William A. Hilliard (1927-)

William A. Hilliard was the first African American editor of the *Oregonian* and one of the few to serve as the editor of a major newspaper. Growing up in Portland, he was refused a paper route for the *Oregonian* for fear that white subscribers would resent it, and he transferred from the University of Oregon after a professor told him there was no place for blacks on newspapers.

After receiving a degree in journalism from Pacific University, Hilliard started a paper covering Portland's black community. He began his career at the *Oregonian* as a copy boy in 1952 at the age of twenty-five. He rose to sports reporter but was never sent to cover a game until the Harlem Globetrotters played an exhibition. After working several reporting beats, he became an assistant city editor in 1965 and city editor in 1971.

In 1982, Hilliard was named executive editor of the *Oregonian*. One of his first duties was to oversee the paper's merger with the afternoon *Oregon Journal*. The two staffs had long had a competitive, almost suspicious attitude toward each other. "No one realizes what Bill had to go through when we combined those papers," *Oregonian* publisher Fred Stickel said on Hilliard's retirement. "The tension in the newsroom was thick. Bill had to deal with it."

In 1987, Hilliard was named editor of the paper. His first accomplishments were to expand the reach of the *Oregonian* into the suburbs and to institute practices that encouraged diversity in hiring and news coverage. In 1992, he directed the paper's sports department not to use Indian-themed nicknames for professional and college sports teams, a policy that drew national attention. He also championed tolerance for homosexuals. "It is imperative that our newspapers reflect the multiculturality of America," he told an Oregon newspaper group in 1993. "Let's respect the sexual orientation of others."

In 1993, Hilliard was named president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the first African American to hold that position. At the end of his one-year term, he retired as editor of the *Oregonian*. "I want to believe," Hilliard said at his retirement, "that over the years, scores of young people of color have looked at me and said, ‘It can happen.'"

In 1998, Hilliard was named to the Oregon Newspaper Hall of Fame, and in 2002, was one of three nationally known newspapermen named to investigate a plagiarism scandal at *USA Today*.

Written by David Sarasohn

Further Reading:

"Hilliard, William A." www.blackpast.org.

"William A. Hilliard." Oregon Newspaper Hall of Fame. www.orenews.com/About/halloffame/wahilliard.

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