My ADIRONDACK Life

HOW CAN THE PARK BECOME MORE DIVERSE AND WELCOMING TO PEOPLE OF ALL BACKGROUNDS? HERE'S WHAT GROWING UP BLACK IN THE NORTH COUNTRY TAUGHT ME

AN ESSAY BY DR. ALICE PADEN GREEN

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WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME ABOUT MY LIFE AS A BLACK person growing up in the Adirondacks among a predominately white population during the 1950s and '60s, several persistent images explode in my mind.

In one, I was a high-school student in the small iron-ore mining hamlet of Witherbee. It was the first day of the school year. The teacher welcomed her new class of students and asked us, in seating order, to identify our family's country of origin. Each year I would endure the pain that accompanied this exercise. I was always the lone black student in class.

As I waited my turn, my heart felt like it might jump out of my chest and my hands grew sweaty. Each of my fellow students called out, proudly: Poland, Italy, Canada, Ireland, Spain and so on. I dreaded what I knew would follow—my classmates bursting into hysterical laughter as I timidly pronounced, "Africa."

The author, Alice Green, second from left, and her white friend Myrtle, far left, were told they couldn't room together at the motel where they worked. PAGE 47: **Green, circa 1958.**

Africa was perceived by them, me and everyone else in town as a vine-covered jungle, mysterious and dark, in a faraway land inhabited by wild animals and uncivilized black people. Sadly, no one in class, not even the teacher, recognized that Africa was not a country. All our knowledge of the continent came from the popular Tarzan movies screened on Saturday afternoons at the nearby Port Henry Movie Theatre.

Another haunting image is when I arrived at my first job with my white neighbor and closest friend, Myrtle. We had just turned 14 and were hired for the summer to live and work together at Clautice's Motel and Restaurant, in Paradox Lake. We bubbled over with joy at the prospect of earning money for needed school clothing. Mrs. Clautice, the owner, politely welcomed us and instructed us on our duties. We burst with excitement as we waited for her to show us our shared room.

Then, Mrs. Clautice dropped a bombshell that destroyed our dream and turned my world upside down. She informed us that we could not room together. Myrtle would be living in the family's living quarters in the main building. I would be housed in a bat-infested loft in a dilapidated backyard barn where the other black help from the South lived. Fearful of the bats that circled my room, I cried all night, feeling devastated, dehumanized and alone. As soon as morning came, I walked to the main house and confronted Mrs. Clautice. While dismissing my claim and expressing shock over my recalcitrance, she tried to fire me from a job that I had already resigned in my mind. Myrtle and I left Clautice's together to find our way home and face the reality of a world that had just slapped us in the face.

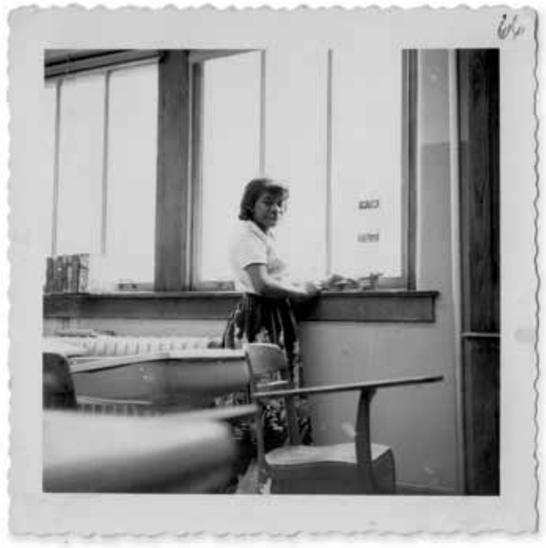
These two personal experiences are historical accounts of what much of the Adirondack community was like in its treatment of black people. Today, many people in the region seek to transcend that ugly past and become a community that supports true diversity, equity and inclusion of all people.

My early experiences also speak to several concerns that must be truthfully confronted as part of any regional efforts to encourage new visitors and residents. At the outset, ethnic diversity is not enough. It is not simply a matter of numbers, as some seem to believe. Witherbee was, perhaps, one of the most ethnically mixed communities anywhere. Almost since its discovery, in the early 1800s, iron-ore mining attracted a variety of immigrants to the area. Despite some ethnic conflict early on, the new immigrants settled most of their differences and united as a community based on their work in the iron-ore mines and, most importantly, their European whiteness. But when small numbers of African-Americans began migrating from the American South to the Adirondacks to flee Jim Crow racism and work in the iron-ore industry, just as the white immigrants had done earlier, they were not welcomed. My father and uncle were two of those African-American migrants.

Witherbee included a few kind and accepting neighbors and friends. But even they showed little understanding of or interest in African-American history and culture. The community generally failed to recognize the lasting legacy of slavery we were suffering. Though they accepted our presence after a while, few openly embraced us as equal human beings entitled to share in the beauty and charm of the Adirondacks.

Black historian and researcher W. E. B. Du Bois spoke of the existence in America of a color line drawn by whites, who generally deny its existence though it prevents them from seeing African-Americans as fully human Americans. This, in turn, affects how blacks see themselves. This racial dilemma, or "veil," as Du Bois called it, cannot be ignored as we develop strategies to attain the goals of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Photographs courtesy of the author



LEFT TO RIGHT: **Green, far left, and her sisters before prom in Witherbee; as none of their white classmates would accompany them, their dates were black airmen from the Plattsburgh Air Force Base. Green dreaded when teachers asked her to identify her family's country of origin.**

One Adirondack resident recently wrote, in a letter to the *Adirondack Explorer*, "The outdoors is truly the great equalizer of all people and does not discriminate based on the color of one's skin. It thrives on the character of those who choose to explore, enjoy, respect and protect it." No, the outdoors does not discriminate based on skin color, but some people who choose to recreate in it do. Just ask Aaron Mair, the African-American former head of the national Sierra Club, how he felt when rafters called him a racial expletive while he was being photographed at Schroon River for an article in this magazine several years ago. Ask the black summer camp counselors about the racist insults and bigoted comments hurled at them at the Ticonderoga Walmart and a Lake George restaurant one year. I wonder how much things have really changed since my childhood in the Adirondacks.

Due in large measure to the Civil Rights movement, the black psyche has changed since my childhood. We are no longer willing to allow whites to define us. We are much more psychologically and politically prepared to assert ourselves in the face of oppression. The Black Lives Matter movement opposing police brutality and racial injustice poignantly bears this out.

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These concerns were uppermost in my mind in 2014, when I attended the symposium titled "Toward a More Diverse Adirondacks" held at the Adirondack Interpretive Center at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Newcomb. The well-attended gathering included residents, educators, activists, writers, students and community leaders. The broadly representative group allowed for serious discussions and strong presentations. Yet I left feeling disappointed that they had not defined the nature of the diversity in mind; failed to address the issue of inclusion and its significance; and never spoke of valuing black lives, racial equity, or their reasons for seeking diversity in the first place. Some expressed concern that the state would, in the future, fail to provide needed funds and services to maintain the beauty and livability of the area unless there was a more diverse population involved in the life of the Adirondack Park—a self-serving motivation, whether or not it's grounded in truth.

To my pleasant surprise, the symposium gave rise to the Adirondack Diversity Initiative, which received enough funding in 2019 to hire a full-time director, Nicole Hylton-Patterson.

In February, Ms. Hylton-Patterson and I had the opportunity to talk about her vision for promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in the Adirondacks. Her experience, commitment, sensitivity and expertise suggest that the Adirondack community | *Continued on page 89*

down on Abel's forehead in a ferocious arch. The candles went out in the rooms of Abel's head.

HE CAME TO MOMENTS

later with the man on top of him, the long black whiskers prodding his face. He was almost able to taste the man's breath as he yelled directly into Abel's eyes.

"Get on up, put them mud hooks on the ground!"

Abel stood, as steady as a newborn fawn. Ruckett quickly pulled the jacket off Abel and tore down his pants, leaving him only in the single-set underwear. Ruckett worked quickly, his thin fingers grabbing at Abel's belongings. Rooting through his haversack and pulling his moccasins away, Ruckett grumbled out a proclamation to Abel, who huddled in his underwear around the dwindling coals of his fire.

"Have this be a lesson for you to dwell ova', don't go flashing your goods where evil eyes can see," he grabbed another pile of Abel's things and pushed them into the haversack, "and fast hands can steal!"

Ruckett piled all of Abel's things, including the firebox, into the haversack—still holding the ancient pistol on Abel. There was a brief pause between them where each others' eyes met. He reached into the moment with his look, trying to place the spark of human decency back to Ruckett. But it was for naught, the man was green with want and his eyes were void of reason.

After all of the goods were stowed, Ruckett Dion let out an odd laugh that sounded close to crying as he kicked snow on Abel and the fire, leaving nothing but a white steam cloud as he ran off laughing.

Abel, in stocking feet, held his temples with his frigid hands—there was an echoing ring between his ears from the blow. All around him was steam, white snow, ringing. A moment later he was unconscious again, face down in the snow in nothing but his underwear. ▲

Excerpted from the novel *Ballad of the Bark Eater*, by Jim Powers, under the name Adler Buck Mason. Available at westfieldfilms.com, shoptbmbooks.com and local bookstores.

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will engage in lively, serious and productive dialogues on how to share the Adirondacks and promote transformative change in its use by all.

However, the most challenging engagements promise to center around the necessary discussions of lingering individual and structural racism and the prison industry that serves as the economic lifeblood for many Adirondack communities. Both are interconnected and function to devalue, demean and destroy large numbers of black and brown people incarcerated in the region.

Structural racism permeates all of our society's institutions, denying people of color access to equal rights and services, and gives rise to what incarcerated people call "crime-generative factors"—unemployment, poor health, homelessness, bad housing and poorly functioning schools. Mass incarceration results in further collateral damages, perpetuating a cycle that many black and brown people are unable to escape.

As we gear up to welcome minority populations to the area, there exists no reliable count of the number of blacks residing in the Adirondack region. This is due, in large part, to the presence of both state and federal prisons. Prior to 2010, many state prisons counted their confined populations as residents of the county in which they were incarcerated for legislative districting and federal reimbursement purposes. Though 2010 New York State legislation required state prisons to count their inmate populations as residents of their home communities, the U.S. Census continues to count them as residents of the community in which they are confined. Still, the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision is able to provide monthly counts of their somewhat fluid prison populations. We do know that whatever the actual number of blacks who reside in the Adirondack region, more than 70 percent of that population is imprisoned.

Conditions have grown direr in this 2020 Census year, which has also brought us the COVID-19 virus. There are now an estimated 9,000 people imprisoned in the North Country and some facilities, including Great Meadow, on the eastern

border of the Blue Line, have experienced outbreaks. We know that infectious diseases, especially this new one, can spread like wildfire in prisons if there is little room for social distancing and inadequate testing and medical care.

In an effort to deal with the impending threat of the current pandemic in its prisons, it was reported on North Country Public Radio that New York State started transferring an unknown number of prisoners from Fishkill Correctional Facility to North Country prisons to relieve staffing shortages linked to the virus. This kind of movement can exacerbate the problem for those imprisoned, employed, and living in the Adirondack community, as well as the families and communities from which most of the prisoners come. There looms the possibility of increasing exposure to a disease that disproportionately affects black and brown people, and of straining and eventually exhausting the limited medical resources available in the Adirondack region.

The long history of the disproportionate incarceration of black and brown people in the North Country has prompted many in their home communities to view the Adirondacks as "prison country," with echoes of the plantation economy and chattel slavery that existed in America for 250 years. It will require much work to address this characterization, which prevents many from traveling to the area.

WHERE DO WE GO from here to achieve diversity, social equity, justice and inclusion of all in the Adirondacks? I see two important issues that we must address to bring about real change.

First, as the Alabama-based organization Equal Justice Initiative proclaims, "We must tell the truth about our history of racial injustice before we can address the legacy." This will be especially difficult in the Adirondacks, which has not had to directly confront the issue, in large measure because of its homogeneous population and politically conservative environment. One important way of starting to tell the truth is to support the work of existing regional groups eager to teach that history, including John Brown Lives!, the North Star Underground Railroad Museum, the Paden Institute and Retreat for Writers of Color, Adirondack Experience, and the Adirondack Diversity Initiative.

One of these, the Paden Institute and Retreat for Writers of Color, was founded by my husband, Charles Touhey, and me in 1997. It hosts and instructs writers and introduces politically astute thinkers and writers from across the country and the world to the Adirondacks and its people. A cross-fertilization continues to take place in Essex, New York, with books being published, residents engaging in conversations with writers about racism, and healthy relationships being developed as writers continue to devote much of their work to telling the history and culture of black and brown people.

Second, the Adirondack community must engage in serious dialogue and develop realistic strategies to address the presence of prisons. We must organize efforts to demand state government produce an effective economic development strategy that will eliminate the area's heavy dependence on the prison industry. Some believe that such an idea is far-fetched. But we can look at Plattsburgh as a model that successfully survived the loss of the Plattsburgh Air Force Base that the city once heavily depended upon.

There are growing signs that the region may soon lose one of its leading industries. The alternative-to-prison movement is growing; multiple advocacy groups are working to end mass incarceration; the New York State prison population is drastically declining; and in his 2020 State of the State message Governor Andrew Cuomo—who earlier proclaimed that prisons should not be accepted as an economic development program—asked for the authority to close prisons in three months. He seeks to reverse his father's legacy as the builder of more prisons than any other governor.

The loss of its prisons may prove to be the Adirondacks' saving grace. It could signal to the world that this place is free, open and ready to welcome all people. It just may be the time. ▲

Dr. Alice Paden Green is the founder and executive director for the Center for Law and Justice, based in Albany.