

# BLACK DAYTONA BEACH IN THE 1940s

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A community at a crossroads: Part 1

*Editor's note: This commentary was originally written in "Midway: Portrait of a Daytona Beach Neighborhood, 1942" (Southeast Museum of Photography, 1999). It featured the photography of Gordon Parks.*

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*GUEST COMMENTARY*

Gordon Parks' 1943 photographs of Daytona Beach reveal a poor but proud and cohesive African-American community at a crossroads – still largely excluded from White America, yet in the midst of the momentous changes being wrought by a world war that initiated fundamental changes in American race relations and the status of African-Americans. However, in 1943, most of those changes lay in the future, and racial segregation remained firmly in place.

Daytona had not always been so rigidly segregated. During the late 19th century, several of Daytona's more prominent African-Americans owned homes and shops in the center of town, along with Whites.

## **Black representation**

Daytona's Blacks were active politically during this period as well. Two African-Americans, John Tolliver and Thaddeus Gooden, were among the town's 26 electors who voted to incorporate the town in 1876. In 1898, Daytona elected Joseph Brook Hankerson, a Black barber who owned a shop on Beach Street, to the city commission.

By the opening decade of the 20th century, however, racial segregation had enveloped the town of Daytona, which merged in 1926 with the beachside towns of Seabreeze and Daytona Beach to form the city of Daytona Beach.

African-Americans, who comprised over 52 percent of Daytona's 3,350 residents in 1905, were concentrated west of the Florida East Coast Railroad in the three adjacent neighborhoods of Midway, Waycross, and Newtown.

## **Northern influence**

Even with the onset of rigid segregation, Daytona's racial climate remained milder than that of most other Southern cities. The majority of Daytona's original White settlers of the 1870s and 1880s were from what had been abolitionist strongholds of the North, including Ohio, New York, Michigan, and Massachusetts. The arrival of Flagler's East Coast Railroad in 1888,

making the town accessible to wealthy visitors wishing to escape winter, resulted in continued Northern influence.

Howard Thurman, the renowned Black theologian who was raised in Daytona during the early 20th century, concluded that the moderating influence of these turn-of-the-century snowbirds “made contact between the races less abrasive than it might have been otherwise.”

### **Bethune’s influence**

The presence of Mary McLeod Bethune and her school also had a positive effect on relations between the races in Daytona.

In 1904, Bethune founded the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls.

Located in Midway, the school quickly endeared itself to moderate elements in the White community by emphasizing domestic and industrial training and “Negro uplift.”

After receiving a letter from Bethune in the spring of 1905, the city commission unanimously passed a resolution that endorsed the school. Over the next several years, the commission approved installation of storm sewers and cements sidewalks in Midway, and employed Black policemen to patrol Midway and Waycross.

Bethune soothed White anxieties by inviting visitors to come to her school and see “The Booker T. Washington Idea of Education Demonstrated” and to hear the “Old Plantation Melodies and Jubilee Songs.”

In 1923, the school merged with Cookman Institute of Jacksonville to form the co-educational Bethune-Cookman College. At first, the college offered only high school and two-year college diplomas. It awarded its first baccalaureate degrees in 1943.

### **Racial oasis**

The college was an oasis of integration during the first half of the 20th century. Sunday afternoon programs were held in the chapel, and Mrs. Bethune made a point of inviting prominent members of the White community to attend.

White guests would invariably enter the chapel and instinctively search for the “White only” section. From the stage, Bethune would beckon the visitors to “come right in and be seated anywhere; we have no reserved seating at my college.”

Besides acquiring support from Daytona’s White moderates, Bethune provided leadership and inspiration to the town’s Black community. Howard Thurman noted that “The very presence of the school, and the inner strength and authority of Mrs. Bethune, gave boys like me a view of the possibilities to be realized in some distant future.”

### **Black hospital**

For many years, Bethune’s school also provided the only hospital care for African-Americans in

the Daytona vicinity. Built prior to World War I, McLeod Hospital existed until 1931, when a “Negro annex” of the public hospital, Halifax, opened nearby.

Not until 1948 could Blacks be treated at the main Halifax Hospital facility, and even then they were relegated to the hospital’s “Negro wing.” Halifax would finally integrate during the 1960s.

Anchored by Bethune-Cookman, Midway became the center of Daytona’s African-American middle class during the first half of the 20th century. By 1924, its main business district stretched for several blocks along Second Avenue, and benefited from a captive clientele – the byproduct of rigid segregation.

Besides Bethune’s school, Midway’s main thoroughfare contained three physicians, one dentist, two churches, and an assortment of 41 small businesses. Since African-Americans were denied service in White eateries, Black restaurants had become especially prominent along Second Avenue; nine of them operated in 1924.

In 1944, Second Avenue contained approximately the same number of Black-owned businesses, including nine restaurants. There were some new additions, however; a vocational school joined Bethune-Cookman College, as did a “colored” chapter of the American Red Cross, a Black Knights of Pythias Hall, an additional church, and a terminal for the all-Black municipal bus line.

Despite Midway’s small but thriving middle class, most Blacks during the 1920s and 1930s held menial jobs in the city’s hotels and private residences, or worked as laborers in the lumber yards, railroad and turpentine camps, and on the farms and in the citrus orchards that dotted the area.

### **Boom and bust**

Daytona’s economy thrived during the early and mid-1920s, thanks to the Florida real estate and tourist boom. During these years, both Blacks and Whites flocked to the city. Between 1920 and 1924, Daytona’s population increased more than 61 percent, with Blacks accounting for almost one-half of the city’s more than 10,000 residents in 1924.

As a result of Daytona’s merger with Seabreeze and Daytona Beach in 1926, the new, consolidated city of Daytona Beach boasted a population of about 15,000, one-third of which was Black.”

Prospects were high, in early 1926, for continued growth and prosperity in Daytona Beach, but the land boom collapsed later that year, and while the economy partially recovered in 1927 and 1928, the onset of the Great Depression at the end of 1929 marked the beginning of hard economic times for Daytona Beach and the rest of the nation.

Suffering in the African-American community was especially acute. By the fall of 1932, the Black unemployment rate in Daytona Beach was twice that of Whites. Furthermore, Black families on relief received only about three-quarters of the financial aid that White families received.

During the lean years of the late 1920s and 1930s, Daytona Beach's population continued to grow, but more slowly than during the early 1920s. By 1930, 16,598 resided in the city – 33 percent of whom were Black.

### **Leading the way**

Despite the hardships, Black Daytonans endured during the great Depression, they fared better in many respects than African-Americans elsewhere in the South. Mary McLeod Bethune and the city's mayor, Edward H. Armstrong, had much to do with the relative good fortune of Daytona's African-American community during the Depression years.

Bethune's rising stature within President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration enabled her to furnish material benefits to Bethune-Cookman College and Daytona Beach.

In 1935, President Roosevelt appointed the esteemed educator to the advisory board of the National Youth Administration (NYA) and as special advisor to the president on minority affairs.

The following year, Roosevelt named Bethune to head the newly created Office of Minority Affairs within the NYA, a position that she held until the NYA was disbanded in 1944.

Bethune thus became the highest-ranking Black official in the federal government, and became the leader of the "Black Cabinet" of African-American New Dealers who advised Roosevelt on racial matters.

The National Youth Administration funded work and educational programs for young men and women aged 16 to 24. Bethune helped enable tens of thousands of African-Americans to attend college and many young Blacks in Daytona availed themselves of NYA-funded jobs.

Using her friendship with Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor, Bethune managed to secure \$500,000 in 1939 for the construction of the Pine Haven housing project. This all-Black development (the city charter mandated segregated housing) consisted of more than 225 dwellings. These new homes represented a marked improvement over the rickety abodes that most Black Daytonans occupied.

### **High voter turnout**

Daytona Beach was one of only a handful of cities in the pre-World War II South where African-Americans voted in large numbers. In 1927, Edward H. Armstrong, a White grocer originally from St. Louis, was elected mayor of the newly consolidated Daytona Beach by establishing a bi-racial coalition of voters.

In all but two of the years between 1927 and 1937, Armstrong and his allies on the city commission controlled Daytona Beach's government with the aid of Black voters. The mayor rewarded his Black supporters with city jobs and improved public facilities.

During the New Deal years, Armstrong successfully obtained federal monies to construct a boardwalk, the Bandshell, public docks, an airport, and a city waterworks, which provided jobs for the hundreds of Blacks who were hired to work on these projects.

### **Military base**

The outbreak of World War II ended the Great Depression, as defense-related jobs became plentiful. For Daytona Beach, the war years brought considerable economic benefits.

In 1942, the government established a naval air station and a Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) base. (The name was changed to the Women's Army Corps, WAC in August, 1943).

Although Black Tuskegee Airman would become renowned for their wartime contributions in the face of extreme prejudice, no Black pilots trained in Daytona. However, many Black Daytonans served as laborers at the naval air station.

The WAAC base was established at the urging of Eleanor Roosevelt and her Daytona Beach friend, Mary McLeod Bethune. By the fall of 1943, approximately 14,000 WAACs were training in Daytona Beach. Bethune was special assistant to Colonel Oveta Hobby, the commanding officer of the WAACs, and she was responsible for selecting Black women to attend Officer Training School.

Although Bethune vehemently objected to the strict segregation enforced at WAAC bases, she did not resign in protest, but instead worked tirelessly to help hundreds of Black women become officers.

### **Large disparity**

Although Black Daytonans, along with the majority of the nation's African-Americans, realized economic gains during the war and post-war era, the disparity between Blacks and Whites remained enormous.

In the United States, median Black family income rose steadily during the 1940s and 1950s, but even with the increase, Black families averaged just over one-half of what Whites earned.

While the percentage of Black professionals and skilled workers increased, the majority of African-Americans were concentrated in America's lowest-paying jobs.

In Daytona Beach, the percentage of Black workers who held skilled or professional jobs increased from 11 to 15 between 1940 and 1950. However, by 1950, White Daytonans were more than three times as likely to hold such jobs as Blacks.

### **Working women**

In 1949, the median income of the Black families and unrelated individuals was under \$900, compared to over \$2,000 for Whites. Low wages for Black males meant that Black women often had to work so their families could make ends meet.

In 1940, approximately 53 percent of Black women in Daytona Beach worked, and in 1950 about 46 percent. In contrast, only about 25 percent of White women had jobs outside the home in 1940, and in 1950 about 29 percent. Furthermore, about three-fourths of the African-American women working in Daytona Beach at mid-century toiled in the low-end service jobs – mostly as domestics.

Next week: Black expectations are raised in Daytona Beach.

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*Bethune-Cookman College students peer through microscopes in February 1943.  
(GORDON PARKS)*