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# The Student Life of Robert R. Johnson

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# The Student Life of Robert R. Johnson

Pedro Tomazzelli

African American History

When one thinks about African American history before the Civil Rights era, one thinks of hardships, inequality, and racism towards African Americans. Although racial history in the North were not as evident as some in the South, African Americans still dealt with the same turbulent reality, only not as overtly. Spokane, WA, for example, still underwent though phases of racial discrimination. A major turning point in Spokane's racial history was World War II, when racial tensions of discrimination reached new heights. According to Carlos Arnaldo Schwantes, this period is when "smaller communities started to exclude blacks from public areas, and the first-time discriminatory signs appeared in the region."<sup>1</sup> During the same time this anti-black sentiment was rising, an African American student, by the name of Robert R. Johnson, was completing his senior year at Whitworth University as the only African American student in his graduating class. Despite racial discrimination of the early 1940s, Robert Johnson was able to have a successful experience at Whitworth. As a student, some of his accomplishments included: representing Whitworth at religious meetings and choir events, his participation in several clubs to better the school, and passion for religion that shaped his future as a pastor, and allowed him to become very influential among his peers.

During the early 1940s, as Americans fought abroad for both freedom and democracy, African Americans fought for the same reasons only domestically. Though Americans won their fight for democracy abroad, the idea of Double Victory failed, and African Americans continued to experience racial discrimination<sup>2</sup>. Spokane was not an exception. During the same time Robert

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<sup>1</sup> Schwantes, Carlos A. *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History*. Rev. and Enl. ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Mack, D. (2014). *Black Spokane: The civil rights struggle in the inland northwest* (Race and culture in the American West; v. 8). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Johnson attended Whitworth, African Americans throughout town had their basic rights stripped away from them. In Spokane, Redlining and housing covenants excluded African Americans from several areas in town. Police brutality and segregation within recreational areas, as well as jobs, added to this anti-black sentiment.<sup>3</sup>

Though it is not clear if Robert Johnson was directly affected by the hostility towards African Americans in Spokane, or even at Whitworth for that matter, there is enough strong evidence to argue that he was viewed in a positive light by his peers. According to the 1943 Whitworth Natsihi yearbook, people seemed to believe it would be unimaginable to picture “Robert Johnson without a song.”<sup>4</sup> During his time at Whitworth, Johnson became a bit of a celebrity on campus due to his skills as a musician and a saxophone player. It was with this notion that Robert Johnson, also known as Bob Johnson, represented Whitworth University during several religious and choir meetings throughout the state. One Sunday, October 26<sup>th</sup>, the Whitworth Chorus made its first appearance of the year at Chewelah and Colville. During this trip, thirty-six students participated in the event, but “Robert Johnson and a few other groups were selected to deliver special numbers.”<sup>5</sup> Later in the school year, Johnson went on to represent Whitworth both in Newport and Sandpoint, Idaho where Robert Johnson was both “enthusiastically received, and delighted by everyone”<sup>6</sup> for his performance.

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<sup>3</sup> Mack, D. (2014). *Black Spokane: The civil rights struggle in the inland northwest*.

<sup>4</sup> Whitworth University “Natsihi Yearbook 1944” Whitworth University (1944). *Natsihi Yearbook*. Paper 19. <http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/yearbooks/19>

<sup>5</sup> Whitworth University, “The Whitworthian 1942-1943” Whitworth University (1943). *The Whitworthian Student Newspaper*. Paper 39. (April 1943)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

When Robert Johnson was not spending his time representing Whitworth by singing or in classes, he spent time with school clubs to make the school a better place. Robert Johnson was the secretary of the W club and a Philadelphian club. The W club “consisted of letter men in athletics, and its chief interest was for the promotion of the athletic interest of the institution.”<sup>7</sup> As a secretary for the club, Johnson assisted with a program called Bricks-Krieg, a play on words on the German military term for a lightning war during World War II. Bricks-Krieg aimed at building the field house on campus quickly by breaking into squads and selling bricks for people in order to hasten the development of the new building. Johnson also represented the Philadelphian club during his last year at Whitworth. The Philadelphians were constituted by young men who were preparing themselves for a life of full time service in the military. “They meet for prayer and meditation once or twice a week”<sup>8</sup> to reflect about the hardship these young men would go through once in the military. The Philadelphians really cared about the members of the student body who were leaving for war. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, a few members gathered for fellowship before Odin Baugh, a student, was to leave for the army.<sup>9</sup> They gathered along a fire for some food and “gave Ode favorite scripture verses.”<sup>10</sup> At the end of the gathering, he was presented with a gift and “Robert Johnson sang two hymns”<sup>11</sup> to close it all up.

Often, churches around the area would call the Philladelphians for assistance in Sunday services. The university’s chapel also called on the Philadelphians to deliver sermons. On

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<sup>7</sup> Whitworth College. “The Whitworth College Bulletin. (1942-1943).” *Whitworth College Student Organization 1942-1943*.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Whitworth University, “The Whitworthian 1941-1942” Whitworth University (1943). *The Whitworthian Student Newspaper*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

November 17<sup>th</sup>, “an exceptionally fine service was given by the Philadelphians with a beautiful instrumental prelude, and two beautiful songs sung by [Robert] Johnson.”<sup>12</sup> The sermon that day dealt with the “Challenge of Christian living.”<sup>13</sup> In the sermon, the challenge meant to forget the artificial and material things in life and focus solely in Christ. In addition, it preached that Christians should be like a great ship at sea, the only danger being when water falls into the ship. Water in this case, are the distractions of the outside world instead of the focus on God.

Robert Johnson was deeply connected to faith and Christianity during his time at Whitworth. His passion for Christ, combined with his love for music, allowed Johnson to “be selected to attend the National Council of Baptist Youth Fellowship.”<sup>14</sup> Johnson was selected by the Washington Commission of Christian Education for “his outstanding work in the church where he was the president of the Young People’s fellowship for the past three years, and for his major role in the organization of youth programs for the state<sup>15</sup>.” Johnson was also president of the Baptist Young People’s Union. This group “sought to put young people in the way and at the task of unselfish services to others and expose them to the Christ desire to do good.”<sup>16</sup> As a president, Johnson was responsible for creating committees such as memberships, Bible studies, and mission work and community development. He was also in charge of weekly meetings such

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. (November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1941)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Whitworth University, “The Whitworthian 1942-1943” Whitworth University (1943). *The Whitworthian Student Newspaper*. Paper 39.

<sup>15</sup> Flake, Arthur and Lambdin, J E. Southern Baptist convention. “Baptists Young People’s Union Administration.” *Nashville, Tenn., Sunday School Boad of the Southern Baptist Convention. 1942*

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

as Sunday school and bible study groups, as well as the development of the Christian skills of the youth.

The student life of Robert Johnson was very powerful. In a time of discrimination towards African Americans, Robert Johnson was able to become a bit of a local celebrity around campus, and a representative of Whitworth of several events. His outgoing charisma and willingness to teach others his love for God allowed him to become “Whitworth’s most widely known personality.”<sup>17</sup> Though there was lots of racial discrimination surrounding Johnson, his willingness to help in youth ministries put young people on the path of service through God, and his sincere care for his peers who were selected to serve in the military allowed people to overlook the differences in skin color. After graduating from Whitworth, Robert Johnson received a “Master of Divinity degree from Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in 1946.”<sup>18</sup> In 1953, Johnson founded the “St. Albans Congregational Church in New York.”<sup>19</sup> He was also the “founder of York College in Jamaica, Queens, founding director of the Queens Inter-Faith Clergy Council, and a former director of the N.A.A.C.P.”

In conclusion, Spokane had a very turbulent racial history during the 1940s. Other students around the area such as Jangaba A. Johnson, for example, suffered from discrimination segregation in the area. Jangaba Johnson was an African American student at Gonzaga University

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<sup>17</sup> Whitworth University “Natsihi Yearbook 1944” Whitworth University (1944). *Natsihi Yearbook*. Paper 19. <http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/yearbooks/19>

<sup>18</sup> Saxon, Wolfgang. “Rev. Robert Ross Johnson, 79, First Pastor of Queens Church.” *The New York Times*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

that was kicked out of a barbershop for being black after waiting for a while to get his hair cut.<sup>20</sup>

It is not certain to say that things like this did not apply to Robert Johnson. Though his story is not one of direct combat of inequality or of activism during his student years, there is something simple yet powerful about his time at Whitworth. His love for Christ, genuine care for the future generations, and his skill of music allowed others to view him with tremendous respect even if they did not like his race.

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<sup>20</sup> Mack, D. (2014). *Black Spokane: The civil rights struggle in the inland northwest* (Race and culture in the American West; v. 8). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

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