

William McClendon (1915-1996)

By Stan Fonseca

William McClendon was a writer, journalist, intellectual, activist, and jazz musician who was a prominent member of Portland's civil rights community from 1938 until his death in 1996. He was the founder and editor of the *Portland Observer*, a short-lived but vitally important newspaper that focused on issues facing African Americans in Portland before and during World War II.

Born in Atlanta in 1915, McClendon attended Morehouse College before moving to Portland in 1938. He lived on Northeast First Avenue with his wife Ida McClendon. On the advice of Charlie Garrett, his friend and the owner of Madrona Records on Williams Avenue, McClendon began publishing his first journalistic venture, the *Portland Observer*. The newspaper, which covered issues relevant to the black community that were ignored by larger publications like the *Oregonian*, ran for about a year before shutting down. The black population of Portland had been hit hard by the Great Depression, and businesses that relied on black patronage found it difficult to survive.

With the start of World War II and the arrival of wartime industries in Portland, thousands of black workers moved to the city. While this led to a renaissance of the small black community in Portland, it also caused serious housing shortages and a panic among the white population. Segregated housing policies became commonplace, and "We Cater to White Trade Only" signs appeared in businesses throughout the city.

Discriminatory hiring practices in the shipyards were enforced by the Boilermaker's Union, a group of avid segregationists, ensuring that black shipyard workers were given the most menial jobs with no union protection. In response to workplace racism, segregated housing practices in private and public facilities, and prejudice throughout the city, blacks created numerous civil rights coalitions to address injustices and fight for equality. McClendon was at the forefront of that battle.

In June 1943, McClendon revived his newspaper as the *People's Observer* at the behest of the Shipyard Negro Organization for Victory (SNOV), an activist group formed in November 1942. McClendon was employed at the shipyards when the first issue of the *Observer* was printed, but would be fired that July after leading a protest to address complaints about racial epithets aimed at black female employees. He agreed to run the newspaper as long as the members of SNOV subscribed to it. The bimonthly newspaper was intended to "fight social and economic evils detrimental to the Negro people and other minorities," according to McClendon, and it became a mouthpiece of the civil rights coalition and an important part of the black community.

McClendon wrote passionate editorials in nearly every issue, taking on controversial issues with keen insight and blunt honesty. He associated with other figures in Portland's civil rights groups, including J.J. Clow, head of the Portland NAACP, and DeNorval Unthank, the founder of the Emergency Advisory Council for Negroes. The *People's Observer* helped publicize instances of police brutality, workplace discrimination, and government corruption. McClendon wrote several editorials, for example, that strongly criticized the Portland Police and the Oregon court system after the wrongful shooting of a black man named Erwin Jones by a police officer in August 1945, and the exoneration of that officer in court.

The *People's Observer* also reported cultural news, ranging from descriptions of the burgeoning jazz scene on Williams Avenue to marriage reports and high school sports news. McClendon published the last issue of the paper in July 1950. In 1970, a new black newspaper, also called *The Portland Observer*, began publication under a different publisher and editor; and although McClendon was not involved, the new *Observer* traces its roots to McClendon's original publication.

In 1949, McClendon bought a jazz club called the Savoy on Williams Avenue and renamed it McClendon's Rhythm Room. A jazz pianist himself, he ran the club until the mid-1950s. It was the most popular venue for jazz in Portland at the time, hosting musicians as famous as Oscar Peterson and playing the latest jazz music. His contribution to Portland's jazz scene has been memorialized in the Bill McClendon Award for Excellence in Jazz, given out each year at the Portland Jazz Festival.

For the rest of his life, McClendon would be involved in civil rights struggles in Portland. From 1967 to 1971, he taught social sciences at Reed College and later at Portland State University, where he helped found the Black Studies program. He also was a member of the Education Committee of the Portland NAACP, the advisory editor of the Black Scholar Press, and the deputy director of affirmative action under Governor Vic Atiyeh. In 1995, he published *Straight Ahead: Essays on the Struggles of Blacks in America*, a compilation of essays and articles spanning almost sixty years of his commitment to civil rights. McClendon died in 1996 at the age of eighty-one.

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