AN INTERVIEW WITH

Paul Robeson

On this page is an interview with Paul reprinted from the AFRO of March 4, 1950.

At that time, he was accompanied everywhere by members of the FBI, had travelled everywhere with Henry Wallace, candidate for President on the Progressive ticket, and had 86 scheduled concerts cancelled because he could not hire a public hall.

By Carl Murphy

COMING

Beginning March 4, 1958; the AFRO Magazine Section will print a series of four articles from Paul Robeson's new book "Here I Stand."

A revealing insight into what has happened to Mr. Robeson after eight years. Little known facts about the man who became one of America's most controversial figures.

Don't miss a single chapter.

When Paul Robeson stepped off the train in Baltimore, recently, he was followed by an agent of the FBI. He is constantly under surveillance.

It has gotten to the point where he recognizes plain-clothesmen, although he doesn't let on to his friends. He's been told they follow him for his protection, but it isn't comfortable sometimes.

During the Presidential campaign he spoke in Houston, Tex. There was an unsegregated audience and the crowd was large. Robeson sang, and spoke. There was a tenseness in the air.

Then Henry Wallace arose to speak. An egg flew through the air. Quietly the colored members of the local committee arose from their seats and stood in front of the platform to protect the speaker. There was no more trouble.

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AT PEEKSKILL, N.Y., Aug. 27, 1949, where Robeson was scheduled to sing, a mob of 1,000 persons broke up the meeting before it started and blocked the roads so that Robeson could not get to the meeting place.

A second concert was staged at Peekskill on Sept. 4. This time 900 policemen saw to it that the crowd of 25,000 could hear Robeson sing.

But when the program was over, policemen were unable to prevent violence. Some 145 persons were beaten and required medical attention.

At least 16 automobiles were overturned. Fifty buses and innumerable autos had their windows smashed.

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UNDETERRED by such violence, Mr. Robeson scheduled a string of meetings across the country.

In Cleveland and in Los Angeles, he never saw so many policemen in his life. Announcement that he is to speak or sing in some cities causes most public halls to close their doors.

Private meetings bring the police out by the dozens.

So he is uncomfortable sometimes. He realizes that at any of these meetings somebody can take a pot shot at him.

Mr. Robeson has known what it means to be a popular star of stage, screen, radio, and the concert stage.

Playing pro football in Akron, Ohio, in 1922, he was paid $1,000 a game. Friends wanted to train this 210-pound giant to defeat Jack Dempsey. He wouldn't listen.

He got his first chance to sing in "The Emperor Jones" in 1923. Friends urged him to give a concert. He became famous overnight.

In 1928, he went to England and lived for 11 years. When he returned home he sang the "Ballad for Americans," and every U.S. city clamored for Robeson concerts.

For the movie "Showboat" he earned $45,000.

For concert appearances he made $2,000 to $3,000 a night.

For the play "John Henry" he received $1,500 a week.

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SO, DOWN to 1947, he was on top of the world. After 20 years of work, he had earned and spent several fortunes. But he was not happy.

Doors were open to him but were closed to other colored people. He would take up their fight.

In Russia, where he sent his son to school, he suffered no racial discrimination by law.

Why couldn't the U.S. do so too? Maybe it would, but somebody would have to champion the little people.

He could.

Why shouldn't he?

He had been born poor. He has done menial work. He got through school because his father stinted and got help from influential people, whom Robeson himself has sought out and paid back.

To the credit of many of them, he says, they declined to take the money and told him to give it to a worthy charity.

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SO HE NOW dedicates his life to fighting segregation and jim-crow.

In his speeches he says frequently that Russia treats colored people better than the U.S. does.

In Paris he said he wouldn't go to war against Russia.

That sentence taken from the context of the Paris speech made Mr. Robeson the most unpopular man in some U.S. circles.

The reaction saddened him. A smart-aleck at a Congressional hearing referred to him as a Black Stalin. At home he gets threatening telegrams and phone calls.

"They can shut me up. I'll gladly shut up tomorrow," said Mr. Robeson, "if the poor colored worker is freed of discrimination and can stand up with dignity and be a man.

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"I DON'T expect to recant what I have said about Russia, because I feel too deeply that Russia's program of raising the little people of all races to basic equality in their nation and in the world is the opposite of what our country and England and the fascists stand for.

"They have said I don't speak for the common people, but I have been comforted and reassured by them at every turn.

"When I walk about in Harlem eight out of ten people stop and shake hands.

"THE MOST striking evidence of interest and understanding among the little people I can recall involved a man who passed me on the street one day.

"For some reason best known to him he couldn't smile or shake hands. He winked his eye and walked on.

"A cabby in New York stopped me as I was about to get into his taxi.

"'I'm not taking any more riders,' he said. Then he took a second glance and added: 'Mr. Robeson? Get in. Where do you want to go?'

"When I got off the train a few minutes ago in Baltimore, a red cap approached.

"'That's all right,' I said, 'I can carry this. It's light.'

"'Mr. Robeson,' said the red cap, 'I consider it an honor to carry your bag.'

"I never feel alone.

"In the most unexpected places there is someone to pat me on the back or shake my hand, or give me a friendly smile."

BALTIMORE VISIT—Dr. J. E. T. Camper and Paul Robeson chat during the singer's visit to Baltimore in 1947. Dr. Camper was his host.

--Perfect Crime

Continued from Page 3)

the Police Station to continue the investigation. As we left the house, former Commissioner Sam Battle, then the ranking colored police officer, was my escort.

Friends who knew me were shocked seeing me come out of the house with the police. Right away they spread the rumor that I had murdered Thelma Scott — which was quickly squelched.

Four bodies were removed from the death house and taken to the morgue next day—being lowered by block and tackle from the apartment, later they were quietly buried in a lonesome cemetery upstate.

Police got busy. They quizzed everybody and came up with exactly nothing. But there were some details that leaked out.

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THELMA'S mother once lived in the San Juan Hill district. She made her home there on arriving in New York — like many another newcomer. She had the pretty little girl, bringing her from their home in Lynchburg, where it was said, some white man fathered Thelma.

With the general exodus to Harlem, Mrs. Reed moved uptown, getting an apartment in West 135th St. on the site of the present YMCA branch.

The family lived there, Thelma going to school, quitting before she got half way through high school, to go to work. She was doing clerical work for a small printer in the neighborhood — on a part-time basis.

She added to her income doing "gigs" or dancing at entertainments, club affairs or wherever she could get a job. Her mother was a char woman in a government building.

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ONE NIGHT, it is reported, Mrs. Reed received a letter, about which there was considerable speculation. That very day, she moved from the 135th St. apartment, leaving clothing, furniture and other belongings, hastily taking the apartment just a block away where she was murdered.

Closest police came to solving the murder was the information by a neighbor.

She occupied a nearby apartment. She had received a dispossess notice — the depression was creeping up on Harlem then — and was packing her household furnishings to move out.

The morning of the murder, someone came around sticking throways under doors advertising a sale of some kind. The neighbor saw it and started to the door when she heard someone fumbling around her doorknob. She hesitated because in Harlem when that happens, beware of intruders.

Fortunately, the rattling stopped and she heard the stranger ring the bell at the Scott apartment.

As the neighbor walked down her hall to pick up the advertising, she heard someone shuffling down the Scott's hall. The door opened and the curious neighbor waited to get a bit on her neighbor. Through her closed door she heard a fear - stricken "Oh!" by a woman's voice. Then a heavy thud like blow was struck. Last thing she heard was a strange sound as if someone was being dragged down the hall.

"I got out of there quick as I could," she told the cops.

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FOR MONTHS, the apartment where the murders occurred stayed vacant, but the housing shortage in Harlem soon remedied that situation and the apartment hasn't been vacant since.

What did the police miss?

It was well known that Thelma made a phone call every day at 5 o'clock from the little candy store run by Joe Pritchard on West 135th Street. Could they trace that call?

It was known that Thelma had an address book in which was the name of a white man with an office "601" in a 42nd Street building, the exact location being stated.

Fingerprints littered the death apartment, but whose were they?

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POLICE KNOW that the murderer was known to all three women.

It was Thelma he was really after. Was it some lover she threw over to marry a boy friend? But to get to Thelma, he had to kill everybody else. And the first person slain was the aunt — she happened to be home by herself.

The mother came in later and she too was knocked out then garroted.

Thelma was seen on the street at eleven o'clock Tuesday night, coming from the Lafayette Theater, wearing the patent leather Russian boots popular then and her imitation fur coat.

She had the boots on when her mutilated body was found. The coat was the baby's blanket.

So the murderer sat with his two dead women to wait calmly — or was it calmly — for the third one.

He wanted to torture her before finally killing her. And torture her he did for the death mask that was her face, was one of terror knowing death was near.

Had Thelma Scott been living today, she would probably be a grandmother. She was 19 when she met her untimely death and one of the most popular members of Harlem's dancing set.

Is the killer alive? Who knows? Harlem still asks, after 27 mysterious years—"Who did kill Thelma Scott?"

BALTIMORE'S FIRST NAACP CALLED ITSELF THE...

Brotherhood Of Liberty

In sixteen years, 1885 to 1902, it secured admission of the first colored lawyer to the bar, appointment of first colored teachers and principals in public schools, erection of first new school building for colored Children — organization of the first convention of Baptist churches.

And in addition the Brotherhood established the AFRO-AMERICAN in 1892 and the 2nd Branch of the NAACP.

By John Jasper

Everybody in Baltimore knows about the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

It was founded in 1901 and has over 300,000 members today; 20,000 of them in Maryland.

Few people know about Baltimore's first NAACP, organized June 22, 1885 — 73 years ago.

For light on a little known organization, which performed miracles in its day, the city can thank A. B. Koger who recently published a 23-page pamphlet, on the life story of Rev. Dr. Harvey Johnson.

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DR. JOHNSON was pastor of Union Baptist Church, a pioneer civic leader and the founder of the "Brotherhood of Liberty."

Actually, Rev. Harvey Johnson called in four other well-known pastors for the meeting of the Brotherhood of Liberty. They were, according to Mr. Koger:

The Rev. W. M. Alexander, pastor of Sharon Baptist Church; the Rev. J. C. Allen, pastor of First Baptist Church; the Rev. W. C. Lawson, pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church, and the Rev. W. N. Braxton, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church.

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WHEN THE Brotherhood was organized, there was not a single colored teacher in Baltimore City.

There was no high school for colored children.

Separate colored schools had all white teachers. Colored persons passed examinations and the school board refused to appoint them as teachers.

No new school building had ever been built for colored pupils.

Statutes forbade admission of colored lawyers to practice in Baltimore, and colored people were systematically barred from jury service.

The avowed purpose of the Brotherhood of Liberty was "to use **legal means** to procure and maintain the right of citizenship for colored people."

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THE FIRST "law suit" (it cost Dr. Harvey Johnson personally $145) was a hearing before the Supreme Bench, which ruled for the first time that a colored person could practice law in Maryland.

No qualified person could be found in Baltimore. Rev. Harvey Johnson "imported" Everett J. Waring from Howard University in Washington.

Waring was admitted to practice Oct. 10, 1855.

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WITH THIS first colored lawyer to advise it, the Brotherhood petitioned and appeared before the City Council, the Board of School Commissioners and the city's courts.

The school board had said, there were not enough colored kids in N.W. Baltimore to warrant a public elementary school.

North West Baltimore was then a mixed area like Forest Park is today.

The Brotherhood enrolled 300 pupils at Shiloh Baptist Church, Laurens and Calhoun Streets, and hired three teachers. That settled it, the school Board was convinced.

The first colored public school teacher and colored principal were appointed (Fannie Barbour — George Biddle).

The first new school building for colored children was built at Riggs and Carrollton Avenues. It wasn't occupied immediately, because whites in the neighborhood made a determined fight to make it an all-white school.

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THE STATE had an infamous Bastardy Law which protected white women only. The Brotherhood used the courts to have the discrimination removed.

A colored man, Briggs, was lynched in Frederick. The Brotherhood offered $500 for "arrest and conviction of the hoodlums."

A colored woman was raped in Baltimore June 1889, by four white men. The Brotherhood pressed for a speedy trial and obtained a settlement out of court from the families of the four rapists.

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COLORED AMERICANS, exported to Navassa Island in the West Indies to collect Guano, rebelled under starvation wages and killed company officials.

Twenty-seven of them were brought to Baltimore's U.S. District Court to be tried for murder.

Two Brotherhood lawyers defended the men, won the praise of the court, secured some acquittals.

The trials and appeals, lasting several months, stirred the whole country.

The case is known now as the famous Navassa Riots.

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THE REV. HARVEY JOHNSON and the Brotherhood of of Liberty helped sponsor two other movements.

One failed. One succeeded. The failure: an attempt to persuade the U.S. Government to purchase the entire state of Texas and colonize it with colored citizens from the states.

The success — A Brotherhood of Liberty on a national scale.

The Rev. Harvey Johnson was the Baltimore delegate to a conference of national leaders at Niagara, Canada in 1901.

He reviewed what had been accomplished in Baltimore, and advocated a national Brotherhood of Liberty.

Historians agree, says Mr. Koger, that out of the Niagara movement came the NAACP.

"What was never mentioned is that the Rev. Harvey Johnson was, very largely, father of the whole idea."

When the NAACP was finally organized, Baltimore became the second branch to be established.

The Rev. Harvey Johnson helped organize it and nominated the Rev. Garnett Waller its first president.

INDIRECTLY THE spirit of the Brotherhood affected life of the city in two other areas.

1. The white Baptist Union refused full membership to colored churches and their pastors.

The Rev. Harvey Johnson, soon after organizing the Brotherhood in 1885, founded the Colored Baptist Convention of Maryland in 1898.

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2. TO INFORM the people of their liberties and enlist their aid in the struggle for freedom, a weekly newspaper was necessary. The AFRO-AMERICAN was established in 1892 and its first editor was a Baptist pastor and charter member of the Brotherhood of Liberty, Rev. Wm. M Alexander.

Dr. Harvey Johnson, distinguished by his white hair and long, white whiskers, was a familiar sight on Druid Hill Avenue until 1923.

He built Union Baptist Church and pastored it for 51 years—its membership once numbered 3,028.

The old church on North Street cost $20,000. The present church, built in 1905, cost $57,756.

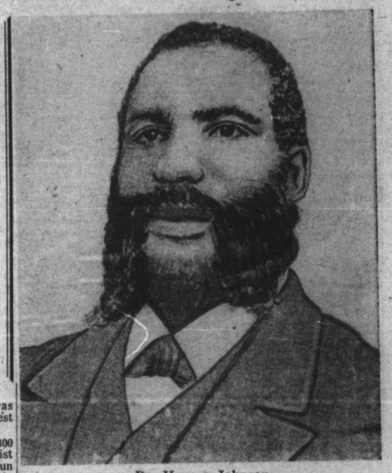
During his administration at Union, 15 Baptist churches, including First Baptist, Macedonia and Perkins Square were established.

From his congregation were ordained 11 ministers including such distinguished characters as Rev. Wm. A. Creditt, founder of Downingtown, Pa., Industrial School; Rev. Wm. M. Alexander, Rev. P. C. Neal, Rev. C. H. Jones and Rev. Garnett Waller.

Memorials to him are a junior high school, Union Baptist Church and its new Harvey Johnson Educational Center.

Dr. Johnson died January 12, 1923, at the age of 79. A special granite memorial stone marks his grave in Laurel Cemetery.

A son, Harvey, Jr., one of three children, still survives.



Dr. Harvey Johnson

Ralph Cook, first football coach at Douglass High School, presents a diamond brooch to Miss Fannie Barbour, first teacher in Baltimore. The presentation took place in 1934.

George Biddle, one of Baltimore's first school teachers.

A. Briscoe Koger