

Black History Month: A Reflection

I am writing this reflection at the end of Black History Month. I grew up in Virginia and Massachusetts in the late 1950's and 1960's. I followed with great interest the Civil Rights movement at that time for a number of reasons. First, because the response by the Commonwealth of Virginia to the prospect of racial integration would adversely affect my education and I could not understand the anger and hatred this generated within people who had grown to be my friends. But, I'm not writing about that in my high school years. But rather about an important person I met while attending college in Boston. But before getting into my story, some historical background is necessary

Boston was founded in 1635, The original town was built on a peninsula surrounded by the Charles River to the north, Boston Harbor to the east and the ocean to the south. The town was connected to the mainland by a narrow stretch of land. For the first 200 years there was no change to this geography. But in the 19th century, the growth of the town forced a number of civil engineering projects that filled in swamps, marches and shores to create space for the growing population and industry. This led to the development of neighborhoods in both the original parts of the town (now a city) and on the newly created land, as well as the towns immediately next to the core city. The effect of mass immigration beginning in the 1840's these neighborhoods became places where people from the same part of Europe would live. So Italians lived in the North End and East Boston. The Jewish population lived in the West End and the nearby town of Milton and later Roxbury. The Irish settled in South Boston and the town of Dorchester. Political changes also occurred where the towns closest to Boston were absorbed by Boston. Beginning in the mid-1800's African American began to settle in the new South End section of the city. All of these neighborhoods became very insular, with very little movement of people not from the native country moving or living into a neighborhood. The racism that is still part of this city was aggravated by this cultural development.

The African Americans, many arriving from the south via the underground railroad worked as servants or in menial industrial jobs. However, the arrival of the rail roads into the city had a positive impact on the South End community. Three primary railroads served the city. The Boston and Maine operated out of North Station and connected the city to Northern New England. The New York, New Haven, and Harford provided service to New York and points south, and the NY Central/Boston and Albany railroad provided service to Albany and points west. These two lines terminated at South Station and their tracks went through the South End to a new Back Bay station and points west and south. These railroad lines hired African Americans to work as porters for their trains. Later, Pullman coaches were added to the train service. The Pullman coach provided the first-class service for wealthy passengers including sleepers and fancy restaurant service. To be a Pullman porter was a significant jump in prestige and income for a person who qualified. The Union of Railroad Porters was formed by African Americans from the South End.

With the income from the railroads, the South End prospered. A middle class developed with shops and restaurants opening. Beautiful brown stone homes were built. The community was very religious with many denominations represented, including the Episcopal Church. One of the three "High Church" Episcopal parishes in the city was founded in the South End. In the

early 20th century, Jazz clubs became popular as well as theaters (both live and movie), and concert halls were opened. By the 1920's and 30's the South End became the Harlem of Boston. I should point out that Martin Luther King lived on Mass. Avenue in the South End while attending Boston University as did Coretta Scott, his future wife.

With this background, let me share my story. I attended Boston University in the early 1960's. I began to attend the Church of the Advent, the largest "High Church" in the city. I was fascinated and learned to love the Anglo-Catholic approach to my life-long church. I made many friends who attended MIT, Harvard, Wellesley and a very special woman who was a student nurse and New England Deaconess Hospital School of Nursing -one Ann Guillot. There was a college age group at the Advent where we discussed (among other things), the civil rights issues of the time. This is when we met an artist from the South End, Mr. Allan Rohan Crite. He was born in 1910 and lived there his whole life. He was a High Church Episcopalian. His art used black brush drawings or watercolor paintings. He was a loving, gentle man who, using his art and life experience, to gently explain how God is present in the African American experience to a group of well off, white suburban students. He showed us by seeing God in all people we could move from being a bunch of white do-gooders, doing a good deed then returning to school; to becoming part of a community that works together serving each other through Christ. And doing this peacefully without an agenda or an action plan. Most importantly for me, I became aware of the presumptions, assumptions and misinformation I grew up with about black America. Thus, I began the long process of approaching race and race relations positively using both my Baptismal vows and most recently my Benedictine Vows as a foundation to truly see Christ in every person.

To get a better understanding of Allan Crite's work, I'm including some examples of his art. From this I hope you will understand the impact he had on me.

-Abbot David, OSB



Our Lady of Harvard Square-1950

O all ye things that grow on the earth, bless ye the Lord, praise and
exalt him above all for ever



There shall be
born of the
Seed of Jesse
a Son and
his name shall be
Jesus
for he will
save his
people

Our Lady of the Garden

Our lady of the Garden-1944



Street Car Madonna -1946

From "All Glory: Brush Drawing Meditations on the Prayer of
Consecration" (1928 PB)



All glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father;



for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine
only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for
our redemption ;