

*The Struggle for Equality in
“America’s Finest City”:*



A History of the San Diego NAACP

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The Early Years

In 1917, realizing the hunger for social justice among the one thousand African American residents of San Diego, W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the towering intellectuals of the past century, traveled from Los Angeles to San Diego as part of his western states tour on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Having previously surveyed the city in 1913, and as editor of *The Crisis* and a national board member, he undoubtedly was aware of the burning desire of certain individuals to form a branch of the NAACP. They included community leaders like reputed ex-slave and Bethel A.M.E. Church co-founder Solomon Johnson and businessman Edward W. Anderson, the first black in Southern California to file a racial discrimination lawsuit. Six years later Du Bois waxed poetic on his two mentally relaxing and organizationally fruitful visits to the city. He wrote:

"What wonderful and varied audiences they were (in California). . . . the thoughtful half thousand (listeners) down in San Diego. . . . (with) kindly and thrifty (black citizens), with pushing leaders. . . . Then come scenes---scenes so beautiful as to be indescribable: the lilies and geraniums of San Diego. . . . San Diego: hedges of gerania, fields of callas---star-eyed palms ---dark fingers of land pointing seaward and the clustered, smoking city."

Du Bois' positive impression of San Diego's black community was well founded. Following a meeting with some of these "thoughtful," "kindly and thrifty" souls he posed for a photo with members of the Organizing Committee of the San Diego NAACP. In December 1918, the national headquarters received an application for charter status



1917 Organizing Committee of the San Diego Branch NAACP (W.E.B. Du Bois standing third from left)

which was approved in early 1919, five years after the Los Angeles branch was established. The confidence and fighting spirit Du Bois saw in the character of black San Diegans and the 54 founding members of the branch was fully justified as these men and

women and their successors were responsible for a string of civil rights accomplishments stretching over nine decades, victories for which they could point to with pride.

Though significant progress had been made, in February 1924, then branch president Elijah J. Gentry, a “shoe shiner” and Sunday school supervisor at Calvary Baptist Church, forwarded a frank assessment of the racial climate in San Diego to NAACP field secretary James Weldon Johnson, the celebrated writer and poet who in 1919 had visited the city and recruited two judges, the city treasurer, and the chief of police to assist the new branch. “Colored people [in San Diego] are not allowed in restaurants, nor to drink soda water in drugstores, nor can they rent bathing suits at any bathing house or beach in this city,” Gentry revealed. He affirmed that despite the small number of blacks in the area and the perception of racial tolerance, this place was nonetheless “a very prejudice[d] city.” There was only limited Ku Klux Klan activity in the region in the first half of the last century, most of which was directed at Mexican immigrants. But famed actor Gregory Peck recalled that as a child living in La Jolla he witnessed a cross burning there on the lawn of a house rented by a black family. The closest thing to a lynching occurred in Ocean Beach in May 1923 when blacks, already warned at gunpoint to leave the neighborhood, had their home burned to the ground as they fled for their lives. They were saved by a policeman. A month prior, an elderly black woman in the same neighborhood who had been warned to leave had her house destroyed by fire. Not only was there just reason to complain about the situation within city limits, but as reported in 1926 in *The Western Appeal*, when branch officials looked across the border they protested against signs in Tijuana shops warning “colored not wanted.” However, they refused to sink into despair. In fact, just three years after Gentry’s grim communication to Johnson the branch scored another civil rights victory. On September 7, 1927 it gleefully fired off a telegram to officials in New York City that read: “The San Diego Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was victorious in the fight for admittance of colored girls as nurses in the San Diego County Hospital. . . .”



Edward W. Anderson

Edward W. Anderson (1871-1953), one of the most successful black businessmen of the past century, served multiple terms as branch president. His importance cannot be overstated. In 1897, when he and his wife were denied premium seating they had paid for at the Fisher Opera House, a chain of events were set in motion that resulted in a lawsuit that tested California’s newly enacted civil right law which established the right of citizens to enjoy “full and equal accommodation” to facilities offered to the public and levied a fine of \$50 for cases where racial discrimination was proven. Anderson won his

case but lost on appeal. Fast forward to 1923: with Anderson present to help guide it and emboldened with its two influential white board members--- Superior Court judges Spencer M. March and Alfred Haines who was also a former branch president---the branch successfully lobbied for an amendment to the law which added places which sold soft drinks and ice cream to the list of establishments prohibited from “unreasonable” discrimination based on race and increased the fine to \$100. The branch’s big victory was celebrated in the pages of *The Crisis* and, back home, Anderson’s name became legend. The law, amended and broadened once more in 1959 and today popularly known as the Unruh Civil Rights Act, has been used numerous times to challenge various instances of discrimination throughout the state.

Recognizing the growing significance of blacks’ westward migration, the national organization held the first Western Convention of the NAACP in Los Angeles in 1928. In 1932, John E. Craft became the local NAACP president. He and his wife were from Kentucky and had arrived in San Diego in 1910. John started work here as a janitor, later owned Crafty Cleaning Company, then ventured into real estate. His wife, Rebecca, a graduate of Kentucky State College and a former school teacher, also served as president of the branch and was considerably more successful in advocating for fair housing and employment. On her watch scholarship money was raised and at least one promising black co-ed at San Diego State College was awarded \$50.00. Founder of the Logan Heights Women's Civic League and active in Democratic Party politics, today she is best remembered for her efforts to pressure the city’s bigoted police chief to hire a black policeman, Jasper Davis in 1931, and for leading the charge to have the school board hire its first black teacher, Lorraine Van Lowe in 1942. Ironically, Rebecca fought to have a black teacher employed though she herself had long been denied such a position. During World War II she worked as a packer for the much publicized black-owned Pacific Parachute Company, and she counseled and planned activities for black soldiers through the USO. At age 58, Rebecca died of cancer on December 6, 1945.



John and Rebecca Craft

In the pre-war years members of the San Diego NAACP had the opportunity to meet with visiting dignitaries and officials from the national headquarters, among them organizer James Weldon Johnson in 1919; NAACP co-founders Mary Burnett Talbert in 1921 and Mary White Ovington in 1922; the lone black Congressman Oscar DePriest in 1929; NAACP field secretary William Pickens in 1930; and the NAACP’s brilliant legal counsel Charles H. Houston and *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist George Schuyler in 1936.

Consistently acknowledged by headquarters for its exceptional fundraising, fiscal health, and for signing up new members, in 1934 regional director Daisy Lampkin referred to the San Diego NAACP as “one of the most faithful of the NAACP branches,” and recognized that it had fought “for a number of years against racial discrimination in this naval port, and has won the respect of the community in this effort.”

The Postwar Era

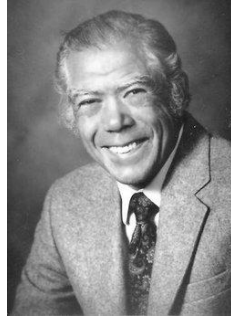
Testifying in Los Angeles in 1952 at a "Communist conspiracy trial," a government-paid informant recounted how his San Diego branch of the Communist Party conducted anti-racial discrimination pickets at a chain grocery store and movie theaters in 1945 and 1946. He said that then San Diego NAACP board member George Lohr, a German-American Communist organizer in the county, had encouraged the branch's participation in the picketing but that the party had failed to attract any black recruits. He further stated that the branch's president terminated participation in picketing so as not to be associated with alleged subversives.



Picketing the Victory Theatre on Imperial Avenue, 1945

The undeserved reputation of a branch infiltrated by radicals like Lohr and socialist professor Harry C. Steinmetz did not deter its most historically significant leader to date: Jack Johnson Kimbrough, a gentlemanly, refined dentist from Lexington, Mississippi who arrived here from UC-Berkeley in 1935 and elected president in 1947. Humiliated and angered at having been refused a snack at a downtown “greasy spoon,” Kimbrough and Gordon H. Stafford, a white integrationist and branch board member, methodically devised plans for redress that made them pioneers in anti-discrimination tactics at the dawn of the civil rights revolution. Taking full advantage of that amended state law the branch was responsible for in 1923, Kimbrough recruited a group of black and white students at San Diego State College, carefully rehearsed them to act as customers and witnesses targeting white-owned restaurants where they fully expected the black students would be denied service. The already seated white students would observe what transpired for testimony in court that was sure to follow. Using this innovative scheme they filed and won 31 of its 32 lawsuits against the restaurants, usually with court awards to plaintiffs of \$300 per case that was split between the students and their attorney. Kimbrough followed up this triumph with the desegregation of the Grant Grill at the prestigious U.S. Grant Hotel in 1948—another story filled with tension and drama that screams for media attention. Similarly, as reported in the August 1948 issue of

Ebony magazine, Stafford, who personally participated in and arranged non-discriminatory compliance tests with his racially mixed crew of daring individuals, educated restaurant owners about California's anti-bias law and successfully sued those who refused to abide by it.



Jack J. Kimbrough

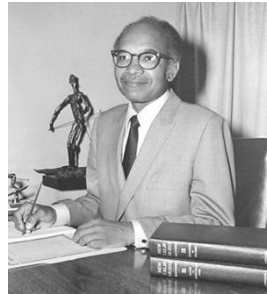
Kimbrough's genius as a civil rights tactician aside, he could not reverse the NAACP's precipitous slide from prominence in the community that began several years before he took the helm. In a recent article in *California History* by Texas A&M history professor Albert Broussard, half a page is devoted to explaining why in the 1940s and the early 1950s the local NAACP became "inactive," "weak and ineffectual," that the membership "plummeted" (from 1,803 members in 1946 to 240 in 1951); and there remained the perception that the organization may have been contaminated by subversive elements. Rev. John J. Lewis, pastor of St. Paul's Methodist Church, wrote to NAACP executive secretary Walter White: "I have been elected President of the San Diego Branch of the NAACP for 1948. Our Branch here is in a very bad condition, but I will do all in my power to make it one of the best in the nation."



One of the few bright moments in this period happened in March 1949 when board member Gordon H. Stafford sent a letter to *Time* magazine chastising it for featuring a watermelon-chomping black caricature in a windshield wiper advertisement, compelling this leading news magazine's advertising editor to send a written apology to NAACP headquarters in New York City. But Rev. Lewis was not able to achieve his ambition of reviving the branch during his tenure and the organization continued to drift. The branch's failings must have been painfully felt by Kimbrough who by 1953 had moved on and co-founded the San Diego Urban League. Prof. Broussard convincingly argued that it was in the postwar period that the San Diego Urban League eclipsed the San Diego NAACP as the most important group agitating for civil rights, anti-discrimination, and economic uplift efforts on behalf of blacks in the region.

Mid-Century Resuscitation

The competence of the organization had slipped so rapidly in the postwar years that by the early 1950s it virtually disintegrated and had to be “reactivated” in April 1956. Membership soon rose to 600, with 35 persons in the youth division and 4 prospective life members. Fortunately, by the late 1950s there were four black attorneys practicing in the city. Two actively assisted the branch. Sherman Smith served on the executive board and his law partner, Alpha “Al” Montgomery Sr., was eulogized thusly in the *San Diego Union* in 2004:



Alpha Montgomery Sr.

“Hundreds of blacks, frustrated by segregated housing in postwar San Diego looked to (him) for a piece of the American dream. As one of the city’s first black trial lawyers, he navigated his clients around social obstacles and into neighborhoods where property ownership had been denied to nonwhites. One of his first successes in the early 1950s, was in Valencia Park. Later, he provided the legal impetus that forced the San Diego, U.S. Grant and El Cortez hotels to rent public rooms to blacks for meetings and social functions. . . Judge Montgomery became a legal ally of the NAACP in championing civil rights.”

The San Diego NAACP signaled that it was recovering from its long malaise in 1955 when it successfully petitioned the County Board of Supervisors to officially honor the memory of beloved black pioneer Nathan Harrison by changing the name of the road on Palomar Mountain called “Nigger Nate Grade” to “Nathan Harrison Grade Road.”

The branch also began a tradition of holding solidarity meetings in response to civil rights outrages (e.g., jury acquittal of Emmett Till’s murderers, the assassinations of Wharlest Jackson and Medgar Evers in Mississippi, Boston school busing violence, et al.). The first branch NAACP Fashion Show fundraiser was held at the Lafayette in 1956. As the decade closed members were preparing to picket companies in the city whose operations in the segregated South mistreated blacks.



1956 fashion show fundraiser, Lafayette Hotel

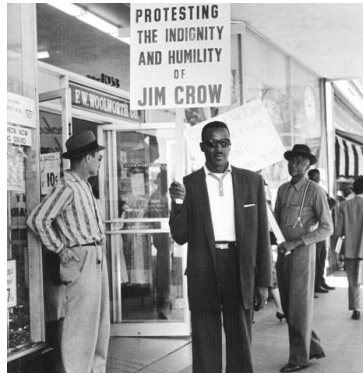
Resurgence in the '60s and '70s

The decline of the local NAACP in the 1940s lasting into the early 1950s was followed by its resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s. In March 1960, spokesman Ted Patrick (later known nationally as the controversial “father of cult deprogramming”) was interviewed by the press when the branch picketed downtown department stores S. H. Kress and F.W. Woolworth. Among notables who spoke to NAACP audiences were Vice Admiral Samuel L. Gravely, football star Jim Brown, NAACP national president Kivie Kaplan, and California State Superintendent of Education Wilson Riles. In December 1964, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins came to town and denounced California’s Proposition 14, a measure designed to nullify the Rumsford Fair Housing Act that was overwhelmingly approved by voters but later declared unconstitutional. The following year Wilkins slammed the San Diego school board’s handling of race-related matters which made newspaper headlines and forced board officials to address problems in the district. On March 29, 1964, San Diego NAACP president Hartwell W. Ragsdale ordered a limousine to do an airport pick-up of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. because, he said: “Having Dr. King here had meaning to me. It was the greatest thing associated with my life.” On a sweep through West Coast states to bring attention to widespread housing discrimination, a rather exhausted King stopped off at branch headquarters at 2601 Imperial Avenue to meet with Ragsdale and his staff. They discussed a fair housing bill pending in Congress. After speaking to an estimated 3,500 people at two venues in the city, branch officials escorted King back to Lindbergh Field.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Notwithstanding Jack Kimbrough's brilliant maneuvering to desegregate a U.S. Grant Hotel restaurant, reports of racial discrimination there were recorded over the next twenty years but essentially ceased on the night of January 30, 1968 when the San Diego NAACP, lead by dynamic president Tom Johnson, confronted hotel management over its sorry history of hiring black workers. Johnson threatened to have the National Council of Churches cancel a scheduled conference if the hotel failed to agree to demands to improve its hiring practices. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, management was struck by Johnson's blinding candor and miraculously converted to true believers in equal opportunity in employment.



Picketing downtown department store

At the onset of the 1970s President Charles E. Johnson, a trailblazing Republican business executive who was the first black to own an FM radio station in California, received a recommendation for a position in the Nixon Administration. His successor, Charles E. Reid, announced in early 1971 that the San Diego NAACP planned to survey hotels and motels in the city and asked the Republican National Committee to refrain from renting rooms for its conventioners at those places that had an abysmal equal opportunity employment record. That summer Reid confirmed that, in "an effort to combat underemployment among Negroes," the branch participated in a federally funded program to train people to use the computer to create an employment data bank. In 1974 the branch staged its first annual awards banquet; and in 1975 it held a ceremony to honor former branch leaders and life members.



Approaching a Century of Activism

In the 1980s the San Diego NAACP offered financial and legal assistance to Mr. Sagon Penn who was involved in an altercation with police that resulted in death; under the capable leadership of the late Judge Daniel Weber it was out front and on the winning

side of the fight for district-wide elections; and, during the tenure of President Curtis Moring, it filed a racial discrimination complaint with the FCC that temporarily halted the operating license renewal of KFMB-TV. In recent years the branch joined with other community groups to demand a thorough investigation of the police shooting of unarmed former pro football player Demetrius DuBose; observed the naming of two elementary schools in honor of former presidents Drs. Walter Porter, who helped launch the city's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Parade, and Jack Kimbrough; co-sponsored a rally at Gov. Schwarzenegger's downtown office in support of Assembly Bill 1531 to mitigate the harmful effects of California's high school exit exam; arranged the local version of the ACT-SO Competition; focused attention on instances of racial profiling and police brutality; intervened in the Associated General Contractors of America v. California Department of Transportation lawsuit; convened numerous community forums to educate the public on a wide range of issues featuring experts and politicians; and took a stand on many matters of local concern like San Diego State University's revised admissions policy, redlining, domestic violence, and issues of concern to Latinos.



2011 Branch President Lei-Chala I. Wilson

Over the past few decades the branch had to contend with such challenges as powerful conservative administrations at both the national and state level; anti-affirmative action and anti-minority ballot initiatives; an ambitious renegade as president of the local Urban League; and NAACP national headquarters blamed for declining support, resource-depleting lawsuits, scandal and mismanagement. But through it all the San Diego branch of the NAACP has persevered and been a reliable and forceful voice for the abused and the disenfranchised, ever faithful to the formidable but necessary mission its proud founders undertook ninety-two years ago.

San Diego NAACP Past Presidents

William T. Hendrey
The Honorable Alfred Haines
Charles H. Dodge
Elijah J. Gentry
Dennis V. Allen
John E. Craft
Rebecca Craft
Edward W. Anderson
Richard E. Roundtree, Esq.
Theodore M. Brinson
Rev. Lloyd W. McCoy
Marvin J. Porter
Claude D. Jolly
Dr. Edward A. Bailey
Mercer Z. Ray
Dr. Jack J. Kimbrough
Rev. John J. Lewis
Willie M. Roberson
Ray Frazier
Rev. Therion E. Cobbs
Ruth A. Green
Dr. James Edward Lee
Hartwell W. Ragsdale
Ernest J. Roberson Jr.
Dr. Walter J. Porter
James E. McCann
Dr. Harold E. Burt
Tom Johnson
Charles E. Johnson
Charles E. Reid
Dr. Charles W. Thomas
Sonja R. Reid
Gerri A. Warren
Rev. Robert Ard
Theodore W. McNeal
Mamie Louise Greene

Curtis Moring
The Honorable Daniel Weber
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Frank Jordan
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