

# African-Americans in the Union City Area

Research by

**Timothy Swenson**

President

Museum of Local History

## Introduction

The history of African-Americans in the Union City area is not well documented. There is no African-American that stands out in the early history of Union City. This paper makes an attempt to clarify this history, using a number of different sources and persons. This paper was not written from exhaustive research, but is from a number of historical resources and from a number of local historians. This paper should provide an overview of African-American history in the Union City area.

The key sources used in researching this paper are; newspaper clippings, photographs from Alvarado Grammar School, census records and interviews with older residents who remember Union City from about the 1930's.

## African-Americans in Washington Township

The earliest reference to African-Americans in the history of Washington Township is from Irvington in about the 1850's:

*"IRVINGTON, situated at the crossing of the roads leading from the old Mission and diverging to Centreville and Warm Springs, received its first name of "Nigger Corners" from two negroes who kept a saloon on one corner and who, perhaps, were the first residents of what is now Irvington."*

*"The first house in Irvington was built where the Palmdale Winery now stands and was afterwards moved to the corner now occupied by C. Rasmussen. It was used for a saloon, which was kept by the two negroes after whom the town received its name of "Nigger Corners."*

### *History of Washington Township, 1904, Woman's Club of Washington Township*

Phil Holmes has been writing on Fremont and Washington Township history for more than twenty years. He probably knows more about local history than anyone else. When asked about African-Americans in the Washington Township area, he said that there is very little information. He thinks that there were some African-Americans in Washington Township from the 1850's, but very few and mostly unnamed. He thinks that most of them were occupied as servants, coachmen, and other similar types of positions. He believes that it was after World War II that African-Americans in any significant numbers moved to Washington Township. Alice Robie grew up in Hayward, but her families had ties in Alvarado and she visited it fairly frequently. Her maiden name is Jung, and the Jung family came to

Alvarado in the 1860's. She married into the Robie family in 1948, and the Robie's lived just down the street from Alice's grandparents house on Vallejo Street. In talking with Alice, she says that she does not remember any African-Americans living in Alvarado when she was growing up.

Newspaper reports are pretty thin on reporting on African-Americans. Here are some reports that were found:

*For the entire county there are 11,084 children within her boundaries. 10,987 of these are white, 87 are Negro, 13 are Indian and 412 Mongolian (Asian).*

***The Oakland Tribune, December 13, 1876***

*Last year the colored farm workers of Alameda County established a harvest workers camp at Alvarado entirely for Negroes who wished to do farm labor. There were about forty there last year and the camp earned a fine reputation for neatness and the thrifty work done by the colored hands there.*

*This year the number has doubled but the work has not kept pace with the increase. Last week there were too many idle days at Camp Alvarado.*

***The Hayward Review, September 28, 1943***

Census records for 1910 in Alvarado lists two "mulatto" women:

Sadie L. Jones, Mulatto, Servant, 35 Yrs, Single, Domestic in home of Eb. H. Dyer  
Gladys E. Jones, Mulatto, Servant, 21 Yrs, Single, Domestic in home of Eb. H. Dyer

Ebenezer H. Dyer founded the sugar beet factory in Alvarado and a company that built sugar beet factories. He had a large Victorian home and was probably one of the wealthiest residents of Alvarado.

## **African-Americans at Alvarado Elementary School**

The Museum of Local History has recently been given access to a collection of photographs from the Alvarado Elementary School, which includes a number of class pictures from the early 1940's, early 1950's, late 1960's, early 1970's, and the early 1990's. These photographs have been surveyed to find any African American students. Some of the photos are undated, but based on the layout of the school, the earlier ones can be dated to before 1954 (when a new school was built). The first class pictures with African-American students are from about 1947. A number of African-Americans are noted in photographs from the 1950's. A class picture from the 1974-75 school year show a number of African-American students and one African-American staff member.



## Rigmaiden family

Anthony Gualco grew up in Alvarado, graduating from Washington Union High School in 1959, the last class to graduate from that school from Union City. He said that the only African-American family that he knew of in Alvarado were the Rigmaiden family. Using a collection of newspaper clippings that Anthony has transcribed, the following information is found about the family.

Richard Rigmaiden was a contractor for "plowing, harvesting, planting and pruning trees" as mentioned in an ad from September 1946. He owned the Riverside Hotel, which was managed by his wife, Estelle. Estelle was involved with the "Unity Chapel Church of God and Christ" which purchased the old Presbyterian Church on Horner street (then V street), in 1952. Estelle was also reported to be volunteering as a "gray lady", whose duties consist of "working at Hospital wards, shopping for the patients, and arranging and giving parties".

Anthony reported that he remembers the following Rigmaiden children: Antoine, Lucille, Mary, Thomas, Mercedes, and Richard Jr. Graduates from Alvarado Elementary School were announced in the local newspaper. Through these records, the following children were found, along with the graduation year:

- Selina (1947)
- Antoine (1949)
- Mercedes (1951)
- Thomas (1953)
- Mary (1954)
- Lucille (unknown)

When comparing the class graduation year and the photos from Alvarado Elementary School, the following photographs show the following Rigmaidens:

Selina - Class of 1947 - alv082.jpg

Thomas - Class of 1953 - alv093.jpg

(Given that there are two African-American boys in the photo, it is not clear which one is Tom)

Mary - Class of 1954 - alv152.jpg

(This is a best guess based on the other photographs and the fact that she was a student officer)

Looking on RootsWeb, an online source of genealogical information, the Rigmaiden family can be found:

Richard Rigmaiden

Born March 13, 1896 - Imperial Calcasieu Parish, LA

Died December 15, 1971 - Union City, CA

Ovie Estelle Poole

Born 1899 - Imperial Calcasieu Parish, LA

Married - 1917 - Lake Charles, LA

- Golden Rigmaiden
- Selina Rigmaiden
- Richard Rigmaiden

- Antoine Rigmaiden
- Thomas Rigmaiden
- Helen Rigmaiden

The RootsWeb information does show that Richards paternal grandfather was white.

### **African-Americans in Union City Today**

The City of Union City reports on its website that the African-American population of Union City is 6.7%. The County of Alameda is at 9.7%. Back in 2000, the City of Union City reported an African-American population of 8.6% and 17.9% for Alameda County.