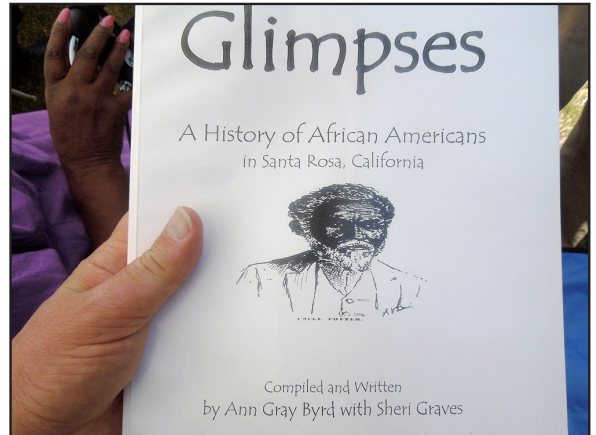


RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

African American History in Sonoma County

by Susan Teel - 2014

Ann Gray Byrd is a retired Baptist minister and longtime rights activist of Santa Rosa. She is the author of, "Glimpses: A History of African Americans in Santa Rosa". I was fortunate to check out the only copy that is available to the public through the Sonoma County Library.



This book includes information about African America history in Sonoma County. "California in the 1850's was filled with the harsh reality of discrimination and racial bigotry. Segregation was the law, and people of color, whether former slave, Chinese, even some Native-Americans could not vote, could not testify in court, could have property taken from them at any time without any court proceedings, and without freedom papers, could be taken at any time by slave hunters."

There were many black slaves that came to California with their masters, and they had high hopes of earning enough money to purchase their freedom. They were among the first to reach Sonoma County. Ann Byrd writes, "Santa Rosa was created a racist town, but the sting of racism was felt, first, by the Chinese because there were more of them than any other ethnic group.

Intolerance of black Americans was more subtle and insidious." The 1850 census lists only two "Negroes" in Sonoma County. The 1860 census lists 20 "Negroes" in Santa Rosa. "The Sonoma Democrat, probably backed with Confederate money in preparation for the Civil War, was published and written by Virginia-born Thomas Thompson. It is difficult to know whether the newspaper reflected the feelings of the community, but indications are that it did. A competing newspaper, the Santa Rosa Times, later the Republican, established after the Civil War, took the same hard line against Abolitionists and against Negro suffrage." There was little change in the attitude of the "Negro" during the 1870s. There are sporadic reports of Negroes being permitted to vote where, "radicals were in charge". The 1880 census lists 60" Negroes". An article written in the Santa Rosa Republican editorial section stated, "colored immigrants are to stay away from California because they were not fit to do battle with the self-asserting people of the state".

In 1890 the " Negro" population decreased to 45 and the 1900 census record shows the Negro population to be 32. Early Negro immigrants died and no young people found their way to Santa Rosa. "There had been virtually no blacks in Santa Rosa through the first half of the 20th century. "Those who grew up in Santa Rosa in the 1920's and 30's talk about Lucy Moore as if she were the only black person they knew." In 1953, Ann Byrd's father, the late Gilbert Gray, along with O. Platt Williams secured 300 memberships and the Sonoma County Branch of the NAACP received its National Charter.

Mr. Gray was the only Santa Rosa participant in the 1963 civil rights march in Washington, during which Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I have a Dream speech". Ann Byrd's book includes an article that appeared in the Press Democrat on September 30, 1997 about Melba Pattillo Beals, one of The Little Rock Nine in 1957 who was "adopted" by Kay and Georgia McCabe of Santa Rosa in 1959 when Melba was forced to flee Little Rock. The article was written during the 40th anniversary celebration of the Little Rock Nine event.