

# Racial Discrimination in Oregon



State Representative Mark Hatfield signs the Public Accommodation Law in 1953. NAACP President Otto Rutherford and his wife Verdell on the far right. Community activists organized an Oregon chapter of the NAACP in 1914. Two years later, the group blocked the screening of "The Birth of a Nation," and in the 1920s defeated a city ordinance which would have made it a crime for whites and Blacks to intermingle in public places of amusement such as dance halls. During the 1930s and 1940s the NAACP fought segregation in schools, labor unions, and housing. Its most important goal, however, was to secure a Public Accommodation Law ending segregation in restaurants and other public places. The Oregon bill was finally signed into law in 1953. Comparable laws had been passed by Washington and California a half century earlier.

Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society

"In terms of the Golden West, I think people have to understand it was the product of a very particular time and place in American racial history. The Golden West was essentially a byproduct of a segregated society. It could not have existed, it would not have been created in a fully integrated society."

Darrell Millner



Dining Car Cooks on the Southern Pacific Railroad, 1916.  
Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society

“Union membership opened to Blacks only after a very hard fight....Every case required litigation.”

“When we first formed our Union, we met secretly. On the car we never did recognize one another or speak to one... because had the company known about it, you would have been discharged...We were affiliated with the Cooks and Waiters and Barbers....Local 401, was all Black.”

Otto Rutherford

“Down on Sixth street...Some of the places had instead of a sign...a great big 'NO', they had a dog...a Black guy looking like Little Black Sambo, and...an Indian, and they had that in the window. If you couldn't read, you could see the picture. And that's down in Skid Row!”

Otto Rutherford



Prior to 1900, according to interviews in the early 1930s with George Hardin and I. Fuller, "Negroes patronized white merchants instead of their own. They went to white theatres, restaurants, saloons, hotels, and lodging houses." However, in 1906 the Oregon Supreme Court ruled that businesses such as theatres could refuse to accommodate customers on the basis of race. Thereafter, Oregon became a segregated or Jim Crow state.

Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society. Quoted in Daniel G. Hill, "The Negro in Oregon: A Survey," M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1932