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## Interview with Dennis G. Payne

Jasse Chimuku

*Portland State University*

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HISTORY

DENNIS G. PAYNE March 15, 2010

Interviewer and transcriber: Jasse Chimuku  
Edited by Dennis G. Payne, May 28, 2010

*J.C.: Hello, this is Jasse Chimuku and I will be interviewing Mr. Dennis G. Payne. The date of the interview was February 23, 2010; the time was 2:04 pm.*

*So, Mr. Dennis Payne, I will be interviewing you. Questions that will be put in the Black History Department's archives and PSU Library. We are creating oral histories of individuals of Portland's civil rights period.*

*I would like to start by asking you about your family history. You're parents and grandparents, and where they came from and how they migrated here?*

D.P. First of all, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to tell my story about being Black on PSU's campus in the late 60's; it's been a long time coming, and thank God for sister Avel Gordly and her leadership in starting this project.

My family came to Oregon in 1941 from Hardin, Montana. My father and mother had met in 1939 in Hardin. My dad was traveling out west from Missouri, looking for work and met my mother's father, John Wesley English. My grandfather was befriended by my dad and their friendship led to my dad marrying his daughter, my mother.

My dad's family is traced back to his grandfather, Leonard Payne. Leonard Payne is traced back to 1860 when he is identified on census records as property on Mr. Payne's farm as a slave. Leonard Payne was married (you have Mary Agnes Dameron crossed out) and they had nine (9) children. My grandfather, Joshua, was the fifth child.

Grandpa Joshua married Mary Agnes Dameron, and dad was their only son. Orvale Joshua was born in 1916. My grandmother died in 1920 and his grandmother in Clifton Hills, Missouri, raised my dad.

My mother, Ethel C. English, was born in 1924 in Moorcroft, Wyoming. Her father, John Wesley English, was a Black cattle hand (cowboy) and her mother was a white divorcée with four white children. My mother had one older Black sister, Lucy,

and a younger Black brother, Edward. My grandparents had to move from Wyoming because of their interracial marriage and ended up in Montana.

*J.C. How many brothers and sisters do you have?*

D.P. I have one older sister, Arvella (Pat), two older brothers, David and Richard, were born in Salem, Oregon in 1942 and 1944.

I was born in Hubbard, Oregon in 1948, and my younger brother and sister were born in Portland, Oregon, in 1949 and 1952.

*J.C. What elementary and high schools did you attend?*

D.P. I was raised in Portland and went to Eliot Grade School. Eliot was opened in 1954 as the new school for black students living in the Steel and Broadway Bridge area, where today the Memorial Coliseum, Rose Quarter Arena and Portland Public School District building are located.

After Eliot, I followed my older brothers to Benson High School (1962-1966). At Benson, I served as freshman class vice-president and sophomore, junior and senior class presidents. Played football, basketball and ran track. I was also elected Secretary of State for Oregon's Beaver Boy State program my junior year summer, 1965.

*J.C. After high school, what did you do?*

D.P. After high school, I stayed home for one year, continuing to work at the print shop downtown that I had worked at during my senior year at Benson. My major at Benson was graphic arts and printing. I was let go by the shop the next spring, because the shop was unionized and Blacks were not allowed in the union. Thereafter, I went to work at Montgomery Ward department store as a janitor and was transferred to work at the warehouse as a warehouseman during the summer.

In the fall of 1967, I enrolled at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. My older brother, Richard, had attended and graduated the year before. During fall semester, the Black Power/Civil Rights movement arrived on Oregon college campuses, and as one of three Blacks on Willamette's campus, I carried forth the struggle. There were several instances at my dorm and on campus thereafter, and I was encouraged to leave and move back to Portland.

*J.C. What happened when you came back to Portland?*

D.P. I moved back to Portland in December and enrolled at Portland Community College for winter term 1968. PCC was located near Portland State University in Shattuck Hall. At PCC, we followed and modeled what Black students at PSU were starting to do and decided to form our own Black Student Union (BSU). During spring term, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed and everyone was in shock. PCC administration was very supportive of our efforts and worked to improve our positions on campus. Fall term 1968 I transferred to PSU and joined its BSU.

*J.C. When you came to PSU, with the Black Power movement continuing to advance, how were you able to maintain your focus on studies?*

D.P. Well, that's an interesting question, I think what really happened was that I just became wrapped up in the struggle for Black liberation and tried to incorporate learning more about Black studies into my college education.

Here in Oregon, we were so isolated from the rest of the country and the Black Power movement and we could not believe the images on TV showing Black people being beaten by police and attacked by dogs.

*J.C. OK, tell me about how things were at PSU during this time?*

D.P. PSU was an interesting place in the late 60's. They had in 1968 just selected a new college president and elected their first Black student body president.

When we (BSU) started raising questions of relevancy of class offerings, guest speakers and services offered Black students and the Black community, the first thing the whites did was run to their Black student body president, Andrew Haynes, a graduate student, and ask him for his opinions. Of course, his opinion was that "there was no need for any changes and that the school didn't need to recognize the BSU." With Andy and his positions, PSU was a very interesting place. Black students did not know Andy and surely were not going to let their needs be denied because of him. Andy was from somewhere back east and we were from the local community. We represented the aspirations of the community and were not willing to compromise our positions on creating new opportunities for Black students at PSU. We now had over 50 Black students on campus, had formed our own student group, BSU, and we focused on making changes that would represent Black people. We were making demands that would change PSU for years to come and improve the lives of Black people in Portland.

Also, PSU was going through its own changes, too. A new president had been selected, Gregory Wolfe, a former US State Department official, and the Vietnam War protest movement was growing on campus.

*J.C. What were the changes that the BSU demanded be made at PSU?*

D.P. The first demand was that all planning by PSU for the Black community be stopped and the BSU be allowed to review and amend them to meet our standards. We also demanded a final veto over anything involving Black people.

*J.C. Right.*

D.P. All this was very historic for this time period. This was our golden opportunity to make meaningful changes to address issues affecting the Black community.

We discovered that dollars from Student Incidental Fees were being used for non-student needs, and joined other students to demand that this practice be stopped and the money be reallocated to support student groups. We demanded that the Student Activities Office form a Black Cultural

Affairs Board to allow us to bring Black speakers, playwrights and others to our campus.

We also demanded that coursework be developed to represent our history, cultural and contributions to society, Black Studies. We also demanded Black faculty members be hired and that they and their coursework's be also offered in the Black community, Albina Presence.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship Fund of Oregon was also started to support Black students' opportunities to attend college.

*J.C. This ends our interview. The time is 2:45 PM.*