African Americans in Winslow: Scenes From Our History

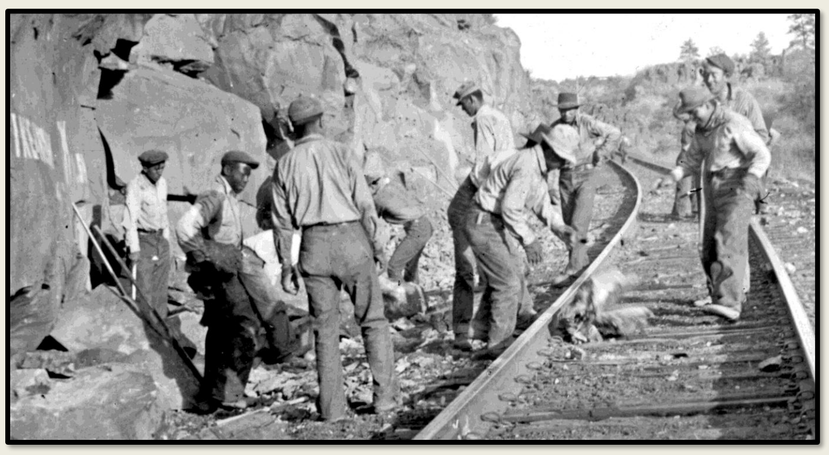
African American Rail & Lumber Workers

During the Great Migration from 1915 to 1970, more than six million African Americans fled the poverty, violence, and Jim Crow segregation of the South and moved to the Northeast, Midwest, and West. As Winslow resident Tommy Dukes said about Hattiesburg, Mississippi, “it was pretty bad, so I’m glad my mother sent us a one-way ticket out of there.”

Many African American Southerners who moved to Winslow hoped to land better-paying jobs with the Santa Fe Railway. Most of the African American men working at Winslow lumber companies emigrated from rural logging towns in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Many of them worked for the Cady Lumber Company in the logging town of McNary, Arizona – 100 miles to the southeast – before relocating to Winslow.

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, African American migrants found that many of the same racial barriers had followed them westward. African American men could only apply for track, rail yard, and passenger service jobs with the Santa Fe, and they could only advance so far at the Nagel Lumber & Timber or Duke City Lumber Companies.

Relegated to the lower-paying jobs in those industries, some Winslow families supplemented their income in creative ways. Railroader R.J. Hannah worked from his home as one of the only barbers for African American men in Northern Arizona from the 1940s to the 1960s. Luola Renfro made tamales and hotlinks that husband Herbert sold each night after his Santa Fe shift.



Left: A section crew laying double tracks between Winslow and Williams in 1938. (Courtesy of Ernest Martinez.) Right: Employees at the Nagel mill in 1948. (Herb and Dorothy McLaughlin Collection, Arizona State University Library, CP MCL 9579)

African American Life in Mid-Century Winslow

There was also a degree of de facto segregation in housing and public facilities in mid-century Winslow. Banks typically loaned money to people of color only if they were going to buy or build east of Apache Avenue, west of Alfred Street, or in Southside or Coopertown. African American residents knew not to sit at the drugstore soda-fountain counters or at the White and National Cafés. The Winslow and Painted Desert Country Clubs were closed to African Americans, and the Winslow Municipal Pool was only open to people of color the day before the water was changed. Growing up in Winslow at the time, Mel Hannah never noticed these practices verbalized or posted on signs, but “it was just a subtle understanding – that’s the way things were.” In 1955, the Alianza Hispano-Americana filed a lawsuit that prompted the city to change the municipal pool policy without *Baca v. Winslow* ever reaching the courtroom.

Once at Winslow High School, African American students received comparable educational opportunities and were typically involved in athletic teams and musical groups. Perhaps because the school was integrated, both African American and white students experienced instances of racial progress. Emil Nasser, head coach of the football team from 1947 to 1983, would only book hotels that allowed his players to stay together when they went on the road. In the early 1960s, Clifford Renfro’s teammates left with him when the National Café would not serve him. Mel Hannah remembers no racial disharmony among his classmates and teammates.

Retail stores, ball games, and numerous parades and picnics were open to everyone. Although the Elks chapters were segregated, the “Black Elks” hosted youth dances, Juneteenth celebrations, and special events – including a 1966 performance by the Jackson 5 – at the Desert Scene Elks Lodge on First Street. All these activities created what Mel Hannah called a “festive atmosphere” in a town where he was grateful to be born and raised. Left: The “A” Basketball Squad in the WHS 1956 Yearbook. Front, left to right: Moe Carillo, Leonard Begay, Bob Gray, Junior Vargas, Stan Chipman, Lee Wadson. Back: Don Williams, Arden McRae, Barry Mack, Mel Hannah, Gene Goldberry, Ron McCarthy, Paul Reynolds