud of the results of my efforts to make the Republican Party responsive to the voices of minorities. Never before and never since has the recognition of minority Republicans been so high in

New York State. I could not foresee that Nelson Rockefeller, Chuck Lanigan, Dick Rosenbaum, and the New York Republicans were the last gasp of Republican progressives who long dominated the party. The conservative movement was well underway to their domination of the Republican Party, sealed and delivered by Ronald Reagan.

I was also a member of the New York delegation at the National Convention; and chance would have it that I sat next to Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and two secret service agents. The South Carolina delegation was seated in front of us, and the senator from South Carolina was enthusiastically jumping up and down directly in front of us. When he jumped up, he left a small pile of papers on his seat. Rockefeller was sitting next to me in an aisle seat with a telephone for communicating with aids. He whispered to me with a mischievous smile, "Watch this!" In an exaggeratedly sneaky move forward to the senator's seat, he grabbed the papers from his seat as the senator was jumping up and down in loud support of some proceedings. Rockefeller came back to his seat in that exaggerated sneaky movement, and immediately an incensed delegate sitting directly across the aisle made a menacing move in our direction and yanked Rocky's telephone wires and returned to his seat. A secret service man sitting next to Rocky made no move other than raise an arm high to signal someone. I was shocked by the lack of response from the secret service.

The Ford/Dole campaign began in New York State with planned fly-in rallies at the airports in Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. Vice President Rockefeller and candidate Dole flew from city to city in Air Force Two, a 737 painted blue and white to resemble Air Force One. The Republican State Committee staff flew to Buffalo and stayed the night at a hotel near the airport where we were to meet with Air Force Two for the flight to airport rallies. We arrived at the hotel in Buffalo and went into a large

cocktail lounge crowded with tables, with bandstands on each side of the room. As we entered the room, the nearest bandstand had a very loud rock band performing. The noise was very uncomfortable, and as a group we moved to tables around the other bandstand which was not in use. As we settled at tables, the bandstand was illuminated by stage lights and a booming loudspeaker voice announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Platters!" It was my favorite singing group, and we had front row tables! The Platters interrupted their act, and suddenly a spotlight illuminated our table. The loud speaker voice boomed out, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Rich Little!" A spotlight picked out the amiable guy sitting next to me, and he rose to do an excellent John Wayne imitation.

The next morning we boarded Air Force Two and the backup plane and flew to Rochester, where a large crowd was waiting in the shelter of a hanger door. Rockefeller and Dole made short speeches, we boarded the airplanes and flew to Syracuse. At Syracuse a rally was in progress, and the crowd again was gathered at the entrance of a large hanger. Dole and Rockefeller again gave short speeches. During Rockefeller's speech a heckler at the rear of the crowd interrupted him. This is when Rockefeller gave what I call "the finger seen around the world." He gave the heckler the stiff finger salute, which was captured by photographers and appeared on the front page of the *New York Daily News*. The remainder of the trip was uneventful.

Jackie Robinson

While I was with the Office of Economic Opportunity, Sam Singletary, who had worked with me at OEO, became assistant to Jackie Robinson at the Governor's office and invited me to meet Jackie. Jackie Robinson, Sam Singletary and I shared a strong belief

that involvement in politics was an opportunity for much needed and much neglected public service to the Black community. Our involvement in politics provided an opportunity to observe the



With Jackie Robinson, c. 1967.

benefits and opportunities that political involvement provided yet bypassed the Black community. We believed strongly that Blacks should be active and involved and present to provide input when political decisions were made that impacted the Black community. Jackie was Assistant to Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who respected and sought out his advice and friendship. Jackie was singularly able to enter Rockefeller's office without introduction and to see him without appointment. He used his direct access and influence to implement activities that put into effect his belief that politics was public service and should be used where possible to aid the underserved Black community. During the "long hot summer" unrest in New York City in 1968, Jackie passed a memo to the Governor outlining concrete recommendations regarding how the state of New York could help the people cork the unrest. His recommendations resulted in the establishment and implementation of Governor's Area Councils in all urban and unrest areas.

Governor's Area Councils were formed from top administrators from all New York state agencies that had a public service mission, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, the State Police, the State National Guard, and the Long Island Railroad, which was state administered at that time. Jackie arranged for my appointment as Chairman of the Metropolitan Area Council of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity, which included New York City and Westchester County. Governor's Area Councils were formed in several urban areas around New York State. The chairman of each area council had direct access to the Governor with the council's recommendations. My area council arranged a camping experience for Harlem children during the heat of the summer. National Guard soldiers from the 369 Regiment Armory in Harlem arranged to take around 3000 children from Harlem to the National Guard Camp Drum and served as camp counselors. A program of

activities was set up including track and field races timed by State Police using radar guns.

The Metropolitan Area Council arranged for surplus state automobiles to be refurbished and donated to nonprofit community service organizations in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant. Also the Long Island Railroad agreed to provide free rides for Head Start children to Oyster Bay, Long Island, where the children watched as the engines reversed direction on a turntable. The turntable was adjacent to a small public park, and the Supervisor of Oyster Bay provided lunch for the children in the park while the engines were turned.

The Town of Greenburg in Westchester had a public housing project pending, which was openly opposed by the Town Supervisor, causing considerable community unrest. My Area Council reported the issue to Governor Rockefeller, who followed up by a telephone call to the Town Supervisor. The Housing Project was approved without further rancor. Prior to the Area Councils in 1964, Jackie Robinson was moved to provide some summer diversion for children in Harlem. He persuaded Rockefeller to finance a bus trip to the Montreal World's Fair for children in Harlem. I went to Harlem on the morning of their departure, and two comfortable buses were loading school children; but two tough-looking street people were standing in the bus doors making it difficult for the children to board. I worked with several parents to push the children past the interlopers, and at last the buses pulled off late with the men from the streets standing in the door well. The trip went without further incident.

Jackie Robinson undertook an active role in Nelson Rockefeller's 1970 reelection campaign and had offices at campaign headquarters in midtown Manhattan with a small staff, including Sam Singletary. I had just begun my new job as Dean of Evening Administration at Pace College when Jackie asked me to join his campaign staff full time. I was inclined to say "no"; but

upon presenting the question to Dr. Edward J. Mortola, President of Pace, I was immediately given a leave of absence for the duration of the campaign. The Republican Party in New York City was not strong, and the reelection campaign leaders generally wrote off the New York City vote and routinely ignored the many Black Republican district leaders. As Assistant to the New York Republican State Chairman, I knew all of the Black district leaders; and Jackie asked me to lead his effort to get the campaign to reach out to them. Jackie fought with the campaign leadership for a budget to support Black district leaders. For the first time ever, through Jackie's efforts, each Black district was provided funds to conduct a grassroots campaign. For the first time ever Republican campaign proms were conducted in Black communities. When the election was over and the results appeared in the newspaper, the support for Nelson Rockefeller was the highest ever for a Republican candidate.

When I returned to Pace after the campaign, I didn't see Jackie often. He had left the Governor's office, and Sam Singletary became Special Assistant to the Governor in his place. Pace College's Higher Education Opportunity Program asked me if I could get Jackie Robinson to speak to them. The Higher Education Opportunity Program, headed by Dr. George Mims, admitted talented minority students into a special program of academic support, remediation and academic orientation that was highly successful. Their graduation rate was better than regularly admitted freshmen. When I told Jackie of the invitation, his response was an immediate and enthusiastic "yes". He spoke to the HEOP group at the Westchester campus of Pace College. Jackie, in his characteristic sincere way, talked to the students about the importance of their studies and their obligation to give back to society some of the benefits that they received. After a standing ovation, Jackie stayed and answered questions and

chatted informally with the students. Jackie Robinson's visit has remained a memorable day for the HEOP program and Pace.

I am often asked what Jackie was like personally. The following incident serves to exemplify the character of the man: It was September of 1969. I was in my first months as the new Dean of the School of Continuing Education at Pace University when, at the request of Jackie Robinson, Governor Rockefeller asked me to join his reelection campaign to assist Jackie and Sam Singletary; and the president of Pace University gave his permission for a leave of absence. One day, the request came in for Jackie to speak to a retirement home in Harlem. Jackie asked me if I would like to go along with him, and he would drive. We got into his car at campaign headquarters on 48th Street in New York City and drove over to Madison Avenue and uptown toward Harlem. When we reached East Harlem at about 116th Street, we came to a traffic tie up. As we eased along in the slow traffic, we could see up ahead that the police had stopped a car and had two Black men spread-eagled over a car and were searching them. All of the policemen were White. There were approximately eight to ten policemen and the two suspects, and several police cars were obstructing traffic. A policeman was directing traffic around the incident; and as Jackie approached, the policeman motioned for him to proceed. Just as the policeman waived Jackie to proceed, he turned back to look at what the other policemen were doing. At the same moment, a woman stepped off the curb and walked in front of Jackie's car. Jackie had to pause to let the person pass. Just as the woman passed the front of the car, the policeman turned around and noticed that Jackie hadn't moved. He turned red with anger. He came over to the car and shouted, "I told you to get moving!! Why are you still here! Can't you understand English!" The policeman shouted several more angry words, then he walked to the window of the car and saw that it was Jackie Robinson.

He said, "Jack E., Jackie, Jackie Robinson! I'm sorry, Jackie; I didn't know it was you!" Jackie got very angry, opened the door, jumped out of the car and drove right into the policeman's face and said, "What difference does it make whether I'm Jackie Robinson, or somebody else. You have no right to talk to anybody that way! I'm not going to stand for you to talk to me or anyone else in that way!" Most of the policemen who were standing around came over and were listening to the interchange; and many of them said, "It's Jackie Robinson! Calm down, Jackie!" This made Jackie even angrier. He said, "I'm not going to calm down, and you guys talking to people in the manner that you have! People deserve respect, and I'm not going to stand for it!" The policemen kept saying, "Calm down, Jackie! We didn't mean anything!" This made Jackie even angrier, and he would not be stopped. He argued and lectured the policeman for at least fifteen minutes and refused to move his car. Jackie finally calmed down and without a backward glance, we got back into the car and proceeded to his speech at the retirement home in Harlem.

Jackie did not talk about his personal experiences often, but they would come up periodically. Without going into details, he often talked about how Pee-Wee Reese was a person who helped him adjust when he first went to the Brooklyn Dodgers. He talked about how much his wife, Rachel, and he had to face discrimination when they went to Florida for spring training. Overall, he did not talk a lot about his experiences until much later after he became very ill with diabetes. Then, on our travels, he became more open and began to answer questions that people would ask him over and over. He would take all the time that was needed to talk with people about his experiences and patiently answer the same questions over and over.

Jackie Robinson was a person who had very strong convictions. If you were his friend, he would stand up for you, White or Black. It didn't matter. He had a fiery temperament and

strong feelings for racial justice. If there was something that he felt Governor Rockefeller ought to know, he would go to the Governor personally. He was one of the few people on the Governor's staff who could walk into his office at any time, and Jackie carried the concerns of Black people to the Governor and got results.

I recall clearly the last time I saw Jackie Robinson. Sam Singletary and I had lunch with Jackie occasionally at the coffee shop downstairs from the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel on 45th Street in New York City. At one of our meetings we made an appointment to meet again for lunch at the Biltmore. On the designated day we waited on the curb of 46th Street for Jackie to arrive. He was being driven in from the Jackie Robinson Construction Company in New Jersey. Jackie's car pulled to the curb in front of us, and he stepped out. I was shocked by his hair that had turned completely white since I last saw him. He limped over to us, and we went downstairs to the coffee shop. We made a date to meet again, but Jackie died the next week from complications of diabetes.

Lionel Hampton

When I took a leave of absence from Pace University to work with Jackie Robinson on the Nelson Rockefeller campaign, I had the good fortune of meeting Lionel Hampton often. This happened because Lionel Hampton was a good friend of Nelson Rockefeller and Governor Rockefeller asked Lionel to play at many of his rallies, and he had many rallies around the state. I attended those rallies with Jackie, sometimes without Jackie. I would meet Lionel at various places around the state and got to know him very well. I would get up on the stage and we'd talk, we'd talk about the campaign. We would talk about the housing that the Governor helped him finance that was being built in Harlem. This Harlem

housing was to be named after Lionel's beloved wife, and the Lionel Hampton houses are in Harlem today.

Lionel was a very, very warm friend who would greet you every time he saw you with a warm smile and a handshake. I absolutely loved his music, especially "Hamp's Boogie-Woogie." That friendship lasted until his death in 2002. Often we would go wherever Lionel was having a gig, and he would invite us backstage and greet us and have a grand reunion. One of the last times I saw him was when he played at the Garde in New London, Connecticut. My wife and little daughter went backstage to greet him after the show (Kirin was perhaps three or four at the time), and he reached in his pocket and gave her a \$100 bill because he didn't have anything else to give her to remember him by!

In 1984 he gave a series of workshops/concerts at Eastern Connecticut State University while I was Dean of the School of Continuing Education there, and we presented him with an honorary degree. After his last concert he came to a reception at my home, which was at the time just across the street from the campus in Willimantic, and partook of my famous chili, which he always proclaimed to love.

Ossie Davis

I have been fortunate in having the opportunity to meet and know celebrities whose accomplishments I greatly admire. Jackie Robinson was the first of such that I met. Not long after meeting Jackie, I was invited by Dorothy Orr and her husband Alfred Orr to their home, which was nearby in Parkway Gardens in the Town of Greenburgh, to meet Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. I was, and I am, a devoted fan; and a large contingent of the Peagler family had recently seen a musical on Broadway called *Ballad for Bimshire* which Ossie Davis produced and starred in. Ossie and Ruby asked the Orrs to invite some friends who might be interested in investing in theater. They were disheartened that more Blacks

were not involved in producing and supporting theater. At the Orrs' home they read a script together and talked to the few guests present. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee lived in New Rochelle and left early for the short drive from Greenburgh.

Parkway Gardens in Greenburgh was an upscale housing development that was home to many Black celebrities who escaped the prevalent housing discrimination in Westchester County. At that time Parkway Gardens was home to Gordon Parks and Mildred and David Hepburn. Mildred Hepburn was an actress and had made several movies, and David Hepburn was vice president of Metromedic in New York City. Another resident was Moms Mabley, a popular comedian at the time. Farther out on Hillside Avenue, which bordered Parkway Gardens, was the home of Cab Callaway; and across town was the home of Roy Campanella.

Betty Shabazz

I met Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, early in 1963 when Bill and Charles Peagler and other family members and I were in New York to see a play and went out afterward to Wells Restaurant, a popular restaurant in Harlem, for chicken and waffles. Betty Shabazz came into that restaurant with a group of people, one of whom I knew, and he introduced me to Betty. Several years later Betty moved to Westchester County and enrolled in the doctoral program at NYU. I was a founding member of the Day Care Council of Westchester, and we were looking for an executive director to replace Inez Singletary, Sam Singletary's wife. Betty Shabazz applied, and we appointed her. I was on the board of directors, and I worked with her for two years as we developed the Day Care Council of Westchester program. She was a visionary, and she was a hard worker. She had wonderful ideas, and she had a great relationship with all the day care programs in Westchester County.

Chapter Six: The Civil Rights Movement

During the early days of the Civil Rights Movement I was a guidance director at Eastview Junior High School in White Plains, New York. As the movement gained momentum, I decided to seek membership on the board of directors of the Urban League of Westchester County as a way to contribute to the growing movement. I became very active in Urban League activities and soon accepted the position of Chairman of the Youth Incentive Committee. I believed strongly that the attainment of civil rights must be accompanied by youth development to fully exploit all new rights and opportunities gained by the nationwide efforts currently underway. At school every day I saw Black children lacking basic skills, struggling unsuccessfully to overcome their academic deficits. As Project Head Start would later emphasize, I concluded that early intervention would help the Black students succeed in the long term. I took the challenge of the Urban League Youth Incentive Committee very seriously and decided that this would be a good vehicle to support Black school children.

With the aid of others, including parents and teachers, the Youth Incentive Committee set up an evening study session in the community room of the White Plains Public Housing Development. Parents brought their children, and local teachers volunteered to help children do their homework. The first evening session filled the community room with buzzing activity and was a stunning success. We expanded the evening study sessions with equal success to New Rochelle and Mount Vernon. Study halls were set up in public housing community rooms, churches and similar venues.

Fueled by the resounding success of the evening study sessions, the Youth Incentive Committee planned a Westchester

County meeting of young people to discuss issues related to the Civil Rights Movement. My friend Mother McCormick, President of Manhattanville College in Purchase, supported our plans and donated the use of the Manhattanville College campus for the event. On a sunny summer afternoon an interracial group of over two hundred young people gathered for lively workshops and sessions led by Urban League of Westchester Executive Director Bill Wolfe and others. National Urban League President Whitney Young, a New Rochelle resident, attended with his young daughters. Young was lavish in his praise of the event.

Soon after this event I was contacted by Henry Krakeur of White Plains on behalf of the men's group of the White Plains Jewish Synagogue. They asked if there was a way that they could help the Civil Rights Movement by helping children achieve. As a result of our discussions, Henry Karkeur chaired a committee to set up a program. We decided to set up a program of youth incentive experiences for inner city kids of White Plains. I was asked to choose the children from the students attending Eastview Junior High School. The Temple men's group financed the program, headed by Henry Krakeur. They accompanied groups of kids to events, college campuses, cultural programs such as the New York Philharmonic youth concerts and historical sites such as the Statue of Liberty. All expenses were handled by Henry and the volunteers from the Jewish temple. I am to this day awed by the warm support and friendships that the men established. Synagogue members, such as fellow Urban League board members and good friends Bob and Hermione Popper, were active and vocal civil rights supporters.

William Kunstler

It was during this time that I met William Kunstler. We served on a panel on civil rights together and also did a radio broadcast. I was impressed by the depth of his feelings about civil justice and civil rights dealing with human rights violations and examples of injustice. Bill sat next to me, and I noticed that large tears came to his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. Years later Kuntsler added to his fame by representing the hippie protesters at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. One of the leading protesters was Abbie Hoffman, which reminds me of my meeting Hoffman when my office as Metropolitan Area Director of the New York State OEO was located at 342 Madison Avenue.

Abbie Hoffman

One summer day a bearded hippie came into the office to seek economic aid for programs that he sponsored in the eastern part of Greenwich Village, a part of the lower east side of NYC favored by hippies and teenage runaways. I accepted Hoffman's invitation to visit the East Village with him. When we arrived, I found that six other people representing prestigious foundations had also accepted his invitation to visit. We were taken to a crash pad maintained for runaway teenagers and the Free Store on East 9th Street. The Free Store had piles of clothing and odd food items. The store was crowded with down and out hippies and teenagers whom I presumed to be runaways. Abbie Hoffman led the visiting group back to the crash pad along 9th Street when a police car pulled to the curb beside us. Inside were four policemen with a beefy red-haired officer in the back seat who rolled the window down and shouted to Abbie Hoffman as he vigorously waved a five dollar bill, "Here Abbie; take your money back." Hoffman shouted

back, “Keep it; I don’t want it back!” As we returned to the crash pad, Hoffman answered our question, “What was that all about?” The explanation was that the day before Abbie was, for a reason not given, taken to a police station for questioning. He vigorously protested and in a rage took his shoe off and threw it at a glass front bookcase, breaking the glass. Then he threw a five dollar bill at the policeman to cover the damage and walked out. The visiting group witnessed the policeman’s attempt to return Abbie’s five dollars on East 9th Street.

The War on Poverty

The federal War on Poverty, which began to be implemented during the 60's, drastically changed the direction of my professional development and my life. The Economic Opportunity Law required “the maximum feasible participation of the towns and cities in preparing proposals for funding.” The Urban League of Westchester led the development of the White Plains funding proposal, and a task force of city residents of all income levels was formed to prepare a proposal. The task force developed an anti-poverty plan for the city; and, as mentioned before, the school system gave me a leave of absence to staff and to prepare the application for funds. The White Plains anti-poverty proposal was submitted to the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity for required Governor’s approval and to the federal Office of Economic Opportunity for funding. The application was funded at over \$600,000, which shocked the local newspaper, the *Reporter Dispatch*, which printed an editorial critical of me and pointedly said that someone more qualified should head the process and condemned the government for allocating such an outrageous amount of money! A Head Start program was part of

the funded project, also neighborhood centers in poor areas and neighbor youth corps job programs for teenagers.

The Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity, Ersä Poston, called me and asked me to visit her in her New York City office after I returned to the guidance director position at Eastview Junior High School. I visited Ersä Poston, and she came directly to the point. She had a newly developed position of education consultant. She was complimentary about the White Plains proposal: "It was the best proposal that we have received." I accepted the job offering without hesitation and began my duties of visiting and evaluating OEO educational programs around the state of New York.

Programs to Combat Urban Unrest

As mentioned before, several months after I joined the State OEO staff in New York City, Governor Nelson Rockefeller appointed Ersä Poston to the position of New York State Commissioner of Personnel. Her position of Director of New York State Office of Economic Opportunity was filled by Deputy Director for the Metropolitan Area Dr. Jack Sable. Ersä Poston recommended me to the Governor to fill the vacant Deputy Director for the Metropolitan Area position, which he did a short time later. My metamorphosis from teacher to administrator was begun, and other doors would soon open. I took over the Deputy Director position around the time of Martin Luther King's assassination and the hot summers of street unrest that followed. In response to the unrest, New York City Mayor John Lindsay formed an urban action task force made up of his staff and department heads to develop strategy to calm the city. The task force met every Monday morning, and I was appointed to represent the state at the meetings. I was the recipient of sharp

criticism from the city people that the state was doing nothing to help with the crises. Mayor Lindsay and Governor Rockefeller were openly at odds with each other at the time. I decided to try to get word back to Rockefeller about the criticism I was hearing.

I decided to develop a plan for the state to participate in calming the unrest, and this was probably my greatest contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. I developed a plan for utilizing state resources to help calm the crises. The best way to get the plan to the Governor's attention was through his special assistant Jackie Robinson; and my memo went to Jackie, who took it directly to the Governor. The Governor liked the memo and presented it to a cabinet meeting of state agency heads. Governor Rockefeller responded to the memo by having his staff form an Urban Area Council for urban areas of the state, made up of representatives of each state administrative department. The state area councils would have direct access to the Governor and implement programs to aid localities to address urban unrest problems. I was appointed Area Council Chairman for New York City Metropolitan Area. I chaired a weekly meeting of representatives of each state department, such as Labor, Welfare, Transportation, and Education. The Metropolitan Area Council came up with the following state initiatives to address the urban unrest problems with the direct support of the Governor.

1. The State of New York ran the Long Island Railroad. The Transportation Department member of our council recommended we use the Long Island trains that returned empty to Long Island after morning rush hour to transport Head Start children from Harlem to Oyster Bay, where the children could observe the train engine turned around on a turntable. The terminus was adjacent to an Oyster Bay Park, and the Town of Oyster Bay provided refreshments for the children.

2. The New York State National Guard, through the 369th regiment armory in Harlem, elected to develop a summer camp for children at the National Guard Camp in Peekskill utilizing camp housing and 369th regiment troops as counselors. The camp was able to move over 1000 young people off the streets of Harlem during that summer. The state police participated and used their radar guns to time races and show equipment to the kids.
3. The State Department of General Services refurbished outdated state automobiles and donated them to appropriate non-profit service agencies in the metropolitan area.
4. The State Department of Labor sought out job opportunities for teenagers.

Charles Evers

On one occasion Nelson Rockefeller chartered an airplane to transport invitees to the inauguration of Charles Evers, recently elected mayor of Fayette, Mississippi.²² Sam Singletary placed my name on the invitation list. As I boarded the plane, a middle-aged man sitting alone in what was usually the 1st class section waved me over to sit beside him. He was most amiable, and after take-off we introduced ourselves. I was pleasantly surprised and honored and pleased to be sitting beside the father of Mickey Schwerner, one of the young civil rights workers murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi. We talked and shared ideas for the whole two-hour flight to Jackson, Mississippi. I avoided bringing up the topic of his son's martyrdom. He brought up the subject by expressing great

²² Charles Evers, brother of slain Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, was elected mayor of Fayetteville, Mississippi in 1969, the first African-American mayor in the state since Reconstruction, and served in that capacity until 1989.

pride in the dedication and commitment that his son had for civil and human rights. I was deeply moved by this man who had lost his son whom he clearly loved very much, and even after such a great loss he expressed the same deep feeling that motivated his son. It was an inspirational experience to share time with such a human being.

When we landed in Jackson, I was conscious of the fact that this was the farthest south that I had ever been. I was surprised that all of the airport personnel and car rental personnel that we dealt with treated us with courtesy. I had expected to encounter at best coolness, at worst hostility from White people. The group rented cars and drove to Fayette. Outside of the town we left the cars and formed into lines and marched into town. We walked past Whites sitting on porches, standing in yards and staring at us, showing no reaction on their faces, just staring. We marched to the central plaza where a statue of a Confederate soldier dominated a tiny rotary park. We passed very small groups of Whites who stood mute and expressionless along the street. We ended our march at a roughly built speaker's platform. Most of the Black dignitaries climbed upon the platform and began an impromptu program. Just as more people climbed up, the platform collapsed. No one was injured, and the program continued.

Equal Opportunity

The Civil Rights Movement really brought home to me the importance of providing equal opportunity for everybody. I grew up in a very different kind of experience for a Black person, and I didn't realize the harsh reality of segregation. I understood that Black people were going through hardships, but I never experienced it. The Civil Rights Movement brought me closer to the problems of my people. The other thing that happened is that

the Civil Rights Movement opened up more job opportunities for Black people. For instance, my first job with the state of New York was dealing with the problems of poverty; and that program, the Office of Economic Opportunity, was a direct result of the Civil Rights Movement. That program grew out of the Civil Rights Movement and provided meaningful job opportunities for many, many minorities. The Civil Rights Movement moved me to look at life more broadly, not to be so narrow, not just reading things in the newspaper but to experience the problems that people had and to have the desire to move and help them.

The Civil Rights Movement gave me the opportunity to witness and participate in one of the most significant social and political changes in American history. These were changes that I had not expected to see in my lifetime. Because of the actions of a relatively small number of people led by Blacks, the whole country was forced to face the moral, social, and political inequities that were deeply buried in American culture. The moral conscience of the country was aroused by the just cause of the Civil Rights Movement, and segregation and its accompanying evils could not withstand the national moral uprising.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

About a year after the March on Washington, Governor Nelson Rockefeller invited Martin Luther King to a special luncheon in his honor which was held at Rockefeller's Pocantico Hills Estate overlooking the Hudson River in Westchester County, New York. Sam Singletary was Assistant to the Governor at the time since Jackie Robinson had resigned after informing the Governor that he could not support Richard Nixon for President and did not wish to cause embarrassment to Rockefeller. After Jackie left the Governor's office, Sam took over the position of Assistant to the Governor. Sam managed to get me on the invitation list to many

events, including the Martin Luther King luncheon. After arriving at the estate, heavy security at the gate checked the guest list and I was admitted to the expansive grounds, festooned with large sculptures on manicured grounds. The luncheon was held in the pool house, which sat on a rise providing a panoramic view of the Hudson River. When I arrived, cloth-covered tables were set up around the pool in a festive array, guests were milling around between the tables, and Dr. Martin Luther King was walking among them shaking hands and amiably chatting and greeting as he moved about. He was surrounded by people. I watched as the crowd around him moved with him in my direction. After several minutes, people around him dispersed. I have wondered for many years what prompted their dispersal. By some coincidence, Martin Luther King was left standing alone near me. I stepped up to him and introduced myself, and he greeted me pleasantly. I searched desperately for something to say that would inspire conversation, afraid that someone would come over to lure him away. I blurted out a question, "Do you think that we can win our full civil rights? Are we making progress?" He responded that yes, we were getting the moral conscience of our country aroused and that moral conscience would win the Civil Rights battle. I will never forget that. He was very low-key, very soft-spoken but very firm in his convictions.

As I said, this meeting took place about a year after the March on Washington, but I was there at the March and almost got to hear Dr. King make his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. It happened like this: The day of the March on Washington, August 28, 1963, was bright, sunny and warm. We were to meet in front of the Urban League of Westchester Office on Railroad Plaza in White Plains early on that morning. When I arrived at the Urban League Office, at least ten buses were waiting. There were city buses, school buses, luxury buses, all descriptions of buses. There was a large crowd of people, and Whites outnumbered Blacks.

People loaded into the buses as they pulled up in front of the offices, and I waited patiently while the buses filled and my turn came. The bus that I got on was a city bus from Yonkers, New York. It was a reasonably comfortable bus for the long ride to Washington, D.C.

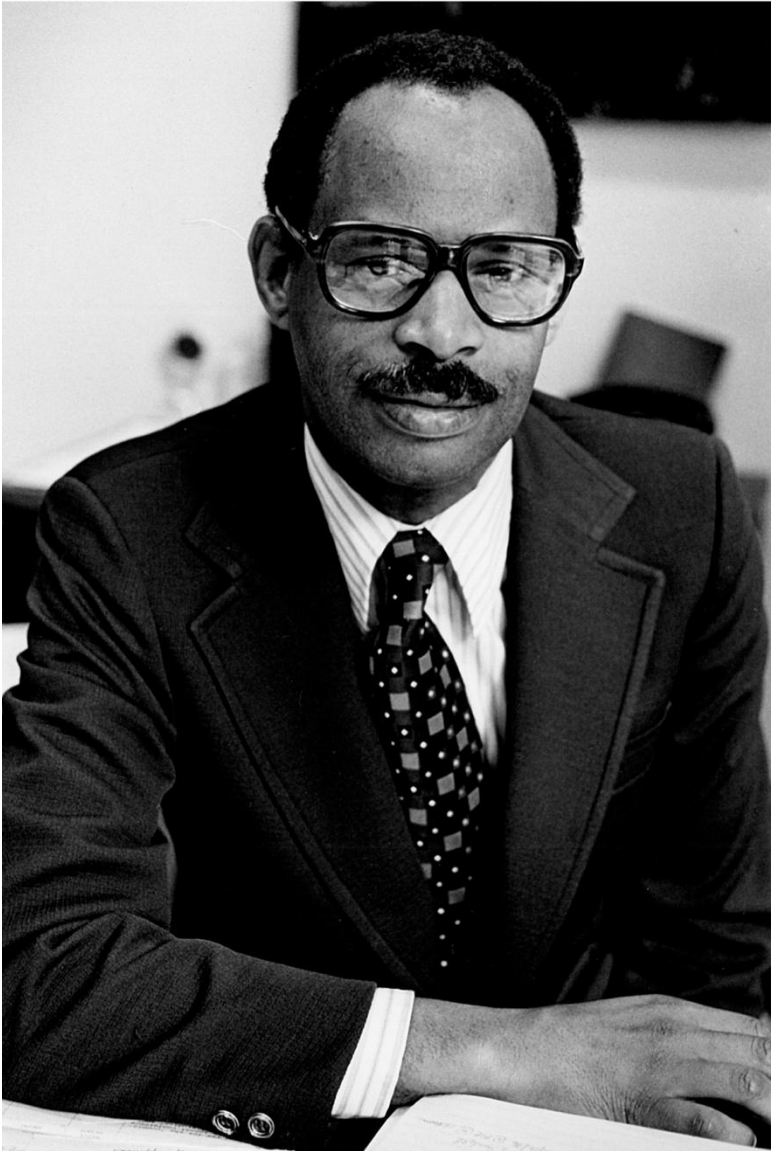
We got onto the highway; and I remember that as we entered the New Jersey Turnpike and began to go south, there were no other vehicles in sight in the southbound lane except buses as far as you could see in front of you and buses as far as you could see in back of you. It is a sight that I have not seen since, nor do I expect to see again. When we arrived in the outskirts of Washington, D.C., the streets were lined two or three deep with residents of Washington, all Black, waving and cheering the buses as they passed. We proceeded through the city to the Mall. The crowds got bigger and bigger as people poured into the march from the side streets, and the great cheering and chanting continued. We stood and watched as famous people marched by on the way to the Lincoln Memorial.

As we were about to go to where the speeches were to begin at the Lincoln Memorial, a lady from the Urban League asked me if I would help her find a place for her to go to the restroom. I agreed, and off we went to find a restroom. We went from the Mall to the nearest hotel, where the restrooms were not open to Blacks. We went to public buildings, which were all closed. We went on to a restaurant, where Black people were not allowed. We finally found a small place, a small nondescript restaurant that allowed us to use the rest room. When we returned to the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King had already spoken, and the ceremony was winding to the end. We had missed the most famous speech in civil rights history.

The Harlem Riots

When the Harlem riots started after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, I was in the position of Metropolitan Area Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity with offices at 342 Madison Avenue. New York Mayor John Lindsay convened a weekly meeting of city government department heads. The group that met each Monday morning was called the Mayor's Urban Action Task Force. I attended the meeting as the state representative. The city department heads made recommendations to ease the Harlem unrest, including better garbage pickup, service shower caps on fire hydrants for children to play in unrest areas, increased police presence and others. I remember a meeting that Mayor John Lindsay attended and what an impressive figure he was: tall, slim, blond hair and radiant blue eyes. He spoke of visiting the riot areas to establish presence and concern. After the meeting, mayoral assistant Barry Gottehrer, who chaired the Task Force meetings, approached me with the question "What's the Governor and the State going to do to help curb the unrest problem sweeping the City?" I replied that I would pass his inquiry on to Governor Rockefeller. This conversation prompted my memorandum to Jackie Robinson making suggestions of ways the state could help in the crises, which Jackie passed directly to Rockefeller. Rockefeller immediately shared the memoir with a meeting of state commissioners and department heads. He delegated a young assistant named Barry Van Lare to develop a program to implement state assistance in response to the urban crises. Van Lare recommended that a series of Governor's Area Councils be set up in each state urban area. The Area Councils were to be made up of administrators from each state agency who would meet regularly to monitor the urban tensions in their area. Each council would make action recommendations directly to the Governor.

Jackie Robinson arranged my appointment as Chairman of the New York Metropolitan Area council. This was the kind of politics that directly served the community that Jackie, Sam Singletary and I believed in.



Chapter Seven: A Change of Pace

My decision to leave Pace University in 1978 was not based, in hindsight, upon deep thought. By the late seventies I had established new programs such as the Bachelor of Professional Studies degree for adults who wished to complete or begin a college degree. The Credit for Life Experience program combined with the new BPS degree resulted in a large increase in adult evening students. Off campus courses were offered at various businesses and at the Co-op City housing development. Pace received a grant to develop a program for retired adults and the School of Continuing Education, a program based largely on the very successful adult retirement program at The New School. Thus, the Pace Active Retirement Center was established. I take pride to this day in the first program of the Retirement Center. The Center members, many of whom had worked in the garment district, put on a sale of items they gathered from their previous employment and presented the proceeds to the University senior class in support of senior class graduation activities. In appreciation, the senior class invited PARC members to join them in planning and participating in the senior graduation prom.

After those exciting years developing new programs, my mind turned to exploring other challenges, perhaps in another field. Chuck Lanigan, the former New York Republican State Chairman, called and asked if I would be interested in looking into a position with the Western Electric Company corporate foundation. After an interview with the company officers, I decided that the position offered little opportunity for new and interesting programs. After a job offer, I withdrew my application.

My wanderlust was not satisfied, and I began to read nationwide college and university positions openings in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Here I spotted a School of Continuing Education Deanship at Eastern Connecticut State University. The ad intrigued me. No more commuting to New York City daily by train. No more soaking hot subway rides from Grand Central to Brooklyn Bridge. I thought of moving back to Connecticut and the excitement of beginning again and building again an adult-focused higher education program. After being offered the position by the search committee, however, I withdrew my application. Eastern President Charles Webb asked me to think over the decision and said he would hold the position open in case I changed my mind, which I did, accepting the position after a week of deep thought. I resigned from Pace University and accepted the position at Eastern Connecticut State University. I then moved to Willimantic, Connecticut, leaving my wife and two children and home in Hartsdale, New York.²³

23 *Ed.* Owen remarked to me on several occasions that part of his reason for leaving his position at Pace University was to reduce the pressure in his life and try to save his eyesight, which was being adversely affected by glaucoma. He admitted that his marriage had become largely incommunicative by this time; but he always said that he regretted that he had simply "left," as he put it. Following their divorce, he and Joyce remained friendly, however, and became even closer after his stroke in 2007.

Health Issues

I was diagnosed with glaucoma in the mid 1960's, and for the next twenty years treatment by various doctors seemed to control damage to the optic nerve until a routine visit to an ophthalmologist in Willimantic, Connecticut returned a finding that the glaucoma had increased the pressure in my eyes to a dangerously high level. Since the prescribed eye drops were not effective in reducing the pressure, surgery in both eyes was necessary before the high pressure damaged the optic nerve, resulting in blindness. The Willimantic ophthalmologist quite strongly recommended surgery at the earliest opportunity, and he recommended that he perform the surgery. Since my brother Phil was 100% blind years after unsuccessful glaucoma surgery, I was determined to seek out the best glaucoma treatment available since my eyesight depended on it. A colleague at Eastern Connecticut State University offered to do a nationwide search for the best eye treatment centers and came up with the following names: Wills Eye Center at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, the Mayo Clinic in the Midwest and, to my great relief, the Yale Eye Center in New Haven, Connecticut just fifty miles away! I called the Yale Eye Center determined to get an appointment right away, prepared to argue or visit without an appointment. My call was answered by a very pleasant woman who proceeded to set up an appointment with Dr. Marvin Sears for the next week. I met with Dr. Sears; and after a thorough examination, he confirmed that the ocular pressure was dangerously high and surgery on both eyes should be done as soon as possible. Dr. Sears had experience operating on Black people, whose tendency toward excessive keloid growth after surgery decreased the chance of success. He shared this information, but his demeanor and confidence reduced my apprehension. He operated first on the left eye and then the right eye, and I was placed in a hospital room for two days. When the

bandages were taken off, I could see as well as before, the ocular pressure was reduced to acceptable levels, and my anxiety was eliminated.

On my follow up visits to Dr. Sears, he confirmed that the operations were successful and holding up well. He cautioned me to be careful not to contaminate my eyes in any way since germs had access to my inner eye. He gave me his home telephone number and said to call him at any time if there was any sign of infection. Two weeks later the Board of Directors of WAVE, Inc. of which I was a member, visited a WAVE program in San Antonio, Texas. In my hotel room on the first night in San Antonio, I noticed a viscous discharge from my eyes which blurred my vision. I immediately became highly stressed and recalled Dr. Sears' warning "if you see any sign of infection call me right away." In near panic and barely seeing, I searched my wallet for Dr. Sears' home telephone number, which I dialed and heard his voice. I told him where I was and that I could barely see because of the eye discharge. His calmness reduced my anxiety as he asked if there was a telephone book in the room and told me to find the yellow pages, look at the doctors listed by specialties and find the list of ophthalmologists. I fought back panic as I scanned the page through blurry eyes. Dr. Sears continued, "Tell me when you find the list of ophthalmologists and read the names to me." This I did, and not far into the list he said, "Ok, read the telephone number of this doctor and hold on." With difficulty, I read the name and telephone number and held on. Minutes later Dr. Sears' voice came back with instructions: "This is a graduate of the Yale Medical School. He is at the University of Texas Health Center in San Antonio. I have talked to him. You are to take a bus from near your hotel to the Health Center and go to the Emergency Room and ask for Dr. He will be expecting you."

I took the bus to the Health Center as directed and entered the crowded emergency room. After asking a nurse to tell

Dr. ... that Owen Peagler was here, very shortly the doctor appeared and escorted me to an examining room past the waiting crowd, where he examined my eyes and administered eye drops. He asked about former acquaintances at the Yale Eye Center and chatted until I mentioned taking a return bus to my hotel. He said, "The buses have stopped running by now; I'll drop you off downtown." The background to this story is that when I called Dr. Sears from San Antonio, with the time differential it must have been after midnight at his home. My telephone call came as he was packing for a trip to China that was beginning early the next morning. The passing of years has lost the name of that kind, young San Antonio doctor who with Dr. Marvin Sears saved my eyesight. When Dr. Sears retired, he was replaced by Dr. Bruce Shields who can only be described as a highly competent, gracious gentleman. I have been very well served by the Yale Eye Center.

Eastern Connecticut State University

When I first arrived at Eastern Connecticut State College (later University) in 1978, the academic schools, The School of Arts and Sciences, The School of Professional Studies, and the School of Continuing Education were newly established, as were the Deans' positions to lead each school. My position was one of three newly created Deans positions. Eastern had no Deans before this time. Dr. William Billingham, head of the Department of Education, became Dean of the School of Professional Studies; and Dr. Kathleen McGrory transferred from Western Connecticut State College to assume the position of Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. The three Deans immediately formed a close working relationship with each other and between the academic schools. We formed a bond and worked together to implement the new administrative structure.



Dean Peagler, ECSU School of Continuing Education.

My position at Eastern was held temporarily by Hermann Beckert; and I inherited his secretary, Mary Wilson, who was the only other Black member of the college staff that I observed upon arrival. President Webb offered me the opportunity to change secretaries and transfer Mary back to her old job in the admissions office. I refused to transfer Mary, however, and she remained in the position until her retirement. Mary Wilson's husband was Burt Wilson, a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first Black pilots in the Army Air Corps during WWII who distinguished themselves in combat in the European theater.

Early in my tenure at Eastern, President Webb approved my request to hire an assistant dean. A search committee chaired by Bill Billingham was formed and candidates recruited. I carefully reviewed each application numerous times, and one applicant repeatedly caught my attention. She was not one of those recommended by the committee; and after many reviews of the applications, I asked the search committee to call Carol Williams for an interview. An interview date was set up; and the day before, a tornado struck the area near Bradley Airport in Hartford, which delayed my return flight from Washington D.C. where I had been attending a WAVE meeting. I returned to campus just in time to meet Carol walking back to her car in the parking lot. We returned to my office, and the interview was conducted. I hired Carol from North Adams College in Massachusetts. I did not foresee at the time that Carol Williams would be the best contribution that I would make to Eastern and that she would become the best continuing education administrator in the state of Connecticut. Together we improved the course offerings available to part-time students; developed video courses for submarines to take while deployed; and offered credit courses on site at Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, the Connecticut National Guard, Naval Submarine Base, and Rockville Hospital. The off-campus courses were made possible by the academic department chairs and faculty willing to

travel off campus at night to conduct class. We created the Bachelor of General Studies degree, BGS, for adults and Credit for Life Experience Program at Eastern. The School of Continuing Education had its own budget called "the extension fund," and the increased enrollment of part-time students provided funds for the college to survive budget cuts from the state.

Continuing Education administered the evening classes, summer school, and non-credit courses, of which there were none offered at the time. Dr. Ken Parzych had for several years offered non-credit business training courses in cooperation with the Small Business Administration. Ken's non-credit programs were the basis upon which I developed future non-credit programs. Evening classes and summer school classes were determined by what faculty wanted to teach and were not offered in sequences to meet core requirements or degree requirements. With the cooperation of academic department chairs, we soon began to offer evening and summer courses that met degree requirements; and enrollment rose quickly. As enrollment of part-time students grew, the staff of the school slowly increased, beginning with the addition of Karen Collins to the position of administrative assistant. Karen soon became a strong creative initiator in support of our growth. Assistant Dean Nancy Tarkmeel proved to be a strong administrator of the Credit for Life Experience program and the academic advisement program for adult students.

In prior years summer courses were run regardless of enrollment and produced a budget deficit that took surpluses from both the fall and spring semesters to pay off. President Webb asked me to develop a program for the interim period between the fall and spring semesters. My first evening and summer sessions revealed a strong demand for credit courses meeting degree requirements for adult students. I decided that the interim offerings requested by President Webb should be designed to capitalize on the demand for credit courses for adults with the help

of senior faculty and academic department chairs. The first Intersession was offered in 1980 and over the years grew in enrollment and popularity. [*Ed.* It is still going strong to this day and has been copied by all of the Connecticut state universities.]²⁴

As the part-time student enrollment increased, classroom availability became an increasing problem which threatened to reduce the number of classes available to part-time evening students since college policy at the time did not allow part-time students to attend day classes with full-time students. The solution to the problem came with the request from Rockville Hospital to offer courses for nurses on site in Rockville. The idea of offering courses at off-campus sites to circumvent campus classroom shortages was planted. The idea grew into a new emphasis on offering credit classes where people worked. Again, the initiative of Dr. Ken Parzych was the stimulus of a unique School of Continuing Education initiative. As Chairman of the Business Department, Ken regularly invited high level administrators to speak to business classes. On one occasion the commanding officer of the Naval Submarine Base met with the business students. Ken, always on the lookout for ways to expand his teaching arena, asked the C.O. what education opportunities were available to the sailors at the Sub Base. He responded that a big problem was higher education opportunities did not exist for submarine crews because they were deployed overseas at Holy Loch, Scotland for six months, followed by six months home based in Groton. They were never available for regular college sessions.

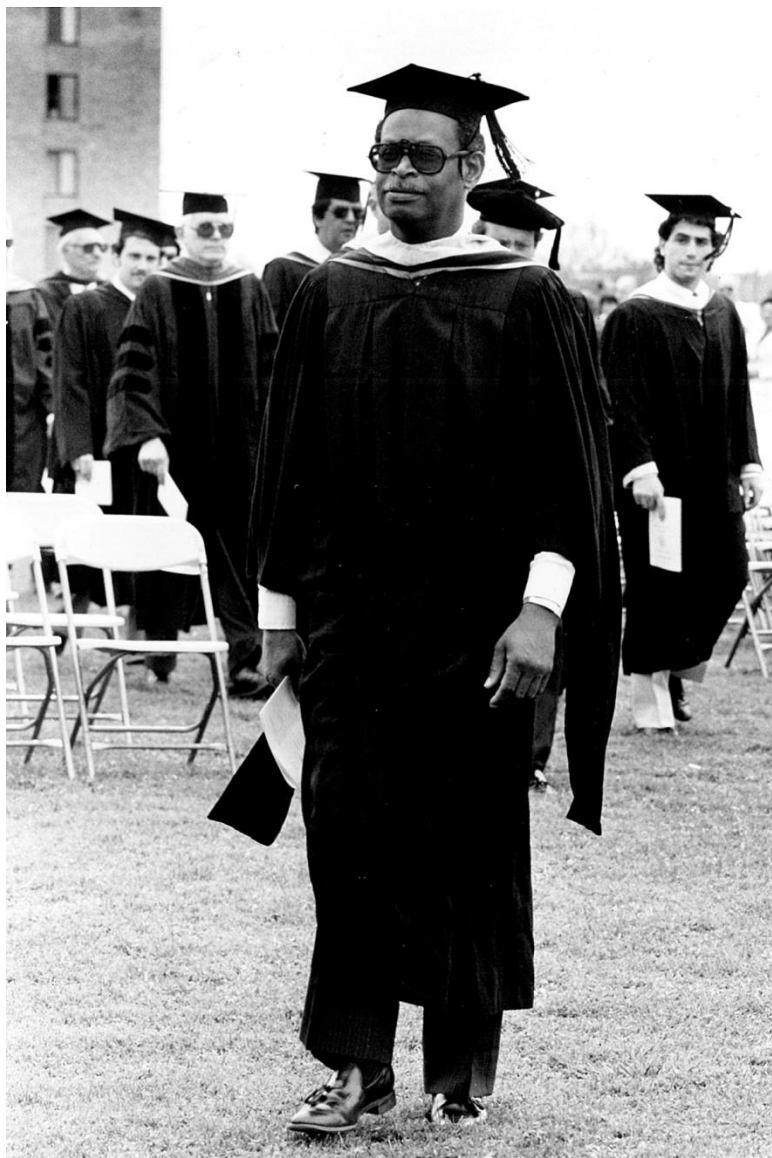
I was aware that Ken had made a video tape of a Business 101 course which he had available in his office. Ken and I talked about the possibility of offering his videotape class for sailors to view while deployed. The commander of Submarine Group 2

²⁴ *Ed.* Owen also instituted a highly popular annual "Day for Women" with workshops and guest speakers to help encourage women returning to college after years of staying at home as wives and mothers.

embraced the idea. Ken and I met with submarine crews at the Sub Base, and Ken gave a pre-deployment introduction to the course and provided study materials to be read while deployed. The college provided the video tape player, and the submarine electrician installed it on the submarine. Crew members were officially registered for credit and viewed the video course while deployed. After returning to base after six-month deployment, Ken met with those registered and answered questions and administered a final exam. To our pleasant surprise, the sailors did as well as the on-campus students on the final exam. The procedure was systemized and two other faculty members developed videotaped credit courses. Soon six to seven boats were regularly taking courses while deployed. One submarine crew excelled in the number of college credits earned through the program. Crew members of the *USS Dallas* completed one hundred twenty-four credits, which is the number required for graduation. President Webb agreed to award a degree to the submarine, and a naval officer was present at graduation to accept the Eastern Connecticut State University diploma on behalf of the *USS Dallas*. The *USS Dallas* is the only boat in the submarine service with a BS degree!

Employees of Pratt and Whitney Aircraft in East Hartford attended evening classes at Eastern, and their tuition was paid by the company. Through our Pratt and Whitney students, we met the administrator of the Pratt and Whitney Tuition Program. In our discussions we agreed it would benefit the Pratt and Whitney students if credit courses could be offered on site in available training classrooms. Numerous courses were offered at Pratt and Whitney, and the number of Eastern students blossomed.

In the 1980's the National Guard instituted a requirement that all officers must have a college degree. Soon after, I was contacted by Col. William Meagher, Chief of Staff of the Connecticut National Guard. Bill wanted to encourage the officers



Eastern Connecticut State University Graduation Exercises

in the Connecticut Guard to obtain the college degree and asked if we could work out the means for them to pursue a degree. We began by offering evening credit courses at the Hartford Armory and expanded the offerings to other armories. Bill set up a program that allowed the use of Guard vehicles to transport Guard members to classes at the armories. The leadership of the Connecticut National Guard led the way in taking courses, and the graduation rate was high. It came to pass that eventually the entire leadership of the Connecticut National Guard were Eastern Connecticut State University graduates.

[Ed. In addition to his success in implementing and administering new continuing education programs, Owen made many good friends after his move to Willimantic. He had some of their names written down in his notes to himself while writing these memoirs and, I am sure, would want them mentioned here. He met Nat Williams and his wife Lorna, both of whom worked for Aetna Insurance Co. in Hartford, at a social gathering; and they soon became his best friends. Nat and Lorna would become godparents to his youngest daughter Kirin. Fran Funk, photographer for the *Willimantic Chronicle*, was one of the first people to meet Owen after his move to ECSU when she accompanied a reporter sent to interview him soon after his arrival in Willimantic. She and her husband Chip, a former history teacher turned mechanic whom Owen always called a "Renaissance man," became like family and largely kept him entertained in the first months after his move to Willi. From ECSU, his associate dean, Carol Williams, remained a close friend and confidante for the rest of his life, as did Tom Salter, professor of English. Carol and her husband Bob, Chip and Fran, Nat and Lorna, Tom and his wife Norma, and Tom and Celia Anderson (professors of history and English, respectively) were frequent visitors to our home in Old Lyme and always took part in our annual Halloween parties. He

loved them all dearly as well as the other close colleagues who are mentioned later in his remarks upon retiring from ECSU.]

Delaware State Department of Community Affairs

In 1982 I was invited by Governor Pete DuPont of Delaware, whom I had met through his involvement with 70001 (WAVE), to become Secretary of Community Affairs for the State of Delaware. The State of Delaware Department of Community Affairs was head of a department that included the Office of Consumer Protection, the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Office of Human Rights and the State Library. In addition, the Secretary was Chairman of the Delaware State Housing Authority, which developed and sold state bonds on the bond market to fund building low-income housing.²⁵

²⁵ *Ed.* Although Owen did not write much here about his experiences in Delaware, a scrapbook put together by his secretary in Delaware at the time of his departure to return to ECSU tells the story of thirteen months filled with meetings, formal events, weighty decisions, and, at times, high drama. After a Delaware Senate grilling, he took office on March 25, 1982, as a member of Governor Pete duPont's Cabinet and the highest ranking Black in Delaware state administration. After considering more than a dozen applicants, duPont tapped Owen, whom he had known as a fellow board member of the 70001 Foundation, for the position, calling him a man of "high quality who brings considerable experience and expertise in a variety of disciplines to this important cabinet post." Early in 1983 Charles Webb, then President of Eastern Ct. State University, prevailed on Owen to return to his position at ECSU after his one-year leave of absence; and Owen submitted his resignation to Governor duPont effective April 30, 1983. In his letter of response, dated April 7, 1983, duPont wrote: "I am not at all surprised that the leadership of Eastern Connecticut State University has sought to press you back into service. That only confirms what we have come to realize during the past year - that you are an extremely capable and imaginative manager and leader. Although your stay here will have been short, I think you leave a department that has been substantially improved over the past year and

I moved to Wilmington, Delaware after taking a leave of absence from Eastern Connecticut State University. This move put me only five hours drive from Williamsburg, Virginia, which I visited often while living in Wilmington. Many weekends I would drive to Williamsburg to visit my Uncle Charles Gary, Mom's brother, and his wife Aunt Zelda DeBerry Gary. Uncle Charles was still the proprietor of The West End Valet Shop, a dry cleaning and tailoring shop at 607 Prince George Street, and Aunt Zelda was at the time serving as a school nurse at the James Blair Junior High School on Ironbound Road in Williamsburg. My visits from Delaware often were for a long weekend. On several visits Aunt Zelda would have her close friend, a young music teacher from the school, over for dinner. I remember first meeting Teresa Balough in the Gary's kitchen at dinner. She sat on a stool near the kitchen table holding her three-legged dog that she had rescued from the side of the road and took home and nursed back to health. Zelda named the dog "Thor," and she and Terry lavished affection on Thor. I watched this beautiful woman lavish affection on the dog who lay contented in her lap. I was strongly moved by her quiet, gentle, affectionate demeanor, intelligence and beauty. After several visits Terry and I attended several Williamsburg events together such as the Grand Illumination at Christmas and the 4th of July fireworks in addition to long walks along Duke of Gloucester Street. Terry took a one-year leave of absence from the Williamsburg school district to complete a PhD at the University of Western Australia in 1984. When she returned, our relationship moved to another level; and it would not be long before Terry moved to Connecticut and the birth of our daughter Kirin made us a family.

have created an opportunity for further positive developments within that department."



Terry, Kirin, Uncle Charles Gary, Owen, Aunt Zelda DeBerry Gary, Bloomfield, Ct., March 1988.

Old Lyme, Connecticut

After a year working with Pete DuPont in Delaware, I returned to my position at Eastern Connecticut State University and began looking for a new house. I had purchased a “Victorian Lady” just across the street from my office on Windham Street in Willimantic and rented the upper stories to college students; but now I was ready for a home further from campus. I found the house of my dreams on the shores of a small lake in Old Lyme, Connecticut, about thirty miles from Willimantic.²⁶ Terry and I moved into our newly purchased home at 57 Boughton Road in Old Lyme in January of 1986, and our daughter Kirin Elizabeth, named after my mother Myrtle Elizabeth, was born on May 19, 1986 in Manchester Hospital.

Procedures had changed drastically since Cathy and Robbie’s births. I was welcomed in the birthing room and watched the birth of my third child. It was like watching a miracle happen before your eyes. Kirin was born with no crying, held with no evidence of stress by the nurse who bathed her and handed her to me. She lifted her eyelids, revealing large cobalt blue eyes and the face of an angel. Later Terry took her in her arms, and Kirin remained calm and quiet for the remainder of the hospital stay and for weeks after. Terry chose the name “Kirin” because of its spiritual meaning: “unicorn.”

²⁶ Ed. When Owen told me about his heretofore unsuccessful search for his ideal house, I suggested to him that he make a “Treasure Map” of what he was looking for and surround it with affirmations. (This process was suggested in Shakti Gawain’s book *Creative Visualization* and had proven successful for me in clarifying my goals on more than one occasion.) Owen dutifully drew a picture of a two-level house with an upper deck overlooking a body of water and within a matter of days was introduced by a realtor to a house in Old Lyme, Ct. that looked almost exactly like the one he had drawn. As it happens, I was actually with him on the day he was shown the house!



1988



Family Reunion, Old Lyme, CT., Summer 1988.

Back Row: Twyla Whitby, James Whitby, Richard Peagler, Bill Richards, Townsend Richards, Nat Williams, Rob Peagler, Charles Gary, Buddy Whitby.

Middle Row: Orel Robinson, Linda Whitby, Mabel Whitby, Sandy Richards, Owen Peagler, Philip Peagler, Karen Whitby, Richie Peagler.

Front Row: Terry Balough, Kirin Peagler, Valerie Whitby, Lorna Williams, Vashti Peagler, Phyllis Whitby, Bill Peagler, Cathy Peagler with Keleigh Whitby Logan, Karen Whitby, Alan Whitby, Ike Whitby.



With Aunt Celestine Gary Outten and Uncle Charles Gary, Ironbound Road, Williamsburg, Virginia, late 1980's.



Philip, Uncle Charles, and Owen, Ironbound Road, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1990's

Australia

Terry completed requirements for the PhD degree from The University of Western Australia in 1988, following a one-year leave of absence from her position as band director at James Blair Jr. High School in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1984 to study at UWA. The timely award of a consultant payment from the Board of Directors of WAVE Inc. made it possible for Terry, Kirin and I to visit Australia to attend Terry's graduation in Perth, Western Australia in 1988. Five years later we would make a return trip to Australia when Terry was invited by the Percy Grainger Museum and the University of Melbourne to deliver the annual Percy Grainger Lecture in 1993. We would travel once more to Australia in 1999 to visit the wonderful friends we had made there.

On each visit we took time to visit the Outback. On the first visit I was sent off by train to visit the goldfields of Kalgoorlie while Kirin and Terry stayed with friends in Perth. On each of the other two visits, we all traveled to Alice Springs and from there to Uluru (Ayers Rock) and the Olgas, sacred sites to the aboriginal people. On my first visit to Uluru, the large red monolith that rises vertically from the level wasteland of the Outback, we approached the red façade of the rock on a bus that brought us from Alice Springs. It was late afternoon; and the setting sun illuminated the red, vertical sides of the rock. As the bus drew nearer, I felt a strong, almost overpowering, sense of *déjà vu*, a feeling that was repeated several years later on my second visit. Tourists from the bus began to climb the 45 degree angle trail up the side of the monolith. I followed for a short distance and was overcome by a feeling that "I don't belong here" after passing several markers indicating where people had died in falls from the rock in the past. I later learned that "Ayers Rock" is an aboriginal holy site which they call "Uluru".

We also took in Cairns, the Great Barrier Reef, and Kuranda Rain Forest on our trips to Australia. In the rainforest I joined an aboriginal dance group to awe the audience of tourists, attempted to learn to play the didgeridoo, and successfully practiced throwing a boomerang.



Owen onstage in Queensland, Australia.

Chapter Eight: Leaving Eastern

As the years passed leading to the millennium and my 20th year at Eastern, the part-time adult student enrollment, including the summer school, the winter intersession, campus evening sessions and the off-campus satellite courses continued to grow, setting adult student enrollment records each year. During this time fellow deans, the Dean of Arts and Sciences and the Dean of Professional Studies, were asked to resign with no reasons given. The Dean of Professional Studies was caught totally off-guard because she had just received a large grant for the Education Department. The Deans' immediate supervisor, the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, provided no feedback from the President and showed no interest in the School of Continuing Education. Had I been more alert and less infused with a sense of loyalty to my superior, which I learned at Pace University, I would have seen the handwriting on the wall.

My experience in higher education since my years at Pace University has been collegial and open and supportive. I have never felt the need to watch my back. In fact, I have always strongly supported my colleagues. So I was by experience and by nature unprepared for the meeting with the Vice President of Academic Affairs in 1997 when he informed me that I was fired. With no introduction or sense of regret he said, "Your contract isn't being renewed." No reason was ever given. So much for thirty years in higher education. So much for twenty years at Eastern Connecticut State University. But why was I surprised? Four deans and a vice president of academic affairs were dispatched in similar manner before me. There is no bitterness in these words: just the facts as I experienced them.

I was just shy of my 68th birthday and recalled the jesting remarks by the President and the Vice-President about my age. Since no reason was given for my firing, I filed an age discrimination complaint with the Connecticut State Office of Human Rights, which ruled "probable cause." As a result, I was given another year of employment with a substantial raise for the year, which made a big impact on my retirement finances. My departure from Eastern Connecticut State University was eased by a gala retirement party by the faculty orchestrated by faculty colleagues Bob Horrocks and Steve Kenton.

[*Ed.* Contrary to his originally expressed wishes to have no celebration, Owen was given a retirement reception spearheaded by Steve Kenton and Bob Horrocks of the mathematics and physical education departments, respectively. It was a jovial, well-attended gathering with over a hundred people present held in the President's Dining Room of ECSU's Student Center, in which Owen was praised, gently roasted and surprised by the presence of his extended family (all wearing caps emblazoned with the name "OWEN") and many colleagues and well-wishing friends. At the end of the program, which included statements and presentations by the Ct. National Guard and the Submarine Base in Groton, Owen was invited to make the concluding remarks which follow.]

Owen Peagler Retirement Reception Response²⁷

October 19, 1998

You know, I've been to a hundred of these things, and I've often sat there thinking "What would I say?" I remember some say what they're going to do and how they're going to retire and what they're going to do on retirement; and I still haven't figured out what I'm going to say. However, some things immediately come to mind, that is that this has been twenty years almost to the month. I came in August 1978, and one of the things that I just did want to mention at this point is that those who were here in those days will remember that the deanships had just been established. I'm the last of the first deans at Eastern; I'm the last one. But the other two, Dr. Bill Billingham and Dr. Kathleen McGrory, were partners, and we came together and put together the academic team. We met in the evening, we worked together, we became good friends. As a matter of fact, Bruce Clements may remember that he came home one night, Kathleen McGrory was house sitting for him, and found us at his kitchen table with the detritus of a meal left over. (Do you remember that, Bruce? You came home, and I had never met you before. Never forgot you either!) We were starting, we were putting together an academic program; and we worked on it. And I guess that one of the things that bothered me is that Dr. Billingham disappeared. He didn't have a going-away. He did great things for Eastern. Dr. McGrory, who was so popular that the faculty demanded practically that she become Academic Vice-President, which she did and did wonderfully, disappeared. We never said "thanks" to her. And my first feeling when Steve and Bob said the faculty wants to do something, was "well these great people disappeared. I just want to disappear too." They convinced

²⁷ *Ed.* Transcribed from a video recording. Owen did not read from a prepared script.

me, my wife and so on convinced me, well, you know, you should go through with this. I want to thank you all, but I also want to raise the names of Dr. Billingham and Dr. McGrory, the two other pioneer deans. I am the last of an era.

The campus reflects the new, the millennium is here. Sand will fill my tracks very quickly, so I am going to savor this moment now. I am proud of what we accomplished together, the faculty, the department chairs. We wanted to do different things, do different modes, go different places, serve the adult student. To the various offices on campus who we asked to stay open and serve the part-time student, everybody responded; and we put together with the help, and I think the enthusiastic help, of all of the offices and all of the departments, a very credible program for adults. Frankly, I think we have the best program for adults in the state of Connecticut, bar none. And I think that we've offered opportunity, as reflected by Colonel Pinette and Sargeant-Major Savino. This is realistic education. This is education that produces leaders, that changes people's lives; and I'm proud of that, and I'm proud that I've done it together with you, with all of you because nobody does anything alone. But in doing it we have become very close, we've worked together; and that staff! Dr. Carol Williams: if there is one best thing that I did for Eastern, it's hiring Carol Williams. Then, we put together everything with her help (all the things that I take credit for, when you're dean you take credit for everything), all the things we put together with her creative ideas and so on. And then we got together and we got Karen Collins and lured her away [from another department]; and we got Joan Harrell and we got Nancy Tarkmeel. Nancy Tarkmeel came when they got me out of the state to work with Pete Dupont [as Secretary of Community Affairs for the State of Delaware for a period of one year] and they hired Nancy to fill in; and, fortunately, Nancy stayed. We put together a team.

I think if there's one thing I'm proud of, if you called our office I think you got an upbeat response, you didn't get a negative. When we answered the phone, we answered it upbeat, not only with colleagues, but with students. There was a place that if we couldn't answer the question, we found the answer for you. It was a place that respected the students. As a matter of fact, sometimes in the early days we were accused of coddling the students. And perhaps we did, but the point is they came and they came back and we had double digit enrollment increases. With the help of Roy Marolli, they took those enrollment increases and added income and squirreled it away; and that is the surplus that helped us through those awful 90's. I'm proud of it. I appreciate the fact that all of you have come and said that you think I did a good job. I thank you for coming. This has been a very great day, and now I'm going to retire. Thank you.

[Ed. Professor of Music, Ed Drew, penned and sang the following song in honor of Owen to the tune of "Mother," which he explained seemed appropriate "since he nurtured the program much as a mother would an adoptive child."]

***O** is for his optimistic nature
And it stands for his outgoing warmth.*

***W** is his winning, winsome ways
And just how very wonderful he is.*

***E** is for his ever ready laughter
Also how he's helped our Eastern grow.
Put them all together they spell "**OWE**"
We owe him quite a lot that's really so.*

***N** is for the need not to say "no"
(Spoken: I think that's the best line of the whole thing.)`*

And the fact that man is really nice.

***P** is for his name spelled incorrectly
As predictively positive his style.*

***E** this man is easy to endure;
It's also for his easy, friendly way.
Put them all together they spell "**OWENPE**"
At Eastern we're all grateful for his stay.*

*Now **A** stands for accomplishments so many,
A progressive administration so well done.
G is for the great things he's accomplished
And that he is a good and gentle one.
L stands for all students brought to learning
And its all time lingering effect.
Put them all together they spell "**OWENPEAGL**"
I can't believe this spelling is correct!*

*E is for everyone he's guided
And how eternally grateful they will be.
R is for respect this man has earned
And also for the reason we are here.
OWEN PEAGLER is for colleague, friend and family,
A consummate professional is he.
And, Owen, put this all together they spell "Y-O-U"
Please accept these words of praise to you from me.*

[Ed. Art Johnson, poet, journalist and professor, penned this tribute for the occasion, which he later had framed and presented to Owen.]

Owen Peagler²⁸

*A sonorous laugh welling up
As a paean to life
Creative, energetic, purposeful
On whom age sits as lightly as a bird
Upon a bough.*

*Questioning, probing
A piquancy
Challenging, arresting not
Pedantic.
Loyal, a systems adherent
Pursuing, with passion, educational goals.*

*Seeing broad dimensions
Distance learning
A futurist
Fated to pursue new directions
Resting not upon his oars
Strong undercurrents of life
Will propel him in new challenging directions.*

²⁸ Ed. Published in *The Collected Poetry of Arthur Lyman Johnson*, 2001.

*Eastern is the richer for his presence
Indelible stamp upon continuing education
Is his legacy.*

Art Johnson, 10/19/98



Rob, Owen, Cathy and Kirin, Owen Peagler Retirement Reception, October 19, 1998.

"Retirement"

After the unpleasant experience of being fired from my position at Eastern, I retired to my home in Old Lyme, Connecticut and began looking immediately for a retirement position in Southeastern Connecticut that would utilize my experience and new free time. I first talked to the Executive Director of The Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut, who was a friend and a former adjunct instructor of sociology in the School of Continuing Education at Eastern. He was very gracious and immediately suggested a social work position in one of his newly funded programs in support of troubled families, which I accepted with enthusiasm. I joined a team of professional social workers and teamed up with several to make family visits. After a few weeks, when it was time for me to make family visits on my own, I came to a decision not to continue in the position because it became painfully apparent to me that their training and experience brought more support and guidance to the families than I could. I resigned the position because I felt strongly that the families deserved more than I could deliver.

I next visited Dr. Mary Ellen Jukowski, President of Mitchell College in New London, a former Continuing Education Dean at Sacred Heart University in Bridgeport. We were friends and both past presidents of the Connecticut Association of Deans of Continuing Higher Education. The timing was fortuitous. She was about to expand the number of student advisors and hired me on the spot as one of her student advisement team. After approximately a year, my position was eliminated in a college-wide reorganization. Again fate was on my side, however. At that time the Education Department of the Mohegan Indian Tribe was advertising for an education counselor for tribal members. I immediately applied and met with the Director of Education, the head of the Tribal School Board. I brought my New York State

Guidance Counselor certification papers, which were still in effect; and the position was mine. I was enthusiastic because at last I had a position directly related to my graduate degrees from NYU. [Ed. Owen remained in his position with the Mohegan Tribe for the academic years of 2004-2006, leaving in the spring of 2006 to be with his sister Mabel in Maryland, who was gravely ill, and would be with her when she passed away in May of that year.]



Owen and Mabel, Old Lyme, Ct., 1990's

South Africa²⁹

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, which my family and I attended, began a partnership with Soweto, South Africa's Central Methodist Church following a visit there during the apartheid period by David Good, senior minister, and Carleen Gerber, associate minister. In 2002, following an exhilarating visit to Old Lyme by the Choir of Central Methodist Church³⁰, I joined a group of twenty-eight parishioners from Old Lyme to visit South Africa to take part in The Jimmy Carter Habitat for Humanity housing build in Durban, South Africa. I was reluctant to undertake such a long trip so soon after retirement. After gentle prodding by Terry (who said it would be an "epiphany" for me) and by the encouraging agreement with Rachel Robinson³¹ that she would only make the trip if I agreed to go, I finally made the decision to join the trip. My reluctance faded immediately, and I joined the

²⁹ *Ed.* This lengthy description of Owen's first and only trip to Africa was made possible by incorporating extracts from the journal which he kept while there.

³⁰ *Ed.* The choir's visit actually took place in September following the Habitat build in May; but the two events became so enmeshed in Owen's mind, that it is easy to see how he reversed the chronology.

³¹ *Ed.* Owen and Rachel had reconnected in 1998 through a Habitat for Humanity build in Salem, Ct. sponsored by our church, The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, in conjunction with the Madry Temple of New London, Ct. on two acres of land donated by Rachel adjoining her summer residence in Salem. When we attended the ground breaking ceremony, Rachel spotted Owen and said, "Owen Peagler, what are you doing here!" It was the first time they had seen each other in years. Soon Rachel would invite our family, a young friend of Kirin's who was visiting from the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation, and Sam and Inez Singletary for a memorable lunch at her home. She was kind and gracious and still vibrant and beautiful even into her eighties.

group of travelers on a warm May morning for the drive to JFK Airport to catch the sixteen-hour South Africa Airlines flight to Johannesburg. My friend Manny Red Bear from the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation was in my limo, and during the trip to Kennedy Airport he sang two Lakota Sioux songs. It was a jovial group that included David and Carleen.

When we reached the airport, I saw Rachel Robinson way ahead in the check-in line. She had arrived alone from New York City. She gave me her usual bright and warm greeting. We compared boarding passes and found that we were sitting in the same row of four seats. During the flight Rachel and I were seated side by side, which we thought was serendipitous until we realized that David had organized for us to sit together on all the flights. We were also delighted to find that Niko Paul from the Madry Temple was seated next to us. During that flight Rachel and I recalled our first meeting as graduate students at NYU in a graduate sociology class and later at Pace University when as a dean I escorted her to the ceremony that awarded Jackie Robinson an honorary doctorate.

After arriving in Johannesburg and passing through customs, we were directed by many young volunteers to busses which were waiting. Rachel and I and Lou Connick were the only members of the Old Lyme group to catch the first waiting bus. My first glimpse of Mother Africa! Not exciting. All airports look similar, and Rachel and I remarked that the trip into Durban [a distance of about 365 miles] was very similar to such a trip in many cities that we have visited. Durban is a very attractive, modern city with beautiful downtown beaches on the Indian Ocean. The weather was overcast and windy with temperatures around 50-55 degrees. The city has an attractive downtown with no visible blights. The long beach promenade along the ocean front is wide and beautiful.

While waiting for people to get their baggage at the first stop, a Holiday Inn but not ours, I casually looked into the lobby window and saw Lou Connick in line. I held the bus and went in and got Lou back on board. The driver had told him there was only one Holiday Inn. (There were actually four!) Two stops later we arrived at our hotel, the Holiday Inn Marine Parade. From the outside it was tall and modern and the bright lights of the esplanade and broad beach were directly across the street. I was given to believe that we would have "modest" accommodations, but this hotel and the whole area was luxurious. We checked in just before the rest of the Old Lyme group arrived. The hotel was new, modern and high up on the luxury scale. I entered the room first and went directly to the window to check our view. It was breathtaking! We were on the 25th floor. The room was nicely furnished with two king-sized beds. Our window looked over the esplanade, which at this time of night was illuminated by neon lights in fanciful patterns. Beyond, the beautiful white beach stretched in both directions while directly ahead Indian Ocean breakers were pounding the beach. We were mesmerized!

[Owen was rooming with Derick Maregele, the young minister from South Africa who was spending two years at FCCOL as an associate minister, and who had become a very close friend. He, his wife Joan, and two of their children, Lee Ann and Isaac, added a wonderful element of spontaneity and joy to our church and were much beloved by our community. Lee Ann was the same age as our daughter Kirin and spent many days and nights with us, especially when her family returned to South Africa at the end of Derick's tenure and she remained behind to complete her last year of high school in Old Lyme.]

The next morning, Sunday, June 2, Derick and I overslept til 11 a.m. and then had brunch at the hotel restaurant. We took the shuttle to the convention center to register and then returned to the hotel and walked down the beach to watch the World Surfing

Championship. We met Jimmy Carter walking the esplanade, chatted and congratulated him on his trip to Cuba. We returned to the hotel to meet the Old Lyme group to go to the opening session of Habitat at the convention center. There was excellent entertainment with a dance group and singers. Dinner for thousands followed. I expected a long wait and chaos, which did not happen. The food was served at ten to fifteen buffets, with little or no wait. The food was excellent. The FCCOL group found a quiet corner of the lobby and sat in a large circle. Each person introduced themselves and gave impressions. I was next to last to speak and had no idea what to say. When my time came I had thought of several possible statements. But the talk was put together as I spoke. I said I didn't think segregation in the United States would end in my lifetime. Then I thought apartheid would not end in my lifetime. Both were defeated by good people pecking away until they crumbled. The good works of people are effective over time. When I was young I was often called a _____, then I was a Negro, now I am an African-American. I am proud of the new name that connects me to a proud heritage. Africa, known as the "dark continent," is today viewed as backward. Today few people in the U.S. know that Africa had civilizations and kingdoms that were highly developed.

We returned to the hotel by shuttle where Derick, Stan, Anita, Niko, Dana and two partners from the sister church in Jo'burg went for a walk along the beach. It was a warm, balmy night. I put my hand in the Indian Ocean: quite warm. Many large jellyfish washed up on the beach. We met Paul Velyn [minister of the Central Methodist Church] and Doug Stoebr [then president of

Habitat for Humanity of Southeastern Ct.] walking to Paul's hotel. We returned to the hotel and had a beer, then to bed.³²

Monday, June 3, we were down to the shuttle bus by 5:30 a.m. A large crowd was waiting for the buses, and we finally found space on the third bus. It was dark and cold. My shirt and t-shirt did not keep me warm. I did not get warm until later when the sun came up. We arrived at the building site, and it was on a beautiful hillside with the lights of Durban glittering in two directions. The building site was on a gently sloping hill with a pleasant view. A paved street was lined with concrete foundations and building supplies and storage sheds in place at each housing site. One hundred housing sites were prepared and waiting for the volunteer builders to begin. The site for the two houses sponsored by the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme was at the end of the sloping street.

In a short time cinder block walls were laid, roof supports were prepared and housing shells lined the building areas. Roofs were closed in, inside design and plumbing was installed. Our time at the site came to an end, and we prepared to leave for Johannesburg. Within a few weeks completion crews would come in and finish the work on all of the houses, making them move-in ready. In a few weeks one hundred houses would be built and ready for occupancy!

[Ed. Here the day by day account of the trip to Durban ends as they worked long hours and fell into bed exhausted each night. It would pick up again when the group returned to Johannesburg, but Owen verbally shared a number of anecdotes of their week on the build: his close friend Manny Red Bear becoming

³² Ed. Owen and many others on the trip became enamored of *Castle* South African beer. For a time he was able to order it through an American distributor; but, sadly, it soon disappeared from their lists.

something of a celebrity and being interviewed by reporters and Manny's meeting with Jimmy Carter who called him "Chief;" working with Manny, Rachel and David on their own initiative to build a stairway leading up to the entrance of the house they had worked on; the delight of the young couple who received the house as they were "sung" to the entrance; being called "O-wen" with an emphasis on the "O" by the South African women; the hard work of those who provided meals and refreshment on site; the unfailing good humor of all the workers; and the pride they all felt in the completion of one hundred houses over a period of five days. On Saturday, June 8, they travelled back to Johannesburg to stay at Common Ground, the Methodist Church of South Africa Retreat Center, where they would be lodged for the next five days.]

We returned to Johannesburg where some returned home. Rachel Robinson left to visit her son David at his coffee plantation in Kenya. I departed with a small group of church members for a side trip to Cape Town led by Derick Maregele, who was going home to meet his family. The day after arrival in Johannesburg, we visited the Central Methodist Church where we were greeted by the church choir at the church entrance; and they sang us up a grand staircase to the second floor to a festive reception in our honor. On Monday we drove through Soweto, visited an HIV orphanage, Ivory Park Methodist Church, two homes, and the Vortrekker Monument.

"Encounter at The Vortrekker Monument"³³

The Vortrekker Monument is about thirty km. outside of Johannesburg, nearly to Pretoria. The monument is a squat square obelisk on the highest ground for miles around. The hazy outline of the Johannesburg skyline can be seen in the distance across rolling countryside. The monument honors Dutch settlers of the Cape area who fled British dominance to establish settlements north of the Vaal River in the area now called Transvaal. The Dutch settlers moved north from the Cape in covered wagons reminiscent of the western pioneers in the United States. They moved into Zulu lands, and the Zulu warriors attacked the wagon trains in defense of their homelands. The Zulus won the first battle, but in subsequent battles the Dutch settlers prevailed with overwhelming technology. Zulu warriors with weapons of spears and shields were slaughtered.

Having read this history and knowing that the Vortrekkers were forbears of the architects of apartheid, the Afrikaners, I visited the monument with much reserve. "Where was the monument to honor the valiant Zulu people who fought superior weapons to defend their homeland?" I thought. My reservations were increased when upon entering the monument I saw life-sized sculptures of scenes depicting the trek, including scenes of Zulu slaughter. I now had an idea of what an American Indian would endure when viewing a typical American cowboy movie.

I viewed the historical exhibits which contained artifacts such as wagons, clothing, utensils and maps of the trek. While deep in a subterranean room of the monument viewing wagons and tools, a man approached and asked if I was an American. I

³³ *Ed.* This account was written by Owen for inclusion in a FCCOL church bulletin and is dated July 25, 2002.

replied to the affirmative, and he introduced himself as an Afrikaner (Pieter) and introduced me to his wife (Emma). I was taken by surprise because this was the first person that I met in my eight days in South Africa who admitted to being Afrikaner.

We entered into a spirited discussion. He went directly to the subject of apartheid and said that he was glad that it was over. I asked him if he knew of the atrocities that occurred against Black Africans. He responded that he was a farmer living 50 km. from where we stood and he and his rural neighbors knew only what the government told them. They were "unaware" of harsh measures taken to uphold apartheid. He went on to say that he supported the South African government policy of setting up native homelands where they could maintain their society and rule themselves. I asked him if he supported moving people against their will to the worst land in South Africa that could not support agriculture and provided no livelihood for the people? Did he support breaking up families and households to retain the male labor that was needed but discarding the families to poverty and starvation in the homelands. My voice raised, but calmly I asked if he approved of beatings, shootings, middle of the night arrests in support of apartheid and the homelands policy. I was surprised and touched when he and his wife bowed their heads in real sorrow and he replied, "I am very ashamed of what our government did. We supported the policy of self-governing homelands and separate societies, but we did not know of the brutal oppression." At that moment, I got the idea that this couple sought me out as a way of expatiating their shame and guilt openly. We chatted on; and I had the overwhelming feeling that these were good people who were looking for an opportunity to atone for their shame and guilt. We parted as friends, and perhaps I made a small contribution to the South African program of reconciliation. The trip to the Vortrekker Monument, approached

with a sense of sorrow and apprehension, was turned into a very positive experience by an Afrikaner and his wife.

[Ed. The rest of the week was spent visiting families, attending seminars, seeing museums, and participating in the community service called *Paballo*.] The Central Methodist Church conducted a regular ministry of aid to the homeless in the streets, of which there were many. The ministry was called *Paballo*. Containers of sturdy hot soup were prepared in the church kitchen and loaded into vehicles and driven through the dark, cold streets with volunteers distributing styrofoam bowls full of soup in the dark alleys and storefronts. I tasted the soup and was very pleasantly surprised how hot, rich and flavorful it was. I took two bowls of soup into a stygian dark hallway open to the street. Prone forms lay in rows under newspaper and other detritus. I reached into the darkness until I touched a face or an extended hand took a soup bowl. This scene was repeated up and down the dark, wintery streets until the soup exhausted.

[Ed. On Thursday the group departed for Pilanesberg National Park, where they stayed at the Golden Leopard Resort and took a wildlife tour which Owen later related included a very memorable experience. It seems that they took a late afternoon safari to view the wildlife and at one point during the tour they came across a large elephant standing firmly in the roadway. It would not budge and began to move menacingly towards the open-sided vehicle. Everyone was warned to not even think of taking a photo as a startled elephant could easily push the vehicle over. All held their collective breath as the driver slowly inched the machine toward the elephant, slowly, slowly encouraging the elephant to move backwards. Finally the elephant had had enough and ambled off to the side of the road and into the bush. Now the group had a chilling but exciting tale to tell when they returned home!

On Saturday the travelers returned to Johannesburg, about which Owen made the following descriptive comments:] Johannesburg is surrounded by low hills. There are townships on the hills with nice views. Even Soweto has a good view of the Johannesburg city lights. In the city itself are very crowded streets. I saw fewer than ten Whites when riding around the city, which is a modern looking city similar to any clean American city. It is strange to see crowded urban streets with all Black pedestrians. I have not seen this since the 40's in Harlem. I actually saw more White people in Harlem. Muggings are common, and we must not walk around the city. All homes have fences with razor wire or sharp metal on top. Some walls are electrified.

[Ed. After returning to Common Ground to collect their things, a smaller group of travelers, including Owen, flew on to Cape Town where they would spend an additional week. That evening Owen and Derick visited Derick's brother Denzel and their mother for a cookout where Owen was introduced for the first time to fried snook and pap with gravy, a taste treat which he never forgot. The next morning the group attended a Sunday service in the township of Mitchell's Plain, where Derick presided and Owen introduced the group. Just to cover all bases, he reported that they visited the hotel casino in the evening! On Monday they took the cable car to Table Mountain and visited scenic Hout Bay. Dinner was again at Denzel's house. One of the highlights of the trip took place on Tuesday when the group took the ferry to Robben Island, where they saw Nelson Mandella's cell. On Wednesday they drove to the Cape of Good Hope but arrived after the park was closed. All was not in vain, however, as they drove "through beautiful shoreline towns" and the point was clearly visible. After a last devotional on Thursday morning, they departed for Johannesburg and the connecting flight to New York. An amusing story surfaced after their return to Old Lyme as part of a Sunday sermon by Derick Maregele, who remarked that a

nameless person (at which point he cut his eyes up to Owen who was sitting in the balcony) had miss-set their alarm one night and placed it in their suitcase in the shared Johannesburg barracks. When the alarm went off in the middle of the night, a number of sleepy men frantically went on a search to find the alarm clock and turn it off while Owen slept peacefully through the whole thing, having ear plugs in his ears.]



Owen, Rachel Robinson, and Manny Red Bear in Durban, South Africa at the Jimmy Carter Work Project for Habitat for Humanity, June 2002.

Green Grass, South Dakota

[Ed. The year following his trip to South Africa, Owen joined a group from the First Congregational Church in Old Lyme, including myself and daughter Kirin, on the church's annual partnership visit to the small Lakota community of Green Grass on the Cheyenne River Lakota Sioux Indian Reservation, in the middle of the plains about 150 miles east of Rapid City in South Dakota. Although located in one of the most poverty-stricken areas of the United States, Green Grass is a sacred site, home to the Keeper of the Sacred Buffalo Pipe, Chief Arvol Looking Horse. FCCOL has undertaken these yearly visits since 1985, when a mutually beneficial partnership with the Lakota people was first suggested, and mutual aid and friendship has flourished ever since. Owen had met many of the people of Green Grass on their visits to Old Lyme and had become good friends with Manny Good Bear, who accompanied him on the trip to South Africa, Travis Harden, and the Kasto family, especially Abe, Grace, Winona and Moria Kasto. He had entertained many friends from Green Grass in our home in Old Lyme; but it was his first trip to the reservation, although as Chairman of the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children he had visited Indian reservations in North Dakota and was very friendly with the Lakota former Congressman from South Dakota Ben Reifel who served on the NACEDC with him.

This trip held many memorable experiences for Owen and was the occasion for the *wopila* or thanksgiving ceremony held to commemorate the one-year anniversary of three of our church members being given Lakota names. I have wonderful memories of Owen riding one of the many "wild" horses that roam around

the perimeter of the Green Grass Church, visiting Chief Looking Horse with an offering of tobacco, helping preparation and serving of the *wopila* feast, participating in group discussions, chatting with his Lakota friends during the meals called "feeds," enjoying Indian tacos, making without hesitation the deciding vote on which of two large hand-made drums should be purchased by the church, attending a pow wow on the Standing Rock Reservation in company with Manny and with our visiting minister from South Africa Derick Maregele and his family, being thrilled to learn that a visitor center that we visited in the Badlands was named for his friend Ben Reifel, and climbing to the top of Bear Butte in the Black Hills.]



Clockwise: Owen in the Badlands of South Dakota, wearing his Jimmy Carter Work Project t-shirt. Horseback riding at Green Grass on the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation, South Dakota. Outside the Green Grass UCC Church. With Manny Red Bear preparing to board the bus for the Habitat for Humanity trip to South Africa. 2002.



With sister-in-law Sylvia Rose Hottinger, Old Lyme, Ct. May 2004

The Stroke

[Ed. In September of 2007 Owen experienced a severe hemorrhagic stroke which was pronounced by the E.R. doctor to be "fatal." He was taken by ambulance to St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Ct. , however, where a new stroke center had just been opened, and was operated on to relieve the pressure; and he survived with minimal deficits, "exceeding all expectations." After a week in hospital he was moved to Mt. Sinai Rehab, also in Hartford, where he began the process of relearning how to walk and to eat solid foods. Following a month-long stay he was released to return home, where he took part in out-patient rehab and made steady improvement. One of the first people to visit him at St. Francis was Ned Castner, Minister of Visitation for The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme. The following year, when Ned retired from the ministry, Owen wrote the following tribute to Ned and his wife Wanda for the church bulletin:]

Ned Castner's voice came to me out of the darkness, and I heard this familiar voice that brought me back. In the fall of 2007 I survived a major hemorrhagic stroke which left me in a state of limbo from which it was difficult at first to emerge. My first visitor in the hospital other than family was Ned, who appeared only hours after my release from intensive care. He came at a time when no one else was there, and as his hand came through the drapes surrounding my bed, I felt a deep connection to my past. He was a lifeline to my former life. I shall not forget the wonderful feeling of support to have someone there, someone from the church there at this time. I was fortunate enough to experience the wonderful support that Ned Castner has offered to members of The First Congregational Church in their time of illness and distress. He brings with him a calmness and the love of God. I am but one of the many people fortunate to have had Ned visit at a

critical time. I'll not forget the visits that Ned and Wanda made to me during the weeks I was in the hospital and later at home, bringing the lifeline and the love of God.



Philip, Richard, Rob, Bill, Cathy, Kirin and Owen Peagler, New Milford, CT., c. 2006.

Chapter Nine: Post-Stroke Memories

[Ed. We were given eight more years with Owen, "eight years of grace," before his second, fatal stroke in November 2015. What follows is his recounting of some of the events which took place during those years.]

The Grainger Event³⁴

In February of 2011 English pianist Penelope Thwaites organized a celebratory Grainger event in honor of the 50th anniversary of the death of composer/pianist Percy Grainger. In the months preceding the event, Penny gathered papers about Grainger's life and work from Percy Grainger scholars around the world and edited them into a book entitled *The New Percy Grainger Companion*. Teresa Balough, the foremost Grainger researcher and writer in the world,³⁵ was asked to submit a chapter for the Grainger Companion and to present her work in a speech at the Grainger Event Symposium held at the British Library in London. Terry prepared her presentation and planned our trip for weeks before the event. I looked forward to the trip with some trepidation because of the long flight and several airport changes. My concerns were unwarranted; through Terry's thorough planning the travel to London and on to Scotland to visit dear friends Marjorie and Ronald Stevenson in West Linton was enjoyable and without incident. Terry's presentation at The

³⁴ Ed. Owen accompanied me to London on three occasions, for the first *Grainger Event* in 1998, the book launch of *Comrades in Art* in 2010, and the second *Grainger Event* in 2011.

³⁵ Ed. This is a debatable statement, but it illustrates how supportive Owen was of my work!

Grainger Event was brilliantly prepared and presented. She captured the rapt attention of the audience of Percy Grainger scholars and general public. She ended her talk to energetic and thunderous applause.

At the following reception she was besieged by congratulators and requests to autograph her latest published book, *Comrades in Art: The Correspondence of Ronald Stevenson and Percy Grainger*, and *The New Percy Grainger Companion*. Copies of both books were sold out. The publishers of both volumes were present, and Terry skillfully sought their interest in publishing her planned book, *Distant Dreams, the Correspondence of Burnett Cross and Percy Grainger*, and received encouraging responses. The fine presentation of Percy Grainger compositions was the main highlight of the event, including presentation of my favorite Grainger composition, *The Warriors*, by Penelope Thwaites and John Lavender on piano assisted by the Royal Artillery Band.

Terry escorted me on a tour of The British Museum while we were in London, where we viewed the Rosetta Stone, Roman and Greek antiquities, and items from early English history. On the next day we were guests at a gracious luncheon at the home of Penelope Thwaites in the Golders Green section of London. The events of that week and meeting Terry's friends, Grainger admirers and writers all, and enjoyable interludes with the gregarious Bruce Clunies Ross, Desmond Scott (son of famed composer Cyril Scott) and his gracious wife, Barry Ould, and John Lavender were a wonderful experience. The journey so far seemed to me to move to higher levels of enjoyment, and we had more pleasure to anticipate with our trip to Scotland to spend time with Ronald and Marjorie and their family.



Owen at the Royal Academy of Music, London, 2010.

Townfoot House, West Linton, Peebleshire, Scotland

On the Tuesday following the Grainger Event we made our way to the bus station in London in time to catch the bus for the eight-hour trip to Edinburgh. The thought of the eight-hour bus trip is more daunting than the actuality. Although we were on Highway 68 most of the way, we enjoyed viewing the English and Scottish countryside until we reached Edinburgh after an unexpectedly comfortable and scenic ride. Marjorie Stevenson was waiting to receive us as we stepped off of the bus and drove us about thirty minutes to Townfoot House in West Linton where, after Ronald and I had a "wee dram," she served one of her creatively delicious dinners. I had the feeling that this was the climax of our trip; but we had five more days in Scotland, and the pleasant experiences had barely begun.

Ronald's exciting piano interludes of the music of Busoni and Grainger were the highlight of each day. Our usual discussions about subjects in his extensive library focused on aspects of Paul Robeson's life, prompted by my discovery of a book on his shelf about Robeson. Terry and Marjorie went on outings to Drumelzier in the Tweed Valley, the site of the confluence of two rivers and the purported site of the wizard Merlin's grave. We also visited the botanical gardens, where we all had lunch and viewed the exhibits. We also visited the fascinating bookstore in West Linton and were greeted warmly by the bookstore owner who remembered us from previous visits. We had dinner in our favorite restaurant, The Bake Shop, in West Linton a short walk from Townfoot House. Another day, Ronald, Terry and I took a ramble around the green in West Linton and visited the local church. This was followed by a much longer ramble around West Linton.



Owen enjoys a laugh with Ronald Stevenson in the "Den of Musiquity" at Townfoot House, West Linton, Peebleshire, Scotland.

[Ed. Owen visited pianist/composer and fellow Grainger enthusiast Ronald Stevenson and his wife Marjorie at their home outside Edinburgh in the charming village of West Linton on four occasions: first in 1992 with young Kirin in tow, then again with Kirin when I was editing a book on Ronald's correspondence with Grainger later published and dedicated to Owen and Marjorie, following the book launch in London of that same book, and the final visit at the conclusion of the Grainger Event in 2011. In 2006 he penned the following essay for inclusion in the newsletter of the Ronald Stevenson Society.]

"The Ronald Stevenson Seminar or 'The Fabled Bookshelf'"

I have had the privilege of being comfortably seated in the music room/study at Townfoot House, West Linton, Scotland, engaged in animated discussion with Ronald Stevenson. I compare my discussions with Ronald to in-depth graduate seminars on music, literature, history and the humanities. I cannot play a musical instrument or sing; and, for that matter, I have no background in music. I am not a creator of music, but I am an avid consumer of music.

So how did it come to pass that I had the opportunity to become a friend of one of Scotland's greatest composers, pianists, and scholars? The answer is that I married scholar and author Teresa Balough, who knew Ronald through their mutual devotion to the work of composer/pianist Percy Grainger. I first met Ronald at one of his Grainger recitals and lectures in the United States at the White Plains, New York Public Library, around the corner from

the Percy Grainger house.³⁶ That first meeting developed into several visits to West Linton and several visits by Ronald and Marjorie to our home in Old Lyme, Connecticut. On one visit to us, Ronald gave a rousing performance of his composition *Passacaglia on DSCH* and a lecture for the students and faculty of Eastern Connecticut State University, where Dr. Balough is adjunct professor of music and I was, at the time, Dean of the School of Continuing Education.

My visits to Townfoot House always included the opportunity to sit with Ronald in his study for free-ranging discussions and musical interludes. I sat in a comfortable chair in the small study dominated by a grand piano and bookshelves along two walls crammed with books mostly on music, art, and biography. Music manuscripts lay scattered on most available surfaces, obviously in current use. A picture of Ronald's father was prominently displayed on a lower bookshelf. Ronald sat on the piano bench facing me and would often turn and illustrate a musical example on the piano. I vividly recall a discussion of Percy Grainger's compositions and Grainger's energetic "attack" piano playing style. Ronald turned to the piano and played the complete Grainger composition, *Shepherd's Hey*, from memory with such force, flair and energy that Marjorie and Terry rushed from the kitchen to enjoy the impromptu concert. I thought at the time how Ronald's style must resemble that of Percy Grainger.

³⁶ *Ed.* A personal note: Grainger once wrote that "if you love art with selfless devotion, she will repay you with fourfold interest," and that is certainly true in my case. It was my love of Grainger's music, which I shared with Owen, that moved me to invite Owen to a concert of Grainger music being given by Ronald at the White Plains Public Library in 1985. And it was this concert and my visit with Owen at his home in Willimantic that followed which led to the deepening of our relationship from friendship to love and all the good things, including daughter Kirin, which came from that!

I recall now how topics moved smoothly from music to art to literature to history to biography. Insights and facts came effortlessly from Ronald's memory. "I have a reference to that somewhere here" was a frequent refrain. His fingers would flick along a bookshelf, a relevant volume found, retrieved, and thumbed through to the desired passage. The book would be placed in my lap and the conversation would fluidly continue. We shared conversation with mutual give-and-take, a seminar, not a lecture. Reference books would pile up in my lap as subjects moved smoothly from topic to topic. We would talk of great personages that Ronald admired such as Percy Grainger, Ferruccio Busoni, Walt Whitman and many others.

I remember the topic once turned to Nathaniel Dett, an Afro-American composer, who at one time taught music at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), an historically Black university in Virginia. Ronald is an admirer of Dett and produced several references from the fabled bookshelf. I was particularly interested in Dett because my father, a graduate of Hampton, was probably there during the tenure of Nathaniel Dett. Also, when I was a young child the Hampton Quartet often visited our home in New Milford, Connecticut while on concert tour.

Marjorie's call to lunch or dinner would break the spell; and I would look forward to Ronald's welcome invitation, "Ready for a wee dram?" We then finished a thoroughly enjoyable interlude with the salutes "Slancha?" and "Slancha Va!", then off to one of Marjorie's magnificent meals.³⁷

³⁷ *Ed.* Following Owen's stroke in 2007, Ronald and Marjorie spoke to him by phone; and Ronald performed a selection for him while Marjorie held the phone up to the piano, to Owen's great delight.

Sweden

[Ed. These memoirs would not be complete without mention of Owen's two visits to Sweden, the first in 1998 with Kirin and myself and the second in 2011 with just the two of us, to visit our dear friend Alexandra Ivan. On the first visit we stayed with Alexandra, a preschool teacher and eurythmist Kirin and I had met at an arts conference in Slovenia, in her charming cottage in the woods on the outskirts of Gothenburg. Owen took great pleasure from this visit, enjoying the midnight sun and the midsummer festival, dancing with costumed Swedish nationals around the festival pole, visiting the Skansen Kronan fortress tower and the Tanum rock carvings. In the evenings Owen would read aloud to us outdoors in the lingering twilight from *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* by Selma Lagerlof and tend the midsummer bonfire. An excursion of several days was made to the home of Alexandra's close friends, Gard and Marguerite Koppen and their two daughters, Sonja and Martha, who had a family vacation home overlooking the North Sea near Helsingborg and the crossing into Denmark. Here we picked wild roses to be made into rose oil and the girls persuaded Owen to swim with them in the icy North Sea! En route back to America, we spent an unforgettable afternoon in Iceland, viewing the wonderful rock formations, feasting on Icelandic fish and swimming in the thermal pool called "The Blue Lagoon." The second visit took place following Owen's first stroke in the course of a trip to Scotland. Although it was early spring, it was snowing when Alexandra picked us up from the airport. This time we stayed with her at the home of her mother, for whom she was caring, in Gothenburg and at Owen's request revisited the Skansen that he had such vivid memories of from his first trip to Sweden.]

The French Riviera

[*Ed.* Owen's last overseas trip, in June of 2013, was also made in company with Alexandra, to her family's home on the French Riviera in the seaside town of Les Issambres. Kirin had attended a college friend's wedding in Mougins and met us in Nice for the trip down to Les Issambres. Owen thoroughly enjoyed sitting on the verandah which overlooked a lush garden with the Mediterranean Sea visible perhaps a hundred yards away, a volume of Sherlock Holmes pastiches, his favorite reading material, in hand. Daily trips to the town beach, wonderful meals on the verandah, a trip to Cannes for fireworks on the beach, an evening in Saint Tropez were wonderful experiences which Owen often spoke of after we returned home. He was a wonderful traveling companion and kept us all relaxed and in good spirits. At a layover in the Lisbon airport on the way home, Kirin and I left our bags with Owen while we went in search of refreshments. We returned to find Owen still in his seat but surrounded by airport police! It turned out that they were suspicious of the rather large number of bags piled up next to him, but he calmly awaited our return to sort things out.]



Fishersville, Virginia, Summer 2011.

I'm from New Milford

[Ed. No matter where he traveled or lived, Owen always thought of himself as being a product of New Milford, Connecticut and the wonderful experiences he had known there, as evidenced by the words with which he chose to conclude these memoirs. Among all the achievements and honors which he attained during his lifetime, he always said that his greatest pride was in being inducted into the New Milford High School Hall of Fame.³⁸]

When meeting strangers, a question almost always comes up: "Where are you from?" My answer has always been, "I'm from New Milford, Connecticut." I have always been from New Milford, no matter where I lived, no matter where I was. I met a man at the pool of a motel in Alice Springs, Australia; and he asked the question strangers exchange: "Where are you from?" My response was the usual, "I'm from New Milford, Connecticut." A few days later at the rain forest in Kuranda, we milled around with a crowd of other tourists waiting for amphibious vehicles to view native wild life. Suddenly, a loud voice from the other side of the docks broke the silence, "Hey, New Milford, do you know Bob Ohmen?" I responded in kind, "Everybody in New Milford knows Bob Ohmen!" I was thrilled that someone here in the Australian Outback knew someone in New Milford. Bob Ohmen, an owner of the New Milford Foundry, passed away before I could share the story of his fame.

³⁸ June 1999.



Appendix I

"Reach for the Stars"

Undated Speech for a Negro History Program Sponsored by The Alumni Association of Carver Community Center Port Chester, New York³⁹

I have thought at length about the specific topic that I would discuss here today. When I was asked to speak, my first question was "Must I lecture on Negro history?" For I know that the audience is likely to know as much or more than I do about the subject.

I'll try not to make the mistake of a speaker described by Langston Hughes in his book *Simple Stakes a Claim*. Simple complained after hearing a speaker on Negro history: "He laid our Negro race low. He said we was misbred, misread, and misled and kept us sittin' all afternoon." I have no such plans for you this afternoon. However, I would like to talk for a few minutes about the significance of Negro history in our lives and the lives of our children and attempt to ascertain where the Negro stands at this point in his history.

³⁹ *Ed.* This talk was most likely given in 1964 when he was Chairman of the Youth Incentive Program of the Urban League of Westchester. At this time he was on the Board of Directors of the Urban League of Westchester and the Carver Center for Black Teenagers. During this year he was selected for a White Plains Distinguished Service Award and the New York State Junior Chamber of Commerce's Distinguished Service Award.

The story of the Negro is rich in pageantry, valor, suffering, creativity, pathos, poverty, accomplishment, failure, gallantry, patriotism, and honor. The story of the American Negro spans close to 350 years -- from complete servitude to full (?) citizenship. I do not yet know the whole story, but I do know how important it is that every citizen, both White and Negro, at least know some of the major contributions that Negroes have made to the growth of our country.

I grew up and went to school in a small Connecticut town which had an equally small Negro population. Never until I was late in high school did I ever have another Negro youngster in my class. Each school year, I would wait anxiously with a low gnawing fear for that dreaded announcement that in history class we would discuss the Civil War. The inevitable would always arrive, and alone I would have to relive the humiliation of the Negro slaves. If I had dared, I would have played hooky for 4 to 6 weeks, broken an arm or leg, or caught mononucleosis, anything to escape the often imagined stares of the other children and the syrupy condescending tones of the teacher as we proceeded to relive the "lowly" origins of the Negro in America. The history textbooks described for us the pitiful, ignorant slave who caused a bloody war and stayed on to be a continuing liability to the country. Here and there were injections of a piteous sentiment about the evils of slavery and the benevolent help of some great (White) abolitionists. Perhaps at the end of the chapter the whole story would be dusted with a little sugar about Booker T. Washington who taught Negroes how to make bricks, plow a straight furrow, and otherwise make themselves useful. At no other time during the school year would a topic about Negroes enter the classroom; and except for "Little Black Sambo" and "Old Black Joe," the Negro faded from the curriculum as if he never made a significant contribution to the development of our country.

I am sure that most of you who went to school in a northern state have had similar experiences because this approach to American history is almost universal in our schools. Negro youth in the South is likely to come out with a better background in Negro history because he is likely to attend a segregated school where it is part of the curriculum.

I suffered embarrassment for myself and shame for my race in sitting through those classes, but that is not the great tragedy of the story. The unfortunate thing is that all of us in that class and in thousands of classes like it all over the country were getting a false idea of the importance and value of the Negro to the building of our nation, at first by force, then later by active participation as citizens. Most of the children will never hear of the courage and sacrifice of Crispus Attucks, the Negro patriot and Minuteman and the first American to die in the Revolutionary War, or of the mathematical brilliance of Benjamin Banneker and the contribution that he made to the planning of our nation's capitol, or of Harriet Tubman who alone led thousands of slaves to freedom through her underground railroad, or of Frederick Douglass, thinker, lecturer, editor, diplomat and advisor to President Lincoln, or of the type of slave like Amos Fortune who bought his own freedom then that of his wife and lived to be the leading craftsman and citizen of his small New England town. (Ask any native of Jaffrey, New Hampshire.)

Current history textbooks have not improved at all in their coverage of the Negro. They are in great need of revision. I recently examined two new history textbooks widely used around the country, and in neither did I find more than one reference to a Negro who contributed something positive to our nation's growth. (George Washington Carver) These are inexcusable gaps in the education process today, and I feel that more effort needs to be made to close these gaps. That is the most important significance

of Negro history to me -- a source of pride and an incentive for increased contributions by Negroes to the growth of our country.

Where does the American Negro stand today in the timeline of American history? It is a time that offers more opportunity than was dreamed possible at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation. Today the overwhelming weight of law and conscience (with some well-placed prodding from the NAACP, CORE, and the Freedom Riders) has placed the Negro of today in a position of greater responsibility and opportunity than ever before. We have high government officials, business executives, professional men and women and skilled workers of all varieties. Overseas Negro nations are joining the world community, giving stature to the African diplomat, African culture, and African intellect. The talents of the Negro minority are needed more than ever at this time, but the talents are not yet fully developed and ready to make best advantage of the new opportunities.

There is a growing need in this country for more professional and skilled people, and the need is so great that many of the race barriers are down for those who qualify. This is an opportunity that we cannot miss. The Negro young people have in the palm the opportunity to practically kill racial bias in jobs in the next 10 to 5 years by doing one thing -- utilizing their educational opportunities to the fullest extent and preparing for the future with a profession or skilled trade.

The Urban League of Westchester is aware of the need to interest Negro youth in their abilities, their studies, and their future. At the present time, the League has an active Youth Incentive Program, of which I am Chairman, with active groups in operation in the cities of Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, and White Plains. The program in White Plains is sponsored jointly by the Carver Center and the Urban League. The group of boys and girls meet weekly at the Carver Center and study together for 2 hours.

Math teachers, foreign language teachers, a social worker, the Superintendent of Schools are among the volunteers who come in and do tutoring in the program. The library at the Center is used extensively, and all recreational activities stop during the tutoring study period. Plans are being made for trips to colleges, museums, concerts and other cultural and educational points of interest. Approximately 30 youngsters attend each week on their own. The YIP program hopes, is expected, to help youngsters in the following ways:

1. achieve their best in school
2. broaden their background of cultural experiences
3. raise their level of aspiration re education and occupation.

I would like to ask those of you interested in young people these questions:

Is there a need for such a program here?

Are there those among you willing to help in a YIP program?

Are there library facilities and room for such a program at this Carver center?

If the answers to these are "yes," then you have an opportunity to make an even greater contribution to the young people in Port Chester.

This, then, is my major concern about Negro history -- the history that we are about to write. It will be a great story if the Negro youngster of today can be encouraged and helped to utilize the full scope of his potential and to reach for the stars, for in this space age they are at his fingertips. The only thing he has to do is to stretch -- and the stars are his.

Appendix II

The Quest for Excellence⁴⁰

Today I am going to take the privilege of talking to you about excellence. Excellence is the hope of the human condition. All men strive for excellence in their family life, in their work, in their play, or they are crumbled by not striving for it. We seek excellence in the fit of our clothes, in the restaurant we eat at regularly, and on the charts of hit records. We seek to race to the moon first, get the most touchdowns, or cook the finest meatloaf. Each year the ritual is played out where young people review the annual announcement of motor cars with the new gadgets and designs -- seeking excellence. We select valedictorians and summa cum lauds, and award other forms of excellent performances. Micromini-electronics is an outgrowth of that striving for quality and success in the marketplace. Individualized education is an attempt by educators to provide quality and personalized education to each child. For those of us gathered here today, excellence is quality education provided in an efficient delivery system.

The motivation we try to capture in our students is really the quest for excellence rooted in their souls waiting to be awakened by the magic we call teaching. Humans need this release of energy of excellence and are limited to a two-dimensional existence if it is stifled.

⁴⁰ A speech delivered for CACE, the California Association for Compensatory Education, in Los Angeles, December 3, 1977 while he was Chairman of the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children.

Excellence is a condition of becoming, a job never finished, a reason to live, and a reason to be. It is the definition of the human spirit and can be the architect of the human condition. The living world exhibits excellence in the instinctive formation of a spider web or in the lure of the sphere from the smallest microbiological form to enormous galaxial rotations.

The pursuit of excellence underlies human intellectual life -
- a gift not reserved to advantaged children or to ourselves. Intellectual inquiry occurs spontaneously at birth and continues through the wonderment of the toddler years. By the time an individual enters first grade, systematic and administratively feasible teaching stuns this quality and often kills it by the fourth grade. The few with the stamina to resist being categorized seek quality and excellence despite us and not because of us here in this room.

That is why I came to California to talk with you about excellence. That is why I wish to examine with you an underlying premise of the C.A.C.E. conference which excites me -- This is the first attempt I have seen nationwide by a group of educators to interpret the basic skills movement in terms of quality education.

None of us here would challenge the need for our students who bear distinctive learning styles to acquire the primary tools of education -- reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. But we have allowed cognitive skills gains to become an end in itself and rote performance on standardized tests to indicate genuine learning. Rote performance on standardized tests indicates one thing to me -
- that a youngster has learned test-taking skills -- another basic tool of learning and of adult life.

Intellectual inquiry is the foundation of problem solving, of empirical study, and of survival skills. No one who has faced a drippy faucet, bread that won't rise, or a recalcitrant child can dispute the practical need for intellectual skills. Yet we have allowed the back to basics movement to harness the energy of the

nation behind a superficial backdrop, and have permitted a mediocre and mundane program to go forth in the classroom. Rote learning is dissatisfying to teachers and boring to children. Rote learning is measurable in grade equivalent scores.

We have allowed an atmosphere to settle which fogs our standards and restricts creativity as a second-class learning activity. We have reduced our expectations and frozen the soul of our children to a state of suspended animation. Fortunately, we still can provide the warmth of creativity to enliven the current crop of youngsters if we have the common will to do so.

Rote learning and drill are not the only way to teach or to learn basic skills. Rote learning and drill are not necessarily the best way to teach basic skills. What we are all seeking are the most effective means to the same end -- basic skills attainment and quality education. "Channeling academics through creative experiences" gives the necessary practical and tactile reinforcements which heighten the attainment objectives.

Cooking classes in preschools and early elementary grades illustrate counting, enumeration and fractions. It also indicates that time must elapse, that sequences are important, and that physical changes take place and can be controlled.

We have seen Title I music programs demonstrate that the route to basic skills gains is best achieved through these nontraditional approaches rather than through standard remedial techniques.

The Council has evidence that the contrived head-to-head confrontation between the humanities and basics movements is misleading. We want our children to receive the substance of the basics, but we also can do a better job of delivering that substance with a little pizzazz. The flair of using creative experiences -- crafts for example -- is an exciting way to teach and enhance the basics, but also teaches necessary survival skills.

I recently had the opportunity to review a personnel document which lists evaluative criteria for worker performance. These are the items listed:

- _____Motivation
- _____Flexibility (Acceptance to Change)
- _____Judgment
- _____Dependability
- _____Resourcefulness
- _____Ability to Work under Pressure
- _____Tact and Diplomacy
- _____Sense of Quality of Work
- _____Pride in Product

Certainly an applicant needed to read, 'rite, and do 'rithmetic to get the job. But what did they have to do to keep it or even to receive a promotion? And how did their elementary and secondary education provide the foundation for their survival after placement?

I object to the notion that sports and the sciences, humanities and the arts are frills in education. During the severe re-examination of school budgets we retreat too quickly from the genuine questioning of interested citizens. In fact, the sciences and the arts, sports and humanities may be the best route to the skills the community seeks for its children to have. We allow the polarization of the concept of education to basic education and frill education. And if we do not accept the leadership to clarify the role of the other routes to successful attainment, the community will not provide the resources for it and our children will have a basically inadequate and stultifying education. They might learn how to read, however. We have not provided other creative budget cutting alternatives and have allowed public schools to become a reservoir of disadvantaged children while those who can afford to do so provide enrichment through after school activities or withdraw their children entirely from the standard public fare in

order to enroll them into high quality private schools -- with all the so-called frills.

Finally, let me reinforce the notion that I am not against the basic skills movement when it wants to see accountability and improvement in cognitive skills gains, but I am seriously disturbed to see the basics become an end in themselves at the price of our nation's children's creative spirit. I am concerned to see us sacrifice quality education and call the remains "education." But most of all, I am deeply concerned to see us ignore the natural drive towards excellence which exists in us all. Those children who are taught as disadvantaged children are taught with a limited perspective. We expect limited attainment and permit it. We expect limited goals and permit it. We are even excited by limited attainment because it is more than we expected in our private dreams for disadvantaged children.

Disadvantaged children like *Star Wars* in the same way that gifted children do. Disadvantaged children want to be wealthy, have two cars and live in fine homes. Disadvantaged children want real jobs after the school years are accomplished. Disadvantaged children do not want a disadvantaged education, and we are giving it to them when we limit our style and expectations for them. But for them we are satisfied to call creative approaches and nontraditional routes to cognitive skills attainment -- frills.

For them we are satisfied to increase teacher-student ratios with local funds and let the Feds take care of as many as they will for the few years that federal funds will do the job. Today it serves 57% of elementary school students and 1% secondary school students, with a short infusion each week of remedial isolation and categorization. And we are proud of that, because test scores are going up. Some school districts are seeing greater test score improvement when they utilize the creative approaches - but there is fear about how federal audits will go; so generally, the time has come to redefine compensatory education.

I came to California to talk with you about excellence, and now it is time to remind you about courage. It takes leadership and courage to capture the spirit of the "fad" movement -- back-to-basics-- and to flesh it out in the bright colors of creativity. With every generation has come its political educational movement, whether it is John Dewey or Sputnik or Back to Basics, we seek a banner to describe and define our activities about children. But quality and excellence do not go out of style with the rising and lowering of hemlines. Quality and excellence is what we have to champion for education of disadvantaged children whether we are their biological parents or the responsible persons who are given the day-to-day privilege of sharing education with them by their biological parents; together we have to remind the community at large how important the whole of education is for our children.

As the balance of ages within our population shifts to a larger percentage of older persons and persons without children in school, the disruption experienced by the educational system is at least as great as an earthquake along this famous California geological compensatory education fault we're sitting on -- a new minority competing for educational dollars in a community with shifting priorities. We cannot afford to split among ourselves because together we are still too few to make a majority.

Infusing quality into instruction of disadvantaged children cannot be allowed to be a division issue in the compensatory education movement. We also must include the new majority in educational activities. I am reminded of the Edgar Lee Masters poem "Circle."

We can and have begun to circle in the older student in traditional and nontraditional learning experiences, reinforcing the value and need over the fullest life of learning and education. We have the power to circle in the community through our libraries and museums, planetariums and galleries and, if we wished it, could provide the trappings of formal education to participants

such as certificates of completion. Without including the wider population in educational activities, we will continue to see the educational enterprise suffer from declining enrollment and lack of broad community support.

Declining enrollment hurts our children by automatically reducing the number of parents and other persons interested in children from being involved in the process. Declining enrollment is more than the result of population statistics -- it is the result of unimaginative organizational responses by the LEA⁴¹ limiting the age groups attending daytime and nighttime elementary and secondary school. We should learn from the experience of higher education and seek to incorporate older students and part-time students in the classroom. If the decline continues, it is our limited response which was inadequate to meet the need and the challenge facing education in this generation.

In conclusion, I have tried to present a case for the melding of the back to basics movement with creative experiences in such a way that you would see as I do that they are an integral part of each other. Today I shared with you some of the options left to us as those primarily concerned about quality education. And finally, I tried to show you my view that the pursuit of excellence is not exercise limited to a few and that disadvantaged children are getting more hours of remedial instruction, more materials and more teachers, but less quality education. Thank you.

⁴¹ Local Educational Agencies

Appendix III

"Parents Awakening for the Future" Speech Delivered for the National Coalition of Title I Parents October 1, 1976⁴²

Good evening. My talk tonight is about one aspect of power -- parent power. Title I parents have grown in knowledge and confidence since the first national parents conference called by the National Advisory Council in 1973. At that time, Title I parents displayed a deep sense of frustration because of a deep sense of powerlessness in implementing their role as partners and advisors in the education of their children. At the first meeting of parents some of that pent up frustration was directed at members of the National Advisory Council -- and we understand why. That was the first national forum where parents could ventilate their negative experiences with Title I.

So--although the National Advisory Council was the first agency to meet parents, our relationship did not start out all sweetness and light. Perhaps some of the parents at the meeting did not understand the role of the National Advisory Council and expected too much from us -- and perhaps some of us on the Council were unaware of the widespread negative experiences that parents were having with the Title I program. The differences between us at that time were insignificant compared to the

37 *Ed.* This speech was delivered as Chairman of the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children to the 1976 Conference of The National Coalition of Title I Parents. In it he brings together two of the main themes of his professional career: the importance of continuing adult education and the moral integrity for everyone to become involved in politics by exercising their right to vote.

positive results--which included introduction for the first time of some of the Title I parents from around the country who worked together to begin what is now the National Coalition of Title I Parents.

Parents -- you have come a long way in three years. Sure, you still have many battles to fight -- you will win some -- and you will lose some. As of today, October 1, 1976, you are united in a national organization that is growing stronger daily; parental involvement is mandated by federal law; as individuals you are far more knowledgeable of your rights as Title I parents and more knowledgeable of the Title I law and regulations; and more knowledgeable of your overall responsibilities for the education of your children.

But that is where you are today -- where do you go from here? Well, I am going to take the liberty of making just two suggestions for those next steps -- as priorities for strengthening the influence of parents in the schools and the community.

QUESTION -- If education is the key to your children's future, is it not also the key to your own future as a person and as a parent?

I am suggesting that the knowledge that you have gained participating in PACs [Parent Advisory Councils] and as volunteers and aides in the schools may well be the basis for continuing your own personal development and education. There are new trends in colleges and universities that permit the granting of credit toward a degree for "life experience" - that doesn't mean credit for having a baby or doing the housework - but it could mean credit for membership on a PAC, volunteering or tutoring in the classroom or working as a teacher's aide.

So, I am saying that as you gain the confidence and the knowledge to run a national conference, chair a PAC, decipher federal guidelines, speak before groups, and many other skills -- perhaps one of your priorities -- REGARDLESS OF AGE -- should

be to use this knowledge as the basis for continuing your own education.

Priority # 2 that I am suggesting deals with an aspect of power. Briefly let me sketch the obvious Title I parents power base. First, mandated school level PACs -- 2nd, mandated district level PACs -- 3rd, in thirty-three states, state-wide PACs -- and, 4th, the National Coalition of Title I Parents. Your organizational structure from the school level to the national level is a lobbyist's dream. I predict that with unity up and down the line, Title I parents will have equal or more influence in education than the PTA, the NEA, School Administrators, and the United Federation of Teachers.

But in order to have that kind of power there must be a recognition that any demands that you make as parents will require a political decision somewhere along the line. I.e.: more money for Title I involves Congress -- poor administration of Title I or state problems involves the state Commissioner of Education which involves the Governor or the Legislature. SCRATCH THE SURFACE OF ANY OF YOUR PROBLEMS AND SOMEWHERE BELOW THE SURFACE YOU WILL FIND THAT POLITICS ARE INVOLVED. THEREFORE, PRIORITY #2 SHOULD BE GET INVOLVED IN POLITICS -- NOT THE PACS OR THE NATIONAL COALITION -- BUT AS INDIVIDUALS. You well know that the main basis of influence in politics is votes, not who makes the most noise. If all the parents in every PAC in every school district in the United States were a registered voter with a pattern of voting for their friends and against their enemies, many of the complaints that we have heard in our workshop the past two days would be unnecessary. Your demands on a politician at any level fall on deaf ears unless they are backed up by the threat of some voter retaliation.

You don't have to answer to anyone but yourself but: How many parents in this room can say that they are not registered? How many are registered but do not vote?

Those who say "I am not registered" or "I do not vote" are the people who will prevent Title I parents from having the power and influence that you wish and deserve. Which party? Who should you vote for? That is not as important as being a voting threat to those who make decisions about the education of your children and every other aspect of your lives.

I URGE THE NATIONAL COALITION TO THIS NUMBER ONE PRIORITY IN THE COMING YEAR!

**Statement of Chairman Owen F. Peagler
of The National Advisory Council on the Education
of Disadvantaged Children
before the House Subcommittee on Elementary,
Secondary and Vocational Education
October 26, 1977**

Title I is an effective strategy to reduce educational disadvantage. It has increased the rate of learning among students for whom traditional approaches were ineffective. Title I eligible students who are not served typically attain seven (7) months for each year of instruction, slipping further and further behind their peers. Title I participants achieve at least a year for each year of instruction and sometimes achieve one and one-half (1-1/2) to two (2) years in a school year as a result of intensive instruction provided by Title I funds.

These gains are further dramatized by the fact that nationally, our students' performance has worsened on standardized tests and they have not performed well on the National Assessment for Educational Progress. For Title I students we are seeing a trend which reverses the national pattern, and it is for this reason that the NACEDC⁴³ recommends reauthorization of this successful program.

Even though Title I has become part of the bureaucracy in local school districts, State Educational Agencies, and among constituents and teacher organizations, the Council's view that Title I be retained has not been stimulated by this institutionalization of the program. Title I is viewed as part of the answer to the public outcry against the current educational system, the high rate of youth unemployment, and the rate of dropouts

⁴³ National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children

from secondary schools. The successes of Title I could be available to the rest of the presently eligible population only if additional appropriations are made. With the additional funds and ongoing successes, the Congress and the nation would see a significant change in the performance of our students, especially in the basic skills.

Title I's success has been accomplished by reducing class size and giving additional attention and instructional time to educationally disadvantaged students. This federal educational program has added structure, improved fiscal and plant management, and coordination with other community-funded resources which serve youngsters. Title I has defined parental involvement and assisted in the training of parents to work as genuine partners with staff in behalf of their children. Only five percent of the total allocations for the program have been used for auxiliary services, and then after all other resources have been exhausted. When Title I guidelines, regulations, statutes and spirit are prevailing in a local educational agency the successful pattern of delivery exists. Better technical assistance and increased compliance activities can maximize the positive aspects of Title I. But only more money channeled into this program will bring its benefits to the remainder of eligible children.

The National Institute of Education's Study of Compensatory Education states that 34 percent of eligible children and 99 percent of secondary school eligible youngsters are not served. The NACEDC 1977 Annual Report to the Congress also underscores the need for secondary school compensatory education. In addition to raising the issues of sustaining effects of compensatory education the NACEDC found that adolescent youngsters are not receiving programs tailored to meet their special needs because funds are not available to do so. The Council's 1976 Annual Report discussed the importance of providing educational services to preschool children during the

early years which would prevent much of the disadvantage in the later years. Title I could play this preventative role for children aged three thru five, but local educational agencies are not funded to effectively provide these crucial services. Since the formula count of children begins with children five years old, there is little incentive for LEAs⁴⁴ to provide Title I programs to preschool children. The NACEDC recommends that Title I be made available to the other 34 percent of eligible elementary and secondary school students and to nonpublic school students and preschool children living in target attendance areas.

The most significant improvement that can be made is to increase the level of funding. In 1965 dollars, there has been no real increase in the level of funding for services, although appropriations seemed to have dramatically increased. In considering reauthorization we are looking at a program which has a significant impact on a national concern and is proven to be effective. Therefore, Title I should be implemented on more than an experimental basis.

The pattern of delivering Title I with requirements for comparability and maintenance of effort, allowing the flexible program strategies which successfully raise basic skills attainment, focuses additional local resources and state supplements on improving the basic program. The ability to seed change and focus attention on improved learning strategies is unparalleled among other federal educational programs. The Council has seen evidence that school districts convert programs which are successful for Title I children to district-wide implementation with local funds, allowing for maximal use of Title I as an extra again.

If we are to continue to reap the successes of Title I and maintain services we now deliver to eligible children, the key for

⁴⁴ Local Educational Agencies

Title I in 1977 is full funding, improved technical assistance and tighter compliance procedures.

The other area which should be considered is the renewal of Part C of Title I. Suggestions have been made to revitalize Part C of Impact Aid and place it in ESEA⁴⁵, Title I so that education of disadvantaged children living in federal subsidized housing would be coordinated with the Act. Other suggestions have been discussed which would place in Part C a program which gives additional funds to districts with 5,000 or more poor children, in order to favor urban districts. Still others have suggested using Part C for a program serving rural needs, especially in the auxiliary services (i.e., health, counseling, etc.) so critical in rural areas. The Rural Education Report of the council released last month points out the problems encountered by rural families in attempting to obtain special health services. Many cases of educational disadvantage among the children of these regions can be directly traced to hearing, speech or other physical disabilities which have impaired the child's ability to learn. The Council believes that educational disadvantage can be significantly reduced for such children through preventative and maintenance health services.

The Council visited many preschool and early grade Title I programs throughout the southeastern parts of the country and Appalachia, and noted from discussions with program administrators and teachers that health maintenance services are the most necessary, most expensive and most difficult to obtain. They must not only treat the child's disabilities, but must work with the parents as well to reduce the likelihood of further developmental disorders.

⁴⁵ Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Many of these auxiliary services needs are still unanswered, and evidence suggests that these unsolved issues contribute to high rates of educational disadvantage.

The NACEDC recommends that Part C be designated as a set-aside to provide extra resources to areas which are characterized by high unemployment rates and economic depression, in both urban and rural settings. (Mr. Chairman, we have provided a preliminary copy of the Rural Report to your Committee staff and will forward to all members as final printing is completed. We expect to issue this report to you before you conclude your scheduled hearings for the year.)

STATE ADMINISTRATION

The 1977 Legislative Report of the Council recommends that the one percent ceiling on state administrative costs be raised. Existing monitoring and technical assistance efforts available to local districts have been irregular at the state, regional and federal levels, resulting in many improperly administered or less effective local services.

State educational agencies are responsible for the administration of Title I programs implemented at their local district levels and the Council agrees with this intended recognition of states as the most effective vehicle for providing local technical assistance needs and compliance assurance. However, if we are to expect states to perform their legal functions, we must provide them the resources to do so, and define a pattern of state administration which has been determined as most effective. The Council believes state administration can become an effective mechanism with additional financial resources and administrative staff to perform on-site assistance to local school districts.

Federal officials must remain available for interaction at the state and local levels, however, to provide proper appeal

procedures and to reduce the likelihood of excessive costs due to unresolved intrastate issues. An example of the costs which accrue when states cannot resolve a problem intrastate is evident in the precedent setting bypass cases for the nonpublic schools. Resolved through elaborate administrative procedures established by the U.S. Office of Education subsequent to the Education Amendments of 1974, administration of services to the nonpublic schools was contracted out for administration by an agency other than the local educational agency. The cost proportion of the contract for administration is significantly higher than the costs of state administration.

The NACEDC recognizes the value of some past evaluations of Title I, but recommends that it is no longer necessary to mount large-scale national evaluations. Recent U.S. Office of Education studies have resulted in implementation of improvements in state evaluations, and have established ten (10) technical assistance centers. This outreach effort now makes it possible to realistically expect that states and regional offices will be better prepared to fulfill their function to maintain data on Title I participants. This data could be expanded into longitudinal studies of students' performance.

State compensatory education programs are diverse as to the population served and as to their administrative relationship to ESEA Title I. In the Council's 1972 Annual Report the incidence of this relationship was described for the first time. Thirteen states still offer additional services to educationally disadvantaged children. Two states contribute resources which approximate the federal share. Considering the fact that so many eligible children are still not being provided any extra services, the NACEDC recommends that state compensatory education programs, if they are to be excluded from the comparability computation, must serve economically and educationally disadvantaged children. The NACEDC points out that although funds from federal sources may

be used to serve eligible children enrolled in private schools, constitutionality questions may arise in the use of state funds for nonpublic school eligibles in some states. Caution should be exercised to note whether state compensatory education programs are devised as a means to purposely avoid serving eligible children enrolled in nonpublic schools. The performance of the nonpublic school with Title I children is exemplary, and it would, therefore, be remiss to encourage a policy which would force them to exclude Title I children from services.

Through its studies, site visits and reports, the Council has determined Title I to be effective. The next logical step is to increase the funding for the Act so that the remaining Title I eligibles be given the same opportunity for educational growth and development.

Refinements in the Title I statute are necessary in order to carry out the objectives set forth by Congress. The refinements are of an administrative and funding nature, with a few programmatic concerns. However, the NACEDC suggests that it is important to reinforce the underlying premise of Title I which is targeted to economically deprived attendance areas and to the educationally disadvantaged who attend school in those areas. The NACEDC recommends retaining the dual criteria of economic and educational disadvantage as the foundation of the program. Discussion regarding the wisdom of focusing on children living in areas with high concentration of poor families has resulted in the Council reexamining this issue closely.

The Council has found the underlying premise of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to be valid. Although it would be desirable to serve all educationally disadvantaged children with federal resources, such a program should not be undertaken until the children currently eligible are being served.

Ideally, all children should have the educational foundations necessary for them to constructively accept adult

responsibility. The financial crunch experienced by local school districts makes it difficult to provide all the services necessary. It can nevertheless be expected that effective patterns of instruction and administration can operate in a cost effective manner.

States have been pressured by parents, and other citizens, to develop accountability models in basic skills and in minimum competencies. Approximately 30 states have initiated some activity in this regard and the graduating class of 1981 will have been exposed to a considerable amount of testing and performances to assure the value and validity of the high school diploma. Considering that in 1976, more than 64 percent of students entering high school graduated whereas in 1960 only 41 percent completed high school; this approach will reach a widely representative majority of our students.

Through state legislation and through subsequent court decisions expected over the next five years, state responsibility and local responsibility for the proficiency of graduates will be articulated and redefined. State initiative in this regard has already defined the remedial work associated with the needs of children who do not pass the competency requirements as a State responsibility to be funded with state and local resources. The bottom line is that maintenance of effort provisions will assure that states and locals continue to fund minimum competency policies and programs and, in fact, guarantee that educationally disadvantaged students who are not poor will receive remedial work and extra attention in the basic skills. The costs, however, will not need to be borne by Title I. Caution needs to be exercised that this movement does not become a movement which lessens quality. With the trend of moving toward minimum requirements without lessening the quality of education, the NACEDC finds even stronger reasons today than twelve years ago, to maintain the dual eligibility requirement.

ADVANCE FUNDING

Advance funding for Title I, although improved in the Amendments of 1974, is still not a reality. Local school budgets are set far in advance of final appropriations for federal programs, and teacher contracts awarded at least six months prior to certainty about federal resource levels. Therefore, the NACEDC recommends that Congress appropriate funds for Title I one full year in advance of the applicable school year, so that LEAs can more properly coordinate and plan effective use of Title I to supplement local programs.

BASIC SKILLS

The NACEDC has experienced during site visits and noted in recent reports that Title I resources have been concentrated at the local level on basic skills. The Council has previously supported this concentration of funds and recommended in its 1977 Legislative Report that the stated objective of Title I should be to raise the child's level of achievement in reading, mathematics and language arts. Non-instructional Title I services which are not designed to raise educational attainment dilute the priority which must be placed on the basic skills.

The Council would recommend a mandated concentration on basic skills only to 80% of total local expenditures. Local districts should have some flexibility to expend, when necessary for program improvement, a small remaining percentage of funds for training parents, teachers or administrators; and this should be an ongoing, though limited, area of program concern in planning effective service delivery.

The Council also suggests that many diverse instructional routes are available which generate increased levels of basic skills attainment among Title I students. The criteria for effectiveness of

instruction should be student performance being raised significantly and more effectively in the basic skills. For example, the Council has seen music programs which, when evaluated, double the performance with students in standard remedial programs, and quadruple the performance of students who are eligible to participate in Title I but who, for lack of funds, were not treated. This program serves children at a cost of \$78 per student, whereas others which are more traditional cost from \$193-350 per student.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parent involvement should be strengthened to include parents of all eligible children on the District-wide Parent Advisory Council and on the target school advisory council. This would replace the current regulation requiring inclusion of parents of participating children.

Concerns of the stakeholders are operating on parent advisory councils, the Council finds, and the stakeholders on PAVs are parents of elementary school students. Although programs are legal if they serve a target population of preschool or adolescent youngsters, as presently constituted PACs do not have it in their interest to approve such a program, since it would dilute the services to Title I children now being served. With increases in the funding level, it is consistent to expect that all parents of all eligible children would serve on the PAVC. Council site visits have witnessed exemplary preschool programs cut back, when the Title I allocation was reduced during the formula change. Our point is, there was no representation from the preschool parents on the PAC when the decision was made.

An Achilles heel for parent involvement is the degree of state authority over the program. Every other aspect of Title I is regulated at the federal level, except parent involvement. The

NACEDC has found that the complaint procedure breaks down for cases on parent activity because the regulatory responsibility is inconsistent with the rest of Title I. State regulations often conflict with the federal statute, which makes the only resolution possible expensive, tedious, and time consuming. This is an unnecessary expense to parents and to the Federal Government. The NACEDC recommends that the legislation be changed to make federal and state regulations more consistent with one another.

The ten regional technical assistance centers developed by the USOE⁴⁶ Office of Program Planning and Evaluation, have potential for generating valuable technical assistance to states and LEAs regarding Title I. However, the NACEDC found that the present plan does not provide for technical assistance to District-wide Parent Advisory Committees. With the mandated involvement of PACs in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of Title I, it would be consistent with encouraging a constructive working relationship to have the resources available through these centers also available to the PACs. The NACEDC recommends that technical assistance be available to PACs and their members through the ten regional technical assistance centers.

DATA COLLECTION REQUIREMENTS

Data collection requirements should be simplified to the extent that program integrity is retained and unnecessary paperwork is eliminated. The NACEDC has determined that opportunities exist in Title I to reduce paperwork without interfering with the implementation of the Act. Reduced evaluations of a national scale, centralizing data collection to the National Center for Educational Statistics, requiring a full

⁴⁶ U.S. Office of Education

application every five years, with amendments only sent forward for approval, and data requirements adjusted for the size of the LEA are effective procedures for reduction of paperwork. Title I funds are distributed to 82% of the nation's school districts. More than 85% of these school districts enroll less than 5,000 students; therefore, data requirements which are appropriate for large districts, or for districts in which the Federal Government has a special interest, are often too cumbersome, inappropriate and unnecessary for most districts receiving Title I. Congress can relieve these hardships by amending Title I to address appropriately these more efficient procedures.

STATE PROGRAMS

States must be held accountable for projects they approve, and should be responsible for repayment of Title I audit exceptions after the audit is resolved, if the state approved the application. Funds which are scheduled to be returned to the U.S. Treasury as a result of audit exceptions are funds which did not target properly to educationally disadvantaged children. The NACEDC recommends that an amendment allow repayments required by an audit resolution be spent on Title I eligible children in the district involved.

State Agency Programs for migrant children, neglected and delinquent children, and for handicapped children must be maintained at the 100% level off the top of the Title I appropriation. The federal responsibility is clear for this group of children with special needs. Title I should mandate parent involvement and compliance with Title I program goals in State Agency Operated Programs.

MAINSTREAMING

The Council believes that either pullout or mainstream instruction can be the most effective instructional technique for raising the basic skills attainment by Title I children, depending upon the nature of the instruction and the characteristics of the students. In planning service delivery styles, the Council would recommend that this overriding factor in choice of instructional setting be a technique which is the "most effective." within the confines of the law.

Hesitancy to implement the "most effective" technique may develop among administrators with misconceptions or unnecessary concern over compliance with the supplementary program requirement of Title I law. The Office of Education and the National Institute of Education are aware of mainstream learning systems which legally deliver more effective instruction. Therefore, the Council recommends that USOE develop a technical assistance manual which outlines those legal and effective practices which are possible for Title I services.

The NACEDC recommends that mainstreaming be used where educationally advantageous.

NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS

Service to eligible children enrolled in the nonpublic schools has been improved through the possibility of implementing the bypass authorized by the Amendments of 1974. However, lengthy and cumbersome administrative procedures undercut the implementation of the bypass, and add considerable cost and paperwork. The participation of the Council in the Barrera Case which was required by the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, has given the Council special insight into the problems associated with delivering programs to eligible children enrolled in the nonpublic

schools. The Council recommends that direction be given by the Congress to USOE to revise its regulations for the bypass so that costs can be reduced by streamlining administrative procedures, and program services can be delivered to students.

LOWERING THE AGE OF ELIGIBILITY TO THREE

Preschool programs are now permitted with Title I, but the preschool population is not counted in the formula of eligibles. The NACEDC recommends lowering the age of eligibility for count to 3 years. This should provide an incentive to districts to serve preschool children in target attendance areas. Many districts have programs for some preschool children out of local resources, and this recommendation is designed to provide similar services for Title I children. The Council appreciates your consideration of this recommendation which is consistent with the recommendations of our 1976 Annual Report, but has asked that I point out, that this provision does not totally satisfy the council's concerns regarding the provision of services to preschool children from federal sources.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

The Council requests that this subcommittee give attention to parent education and training programs with a line item set aside in the Special Projects section of the Act. Programs should begin as early as the elementary schools, and continue; coordination should be given with Adult Education and training courses; specific attention for Title I parent advisory council training is also necessary.

In conclusion, the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children (NACEDC) has determined Title I to be an effective program which is critically underfunded. In 1965 this Committee designated the children who are eligible to receive services under Title I. Yet many of them are still not served due to lack of funds.

Title I is successful and the program is effective. It is now necessary for Congress to appropriate sufficient funds to fully serve the group which they have identified as both economically and educationally disadvantaged, before considering adding the remainder of low achievers to the eligible group.

Finally, the Council has attached for your reference a copy of the 1977 Report on Legislation and a current Statistical Appendix. The Council appreciates the opportunity to share these findings with you, and is available to provide additional materials as you require them during the coming months of review of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

**Remarks Delivered to the Massachusetts State
Title I Conference⁴⁷
April 30, 1979
Hyannis, Massachusetts**

I recently addressed the California Association for Compensatory Education for about the third time. After the speech a gushing matron grabbed my arm and said, "Mr. Peagler, I just want you to know that every speech that you give is better than the next one!" There was also the time that I asked one of the Council staff members what he thought of my speech and he replied by saying he was reminded of a little boy whose teacher assigned a brief essay on the subject of matrimony. The boy's essay read as follows: "The Christian religion allows a man to have only one wife. This system is called monotony."

No matter how hard I try to be an educator, cheerfulness keeps creeping in.

Those of us present today have probably witnessed many of the academic gains made by ESEA, Title I services.⁴⁸ You are probably as much aware as we are that despite Title I and our best individual efforts, many students still demonstrate their inability to

⁴⁷ *Ed.* In this formal address a detailed description and assessment of the work of the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children, of which he was still Chairman, was given. His talk is interspersed with humor and a questioning of the desirability of federal and state funds being spent in endless studies and reports rather than on sponsoring concrete educational programs for children.

⁴⁸ *Ed.* The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, of which Title I was a part, was originally passed in 1965 and reauthorized by President Obama as the Every Student Succeeds Act in December 2015. ESEA is committed to equal opportunity for all students. Title I provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers of low income students.

achieve successfully in this society. I am sure we all agree that as educators we know a great deal more about program effectiveness that we did fourteen years ago when Title I began. Even though effective Title I programs vary greatly from school district to school district, clearly, the inability of local school districts to work successfully with low-achieving students is a basic ingredient in assessment of school inadequacy. On the other hand, it must be a central component of any attempt to make programs more effective. An effective compensatory education program, then, is one which provides disadvantaged students with additional help in the basic skills. Effectiveness can be measured favorably or unfavorably depending upon who conducts the evaluation. Who then shall judge the overall impact of Title I? Who shall judge the effectiveness of the \$26 billion spent for Title I since 1965. When we are directly involved with providing instructional or administrative functions of an educational program, our views may become somewhat overly critical or overly protective. This is a part of human nature, affecting everyone from the newly hired Title I aide through the Commissioner of Education and even the Congress itself. It is for this reason that founders of ESEA, Title I and those who have periodically reauthorized its legislative provision, specifically established the National Advisory Council. The membership of this group consist of citizens from outside the federal, state or local educational agencies.

The Council has been charged with reviewing Title I's administration and operation, and making constructive recommendations to the President and the Congress concerning improvements of this program.

My colleagues are from various geographical locations and bring to the Council a wide diversity of occupations, backgrounds, special interests and experiences. This group of citizens have nothing personal to gain or lose whether it be praise of the program's accomplishments or criticism of its failures. During the

course of my involvement, the Council has publicly noted, not only positive aspects but also some deficiencies in almost every area of the program. Although some may criticize many of our recommendations, we have accepted wholeheartedly the challenge of assuring that conscious government efforts are made to provide quality educational opportunities to America's disadvantaged children. We have monitored the implementation of many of our recommendations as well as many others which were derived by organizations such as yours. Last summer, we testified before the Congress during its deliberations on Title I reauthorization, supporting its intended purpose and basic operations. We have called for further expansion of this effort in order to render services to millions of currently eligible Title I children who are not participating in the program due to insufficient funding.

The Council believes that Title I has made significant impact and has accomplished significant gains in improving the education of our nation's disadvantaged children. I would like to share with you some of the Council's observations concerning the accomplishments of this program, and then, some of the current concerns which the Council believe ought to be addressed at this point of our nation's development of effective educational institutions.

First, I would like to explain the general outline of procedures used by the Council to gain the necessary information for judging program effectiveness. This procedure includes obtaining first-hand information through on-site visitations and conducting on-site visitations and conducting informal hearings.

We rely heavily upon first-hand observations and interactions with students, parents, teachers and administrators involved in the day-to-day operations and administration of compensatory education. We do not exclusively rely upon the volumes of evaluation data or research to prove program

accomplishments when children can show us in a matter of moments -- whether or not they can read, write, or compute numbers at a satisfactory level. We have not relied exclusively upon the review of local and state administrative reports of program accomplishments, when, again, parents or teachers can tell us -- in a matter of moments -- whether or not the program is administered in an effective and efficient manner. We like to get out and "go where the action is" and have visited Indian reservations in the Southwest, sprawling areas of the Northeast, agricultural migrant camps in the Deep South, sophisticated suburban areas in the Far West, urban areas in the East and rural areas of our nation's breadbasket. We ask these basic questions: "How well does the program work? What impact has the program had on your child's educational attainment, and what improvements would you suggest?" Even children can readily respond to some of these questions. They know whether or not they are learning anything. Parents and teachers know if children are learning and above all, administrators know if every conceivable opportunity is being provided for learning to take place.

In addition to these site visits, we have informally conducted local, state, and regional hearings to again gather first-hand information and opinions regarding program improvement. One of our largest hearings took place here in the Northeast, in June of 1977. And, I am sure that some of you here today were probably involved. The comments and recommendations we received at that time were extremely beneficial in the development of our 1978 Special Legislative Report issued to the Administration and the Congress prior to their deliberations for Title I reauthorization. Also, we have conducted various seminars involving educational and social experts as well as briefing sessions with federal administrators and congressional representatives. We have found such activities very helpful in understanding

administrative limitations and social variables which so heavily impact upon the practical effects of large scale compensatory education efforts. We do not rely entirely on our annual report to achieve change in Title I legislation and administration. The Council is in constant contact with the education committees of the House and Senate, the White House domestic staff, and the USOE and HEW⁴⁹.

Over the past four years, we have taken strong advocacy positions on behalf of many special groups of our nation's school age children. Not only have we addressed the special needs of educationally disadvantaged children in general, but we have also prepared special reports specifically highlighting the major areas for the educational needs of American Indians, migrants, bilingual, neglected and delinquent, urban, rural and the participation of eligible non-public children.

Many of our efforts have had significant influence on the improvement of Title I and its provision for more effective parental involvement, rapid implementation of the nonpublic school bypass, increased emphasis on basic skills, and encouraging the coordination of all available education and social resources.

Therefore, it seems to me, it's time to stop and ask ourselves some basic questions: where is the Title I program today, and what positive effects has it had on your program? Although these questions may not seem very specific, the Council has often discussed the program in such broad terms in order to retain the original intent of the law. And through our discussions we have arrived at the general consensus that some of the most prominent accomplishments achieved by Title I are: individual needs assessment; pre- and post-testing; an individualized approach to instruction; better coordination; parent involvement; teacher

⁴⁹ The U.S. Department of Education and The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

training; cultural awareness; expenditure accountability; program evaluation and planning; and the development of effective program practices, all of which are incorporated into the basic curriculum for the overall improvement of every child's educational experience. The Council hosted the first national meeting of Title I parents in 1973 which led to the formation of the National Coalition of ESEA,⁵⁰ Title I parents. The development of parents as partners and advocates for quality education for their children is one of the singular accomplishments of Title I.

We have just released our 1979 annual report and five special reports. One of the reports addresses issues on urban education and two other reports discuss the value of, and funding for national evaluation studies.

Our findings in the Urban Education Report draw attention to the fact that 4 or 5 percent of our nation's largest school districts are educating approximately 46 percent of our school age youth. These districts were formerly viewed as the most progressive and innovative school systems in the country. However, they are now struggling under these circumstances of limited educational resources, bureaucratic red tape, thousands of students requiring specialized education, and an environment which provides a breeding ground for influences which could disrupt or subvert the educational process.

The grass roots support must be reestablished. If we are to meet the needs of the urban student, it is necessary to have parental and community involvement in the direct educational process and decision making activities.

The collective bargaining process should be limited to issues of wages, hours, and working conditions. Policy level decision must be left to those so designated by the governing bodies. Urban school systems must recognize that the urban child,

⁵⁰ The Elementary and Secondary Education Act

no matter what the characteristics or background, is the client and that the client is to be served regardless.

One of the Council's major recommendations in this special report is that the American public seriously reexamine its priorities and begin to assume a more responsible attitude in support of public education. No generation of students should have to bear the burden of inadequate support for their education.

Another current concern of the Council has been the federal government's continual efforts to achieve an effective national evaluation of the ESEA, Title I. Our reports on mandated studies discuss the millions of dollars spent on such evaluations, many of which the Council believe to be of minimal value to the basic task of educating children. Between 1975 and 1979, the National Institute of Education expended \$15 million to evaluate compensatory education programs in general, and Title I programs in particular. Although a great deal of data was compiled and presented, there was little information which could be utilized for local program improvement. The Office of Education is currently spending approximately \$7.5 million a year not only for similar studies, but also for the establishment of a uniform system for state evaluation reporting of Title I. Each of these amounts may represent only a small portion of the Title I funds. But, when combined with other state and local administrative expenditures, it represents a significant portion of the Title I allocations. We must stop and think of the significant numbers of eligible students who could be receiving necessary compensatory education services with those funds. We have repeatedly asked ourselves and others as well "How much of the Title I dollar actually reaches the students for whom it is intended?" Although we continue to strive for the assurance that it is the maximum amount reasonably possible, we have no doubt that Title I has not yet reached this level of efficiency.

It is time for all of us to recognize that in order to improve the performance of the nation's educationally deprived children we must continue to identify what works best for the individual child, and make every effort to assure such practices are implemented in the most effective manner. High expectations alone are not sufficient for student success, but we all know they certainly are necessary.

Larry Cremin, the President of Teachers College, Columbia University, has stated the problem facing us very well. Dr. Cremin pointed out that a universal system of education is ultimately tested at its margins. That is, while we may do an excellent job of educating vast numbers in the middle, we stand or fall as an educational enterprise to the extent that we succeed in seeing to it that those who stand on the fringes, at the periphery, outside the so-called normal range -- those handicapped by poverty, by prejudice, and by other disadvantages not of their making -- are enabled to realize their full potential and are assured of the opportunity to rise to an equal footing with more fortunate members of our society.

Two old Spanish American war veterans were rocking in the sun on the porch of the old soldiers home. One old soldier said to the other, "Sam, you remember the stuff they put in our food at San Juan Hill so we wouldn't go out chasin' girls?"

Sam answered, "Yeh, I remember." The first old soldier said, "Well, you know, I think that its finally beginning to work!"

That is my message today, Title I is finally beginning to work!

Speaking of politicians, you should all know the six ways that you can tell the difference between Republicans and Democrats:

1. Democrats buy most of the books that have been banned somewhere. Republicans form censorship committees and read them in a group.

2. Republicans tend to keep their shades drawn, although there is seldom any reason why they should. Democrats ought to, but don't.

3. Democrats eat the fish they catch. Republicans hang them on the wall.

4. Republican boys date Democrat girls. They plan to marry Republican girls but they want a little fun first.

5. Democrats make up plans and then do something else. Republicans follow the plans their grandfathers made.

6. Republicans sleep in twin beds -- some even in separate rooms. That is why there are more Democrats.

"Now Is the Time for Action"

Undated Address to a Title I Parents Conference

Good morning. I want to thank you for the privilege of sharing my thoughts with you at this Conference. We have gathered here this week to accomplish specific goals. I suggest these goals include two major purposes: (1) to improve the responsiveness of the Federal Government to the educational needs of disadvantaged children, and (2) to learn more fully how you as parents, administrators or concerned citizens can be a part of this improvement together.

The opportunities this week have been many. I know you have influenced government. It is my hope that you have learned, and will take back to your local school districts and utilize what you have learned and share with others who could not afford to come or were not as motivated as you to help children have better life chances.

I addressed you briefly at your Third Annual Conference in New Orleans with two major points in terms of parent power -- one, to make it your priority to seek your personal self-improvement and another, to use the power of your organization to become politically influential.

My message to you today concerns the correlation of student achievement and your parent involvement. To date, few hard facts are available about how parent involvement affects student achievement. There are those who believe we cannot quantify effective parent involvement. That is, criteria which documents your effectiveness is not universally agreed upon. You must get further involved in this area and provide the necessary documentation to those researchers now conducting studies of your effectiveness as parents.

As you know, the National Institute of Education is currently conducting a study of the correlation of student achievement and parent involvement. It is attempting to document our Council's claim that parents make a positive difference. The Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Project in Brooklyn, New York is also conducting a similar study on a smaller scale.

The results of these studies and others now contemplated will be eagerly awaited by Congress. For many of its members, these results will determine their support or opposition to strengthening the ability of parents to more directly control Title I decisions.

You, as parents, cannot control the results of these studies by a three-day conference, or by testifying before administrators and legislators about how important you are. You must monitor the studies. Ask for copies of the RFPs⁵¹, contract awards and research designs. You must participate on the advisory boards of these studies.

Your major vehicle of influence is to get involved in your local school and do everything possible to insure that the children are learning.

From my review of the study in Bedford Stuyvesant, the results were that parents did make a difference. The impact of the results was reduced however, because only a very few parents were involved. NIE's study will review many more schools. Your school could be one. Let us hope that NIE's study also does not have "only a few parents who are involved." Let us make it our business to insure that as many parents as possible are involved and are making a difference. ("Buddy System")

Your input on any study measuring Title I effectiveness is necessary. Your establishment of a criteria which will quantify

⁵¹ Request for Proposal

success is essential. You have seen how effective parent involvement reduces discipline problems. You have seen how effective parent involvement reduces teacher absence and increases their accountability. You have seen how effective parent involvement improves your own child's motivation for learning. You are the ones who must supply the documentation that parent involvement does make the difference. You are the witness that can prove that Title I is more effective when home and schools are working together, when parents and educators are working as partners in achieving this goal.

Title I has afforded you a forum from which to speak. Now you must "tell it like it is." You must not give up your bargaining rights. The future of your children is in the hands of educators, legislators and, most of all, yours. You still hold the key to your children's success or failure.

The lines are drawn. Each side has its battle plans. Now is the time for action.

Keynote Address
Connecticut State Head Start Training Center Parent
Involvement Workshops
October 25, 1979⁵²

The origins of parent involvement was in Head Start as part of "maximum feasible participation of the poor" in the poverty program.

-- [It was] a new relationship for parents and teachers. Up to that time, parents were summoned to school only when there was trouble. The relationship between the poor parent (who was seldom in the PTA for reasons you either know or can guess) and the teacher was a negative experience. If the child was in trouble, the parent was called to shoulder the blame and to lay on the heavy hand. If the child was passive, the parent was not wanted regardless of achievement.

-- Parents began to visit Head Start classrooms and were welcomed, involved as aides and volunteers and by law made part of the planning process for the program. THIS WAS REVOLUTIONARY - HERESY IN EDUCATION.

-- But this revolutionary educational concept - parental involvement - could not have flourished in any but the fertile ground of Head Start. Head Start was purposely shielded from the prevailing attitude that parents should not be seen, not be heard. Parent involvement was by far the most revolutionary innovation created by Head Start; and, primarily parent involvement worked because Head Start was funded and administered outside of the

⁵² *Ed.* This address was given the year following Owen's move to Eastern Connecticut State University from Pace University in New York. His take on the impact of Title I on all parents' involvement in education is fascinating.

public schools and isolated from their prevailing arms-length parental policies.

-- And now fifteen years later parental involvement in Head Start continues to be a strong part of the educational program for the children.

-- And that is what this 3-day workshop is all about. It's parents and professionals working together to strengthen parent role in educational process and the administrative process of Head Start.

-- I am sure that you are aware of the positive effect that your participation as a parent in Head Start has on the education of your children. But are you fully aware of the revolution in parent participation in the educational process and administration of public schools as a result of the innovations of Head Start.

-- Spurred by the Follow-Through Program and ESEA⁵³ Title I, parents moved into schools and classrooms across the country. In most school systems they were unwelcome and involved only by the force of federal law. Public schools were told in effect, obey the law and involve parents or get none of the over two billion dollars being spread around to improve the education of disadvantaged children.

-- Parent Involvement in ESEA Title I, though mandated by law, had rougher times than in Head Start. Parents were either ignored or brought together to rubber stamp programs that required their involvement for funding. To be sure, that was not true of all school systems; but except for a precious few, parents of poor children were not perceived as useful in the education of their children.

-- Things have changed today and educators have significantly changed their opinion about parent involvement. Parent Advisory Councils are required by law for every school that

⁵³ Elementary and Secondary Education Act

receives Federal ESEA Title I funds. Another Parent Advisory council is required for every school district that receives funds, and in thirty-eight states there are state Parent Advisory councils. Parents are in the classroom as aids and volunteers. And just as important, more and more across this country, parents, teachers and administrators have set aside the distrust and misunderstanding of each other to work together to improve the education of so-called "disadvantaged children".

-- What is the value of parent involvement? Our major concern is the education of children. Does parent involvement have any effect on learning?

[The] Brownville study [found] parent involvement and participation in the school produced better learning because

- (1) the parents had a positive effect on behavior and effort,
- (2) teacher attitude toward the children was improved, i.e., increased expectations,
- (3) principal had community support for demands for equipment and school improvements which helped get those things.

Principal and teachers soon found that parents who were in the schools were there when needed.

-- This change in the acceptance of parents into the schools through the ESEA Title I program did not come easy. Parents had to organize and fight for their legal rights every step of the way.

-- That is the state of parent involvement today, but where do you go from here.

Question: if education is the key to your children's future, is it not also the key to your own future as a person?

The knowledge that you have gained participating in Head Start programs may well be the basis for continuing your own personal development and education. Connecticut has high school

equivalency programs, community colleges and state colleges conveniently located so that a beginning can be made. Some of the colleges, such as Eastern Connecticut State College, have a life experience credit program that allows college credit for learning that you have gained for such experiences as this conference.

-- So, if you gain self confidence in your work in Head Start and discover that you can learn and gain new skills -- and are a bright, self-sufficient person, perhaps one of your priorities should be - (REGARDLESS OF AGE) - to use this new knowledge and confidence to continue your own education. It's been proven - a parent who is attending school has a positive effect on the attitude of children in the home.

-- There is one other dividend as a result of your involvement in Head Start and that in a word is POWER. You have heard the term "Knowledge is Power." ----I repeat: "Knowledge is Power." I ask that you remember the power you have in Head Start and the power that many of you have in your schools under Title I. You must be consulted and involved. You can have influence and you can make changes in programs that affect the vital education of your children.

-- As your children move into the elementary school, many will be enrolled in Title I programs and continue your involvement through Parent Advisory Councils. You are part of a parent movement that is active all over this country; and because of organizations and activities with the schools, parents have power that extends beyond the walls of the school and the classroom into the community.

-- Use the skills that you have learned here to change some of the problems in your neighborhood and your community. Get the facts, attend meetings and above all - vote. You are effective in improving the education of your children; and the same skills that you learn in Head Start and Title I parent activities can be used to

address the other problems in your community, such as housing, jobs, crime and drugs. You have learned to use your power in the schools and now I challenge you to use that same power to improve other aspects of your life.

-- But in order to have that kind of power there must be a recognition that any demands that you make as parents will require a political decision somewhere along the line, i.e., more money for Title I involves Congress -- poor administration of Title I or state problems involves the State Commissioner of Education, which involves the Governor or the Legislature. You well know that the main basis of influence in politics is votes, not who makes the most noise. If all the parents in every PAC⁵⁴ in every school district in the United States were a registered voter with a pattern of voting for their friends and against their enemies, many of the complaints that we have heard in our workshop the past two days would be unnecessary. Your demands on a politician at any level fall on deaf ears unless they are backed up by the threat of some voter retaliation.

You don't have to answer to anyone but yourself, but: How many parents in this room can say that they are not registered? How many are registered but do not vote?

Those who say "I am not registered" or "I do not vote" are the people who will prevent parents from having the power and influence that you wish and deserve. Which party? Who should you vote for? That is not as important as being a voting threat to those who make decisions about the education of your children and every other aspect of your lives.

⁵⁴ Parent Advisory Council

Appendix IV
"The Black Republican"
Speech Delivered to Eagle Republican Club
Syracuse, New York
October 12, 1975⁵⁵

You are a Republican? How can you be a Republican? Most Black Republicans have had to respond to that question. How do you handle it? Do you have the kind of understanding and commitment to answer forcefully?

It isn't easy to be a Black Republican. It is also difficult to get our message across to our Black communities and, at times, to leaders of our own party. Black communities must realize with our help that politics are not dirty, that most of the important decisions impinging upon our lives are influenced by political activity. The days of demonstrations and demands are gone. The time has arrived for Blacks to recognize the necessity and the value of political involvement. That is why the Eagle Republican Club is necessary -- to carry this message to the Black community and to maintain an active involvement and participation in the Republican Party structure.

We have to bury the myth that party politics are dirty and that you "shouldn't get involved" or that you should be an independent voter. An independent voter is a reactor to the

⁵⁵ *Ed.* This speech was largely based on notes, therefore, the recreation here does not contain all of the historical references which he made. Owen was a firm believer in the two party system and often spoke of the need for good people in each party. Although he was a politically active Republican for most of his life, he always followed the policy of voting for the "best person" for the office rather than for the party. In later years, as the Republican party became more and more conservative, he more often than not voted Democratic.

political scene - - not a participant. The important decisions have already been made by the time a name gets on the ballot.

So, the major political problem that Black citizens face right now is that only one half of the American political system has been utilized. From 70 to 85% of the Black vote is firmly entrenched in the Democratic camp -- for no rational reason.

Few people remember (especially Republicans) the history of our party -- the party of Abraham Lincoln -- responsible for the eradication of human bondage on these shores and architect of all the major guarantees of individual freedom since our country was founded. Frederick Douglas was a Republican. Frederick Douglas was Lincoln's confidant. [In those days] All Blacks were Republicans. The Democratic Party was the party of slavery and repression. Douglas wrote, "The Republican Party is the ship -- all else is the sea." Eisenhower signed the first Civil Rights Bill since Reconstruction in 1957 and 1960. Desegregation started under Truman, who left it 65% segregated; Eisenhower completed it in a year. With the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Equal Housing Act of 1968, in each case Republicans voted more heavily in favor than Democrats. The first law against discrimination in employment in recent times was passed by Dewey in New York State. Dewey also passed the reapportionment law which created the first Black congressional district that allowed Adam Clayton Powell to get elected. This law was vetoed by Al Smith, Roosevelt, et al.

The Republican Party had the confidence of the Black vote until the Roosevelt era of the 30's and 40's. During the period that Black voters were forming a love affair with the Democratic Party, that party was dominated by a vicious clique of southern segregationists. But the charisma of Roosevelt locked in the Black vote to this day.

It is our job as Black Republicans - organizations like the Eagle Republican Club - to untie that Democratic grip and to bring new strength to the Republican Party. The Republican Party on the

national [level] and certainly in New York state has an active, sincere policy of the open door to all. It is a commitment, though not shared by a few, that is not only stated but worked on daily.

"Blacks in the Republican Party"
by Owen F. Peagler
Summer 1976
Special Black Bicentennial Edition
(Unnamed Newspaper Clipping)

Frederick Douglass was a Republican, and a confidant and advisor to Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican president.

Following emancipation, among the first Black elected officials of the Reconstruction Era, such as Pinchback of Mississippi and Revels of Alabama, were Republicans.

These may seem to be strange revelations in this day and age, but following the Civil War, virtually all of the newly enfranchised Black voters were Republicans. The Democratic Party, at that time, was the party of slavery and repression.

The reasons why Black citizens became Republicans following the Civil War are not difficult to discern. Frederick Douglass summed it up in one brief statement, "The Republican Party is the ship - all else is the sea." The new Black citizens supported the political party that championed their freedom and their rights as citizens.

The New Deal

The Blacks remained rather numerous within the Republican Party until the "New Deal" days of President Roosevelt's overwhelming victory. He won the allegiance of Blacks to the Democratic Party, and practically erased historical ties with the Republicans. Democratic domination of the Black vote continues to this day.

This thumbnail, historical sketch is not presented as a reason for being a Republican. In fact, the early domination of the Black vote by Republicans was as counterproductive to our

aspirations as a people as the current domination by the Democrats.

The unfortunate truth is, that Black participation is by one of the major parties, and with a corresponding lack of concern by the other. For us, the concept of a two-party system with its inherent checks and balances has never been a reality.

Difficult Question

Few active Blacks, who are Republicans, escape from that inevitable question, "How can you be a Republican?!" It is a difficult question to answer. Not because there is no answer, but because the question implies a bias that defies rational response.

When I am asked that question, I immediately sift through numerous possible responses. Should I mention Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln?

Should I list the significant decisions made by Republicans to improve the status of Black Americans, such as the first Civil Rights Bill since Reconstruction signed by President Eisenhower in 1957 and 1960?

The leadership of "conservative" Republican Senator Everett Dirksen that moved the passage of such landmark legislation as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Equal Housing Act of 1968?

Should I mention that in New York State, Republican Governor Thomas E. Dewey fought for and signed the first law against discrimination in employment, higher education, and publicly assisted housing?

Or, that Governor Dewey signed the reapportionment law which created the first Black congressional district that allowed Adam Clayton Powell to get elected, which brought a new type of dynamic leadership to a Black community?

Should I be partisan, and note that this same law was vetoed by Democratic governors Al Smith, Franklin Roosevelt, and Herbert Lehman?

Should I note that Republican Governors Rockefeller and Wilson had more commissioners, advisors, and state employees in policy making positions who were Black than any governor before (and since!)?

His Answer

Let's face it, under the gun of a hostile challenge, longwinded answers would be unheard, and unfortunately, be unconvincing.

So, my answer to the question goes to the heart of the matter, "I am a Republican - because I believe - that Black citizens will not be a significant political factor in the State of New York (particularly Harlem), or anywhere else in the United States, until the one-party domination of our vote is broken."

Since our political system is based upon the counter-balance of two parties, we must maintain participation and voting capability in both parties.

As far as I am concerned that is my bottom line argument. With up to 80 per cent of our vote firmly committed to one political party,, Blacks forfeit the threat of political reprisal in the voting booth. One political party has a reduced incentive to win the Black voter by giving consideration to our problems, and the other party is inclined to write off the Black vote.

No Man's Land

In my opinion, that leaves us in a political "no man's land."

At a conference in July 1965, 175 Black Republicans from all over New York State met in Albany to reaffirm their determination to work cooperatively to increase their numbers, their influence, and contributions to the G.O.P.

The convention delegates asked me to lead a task force to develop a structure for a state-wide organization of Black Republicans, dedicated to the principles upon which the G.O.P. was founded; dedicated to getting Blacks involved in the Republican Party structure at all levels; and dedicated to developing a two-party voting pattern in our Black communities.

The Black Conference

On November 22, 1975, the Conference recommended and adopted the task force report, and an official organization called the New York Conference of Black Republicans was formed with leadership drawn from all areas of the state.

The organization requires that members maintain close party affiliation on the local level and urges members to seek and hold positions within the Party structure.

The strength of the Conference of Black Republicans will be the sum total of the active participation and contributions of the members at the local and county levels.

Above all, Black Republicans are reaching out to Black Democrats, independents, and non-voters to join in the crusade. Black Republicans in New York State are committed to an aggressive program to make New York a two-party state for Blacks.

Appendix V

The Other Jackie Robinson⁵⁶

Introduction

Jackie Robinson's life story is a towering saga of courage and talent that blossomed during the middle of the twentieth century and not only changed the game of baseball forever but also impacted the American scene in many other ways. The Jackie Robinson story has been chronicled in many books, articles and films; but there is much about this twentieth century American hero that remains untold. I hope to add some relatively unknown anecdotes from my personal relationship with Jackie over a period of the last five years of his life. These stories will reinforce the already well recognized qualities of intelligence, commitment to the civil rights cause, loyalty, and willingness to speak out for a cause that he believed in.

I met Jackie Robinson in the Spring of 1968⁵⁷ when he was Special Assistant to New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. At the time I was Education Consultant for the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity with offices at 509 Madison Avenue. Jackie's office was at the Governor's New York City headquarters on West 55th Street. Ersa Poston, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity was about to be appointed to head the New York State Civil Service Commission, and my friend and political

⁵⁶ *Ed.* Before his stroke in 2007, Owen indicated to me that he would like to write a book about Jackie Robinson from his perspective as a friend and a political colleague. This is the introduction which he wrote for that proposed book, written sometime between 1999 and 2007.

⁵⁷ *Ed.* Owen has variously indicated the date of meeting as 1967 and 1968.

colleague Sam Singletary was leaving State OEO to become assistant to Jackie Robinson in the Governor's office. I accompanied Sam to a meeting with Jackie at his 55th Street office. When I met Jackie for the first time, I went through the intense emotional lift and speechlessness that I was to witness dozens of others experience in the years to come. Here I was talking easily and warmly with my idol whose career in baseball brought me numerous enjoyable summer afternoons and provided me and other Black kids with a positive, winning role model.

Shortly after first meeting Jackie Robinson, Governor Rockefeller appointed me to the position of Deputy Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity in charge of the metropolitan area. The metropolitan area included all of the boroughs of New York City, Long Island, Westchester, Orange, and Dutchess Counties. The new position and my friendship with Sam Singletary brought me in frequent contact with Jackie.

As the year 1968 moved forward, two concurrent forces were unraveling the fabric of the inner cities of New York. The Vietnam War was increasingly unpopular and civil rights protests were still simmering. On April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis; and urban areas of cities all across the country erupted in grief, anger, and destruction. In just two months, gasoline was poured onto the fire of outrage when New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. A cloud of despair hung over Black communities, and there was widespread fear that a conspiracy to eliminate national civil rights leaders was underway.

New York City Mayor John Lindsay formed the Urban Action Task Force to mobilize city resources to address the problems that fed the rioting and destruction raging in Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx. As Metropolitan Director of OEO, I represented the Governor on the task force that met weekly at city hall. Under the leadership of mayoral aide Barry

Gotterer, city commissioners and department heads were mobilized to provide extraordinary services to the distressed areas of the city. At that time the relationship between the governor and the mayor was strained, and some disdain was expressed about "the lack of response" to the crisis from the governor. I reported the attitude of the Lindsay people to Jackie Robinson, and he jumped hot at the perceived affront.

Jackie, Sam Singletary and I discussed the situation and decided that we would submit a plan to the Governor for a state response to the crises occurring in the cities. We decided that I would present all of our ideas in a memo to Jackie and he would personally take them to the Governor. It is important to note here that Jackie Robinson was one of only a handful of people who had instant access to the Governor at any time. We were sure our ideas would be seen and considered. With the help of two of my field representatives, Al ----- and Bernadette Poole, a memo was on Jackie's desk in two days.

A recreation of the memo to the best of my memory follows:

To: Jackie Robinson

From: Owen F. Peagler

Subj: Recommendations for the State to Address the Urban Crisis

I represent the Governor at the City of New York Urban Action Task Force which was formed by Mayor Lindsay to focus resources on crises areas of the city. I have heard comments among the mayor's staff that the Governor is doing nothing to help the city deal with the crisis. Although I do not believe that this is true, enemies of the Governor might expand this into a campaign issue for the upcoming 1970 gubernatorial election. I would like to make the following suggestions for an expanded state role in addressing the crisis now facing us in the urban areas

of New York State.

1. All state agencies should be asked to review ways that extra help can be provided to distressed areas.

2. Excess state motor vehicles can be made road safe and donated to grassroots community agencies.

3. The New York State National Guard Camp Smith at Peekskill can be turned into a summer camp for inner city kids using National Guard personnel and other volunteers as camp counselors.

4. Long Island Railroad trains which run empty from New York City back to the Oyster Bay turntable can be used to give inner city children exciting train rides, to return to the city by bus.

I am sure that there are other creative activities that can be devised for other parts of the state that would contribute to the easing of tensions in crisis areas. I believe that by implementing these and other creative efforts across New York State, the Governor can express his concern and provide much needed help that will cool the crises this summer.

Jackie delivered the memo to the Governor, the Governor discussed it with his cabinet; and in less than three weeks the Governor's Area Councils were formed in five regions to focus state resources in tension areas. The Governor appointed a chairman for each area council with the mandate to report directly to his office. Each Area Council had as a member a representative at decision making level from the Department of Public Works, the Department of Social Services and the Department of Labor. I was appointed chairman of the Metropolitan Area Council which covered the major hot spots of the long hot summer. Jackie Robinson characteristically remained in the background, and I

suspect that very few people knew that he was responsible for the implementation of this major initiative. Over a three-week period during the summer, 3000 children from New York's troubled neighborhoods were taken on a one-week camping experience to Camp Smith.

A group of Harlem parents got word to Jackie that they would like help to provide buses to take some children to the Montreal Expo 69. After meeting with some community representatives, he later arranged for three buses that were provided by Nelson Rockefeller's personal funds at Jackie's request. Three weeks after the Expo 69 trip, I was visiting a migrant labor camp far out in Suffolk County when my secretary reached me at one of my stops to report that a group of men from Harlem were staging a sit-in at the Governor's office on 55th Street. I asked what they were protesting, and she told me to my astonishment that they insisted on seeing the Governor to thank him for providing the buses for the Montreal trip.

There is much legend about Jackie Robinson's fiery temper, which he valiantly held in check during the first years with the Brooklyn Dodgers. I saw that temper in action only once, and it was awesome. Nelson Rockefeller asked Jackie to run a part of his 1970 re-election campaign, and Jackie and Sam Singletary asked me to take a leave of absence from my new job as Dean of Evening Administration at Pace University to help develop campaign activities for the Black vote. By this time I was Special Assistant to the Chairman of the New York Republican State Committee and had developed a relationship with all of the Black Republican district leaders and organizations in New York State. Although in the Pace dean's position for just a year, Dr. Edward J. Mortola, President of Pace, granted a leave of absence without pay; and I joined the Governor's campaign staff early in the summer of 1970 and remained until after the fall election. One fall day during the height of the campaign, one of the Harlem "street hustlers" who

hung around the campaign to squeeze money from anyone who could be intimidated, begged Jackie to speak to the Harlem nursing home where his elderly mother was living. Typical of Jackie, he agreed; and one afternoon Jackie, another campaign worker, John Haith and I drove uptown to 138th Street for the speaking engagement.

At 118th Street several police vehicles had stopped a vehicle and had the driver out of the car. Traffic was restricted to one lane, and a policeman was directing traffic. The policeman waved Jackie through and then turned his back to watch the activity of the arrest. Our car, however, could not move because a woman and a baby were crossing the street in front of the car in front of us. When the woman safely crossed the street, the car in front of us moved on; and at that time the policeman turned around and found us in the same spot. His face turned red and he erupted into a furious tirade directed at Jackie. He came up to the car window and leveled abuse about holding up traffic. After a full minute of abuse, Jackie pushed the door of the car open and put his face into the policeman's face and shouted back at him in a ferocious counterattack. The policeman looked startled and stepped back, and the look on his face suddenly changed from anger to surprise. He shouted, "Jackie Robinson!! I didn't know it was you Jackie!!" Jackie was incensed up to this point, but those words from the policeman caused an anger in Jackie that was awesome to behold. Jackie shouted at the top of his lungs, "It doesn't matter who I am; you can't talk to anybody like that. Who the hell do you think you are?" At this point the other policemen stopped their arrest and came over to shake Jackie's hand. I can remember their chorus of "Take it easy, Jackie!" "It's ok, Jackie!" "We didn't mean anything by it, Jackie!" Each time they tried to soothe him, Jackie got angrier and angrier. I remember Jackie raised his arm for emphasis and several policemen stepped back. When we returned to our car and started uptown again, Jackie said

to me, "Damn, Owen, why didn't you speak up?" I answered, "Jackie, you had everything under control. If it were me, I'd be under the jail."

When I returned to Pace after the campaign, I didn't see Jackie often. He had left the Governor's office and Sam Singletary became Special Assistant to the Governor in his place. Pace College's Higher Education Opportunity Program asked me if I could get Jackie Robinson to speak to them. The Higher Education Opportunity Program, headed by Dr. George Mims, admitted talented minority students into a special program of academic support, remediation and academic orientation that was highly successful. Their graduation rate was better than regularly admitted freshmen. When I told Jackie of the invitation, his response was an immediate and enthusiastic "yes." He spoke to the HEOP group at the Westchester campus of Pace College. Jackie, in his characteristic sincere way, talked to the students about the importance of their studies and their obligation to give back to society some of the benefits that they receive. After a standing ovation, Jackie stayed and answered questions and chatted informally with the students. Jackie Robinson's visit has remained a memorable day for the HEOP program and Pace.

The next year, President Mortola of Pace College enthusiastically approved my recommendation that Jackie Robinson receive an honorary doctorate. I remember the day the degree was awarded: Jackie wore a shiny dark green suit with red threads that I had seen him wear on many occasions. The occasion was a convocation in the Schimmel Arts Center at Pace. I had the honor of escorting Rachel Robinson for the occasion and sitting with her during the ceremony. The most memorable part of the ceremony to me was observing the pride and love in Rachel's eyes as the citation was read and the degree awarded. As Rachel and I chatted, we recalled that we had sat together in a graduate sociology class at NYU years before. I have never confessed that it

was many years after that graduate class that it came to me that the brilliant, articulate, attractive woman that I chatted with for a whole semester was THE Rachel Robinson.

Appendix VI

Jackie and My Dad⁵⁸

**An Interview with Owen Peagler
by Kirin Peagler**

Jackie Robinson was the first African-American to play in major league baseball. He played for the Brooklyn Dodgers from 1947 until he retired in 1956. After retiring, he became a successful businessman and later became an advisor to Governor Rockefeller of New York. Jackie Robinson is a very important figure in American history because he cleared the path for other African-American athletes. Before Jackie Robinson, it was unheard of to have an African-American playing major league sports. My father, Owen Peagler, started working with Jackie Robinson in 1967. They both worked for New York's Governor Rockefeller. They worked together for five years until Jackie's untimely death in 1972.

How did you meet Jackie Robinson?

When I worked at the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity a co-worker, Sam Singletary, left his position to work in the Governor's New York City office as assistant to Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson was special assistant to Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Sam invited me over to the Governor's office to meet Jackie Robinson.

How long and during what years did you work together?

I worked with Jackie for about five years, from 1967 to 1972.

³⁸ *Ed.* Kirin undertook this interview with her father during the 2002-2003 academic year when she was a high school junior.

How well did you get to know him?

I got to know him very well. We used to travel to political functions in Albany together. On occasion he drove, and Sam and I rode with him. I have been to his home in North Stamford, Connecticut and I attended many political and governmental meetings with Jackie. I worked in his section of Governor Rockefeller's 1970 re-election campaign.

Did he share any of his life stories with you? If so, what stories did he tell you?

Yes. He told me about the time that many of the players on the Brooklyn Dodgers were cool to him but Pee Wee Reese, the Dodger's shortstop, befriended him and made him feel comfortable. He also told me about the time he first went for Spring training in Vero Beach, Florida. He and his wife, Rachel, could not stay in the hotel with the other players. The Dodgers found lodging for them with a local African-American doctor.

What kind of work did you do together?

We attended political rallies on behalf of the Governor and traveled to various parts of the state where Jackie talked to youth groups and community groups. During the Governor's re-election campaign we planned programs for inner-city areas around New York State, especially New York City.

What kind of a person was he?

Jackie was very personable and very easy to talk to. When people recognized him or asked for an autograph, he was very responsive

and very kind. He had a strong desire to help young people, and he often spoke to youth groups. I have been with him at times at receptions where different people would come up to him over the course of the evening and ask him the same questions over and over. He would respond to each question kindly as if it were the first time it had been asked. He was not aloof. He was down to earth and friendly.

What is your most vivid memory of Jackie Robinson?

During the 1970 Governor's re-election campaign Jackie was invited to Harlem in New York City to speak to a senior citizen's group. He asked me if I would go with him with one other member of his staff. Jackie drove his car, and we were proceeding uptown near 109th Street in East Harlem when we came across police activity where traffic was stopped. We were slowly moved forward as a policeman directed traffic. When we got to the policeman who was directing traffic, he waved us forward and turned his back to watch the police activity where a man was being arrested. Just as he waved us forward, a woman stepped in front of the car and Jackie waited until the woman crossed the street before he proceeded. Just as the woman crossed the street, the policeman turned around and saw that Jackie hadn't moved. The policeman was angry that Jackie was still sitting there after he had waved him on and didn't realize what had happened. He began shouting, using several obscenities, asking why he didn't move when he was told to and was in a violent rage. He walked up to the window and saw who it was and said, "Jackie! Jackie! I didn't know it was you, Jackie!" This angered Jackie Robinson, who was known to have a temper when faced with wrong-doing. He jumped out of the car, got right into the face of the policeman and said, "Who do you think you're talking to!" The policeman said, "I didn't know it was you, Jackie!" This made Jackie angrier and he shouted, "It doesn't

matter who it is, you don't talk to people that way!" Meanwhile, the other policemen who were making the arrest came over and stood around while Jackie berated the policeman. They all came over and shook Jackie's hand and patted him on the back. Jackie calmed down and his parting words were, "Nobody deserves to be talked to like that," and we proceeded on to the speaking engagement.

What were Jackie's political beliefs?

Jackie believed in supporting the best candidate regardless of party. He was very loyal. He worked in Republican politics because he liked and believed in Nelson Rockefeller. When asked what party he belonged to Jackie would respond, "I'm a Rockefeller Republican."

What did you admire most about him?

I admired his willingness to stand by his principles, to speak up and to argue for his principles regardless of their popularity.

When was the last time you saw him?

In 1972 Jackie, Sam Singletary, and I met for lunch at the Roosevelt Hotel on 44th Street. We talked about the bringing together of Black voters into the Republican Party to provide balance in voting. We talked about Nelson Rockefeller and his programs. It was a lively lunch where we shared ideas and made plans to meet for lunch the following Tuesday. We walked Jackie up to the street and waited for his car, which was coming from New Jersey to pick him up. We said "goodbye," and that was the last time I saw Jackie Robinson. He died before the next Tuesday.

Just recently my father reconnected with Jackie Robinson's widow, Rachel Robinson. She has a house that is very close to ours, so we have become pretty good friends with her. Last June Rachel accompanied my dad on a church trip to South Africa where they worked together on the Jimmy Carter Work Project for Habitat for Humanity.

Appendix VII

Interview with Owen Peagler by Kirin Peagler

30 April 2005, Old Lyme, Ct.⁵⁹

Owen Peagler was born in 1931 in New Milford, Connecticut. As a young African-American man growing up in a small, rural town in New England, he was relatively isolated from the racism that was rampant during that time in most of the United States. Racially motivated remarks were rare in his hometown, and it wasn't until a visit to Virginia when he was thirteen years old that the reality of segregation really hit him. After studying at Danbury State Teacher's College (now Western Connecticut State University), Peagler returned to New Milford to teach in his old elementary school and from there moved to White Plains, New York as a junior high school guidance counselor. He then moved on to become a key member of the Urban League of Westchester, New York, an assistant to Governor Nelson Rockefeller, the Deputy Director of the New York State Department of Economic Opportunity, and the Dean of Continuing Education at Pace University in New York and later at Eastern Connecticut State University. These are just a few of his many accomplishments. Even more important are his encounters with prominent figures of the 1960's Civil Rights movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson, and Betty Shabazz, and his own involvement in the movement.

Peagler first became involved with civil rights when as a young teacher and guidance counselor he moved to White Plains, New York and came up against racial discrimination in housing. Because real estate agents in White Plains would not rent housing

³⁹ *Ed.* This interview was undertaken as a final paper for Kirin's American Civilization class taught by Sarah Wald at the end of Kirin's first year at Brown University.

to Blacks, he was forced to commute fifty miles to work each day. This led him to become a member of the Urban League of Westchester County, New York, working to improve the housing situation for Blacks. The real epiphany for him, however, the turning point which led him to greater involvement with the Civil Rights Movement, was the March on Washington led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As a member of the Board of the Urban League, he helped prepare the Westchester County involvement in the march and attended it himself. An incident which occurred during that event epitomizes the second class citizen status of Blacks during that era and the injustice they were fighting against. After arriving in Washington, one of Peagler's fellow members of the Urban League asked his assistance in locating a restroom. It took them so long to find one available to Blacks that they completely missed Martin Luther King's keynote speech and only heard it later on the television: a prime example of racial inequality and injustice! Peagler did have the opportunity to meet Dr. Martin Luther King at a later time, however, and was impressed with his firm faith in the correctness and inevitable ascendancy of the non-violent approach to racial justice. It was a philosophy which Peagler himself would incorporate throughout his long career in education and work for minority rights.

During the 1960's and early 70's Peagler met and worked with many of the great figures of the Civil Rights era, including Jackie Robinson, Dorothy Height, and Betty Shabazz. His work on the New York Republican State Committee and with Jackie Robinson was especially important and gave him the opportunity to implement a number of minority programs to help youth, especially during times of racial unrest. As Deputy Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity he was able to put into effect a number of these plans. When he became a member of the President's Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children, he was able to extend this work to other

minorities as well, traveling to Indian Reservations in North Dakota to report on educational progress there. I believe that the events and experiences that Peagler is able to speak about give a really insightful and personal view into an important component of the 1960's.

Tell me something about your background. Where were you born and what was your childhood like?

I was born in a small rural Connecticut town called New Milford. I was a member of one of the few Black families in town. My father was highly thought of in the community. He died when I was three months old, but his influence remained with me. He was well respected, and I was always referred to going through school as "Bob Peagler's son," and I was very proud of that.

After my father died, my mother was left to raise her children alone. She refused to allow the family to be broken up, and by working many low-level jobs she kept the family together with the help of many people in the community. My mother maintained the house that my father had purchased, provided food and clothing for ten children, and still provided love and support for each of us as we proceeded through school. She did all of that with a high level of dignity and strength that engendered respect and admiration in the New Milford community.

We lived in an area called Fort Hill, away from the center of town about two miles. There were four Black families, and the rest of the families on Fort Hill were White. All of the children played together, and the families had a very close relationship. When there was a death in the family, when there was any kind of a way to help, the families, White and Black, worked together. It was a neighborhood of closeness. Race was not a consideration.

My mother had a great respect in the town. During the war, for instance, a woman who admired my mother very much

and often came to see her, and when during the war there were five of my brothers in the service at the same time, this woman had a specially made flag with five stars, which was the way the families signaled how many of their family were in the service. We were the only family with a serviceman's flag with five stars on it in the town of New Milford.

Every fall before school opened, a wonderful woman named Addie Strong, who was from a very old family in New Milford (her picture is in the history books for the town of New Milford, and she was a well-to-do-lady, an elderly lady, she must have been in her 70's); and every fall she would come over to the house and buy all the kids in the family new shoes because my mother couldn't afford it. Mrs. Strong also came and helped out with groceries periodically and looked in to see if things were going well. She was typical of the kind of caring there was in the community.

I remember also as a child that a man in the town named Wes Travers came over to the house often to see how things were going, saw to it that there was food for the kids and helped my mother in any way possible around the house, fixing things and making sure that anything that was broken down around the house was fixed. Travers was more than just a good helper-outer, he was a friend of the family. And evidently he had been a good friend of my father before my father died.

Many people in town, knowing my mother had ten children to raise all by herself, brought clothes and sometimes food and other items to help out along the way. Interestingly enough, never in a "lady bountiful" way but as friends and who would come and visit as friends. There were several Black families in the area who were also good friends and who found the town of New Milford to be a very pleasant place to live.

I used to look out at the mountains from our house, and if you look across the valley at the mountains and in back of our

house at the mountains, we were in this valley walled off from the rest of the world. It was an oasis from the racism and racial problems that were prevalent during the times. And we thrived as a family in that situation. We faced little or no discrimination in New Milford during a time when there were lynchings and segregation and Jim Crow. We faced none of that in New Milford.

Did you ever have lynchings or racial discord in New Milford?

No lynchings in New Milford. They all happened in the South, Georgia and Alabama, but they never happened in Connecticut. We had a relatively stress-free life as Black people living in a small town. However, I was not completely shielded from racism as a child. I can remember as an elementary school student chasing some of the poor kids, White kids, who lived on Middle Street who would call me "nigger, nigger, nigger," and I'd chase them down the street and up to Middle Street where they lived. It made me acutely aware that racism did exist, that this was a special place that I lived.

I also remember an incident when I was in grammar school; and it relates to the Canterbury School, a very exclusive school on the hill overlooking the center of town. It was a boys' school at the time, and often the boys would be allowed to come downtown and fifteen, twenty, or thirty young students would come down and hang around the drugstore. One day on my way home from school I passed a group of them in front of Noble's Drugstore; and a couple of them came up to me and one said, "Hey, where's your father?" And I said, "My father's dead." He said, "Oh, he was killed by a razor, right?" I did not know what he meant. I know the inference now, but at that time I didn't know what he meant. I went home and asked my mother, "What did he mean that Daddy was killed by a razor?" And my mother said, "Oh that is ignorance on his part. Don't pay any attention to it." And so, there was

racism, people who would call you "Snowball." But what was unique about the place is that those people would not say such things openly because it was not an acceptable mode of thinking and behavior in that town. And I always felt secure because of the respect that my father and my mother had in that community.

Coming from a small town, were you aware of the hardships most African-Americans faced?

We were aware, my family in New Milford was aware of the hardships that other Blacks faced. We read it in the newspaper. We often had copies of the Black newspaper. *The Amsterdam News* out of New York and *The Chicago Defender* would make their way to us. But we did not face any of those problems on an everyday basis, and so we didn't think about it that much. On occasion in New Milford, we would run against, up against, a person who would make racial remarks; but such people were not tolerated in the town. They were not the major voice. Most of the people in the town would not accept any kind of racial slur.

When I was thirteen my uncle, Charles Gary, was in the army. It was during the last days of World War II, and he was stationed in Boston. On his way through Connecticut, he asked my mother if she would let me accompany him back to his home in Virginia. I had never been south in my life, and I remember we went by train; and it was a wonderful experience until we got to Washington, D.C. From New Milford to New York to Philadelphia to Washington D.C. we traveled in a very comfortable coach, and I was excited by my first train ride; but when we got to Washington, D.C. a strange thing happened. We were put in the "Jim Crow" coach. I remember it clearly. The seats were the straw seats that I remember seeing in the New York subways; they were hard and unyielding. All the Black people were in an un-air-conditioned car right behind the engine, and it was in the days when there were

coal-fired steam engines and all the black smoke coming from the engine came down and into the first car, which was the Black segregated car. I remember walking to the door of our car and looking back into the White car. The White passengers were sitting on cloth-covered seats, comfortable seats, in an air-conditioned car. I couldn't understand this, and I asked my uncle about it. He said, "Welcome to the South, boy." We went on to Williamsburg, Virginia, my uncle's home and the family home of my mother; and I walked around Colonial Williamsburg looking at the early restoration. As I was walking up Duke of Gloucester Street, toward the upper end, I looked and was amazed. I saw two water fountains. One had a big sign saying "Colored" and one had a big sign saying "White." I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I had ever seen. And I had my first introduction to segregation and "Jim Crow" on that trip.

Where did you attend college, and what was your major?

I attended college at a small Teachers College in Danbury, Connecticut, which was about fifteen miles from where I lived. It was the only way I was able to go to college because the tuition at Danbury State Teachers College was \$10 a semester, and we commuted from home. When I got out of high school, I had absolutely no money. I earned about, I saved about \$75 working hoeing tobacco in Bill Grigg's tobacco field during the summer before my freshman year in college. I applied to Danbury State Teacher's College and was accepted, and the tuition was \$10 a semester. That I could handle. I commuted with Don Wooden, a high school classmate, from New Milford; and so we had no other expenses except gas and food. I had a scholarship from the New Milford Teacher's Association; and the St. John's Episcopal Church was without a sexton, and they paid me \$80 a month to act as sexton on weekends taking care of the church and opening it on

Sunday. So with that I had ample money to go through college. It was not like the \$40,000 that we're looking at for you tuition, but it was a long time ago.

My major was elementary education, and I was proud of that because my father was a graduate of Hampton Institute in Virginia and was a teacher in a rural Virginia town. As a matter of fact, my father met my mother because he roomed with her family while he taught in her hometown.

What town?

The town was called Croaker, a very little crossroads in rural Virginia.

While in college, did you have any experiences relating to civil rights?

At Danbury it was much like New Milford except it was clear that there were some students who, though not openly racist, were condescending and elitist. But they were few and far between. Actually, after my freshman year, which was very enjoyable, for my sophomore year I was elected class president and treasurer of the Athletic Association. I was "big man on campus" and enjoyed the college very much. I enjoyed the four years, made many good friends.

Afterwards, I went to New York University for my master's degree in guidance and personnel administration. NYU was a big school, over 30,000, in New York City; and it was an impersonal experience. I did, however, find an interesting phenomenon. In many of my classes I found Black men and women teachers from southern states who were there with all the expenses paid, including living expenses, because at that time the states of Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and even Florida, South Carolina

and North Carolina paid the expenses of Black teachers to go out of state to get their graduate work so they wouldn't attend the White institutions within the state. This was atrocious. When I had a scholarship to Wesleyan University for science one summer, I ran into several Black teachers there whose expenses were all paid by, in the case I remember, Georgia because they did not want them to attend a White college. And that's how they maintained their separation.

Another interesting anecdote at New York University: in one of my classes I met a young woman named Rachel Robinson. We happened to sit next to each other, and we chatted and talked; and I never made a connection to Jackie Robinson. We became friendly, but it wasn't until I was Dean of the School of Continuing Education at Pace University a number of years later and Jackie Robinson was honored with an honorary degree that I escorted his wife Rachel to the ceremony and we recognized each other. I then realized it. Well, I did realize somewhat before that I had been sitting next to Rachel Robinson in class, but I did not realize it at the time. She was the most gracious, winning person; and, as you know, she is still to this day.

Where was your first job after graduating from college, and what kind of experience did you have?

The first job that I had after college was to go back to New Milford, my hometown, and teach the fifth grade. It was the first time any town in the area had a Black teacher. I taught school with all of the teachers that I had as a pupil coming through, and they treated me wonderfully. I taught school in New Milford for three years.

Before the Civil Rights Movement took off you were interviewed by *Look Magazine* about your work as a school teacher in a small,

predominantly White town. What type of article was it, and why was it finally withdrawn?

The *Look* article was written by a local writer who lived in Roxbury, Connecticut. The article took the view that here was a young Black teacher teaching in a practically all-White community and what was all this civil rights stuff about. Here was a person doing very well and there were good things going on. *Look Magazine* did a layout, and they spent three days taking pictures and interviewing all the people in New Milford and created a beautiful article. The week that it was supposed to appear, the Little Rock problem erupted: Little Rock, Arkansas, where there was a civil rights confrontation, where they would not admit Black students in White schools. And because of that and because of the slant of the *Look* article, it was canceled. I am very grateful that it was canceled because if it had been published I would be very, very embarrassed. It was not a good civil rights article. It would've been embarrassing to this day.

Following your three years of teaching in New Milford, you took a job as guidance counselor at East View Junior High School in White Plains, New York. Why did you decide to leave New Milford, and did you experience any racial discrimination in the larger town of White Plains?

I decided to leave New Milford after three years of teaching there because I felt that I needed to get out into the world and see if I could make it in a town that wasn't so comfortable for me, if I could make it in the bigger world. I applied for and got a job in the city of White Plains, New York in Westchester County, a very good school system. They actually welcomed me; the superintendent welcomed me and he assigned somebody to help me find housing

in the city of White Plains. That person called me on the phone and said "Oh, there's plenty of housing in White Plains and you'll have your choice. We have garden apartments and houses to rent." And so I made an appointment with this representative of the superintendent of schools and I went down, and he looked at me and his mouth dropped. He didn't realize that I was Black, and all of a sudden all of the housing that he said was available was not available. There was no housing that was open in the year 1957, and it was necessary for me to commute from Norwalk, Connecticut for two years until such time as the school system bought some old houses around my school to expand the play area and they rented one of those houses to me and my family. And that's the only way we got housing in White Plains and were able to stop commuting the fifty miles to get to the job.

After living in the house provided by the school system for a number of months, a strange situation arose that provided an opportunity for us to get our own house. It was symbolic of the kind of racism that was rampant in those days, and it happened like this: One day I was in the Urban League office and a White man came in and indicated to the receptionist that he wanted to sell his house, to sell it to a Black person. Of course, the Urban League was working very hard to find un-segregated housing for people in Westchester County. I was standing there, and I asked the man where the house was, and I went out to look at it. It was in the town of Hartsdale, New York, which is adjacent to White Plains. It was on a beautiful cul-de-sac in a very, very nice neighborhood. I went back to the office and arranged to negotiate with the man, and I bought the house. I discovered during the negotiation that the reason the man was selling the house through the Urban League and insisted on Black people was that he was angry at his neighbors and he wanted a Black family to move in to get back at his neighbors. And this was the way he got even.

When we moved in, most of the neighbors just ignored us, which was fine with us. After we were in the house about four months, an incident happened that was absolutely new to me and aroused my anger to fever pitch. I got up one morning to go out and get the newspaper, and I noticed some marks on our mailbox. I went out to the mailbox, and written in spray paint was "Nigger, Nigger Go." I was absolutely angry, and as I took the paper to go back toward the house I looked at the garage door and there in big letters was spray painted "Nigger, Nigger We Don't Want You." I was so angry that I refused to paint over any of the signs. I wanted it to stay there and let my neighbors look at it day after day. Finally after three days, one of my next door neighbors came over, painted our garage and painted the mail box; and he apologized for the incident having happened in the neighborhood. After that incident, more of the neighbors became friendly and although there were several neighbors that we never did get to know or never did speak to, the majority of the neighbors on most of the streets were quite friendly and we visited back and forth from house to house.

As a guidance director at a large junior high school, I had to deal with some openly racist teachers who, although one could not put his finger on specific things, had very low expectations of their Black students and were condescending in many ways. It was because of the racism in housing in White Plains that I became active with the Urban League of Westchester and a member of the Board of Directors. In the process, I helped to develop jobs and housing for Black citizens of Westchester County.

In about 1961 or 1962, I began house-hunting in the city of White Plains; and I was frustrated by the segregation, by the unwillingness of real estate agents to help. The Urban League of Westchester at the time had a group of White people who were used as a means of opening up housing for Black people. They would go out into communities, into the community, and look for

houses for sale. They would go in and ask the real estate agent if the house was for sale and all the details, and these were called "checkers." Immediately following the White checkers, a Black family would come in and seek the same information. Invariably, the real estate agent would say, "there's no housing available." And we began to build up a case against real estate agents. I took my case to the New York State Department of Human Rights. The department investigated the real estate agents and found them to be in non-compliance to the non-segregation law in the state of New York and required that they show all housing, but the real estate agents found ways around this. Even though the checkers and I found blatant discrimination and had articles in the newspaper describing our findings, nothing really changed. The State Human Rights Commission did nothing to back up its findings. It was a disgrace.

What got you involved in the Civil Rights Movement?

My involvement in the civil Rights Movement began when I was a guidance counselor in the White Plains New York public schools. The March on Washington was being planned; but prior to the March on Washington, I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Urban League of Westchester. As a member of the Board of the Urban League, I worked on problems of minority housing, housing discrimination against Blacks. Black people could live only in certain areas of the city of White Plains, and Black people could not get certain jobs. And so at the Urban League, we worked hard to address those problems. That was my first experience with the Civil Rights Movement, and that was back in the early 1960's.

What led you to join the March on Washington?

I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Urban League of Westchester County. The Urban League of Westchester County was the organization that formed and organized the March on Washington for Westchester County. We got the buses together. We organized people to go on the trip. We scheduled the buses, and we got as many people as possible. There must've been over sixty buses from Westchester County that we organized and I, of course, went on one of the buses to the March.

What experiences did you have there?

When we got on the buses we went down through New York City to the New Jersey Turnpike. When we go on the New Jersey Turnpike, going south toward Washington, it was wall to wall buses from all the communities of the Northeast. It was a remarkable sight to see so many buses all going to the same place. The New Jersey Turnpike was wall to wall buses! When we arrived in Washington, D.C., Black people lined the streets two or three deep waving at us and clapping. As we proceeded toward the Mall, where the March on Washington ended, there were thousands and thousands of people milling around and some marching toward the Lincoln Memorial. I personally saw many, many celebrities who were marching arm in arm to hear the speeches.

The most significant thing that happened to me was that a member of our Urban League group needed to go to the bathroom, and she asked me to help her find one. We went to several places, hotels, restaurants, but at that time Black people were not allowed in the hotels in Washington and other places did not allow us to use the restroom. By the time I found a place for this person to go to the bathroom and we got back to the Mall, all of the speeches

were over. Dr. Martin Luther King had already spoken. I did not hear his speech until I saw it on television after I got home.

Did the March change your views on the Civil Rights Movement in any way?

Yes. My views changed tremendously, because for the first time I got involved in the real movement, the real marches. I met some people who were from all over the country. And I began to sense how big and how important the Civil Rights Movement was. I did not have a sense of how important it was until the March on Washington.

How long after the March did you personally meet Martin Luther King, Jr. and how did this meeting occur?

It was a year after the March on Washington. I was at that time Deputy Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity appointed by Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Governor Rockefeller invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to lunch at his Pacontico Hills estate in New York; and he invited me, along with about thirty other people, to attend the luncheon and meet Martin Luther King. That is how I was invited. I went to the Rockefeller estate, where we had lunch around his swimming pool. People were introduced to Martin Luther King, and he was chatting and talking. But for a brief time as people were milling around there was nobody next to him, there was nobody talking to him, so I walked up and introduced myself and spent several minutes talking to him. I asked him whether he really thought that we were making any progress since the March on Washington, and he responded that, yes, we were getting the moral conscience of our country aroused and that moral conscience would win the Civil Rights battle. I will

never forget that. He was very low-key, very soft-spoken but very firm in his convictions.

Did you learn anything from this encounter?

I learned, in fact, that his approach of nonviolence was absolutely correct. I was convinced of it, because his idea that raising the moral conscience of the country would do more than a militant response was a true and correct one. As it turned out, he was absolutely right. The moral sense of the country turned civil rights demonstrations into a victory, not militant fighting in the streets but a rise of moral concern.

Did he share any more of his philosophy?

As I said, he reemphasized to me that raising moral conscience was the way to fight rather than militancy, and it proved that he was correct.

How did you become involved in the re-election campaign of Nelson Rockefeller for Governor of New York?

By the time of Rockefeller's campaign, I had left the Office of Economic Opportunity and become Dean of Continuing Education at Pace University. When I left the Rockefeller administration, the governor appointed me as assistant to the Republican State Chairman. When I was assistant to the Republican State Chairman, I worked with Jackie Robinson, who was an assistant to Governor Rockefeller. When Rockefeller's third re-election campaign started in 1970, Jackie Robinson had a position in the campaign and Jackie asked me to take a leave of absence from Pace University and work with him on the campaign. And that is how I began to work with the Rockefeller campaign.

You worked with Jackie Robinson on the Rockefeller campaign, but when did you first meet and begin working with him?

I began working with Jackie Robinson three years earlier, when I was with the Office of Economic Opportunity. Sam Singletary worked with me at the Office of Economic Opportunity and left that position to go to the Governor's office as Jackie Robinson's assistant. Sam Singletary invited me to meet Jackie Robinson at the Governor's office. I met Jackie Robinson, and in the months afterwards and the years afterwards we began going to Republican functions together on behalf of the Governor. I traveled with Jackie Robinson and Sam Singletary all over the state of New York, and that is the reason why Jackie Robinson asked me to work with him on the Governor's re-election campaign.

Did Jackie Robinson share any of his personal experiences with you? If so, what?

Jackie Robinson did share many of his personal experiences, but he did not talk about them often. But they would come up periodically. Without going into details, he often talked about how Pee-Wee Reese was a person who helped him adjust when he first went to the Brooklyn Dodgers. He talked about how much his wife, Rachel Robinson, and he had to face discrimination when they went to Florida for spring training. Overall, he did not talk a lot about his experiences until much later after he became very ill. Then on our travels, he became more open and began to answer questions that people would ask him over and over. He would take all the time that was needed to talk with people about his experiences and patiently answer the same questions over and over.

What was Jackie Robinson like as a person?

There is one experience that I had with Jackie Robinson that is very, very indicative of the kind of person he was. When we were working on the governor's campaign, he was invited to speak to a Black senior citizens group in Harlem. Jackie asked me to ride with him, and Jackie drove uptown through East Harlem. When we got into East Harlem, there was a police activity blocking the street; and a police officer was directing traffic around the scene. As we approached, we saw the police had a Black man spread-eagled over a car while searching him. And as we approached the scene, the policeman was waving cars by. When we got to the policeman, he waved us through and then turned his back to look at what was going on with his fellow officers. Just as he waved us on, a woman stepped in front of the car and walked across the street and Jackie couldn't move. When the policeman turned around, he saw that Jackie hadn't moved and began to shout at him, shout at him in a very derogatory, menacing manner. And Jackie shouted back at him, "you can't talk to me that way," and was very belligerent back. The policeman came up to the car window and started shouting at Jackie, and then he looked and saw who it was. He said, "Jackie Robinson, Jackie Robinson! I did not know it was you, Jackie." And that made Jackie mad. "What does it matter whether it's me or anybody else. You shouldn't talk to people that way." And Jackie jumped out of the car, went up to the policeman and talked to him to his face. The other policemen came around and said, "Calm down, Jackie, calm down." And Jackie got madder. He said, "You shouldn't treat anybody the way you just treated me." And for fifteen minutes Jackie lectured the policemen. Finally Jackie returned to the car, and we proceeded to the speaking engagement.

Jackie Robinson was a person who had very strong convictions. If you were his friend, he would stand up for you,

White or Black. It didn't matter. He had a fiery temperament and strong feelings for racial justice. If there was something that he felt Governor Rockefeller ought to know, he would go to the Governor personally. He was one of the few people on the Governor's staff who could walk into his office at any time, and Jackie carried the concerns of Black people to the Governor and got results. For example, during the riots in Harlem Jackie Robinson went to the Governor and suggested that the Governor take a group of Harlem children to the World's Fair in Montreal; and the Governor on Jackie's suggestion hired two or three buses, filled them with Harlem children, and took them to the Montreal World's Fair.

What kinds of work did you and Jackie Robinson do together other than campaigning for Nelson Rockefeller?

When I was Deputy Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity, I wrote Jackie a memo suggesting that the Governor provide some help to New York City to calm down the riots that were going on. I made several suggestions about what should be done, and Jackie took my memo to the Governor; and the Governor used my memo at the cabinet meeting to create a program to help quiet the riots. One of the things he did was appoint me to represent him at Major Lindsay's Monday morning crisis meetings on how to deal with the riots. He also created what he called Area Councils all over the state on which all state departments were represented to determine what each could do to contribute to communities to help quell the riots. He appointed me as chairman of the New York City area council, and we created programs that were used to help quell the riots. Two examples of NYC programs: One was with the Black National Guard unit in Harlem. We set up a youth summer camp at the New York State National Guard Camp in Poughkeepsie, New York, and we took two thousand kids from Harlem on a two-week summer camp. The

state police and the various state agencies contributed to this camp. We took the kids out of the city during the riots and provided a camp experience. We also took Head Start children out of Harlem and various minority communities in New York City and we gave them rides on the Long Island Railroad, which had empty trains running back and forth out to Long Island to reposition the trains. And so we put Head Start children on those trains. We took them out to Oyster Bay, where they had a turntable that turned the engine around. The turntable was adjacent to Oyster Bay Town Park. The town of Oyster Bay provided food and activities for the Head Start children while the engines were turned around, and the children got on the trains and came back to New York city. We also provided surplus refurbished state cars to community groups in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant. There were other programs done through the New York City Area Council. The Area Councils, remember, had representatives of every major state department, and we reported directly to the Governor.

While you were Deputy Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity, you worked with John Lindsay and Barry Gottehrer. What kinds of projects did you work on together?

As I've described, I was the Governor's representative on Mayor Lindsay's Urban Action Task Force that was chaired by a man named Barry Gottehrer. They met every Monday to see what could be done to address the riots. As the Governor's representative, I told them what we were doing in the area councils to support what they were doing in the city.

Are there any other key figures in the Civil Rights Movement that you knew or worked with?

As I mentioned before, I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Urban League of Westchester. As such, I got to know and work with Whitney Young, who was the national president of the Urban League. The Youth Incentive Committee which I chaired had a county-wide youth rally at Manhattanville College. Hundreds of people, Black and White, from all over Westchester County came to the Manhattanville College campus and had workshops on civil rights, planning for civil rights demonstrations in Westchester County. Whitney Young came and visited the workshops, and his family, including his two daughters, was in attendance.

I also met Julian Bond when he visited Pace University to speak to a student protest meeting. I was asked to greet him and escort him to the site of the meeting. I greeted him enthusiastically, and he grumbled a "hello" without looking in my direction. He was silent and aloof as I rode with him in an elevator and was curt to those who dared to address him. I was turned off by his egocentric non-responsive attitude that day, but I still respect his contribution to the Civil Rights Movement.

Dorothy Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women, came to me when I was Dean of the School of Continuing Education at Pace University to request co-sponsorship of a clerical upgrade program primarily for Negro women. We developed the program at Pace University which lasted for two and a half years. She is one of the most broadly creative people that I have met, with a great ability to motivate people. She is an inspirational leader whom I had the privilege of nominating for a Pace University honorary degree.

I met Charles Evers, the first Black mayor in Mississippi since reconstruction days, at a party in Greenburg, New York, and then later at his inauguration. Charles Evers was elected Mayor of

the little town of Fayette, Mississippi in 1969. Governor Rockefeller chartered a plane and invited a plane-load of people to attend his inauguration. I was invited to go along on the trip. I had never been that far south, never been to Mississippi. In the 1960's I was afraid to go into the south and face the kind of discrimination that was institutional and rigid. I did, however, join a plane-load of people that flew down to the inauguration. On the trip down I sat next to Mickey Zwerner's father. Mickey Zwerner was one of the three young freedom riders who were murdered and buried in a dam in Mississippi. I had a long talk with him, a man who with great loss was devoted to the Civil Rights Movement and was proud of the sacrifice that his son had made for what he believed to be a wonderful cause. I was amazed at the calm way in which he talked about the sacrifice of his son and the commitment that he had to the movement that was soon to be a success. The plane arrived in Jackson, Mississippi; and buses were waiting to carry us to Fayette. I must say that the White people in Jackson, for some reason, bent over backwards to be courteous. I was amazed at how courteous they were at the airport. We took buses to Fayette. The buses stopped outside of town, and we formed a group with others who had come in for the inauguration and we marched two miles to the town of Fayette. They call it a city, but it really is a town, a very small town. We marched into town past the monument to the Confederate soldier standing in a little mound of grass in the center of the square. And as we marched, White people stood along the way silently, just staring, not saying a word, not talking, just staring. It was a very eerie feeling to be marching down the middle of the street, a hundred strong, Blacks and Whites, and the only people watching along the way were White people, silently looking, some scowling, some just curious, but all silent.

Another person that I met in a different context was Abbie Hoffman. When I was Deputy Director of the New York State Office

of Economic Opportunity, Abbie Hoffman came to my office and asked me to visit him in the East Village. I visited him along with about eight or nine representatives of various foundations. We went to the hippie "Free Store," we went to a crash pad, and we walked the streets of the East Village. We saw hippies on the street, and he wanted to know if there were any financing that could be done to help the people of the East Village. We did not have any state money for them, but other foundations did have money. Abbie Hoffman was a visionary who actually helped calm events in the East Village.

In the 70's you worked with Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz. What did you work on together?

I met Betty Shabazz actually early in 1963 when Bill Peagler and Charles Peagler and other family members and I were in New York to see a play and went out afterward to Wells Restaurant, a popular restaurant in Harlem, for chicken and waffles. Betty Shabazz came into that restaurant with a group of people, one of whom I knew, and he introduced me to Betty Shabazz and I met her; but several years later Betty Shabazz had moved to Westchester County and was enrolled in the doctoral program at New York University.

Just a little history: I was a founding member of the Day Care Council of Westchester and we were looking for an executive director to replace Inez Singletary, Sam Singletary's wife. Betty Shabazz applied, and we appointed her. I was on the Board of Directors, and I worked with her for two years as we developed the Day Care Council of Westchester program. She was a visionary, and she was a hard worker. She had wonderful ideas, and she had a great relationship with all the day care programs in Westchester County.

You were also a good friend of Lionel Hampton, the great vibraphonist and big band leader who helped to integrate jazz bands in much the same way that Jackie Robinson integrated major league baseball. How did you meet him, and how did your friendship develop?

When I took a leave of absence from Pace University to work with Jackie Robinson on the Nelson Rockefeller campaign, I had the good fortune of meeting Lionel Hampton often. This happened because Lionel Hampton was a good friend of Nelson Rockefeller and Governor Rockefeller asked Lionel to play at many of his rallies, and he had many rallies around the state. I attended those rallies with Jackie, sometimes without Jackie. I would meet Lionel at various places around the state and got to know him very well. I would get up on the stage and we'd talk, we'd talk about the campaign. We would talk about the housing that the Governor helped him finance that was being built in Harlem. This Harlem housing was to be named after Lionel's beloved wife, and the Lionel Hampton houses are in Harlem today.

Lionel is a very, very warm friend who would greet you every time he saw you with a warm smile and a handshake. I absolutely loved his music. I would go anytime to hear it, especially "Hamp's Boogie-Woogie," which was one of my favorites. That friendship with Lionel lasted until his death a few years ago, and often we would go wherever Lionel was having a gig and we would visit and he would invite us backstage and he would greet us, and we had a grand reunion. That's when he met you, Kirin, for the first time and gave you a one hundred dollar bill because he had nothing else in his pocket to give you to remember him by!

Your work with the Office of Economic Opportunity led you to visit Indian reservations out west during the 1970's. Did you see any parallels between the situation of Native Americans and Afro-Americans?

During the 70's I was Chairman of the President's Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children, which was the advisory council for the Elementary, Secondary Education Act. The Council took trips to various parts of the country to view aspects of the education for our report to the President and Congress. We made a trip to South Dakota under the direction of one of our council members, Ben Reifel, a member of the Sioux tribe who was a former Congressman from the state of South Dakota. Ben had arranged with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to fly us in two small planes up to North Dakota to view some isolated Indian reservations.

We got onto two small planes, and there were Bureau of Indian Affairs employees who were pilots. We flew off to the north, and I sat up front with the pilot of my airplane. We chatted and talked as we flew north over the wasteland that is interior Dakotas, and I was amazed at the vitriolic racism against Indians that this Bureau of Indian Affairs staffer had. He thought they were no good, he thought that they were a drain, he thought they were not worthy people. He so amazed me that if I were not ten thousand feet up in the air and he piloting the airplane, I would have had a vitriolic response. But I was so amazed that a person working for the federal agency responsible for the welfare of Native Americans was a racist anti-Indian. And I thought about the Civil Rights Movement and I thought about the Indian Rights Movement which was going on at that time in Washington, D.C. with various demonstrations, that the Civil Rights Movement was a movement for all minorities in the country and the Indians had just

the same fight that we had and the same racism to overcome. It was an eye-opener for me.

Out of all your experiences during the 60's and 70's, which ones are most memorable to you and why?

Of course, the biggest was the March on Washington. It was the most impressive uprising of people I have ever seen, people with a common goal expressing themselves by going out, meeting in one place, and supporting the visionary leadership of Martin Luther King. But there's another thing that happened that I'm most proud of. During the early 60's I was guidance director at the Eastview Junior High School, and I was also on the board of the Urban League of Westchester. As chairman of the Urban League Youth Incentive Committee, I set up evening study halls in New Rochelle, Mt. Vernon and White Plains in church basements and housing projects. We had volunteer teachers coming out at night to work with students, and we had twenty to thirty students at each site. This was during the period of unrest, and we were getting children out. This went on for a year. Now, I was proud of that effort during the Civil Rights era.

Probably my greatest contributions to the Civil Rights Movement were the ideas that Governor Rockefeller implemented at the urging of Jackie Robinson. At the apex of the New York City riots, the Area Council that I chaired took two thousand children out of the city to summer camp. Hundreds of Head Start children were taken out of the city on Long Island Railroad train excursions and picnics. Almost one hundred Harlem children were transported to the Montreal World's Fair. Surplus state cars were refurbished and given to effective community groups in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant. Those initiatives are but examples of all our efforts in New York City. And remember, Area Councils in all of

the urban areas in New York State were implementing their unique programs.

What sort of work have you done since that time (after 1975)?

I went from the Office of Economic Opportunity to Pace University as Dean of the School of Continuing Education, and then from there I went to Eastern Connecticut State University as Dean of the School of Continuing Education from which I retired. But during that time I was a founding member of a national program for serving high school dropouts called WAVE, Inc. (work, achievement, and values in education), where we have programs working with high school dropouts and getting them job skills, getting them jobs, and getting them their high school equivalency diplomas. That program is still in existence, still working with young people and has made a contribution actually to the Civil Rights Movement.

After graduating from college, I returned to New Milford as a fifth grade teacher, then I became guidance director in White Plains, New York, then Deputy Director and Metropolitan Area Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity, then Dean of the School of Continuing Education at Pace University, then Dean of the School of Continuing Education at Eastern Connecticut State University, interrupted by thirteen months as Secretary of the Department of Community Affairs for the State of Delaware. After retirement from Eastern I have worked as academic advisor at Mitchell College and currently I am the Education Advisor for the Mohegan Indian Tribe.

Looking back on your life's work, what influence would you say that the Civil Rights Movement has had on you as an individual and on society in general?

The Civil Rights Movement really brought home to me the importance of providing equal opportunity for everybody. I grew up in a very different kind of experience for a Black person, and I didn't realize the harsh reality of segregation. I understood that Black people were going through hardships, but I never experienced it. The Civil Rights Movement brought me closer to the problems of my people. The other thing that happened is that the Civil Rights Movement opened up more job opportunities for Black people. For instance, my first job with the state of New York was dealing with the problems of poverty; and that program, the Office of Economic Opportunity, was a direct result of the Civil Rights Movement. That program grew out of the Civil Rights Movement and provided meaningful job opportunities for many, many minorities. The Civil Rights Movement moved me to look at life more broadly, not to be so narrow, not just reading things in the newspaper but to experience the problems that people had and the desire to move and help them.

The Civil Rights Movement gave me the opportunity to witness and participate in one of the most significant social and political changes in American history. These were changes that I had not expected to see in my lifetime. Because of the actions of a relatively small number of people led by Blacks, the whole country was forced to face the moral, social, and political inequalities that were deeply buried in American culture. The moral conscience of the country was aroused by the just cause of the Civil Rights Movement, and segregation and its accompanying evils could not withstand the national moral uprising.

Thank you for sharing your memories with me.

[Interviewer's Concluding Remarks: In conclusion, I feel that this interview gives great personal insight into the thoughts and experiences of an African-American man during the 1960s, and especially during the Civil Rights Movement. The fact that this extraordinary man is my father made the whole interviewing and learning process so much more intriguing because I felt that I could connect to the stories that he told me. Before conducting this interview I had not known many of the things that he shared with me, and I was truly amazed by his accomplishments and all of the things that he saw and experienced. It was an amazing opportunity for me to base my final paper on the words of my father, and it really brought home to me the meaning of the 1960's and the Civil Rights Movement.]

OWEN F. PEAGLER TIMELINE

November 28, 1931

Owen Fair Peagler, the tenth of ten children, is born to Robert James Peagler and Myrtle Elizabeth Gary Peagler in New Milford, CT.

March 1932

His father, Robert James Peagler, passes away.

1938 Enters 1st Grade at Main Street School, New Milford.

1946 Begins 9th Grade at New Milford High School and becomes a star athlete in track, basketball and football. Alternately elected class president and class vice-president each year of high school with fellow classmate Bill Jones. Becomes head life guard at Lake Candlewood in Lynn Deming State Park (a position he held for eight years).

1950 Graduates from New Milford High School and enrolls in Danbury State Teachers College (now Western Ct. State University) majoring in elementary education.

1951 Elected sophomore class president and treasurer of the Men's Athletic Association.

1952-54

Inducted into Phi Delta Kappa Honorary Fraternity in Education.

Inducted into Kappa Delta Pi Honorary Society in Education.

March 12, 1953

His mother, Myrtle E. Gary Peagler (Todd), passes away.

June 20, 1954

Graduates from Danbury State Teachers College with a B.S. in Science and Elementary Education.

Summer 1954

Attends Wesleyan University on a Science Fellowship.

September 1954

Begins teaching 5th grade at Main Street School, New Milford, Connecticut.

September 1955

Begins teaching 7th and 8th grade science and English at John Pettibone School in New Milford.

1955-57

Works with fellow teachers to start a chapter of the Junior Chamber of Commerce.

Becomes Warden of St. John's Episcopal Church.

Elected Vice-President of the New Milford Teachers Association.

Elected to the New Milford Republican Town Committee.

Becomes a member of the New Milford Civil Defense Police.

Plays ball on the "Wells Chicks" softball team.

July 27, 1957

Marries Joyce Hancock, his college sweetheart, in New Canaan, Ct.

September, 1957

Begins teaching 7th and 8th grade general science at Eastview Junior High School in White Plains, New York (1957-59).

October 1958

Awarded M.A. in Counseling and Pupil Personnel Management from New York University School of Education.

1959 Director of Guidance at Eastview Junior High School (1959- 66).

December 8, 1959

Daughter Catherine Ann Peagler is born in White Plains, New York.

1960 Aquatics Director, YMCA Day Camp, White Plains, N.Y.

1961 Directs swimming program for White Plains Recreation Department.

Co-authors a booklet on *Counseling for Educationally Disadvantaged Students* (New York State Dept of Education).

Early 1960's

Chairman, Public School Division, White Plains Community Chest.

Joins the Board of Directors of the Urban League of Westchester and the Carver Teenagers Center.

Consultant to New York State Education Dept. Bureau of Adult Basic Education.

Chairman of the Urban League Youth Incentive Committee. Adult education guidance counselor for the city of White Plains.

Director of the White Plains Welfare Education Program and a teacher in the Manpower Development Training Program.

Urban League of Westchester Awards for Community Service.

White Plains Community Chest Citations for Community Service (1961-63).

White Plains Junior Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Service Award.

August 28, 1963

Participates in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom as part of the Urban League.

1964 Chairman, Education Council, Urban League of Westchester, New York.

October 24, 1964

Named Young Man of the Year by the New York State Junior Chamber of Commerce (New York State Junior Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Service Award).

February 1965

Awarded Certificate of Advanced Study in Education in Guidance in Secondary Schools (6th Year Diploma) by New York University.

April 1965

Granted a 6-week leave of absence from the White Plains Public Schools to write a proposal for funding local programs through the Economic Opportunity Act, resulting in funding for Head Start, Neighborhood Youth Corps and a neighborhood center.

Summer 1965

Consultant to New York City Summer Poverty Programs.

October 29, 1965

Son, Robert Gary Peagler, is born in Hartsdale, New York.

March 17, 1966

Joins the staff of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity as Education Consultant.

September 1966

Appointed Deputy Director of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity and Director of the New York Metropolitan Area (1967-69).

April 10, 1969

Dean of Evening Administration at Pace University in New York City (1969-1972), also Dean of Continuing Education (1972-78).

1969 Develops the Bachelor of Professional Studies (BPS) degree and the Credit for Life Experience program at Pace.

Appointed Special Assistant for Urban Affairs to the Chairman of the New York Republican State Committee (1969).

1969 **Founding member of the Board of the 70001 Foundation (later called WAVE), a non-profit organization to help high school dropouts finish school and find and hold**

jobs, the beginning of a thirty-year association, first as a member of the Executive Committee, then as President, then as Chairman of the Board of Directors.

1970's

International Management Council Educator of the Year Award.

Begins working with Jackie Robinson, Assistant to Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Given a leave of absence by Pace University to work full-time with Robinson on Rockefeller's 1970 reelection campaign.

Offered the position of Commissioner of Human Rights by New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller but decides to stay at Pace.

Works with Dorothy Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women, to create a program primarily for Negro women at Pace.

Education and Training Consultant to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

New York State Regents Advisory Committee on Higher Education.

Pace University Black Students Organization Appreciation Award.

1972 Appointed by President Nixon to the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children.

1974 Appointed Chairman of the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children by President Ford (1974-78).

Designated "Honorary Texas Citizen."

1975 Title I Distinguished Service Award.

1976 National Coalition of Title I Parents Award.

Named a "Tennessee Volunteer" by Senator Bill Brock.

Named an "Honorary Citizen of New Orleans."

Member of New York delegation to the 1976 Republican National Convention.

Board of Directors, Future Business Leaders of America.

New York District Advisory Council, United States Small Business Administration (1976-78).

1976-78

New York State Regents Advisory Committee on Higher Education.

New York State Department of Education Advisory Committee on the Disadvantaged.

Westchester Citizens Screening Committee on the Family Court.

White Plains Community Chest Board of Directors.

White Plains Schools Committee Chair.

Board of Directors and Founder of the Day Care Council of Westchester County.

Director of the first New York State adult basic education program for people on welfare.

1978 Dean of the School of Continuing Education at Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, Ct.,
administering the evening classes, summer school and non-credit courses, developing an intersession program, offering courses in work places and with the National Guard and on the Sub Base and at-sea (1978-98).

1982 Tapped by Delaware Governor Pete DuPont to become Secretary of Community Affairs for the State of Delaware, taking a one-year leave of absence from ECSU.

1983 Delaware State Board of Education Order of Excellence.
Wilmington Housing Authority Certificate of Appreciation.
Returns to ECSU.

President of the Connecticut Association of Deans of Continuing Education.

1986 Moves from Willimantic to final home in Old Lyme, Ct.
May 19, 1986

Daughter Kirin Elizabeth Peagler is born in Manchester, Ct.
March 20, 1988

Marries Teresa R. Balough of Williamsburg, Va. in Bloomfield, Ct.

1980's-90's

Continues to expand the Continuing Education program at ECSU, instituting a Day for Women, Credit for Life Experience, the Bachelor of General Studies degree, and offerings at numerous off-campus locations.

Elected Chairman of the Board of 70001 Training and Employment Institute

Consultant to the Connecticut State University Central Administration.

Governor's Award for developing a higher education program for the Connecticut National Guard.

National Association of Continuing Higher Education Leadership and Service Award.

ECSU Black Students Organization Appreciation Awards.

1998 Retires from ECSU.

Association for Continuing Higher Education Emeritus Award.

1999 Inducted into New Milford High School Hall of Fame.
Works briefly with Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Ct. as a case worker.

2000 Accepts a one-year appointment on the student advisement team of Mitchell College, New London, Ct.

2002 Western Connecticut State University Centennial Award for Excellence.

2004-06

**Education Advisor for the Education Department of the
Mohegan Indian Tribe, Uncasville, Ct.**

2007 Suffers severe hemorrhagic stroke but recovers and goes
on to write and travel extensively.

November 13, 2015

Passes away at St. Francis Hospital, Hartford, Ct.,
surrounded by family and friends, following a second
hemorrhagic stroke.



Owen and Cody, DEP Boardwalk, Old Lyme, Ct., October 2015

THE ROBERT JAMES PEAGLER, SR. FAMILY



Robert James Peagler, Sr
(September 15, 1886-March 1932)



Myrtle Elizabeth Gary
(July 1, 1900-March 1953)



Mabel Beatrice (August 2, 1915)
(father: James Warner Farthing)



Robert James, Jr. (Dick)
(November 27, 1917)



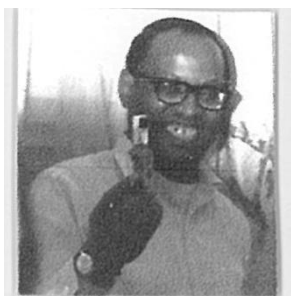
Frances Myrtila (Frankie)
(May 26, 1919)



William Everett (Bill)
(August 23, 1920)



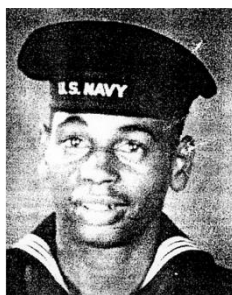
Frederick Douglas (Fred)
(March 23, 1922)



Charles Gary
(March 20, 1925)



Wilbur Irving (Wassie)
(June 26, 1926)



John Russell
(June 1, 1927)



Philip Wesley (Phil)
(November 14, 1929)



Owen Fair
(November 28, 1931)



Last known portrait of Myrt

