

The Parker Family Part 3 – History Makers

Alton and Evelyn Parker's daughter, Freida, also made numerous contributions to the community. Shortly before she graduated from Hotel Dieu of the St. Joseph School of Nursing in Windsor, Black Canadian women were barred from attending nursing school. As a result of this discrimination, the case was taken to the Ontario Human Rights Commission and in 1948 Colleen L. Campbell and Marian V. Overton became the first Black women to graduate from Hotel Dieu. It was not long after, in 1950, that Freida and Cecile Wright would graduate, becoming the third and fourth Black students to accomplish this.

Unfortunately, they also experienced discrimination firsthand. A week before graduating, forty-two nurses from Hotel Dieu, including Freida and Cecile, went out to celebrate at Thomas' Inn on Riverside Drive. The owner, Bertha Thomas, asked Freida and Cecile to leave because she did not want to "disturb" her other guests in the restaurant. They left without saying anything, but when Mayor Art Reaume, whose daughter was among the forty-two nurses, found out about the incident he said, "Let those who have been guilty of this most un-Christian act repent." Additionally, a columnist R.M. Harrison criticized Bertha Thomas, saying it was ironic that she kicked out the same two nurses who cared for her while she was hospitalized. While in the hospital, she did not mind the treatment they provided, but took issue with them coming to her hotel.

Freida has said that during her 3 years of training she performed numerous tasks. She lived in residence at the Jeanne Mance building, which was next to the present location of Hotel Dieu and would rise at 5:30am and begin her work at the hospital by 7am. She would run errands, clean rooms, make beds, assist with baby deliveries, all while attending class. Did you know Freida also had to stencil the words "St. John's Toilet Paper" on each roll of toilet paper

for the St. John's wing of the hospital, which was a wing for Windsor's VIPs? She also patched rubber gloves and sharpened syringes. She said that working at the hospital opened her eyes to the ups and downs of life. It taught the forty-two nurses not to judge and to see the good in people. Freida mentioned one example that involved her mother making gingerbread cookies for all the "street people" on the second-floor ward. Her father even delivered the cookies to the hospital. She said experiences such as this shaped her life.

Freida's achievements are no surprise considering her academic excellence. While attending Patterson Collegiate, she won the girls' public speaking contest, in addition to awards for scholastics and athletics. She also graduated as class president of the entire student body, which was the first time that someone of African descent claimed that honour. The experience she gained as class president most likely transferred to her role as the secretary-treasurer of the Windsor and District Institute of Human Rights, which was an organization that drew attention to the problems of minority groups. While in this organization, Freida worked alongside executive members, Alex Maxwell and the late Dr. Howard McCurdy.

Freida married Eugene Steele who was the first Black firefighter in Windsor. What an amazing family of history makers! He was born in North Buxton on October 25, 1929 to Charles Irving/Ervin (NOTE: the spelling of Charles's middle name is not consistent in documentation) and Laura Belle (Travis) Steele. Charles was born on June 12, 1900 in North Buxton to James E. Steele and Martha Harding. Charles' birth record also lists the family's residence as Lot 7, Concession 6, and lists James' occupation as a farmer. The birth record for Laura Belle Travis lists her date of birth as November 25, 1903 in Chatham Township, but her last name is spelt as "Travese." Laura Belle's birth record also lists her parents as James Travis and Anna Eliza Robinson, but some sources say Robertson, such as Laura's marriage record. Charles and Laura

married on August 10, 1923. At the time of their marriage, Charles (23 years old) worked as a farmer, while Laura was a domestic and 20 years old.

Charles and Laura had four children: James Ervine, Olive (born December 17, 1926), Eugene Wilbur, and Dennis (born May 12, 1940). James Ervine married Ione Chase and they had one child, James Stanley who became a lawyer and had two children: Laura and Gregory. James Ervine's sister Olive married John Olbey who was a millwright. According to Dianne Steele-Beer, Olive was the first person of colour to be hired as a customer service cashier at the A&P in Chatham. She was hired on November 23, 1963. Olive had three children: Craig, Pamela and Michelle. Olive's brother Dennis had six children: Renee, Bradley, Curtis, Ryan, Jordan and Adam.

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 4 where we will share more about Eugene, Freida and their children.