Chapter 4: 1960-1966

"Race Becomes an Issue at Whitworth"

In the early '60s, most Whitworth students and faculty focused their attention on events surrounding the Cold War especially the fear of conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. At the same time, there were growing signs of Whitworth student interest in civil rights, and increased willingness of the few African American students on campus to speak openly regarding racism in the United States.

The incident that prompted a few Whitworth students to comment on the state of race relations in the United States was the entry of Black student James Meredith into the all-white University of Mississippi. Meredith's challenge to the racial practices of the university came in late September and early October 1962. As Meredith tried to register for classes, the governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, authorized resistance. In response, the Kennedy administration federalized the national guard to ensure that Meredith could attend classes. Violence broke out and as a result two individuals were killed.

At Whitworth, Meredith's situation prompted what appears to be the first exchange between a white student and an African American student in the college newspaper. One white

student, Jon Weston, wrote a long column arguing against federal intervention in Mississippi's affairs. "I do not feel the United States government has the right, legally or morally, to interfere between the schools and the states." He likened Kennedy to a dictator. "When any man can control the educational system in a country, he changes his name to Franco or Castro."[1] The following week, Maudest (Maude) Thomas, who appears to be the only African American female attending Whitworth at that time, wrote a letter to the editor in response to Weston. Thomas called Weston's opinion "narrow-minded," based on "emotional attitudes rather than facts and observation." Thomas, who had grown up in Anne Manie, Alabama, asked rhetorically, "If the US government does not have the right to legally or morally interfere between schools and states, then who really has a right to interfere?" Thomas explained, "It must be emphasized that violence in the south is not primarily that of Negroes against whites, but rather whites against Negroes. Since violence is projected against Negroes, may I ask who in the south is going to make a stand for the Negroes?" She stated further, "It cannot be southern law officials because they are too busy activating violence; it cannot be the Christians because violence to them is part of their doctrine; and it can't be Whitworth students because they are too far removed from the south. Who, then is left—only the federal government; and to me, it definitely should have the power to protect the rights of Negroes." She finished her letter by asking Weston and Whitworth students in general, "Have you lived in Negro districts in the south? Have you seen most Negro high schools? Have you seen Negroes still working on plantations? I have a true answer to each of these questions, and I believe that until you can answer these questions you can't ever view any southern situation objectively."[2]

We know little about Ms. Thomas before she attended Whitworth, although she was salutatorian of her high school graduating class in 1960. How she found Whitworth is still not

clear, but Thomas graduated in 1964 with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a minor in psychology. After graduation, she stayed in the Pacific Northwest and taught for several years in the Portland public school system. Eventually she worked in job force training in the community college system and was known for her strong faith within her church.

What seems remarkable is that with this particular letter Maude Thomas violated something of an unspoken code that African American students should quietly fit into the larger Whitworth culture and not cause any controversy. Naming the general ignorance of Whitworth students, and perhaps even faculty regarding conditions in the segregated South, as well as asserting that Whitworth students were too far away from the situation in the South, her response must have raised a few eyebrows. At the very least this letter required a great deal of courage on her part.

One white student, Ron Wellman, submitted his own letter to the editor in which he also objected to the spirit of Mr. Weston's letter, and at least indirectly supported Ms. Thomas's position. Wellman argued that "local government which rules by racial prejudices and the attendant rationalizations is not ever good government, all States Rights arguments to the contrary. . . . Local government does have a place in America, but the final custodian of the individual's liberty is in Washington, D.C., ever so long as we the people remain committed to the dignity of humanity."[3]

In another sign that students were becoming more engaged in race-related issues, a series of comments was touched off in November 1962 by a student reporter for the *Whitworthian*, Don Clark. He decided to share parts of a letter from a Southern minister, whom Clark had previously contacted for reflections on a biblical view of racial segregation. The minister began by saying, "I am a segregationist and I will explain why. I don't believe in segregation just

because the color of the Negro is different from mine. I base my convictions not on the Constitution but upon the Word of God." He went on to cite passages from Genesis that were typically used to explain the differences between the races. He finished with what must have surely been a provocative remark even in 1962: "The thing that is causing the problem today is the fact that some Negroes and whites are trying to get an equal position for the Negro and a servant never rises to the level of the one he is serving."[4]

In the next issue of the *Whitworthian*, Clark responded by challenging the arguments of the Southern minister as did another student, Shari Stewart, who used other Bible verses to dispute the view that segregation and white supremacy were endorsed in Scripture.

The only professor to wade in on this debate in the student newspaper was professor of Communications, Mark Lee. If other professors offered their views, there is no remaining evidence. Professor Lee commented on the disputed biblical interpretation of the segregationist pastor and ended with a strong statement:

> To harbor prejudice, it seems to me, is immoral – to defend it with Scriptures harbors on blasphemy. One further word belongs here. It is interesting that in the history of Biblical exegesis, the misconceptions surrounding the so-called "Hamitic curse" seemed to arise about the time of the Reformation. Has anyone found an expositor who would interpret the passage in this light prior to that time?"[5]

In that same issue, the *Whitworthian* printed the segregationist minister's rebuttal, which asserted that his comments had been taken out of context.[6] Nevertheless, Ms. Maudest Thomas from Alabama, and any other African Americans at Whitworth would have been dismayed by

these efforts to provide a white supremacist minister from the South an opportunity to use the Bible to justify segregation in 1962.

The handful of African American students who attended Whitworth in the early to mid-60s came mostly from middle class backgrounds. Most Black male students were athletes and had come from a Christian background and often had been in Young Life clubs as high school students. Two of the most prominent individuals from that period were Edker (Eddie) Matthews and Walt Oliver.

Matthews grew up in Santa Barbara, California and went to schools that were as integrated as any place in the country. He recalls that his high school was comprised of roughly one-third African American students, one-third white, and one-third Hispanic. An exceptional athlete in high school, Matthews came to Whitworth after being recruited by Sam Adams the football and track coach. Matthews was active in Adams's Young Life club, and Coach Adams played a key role in the Young Life program on campus. Matthews arrived at Whitworth in the fall of 1961 and soon found out there were only three other African American students.[7]

As an athlete and singer, who performed in the student union building and at off-campus dances, Matthews was well liked. He also became a drama major and performed in numerous school plays. He recalls making lots of friends and being accepted among his largely white fellow students. He does remember, however, that a faculty member seemed to question why he, as an African American, came to Whitworth. In general, his impression was that Whitworth expected him to assimilate into its culture and student body.

One of Matthews's best friends was another African American student who was two years younger, Walt Oliver. Growing up in Denver, Colorado, Oliver also came out of a middle-

class family—both of his parents were educators. He remembers that his high school had approximately 5 percent African American students and therefore experienced some level of integration prior to coming to Whitworth. Like Matthews, Oliver also was an athlete who played on the football team and wrestled. He was also heavily involved in Young Life, which was a principal reason why he chose to attend Whitworth.

Once on campus, Matthews and Oliver felt welcomed primarily in the context of the football team. They both credit Sam Adams for being instrumental in making them feel accepted. By all accounts Matthews and Oliver were among the most popular students on campus. They developed a comedy routine of Young Life skits. They also formed a band in which Oliver played the drums at off-campus Whitworth dances; Matthews was the lead singer as well as serving as one of Whitworth's three male Yell Kings at basketball games.

Nevertheless, both Matthews and Oliver recall some sixty years later that racial issues surfaced periodically. For example, Matthews later found out that before he arrived on campus, white students were asked if they were comfortable having a Black roommate. He was never asked whether he would be comfortable with a white roommate. During a football game, Matthews remembers being at the bottom of a pile and someone from the opposing team calling him the "N" word. Back in the huddle, Matthews told his teammates who on the next play found a way to communicate to the opposing player to never say that word to Matthews again. For him, this was a key moment in which he felt defended and embraced by his teammates. Oliver remembers that when he went off campus with a group of football players or dormmates, they invariably encountered looks that conveyed a sense that they were not welcomed in public establishments, primarily restaurants.

Interracial dating was an issue for both Matthews and Oliver. Since there generally were only one or two black females on campus, both Matthews and Oliver noted that if you wanted to go on a date, that meant dating a white woman. Oliver remembered a couple of faculty members who confronted him with the statement that he needed to be sensitive to the fact that interracial dating was not the norm at Whitworth.

Nearly sixty years later, Oliver and Matthews recall how weary they felt when time after time they were asked to speak for all African Americans about race-related questions. Many Whitworth students at that time had never interacted with any African American prior to coming to college. One female student asked Oliver if all black men had a pig's tail. He and Matthews felt that in some sense they were "educators" to many white students and to a certain extent the faculty.

After graduation, Matthews became a much-loved elementary school teacher and was awarded Whitworth's Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2019. Oliver emerged as one of Whitworth's most successful alums ever. He became a senior vice president of Human Resources at General Dynamics which employed more than 80,000 individuals. He and his wife Shirley, until her passing, along with his second wife Kay, have donated significant financial resources to Whitworth; Oliver was named chairman of Whitworth's Board of Trustees in 2008.[8]

Oliver's and Matthews's experiences contrasted significantly with another African American who enrolled at Whitworth from that era—Jeff Tucker. Where Oliver and Matthews acknowledged that they had come from relatively middle-class backgrounds, Jeff Tucker grew up in rat-infested homes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Tucker was the most outspoken African American from that era. His parents moved to Seattle when he was twelve years old and settled in the Central Area. After graduating from high school in the spring of 1963, Tucker remembers

being driven to eastern Washington with several other Black students and given a tour of several colleges. He recalls being enamored with Whitworth's campus and its setting.[9]

Tucker's first year was much more difficult than Matthews's and Oliver's. Tucker played football for Whitworth, but remembers getting into more than one fight with his teammates and with other Whitworth students on several occasions. However, he gave little thought to transferring during that first year. He liked school well enough though it did not come easily. He remembers that he was helped by a program called "Project Able," which was led by English professor Mae Whitten. Project Able provided additional help and tutoring for students who had underachieved in high school. Meanwhile, he recalls that another Black student from Seattle, Clavard Jones, became his closest friend and critical to his decision to stay at Whitworth.

At the end of his first year, Tucker, along with Jones, Walt Oliver, Edker Matthews, Maude Thomas, and another Black student who lived off campus, Jim Sims, all were interviewed in the *Whitworthian*. Their comments provide a snapshot of life on campus for Black students but perhaps reveal even more about what it was like to be Black in Spokane during those years. Student reporters asked these Black students whether they believed there was a racial problem at Whitworth or in the city of Spokane. In these interviews, students generally agreed that Whitworth did not have a significant racial problem, but that Spokane did have a strong current of racism that made venturing from campus at best an uncomfortable experience and at worst a nerve wracking or even horrifying experience.

Among the many responses, Jeff Tucker stated, "Anywhere you go you will find some prejudice but on a large scale at Whitworth, no. There doesn't seem to be a disliking prejudice so much as a lack of previous contact." Walt Oliver added, "I have experienced no open prejudice." Clavard Jones indicated that from some isolated individuals he sensed feelings of

prejudice which threatened to break into the open. Tucker did say however, that, "when white kids hear rumors and then finally encounter Negroes, they are bewildered when they (Negroes) don't respond as expected." Tucker also asserted that, "Teachers bend over backwards to try to help, which might be a cover-up." However, Edker Matthews reported on the one hand, "Whitworth is exceptional in its ability to accept us as an individual rather than as a race." At the same time, as a drama major he was limited in the roles for which he could audition because of his race.

When asked about the comparison between Whitworth and Spokane, Black students reported a much higher degree of discomfort once they left campus. Jim Sims, a town student, said, "There is discrimination and prejudice in Spokane as in any other community." He emphasized differences in housing and job opportunities. Tucker responded that, "There is no comparison between Whitworth and Spokane. There is a completely different atmosphere when you leave campus." Tucker indicated that he felt comfortable in the company of white women on campus but would not in town. The *Spokesman-Review* and *Spokane Daily Chronicle* were mentioned as examples of discrimination in employment and of other forms of prejudice. Maude Thomas said that she considered the local newspapers to be extremely biased in their attitude toward African Americans. She also reacted in much the same way as Edker Matthews by saying, "The Whitworth individual approach accepts you for what you are—not what color your skin is. Race and color are not as important." Jeff Tucker also responded favorably when asked to compare Whitworth to other campuses. "From my experience other campuses in Washington have a greater problem than Whitworth does. It must be the Christian influence." Walt Oliver also agreed saying, "The common interest in Christianity draws the students of different races together."[10]

While the campus experience was generally positive, meanwhile, some of the comments also reveal a frustration with the general apathy of white students regarding racial issues in general. Edker Matthews said, "There is not enough active involvement; students should take some position rather than being middle of the road." He considered the lack of racial problems on campus to be a factor in the apathy of the Whitworth student toward national problems.[11]

Whether the students were being completely transparent regarding their assessment of Whitworth is difficult to say. But in general, at least by 1964, Black students found Whitworth relatively hospitable and certainly more positive when compared with their experiences in Spokane. In oral interviews nearly sixty years later, Walt Oliver remembers frequent dormitory talks between himself, Tucker, Clavard Jones, and Earl Washington. Some arguments could get pretty intense, according to Oliver, but in general they felt safe among themselves for saying what was on their minds.

The experiences of the few Black students on and off campus at Whitworth provide one window into a growing self-consciousness of racial conditions at Whitworth as well as in Spokane. At the same time, a growing number of white students began to raise issues both in and out of class. For example, a student column in the *Whitworthian* written by Dan Sanford, who later became a professor in the political science department, revealed a heightened awareness of racism in the United States, and also likely caught many white students by surprise. Sanford's article was entitled, "Christ May Be Black but Some Say He's White." In his column, Sanford recalled the first time that he remembered seeing a picture of a Black Jesus and the beginning of his own consciousness that he had been raised with certain racial biases. Most boldly, Sanford asserted that "there are no grounds for objecting to interracial marriage, unless

we fear society." He rhetorically asked, "How does society change if there is no one who has the courage to suggest that change and push that change until it is socially acceptable?"[12]

The growing awareness of racism in America among Whitworth students emerged in the mid-'60s. The summer of 1964 is often referred to as Freedom Summer because of the intensity of civil rights activity that occurred primarily in the Deep South promoting voter registration. In addition, conditions in most of the country's larger metropolitan cities revealed deep-rooted racial tensions. Several white Whitworth students found places around the country where they directly experienced conditions in the inner city. Cliff Baker, Mikell Montague, Dave Helm, Nancy Clark were sponsored by the Whitworth Christian Fellowship to work in Raleigh, North Carolina, Indianapolis, and San Francisco. Dan Stearns and Miriam Rosenkranz worked in Tlingit Indian villages in Alaska.[13] No record exists of their reflections, but clearly as individuals and as an institution, there was a growing interest in issues of race and poverty in urban America for African Americans and an emerging interest in conditions for Indigenous peoples.

Heightened consciousness regarding racism in America manifested itself more dramatically in the fall of 1964. In October, announcements were made that both Whitworth's Convocation and Forum programs would focus on civil rights issues. Several speakers and sessions focused exclusively on civil rights and Martin Luther King Jr. [14]

In that same autumn of 1964, Whitworth's Committee on Great Books featured James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Articles were written about Baldwin's searing account of what it was like to be Black in America. It is unclear who was required to read the book or whether it was a suggested reading.[15] In addition, a student wrote a review of Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* about life for African Americans in the South Side of Chicago for the *Whitworthian*.[16] In that same issue, junior transfer student, John Washburn, shared his

reflections about racism. "Race prejudice is learned; religious bigotry is learned; social snobbery is learned; but they can be learned only because they have an appropriate pupil in the inborn, prideful, prejudiced will of man." Washburn took aim at the white church for its critique of the role of the state in attempting to deal with racism, however his larger message was one of imploring white Americans to treat African Americans as persons, "So long as the Negro is to us a means to any kind of end, whatsoever, and not an end in himself, so long as we see him as anything other than an expression of that unique and irreplaceable personality with which God endowed all men, we have abused the image of God in him and we have then also lost it in ourselves."[17]

At least as reflected in the *Whitworthian*, more than a few Whitworth students and faculty members were suddenly engaged by issues of racism in America. More evidence of this occurred after the assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965. One student, however, who regularly wrote for the *Whitworthian*, Don Clark, provided something of a critical but at moments also an empathetic obituary summarizing aspects of Malcolm X's biography. Clark wrote, "The life of Malcolm X is a remarkable study in racist spirit. Loud and militant in the last few years, he reflected a feeling of black nationalism, a philosophy designed to capitalize on white guilt and fear over the race question." Clark wrote that Malcolm X's life was a:

> testimonial to violence and the doctrine of a tooth for a tooth, which he learned during a life of bitter struggle for mere existence in the face of a white supremacy that bore down upon him in all his attempts to become a successful human being. . . . . Malcolm X's experience led him to a deeply rooted conviction that the American Negro was going to have to consider a harder line in gaining civil rights. . . . The repercussions of this crime have hardly begun. But the death of Malcolm X, while he was using his right to free

speech, is simply another signpost to the violence and disarray of the society in which we live.[18]

Clark's essay underscored the growing awareness of some white students of the complex realities facing Black America in the mid-'60s.

In that same issue, student Jay Grandal offered a review of a movie entitled, "One Potato, Two Potato." The film explored issues related to interracial marriage at a time when this subject was virtually taboo in American culture. Grandal ended his review: [T]he movie raises questions so pertinent to modern society that the theme transcends the directing and acting errors. People with real courage are trying to justify their biracial love in a society truly prejudiced."[19]

In spring 1965, increasing numbers of Whitworth students felt compelled to find ways of supporting the national civil rights movement. During the month of March, attention turned to Selma, Alabama, where African American leaders led protests against a state trooper's killing of Black activist Jimmie Lee Jackson as well as for greater access to voting rights. Violent resistance to the protestors erupted on the Edmund Pettis Bridge outside of Selma when marchers were turned back by Alabama State Police in what became known as Bloody Sunday. Two weeks later, Martin Luther King Jr. returned to Selma to resume the march to Montgomery, Alabama, which ended on March 25th. The following day in Spokane, students from Whitworth, including future sociology professor Bob Clark, as well as students from Gonzaga, and Eastern Washington, gathered at the Spokane County Courthouse and staged a march of their own in support of those in Alabama.[20]

Interest in racial issues continued into the fall of 1965. Jeff Tucker, one of the African American students previously interviewed about the racial climate in Spokane and on campus wrote a column for the student newspaper. Tucker made several observations about the civil rights movement. In his opinion, there were three sides: "First the Negro who cries for freedom now. Second, the people who believe freedom should move at a moderate pace. And thirdly the people who don't want freedom for the Negroes." Tucker wrote, "The Negro is no longer patient, he feels equality and freedom within his grasp. For perhaps the first time in his history, the Negro is standing united in a common cause. He has taken a stand as a man, not as a Negro." Tucker continued:

> No revolution is pretty! Certainly, the Negro revolt is no exception. But the Negro knows that freedom is not given, it is earned. . . . There is no room for the lazy, easy-going, fun-loving, illiterate, and Uncle Tom type of Negro in our society. This is a stage of history. We learn from history, we don't dwell on it. Now the white man has to realize this, and he will one way or another. The Negro is running a race with destiny and there has to be a victor, the American Negro. The greatest hope and prayer of the Negro is to be able to say with true emotion and feeling 'My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty' . . . .[21]

When asked nearly sixty years later to reflect on how his thinking was evolving, Tucker pointed to Malcolm X as his personal hero. Clearly, Tucker was becoming more frustrated with the state of race relations in America and some of that frustration was beginning to manifest itself at Whitworth.

1965 proved to be a significant year for the civil rights movement throughout the country as well as at Whitworth. Individuals and institutions across the nation became more aware that

racial problems were not confined to the South. The Watts riot in Los Angeles in the summer of 1965, where 34 people were killed, underscored the extent to which racial unrest was a national problem. It is likely that few Whitworth students beyond Tucker knew much about Malcolm X, but his assassination, coupled with the emergence of the phrase and concept of "Black Power" expressed by Stokely Carmichael and others in 1966, changed the dynamic on the Whitworth campus.

The larger context for civil rights nationally surely influenced Whitworth administrators. Archival records at Whitworth reflect the fact that the director of admissions, Ken Proctor, began exploring possible strategies for recruitment of Black students to Whitworth during the summer of 1965. Proctor corresponded with the director of the National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students.[22] Between twenty and twenty-five African American students each year from 1965 through 1968 were contacted by Whitworth but only three students even responded to Whitworth's inquiry and none of them matriculated.[23]

In December of 1965, Whitworth invited African American James Farmer, the national secretary of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), one of the nation's leading civil rights organizations, to speak in chapel. Farmer told Whitworth students that, "Civil rights is the greatest problem facing America today." He stated that the function of CORE was to provide trained "agitators" for the purpose of bringing about a "creative tension" that would challenge the status quo regarding race relations in America. He further stated that despite the civil rights legislation there has been no significant change in the life condition of the average African American and that more federal laws will be needed "if the Negro is to become truly free." Farmer appealed to students to become involved in the struggle; he concluded by saying "when people are willing to work together, right in the places w[h]ere they live, to eliminate prejudice

and social injustice, only then would the American Dream be reclaimed for the Negro and America would become America once again."[24]

No one could easily predict what the next few years would hold for Whitworth faculty, staff, and students, but certainly change was in the air. What is clear is that Whitworth did not have a coordinated plan for going forward. All of that was about to change, as Whitworth administrators were about to take a much more proactive position regarding the recruitment of African American students.

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[1] *Whitworthian,* October 5, 1962, p. 3.

[2] *Whitworthian,* October 12, 1962, p. 2.

[3] *Whitworthian,* October 12, 1962 p. 2.

[4] *Whitworthian,* November 16, p. 2.

[5] *Whitworthian*, December 14, 1962.

[6] *Whitworthian*, December 14, 1962, p.2

[7] Author interview with Edker Matthews February 2, 2022.

[8] Author interview with Walter Oliver February 8, 2022.

[9] Author interview with Jeff Tucker March 17, 2022.

[10] *Whitworthian*, May 22, 1964, p. 5.

[11] *Whitworthian*, May 22, 1964, p. 5.

[12] *Whitworthian*, October 16, 1963, p. 2.

[13] *Whitworthian,* October 23, 1964, p. 5.

[14] *Whitworthian*, Oct. 2, 9, 1964.

[15] *Whitworthian,* October 16, 1964.

[16] *Whitworthian*, October 2, 1964.

[17] *Whitworthian*, October 23, 1964, p. 5.

[18] *Whitworthian,* February 26, 65, p. 2.

[19] *Whitworthian,* February 26, 1965, p. 4.

[20] Author interview with Bob Clark, February 4, 2022; Dwayne A. Mack, *Black Spokane: The Civil Rights Struggle in the Inland Northwest* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 117.

[21] *Whitworthian,* December 10, 1965 p. 3.

[22] Letter, Kenneth Proctor to Ann Coles, June 18, 1965, Box 2, Folder 23, Mark Koehler files, Whitworth University Archives.

[23]Letter, Kenneth Proctor to Richard Plant, President National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students, December 21, 1965, Box 2, Folder 23, Mark Koehler files, Whitworth University Archives.

[24] *Whitworthian* December 17, 1965 p. 1.