

The Exhibit “and still I rise...”

By Heather A. Rennalls

Roger Ferreira is the artist who designed the logo for the travelling exhibit “and still I rise...: A History of African Canadian Workers in Ontario 1900s to Present.” This multimedia exhibit has been home at the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (WAHC) on Stuart Street in Hamilton, Ontario since March 16, 2003 which ran for a year. Afterwards it traveled to key areas throughout Ontario associated to the history of the Underground Railroad. From February to April 2008, this exhibit will be a temporary home at the Woodstock Museum which is another area that has a history of the Underground Railroad.

Roger provided a brief history for the exhibit. Six years ago a committee was spearheaded to talk about establishing an exhibit of workers of African descendents from the 1900s to the present. WAHC funded the venture and the committee went to the Hamilton Black community to get the stories. The community also had control on how the history would be told.

The committee held a contest for local artists to participate in producing work to capture a concept for a poster. Roger responded but his first piece was rejected which depicted people coming out of slavery. That piece was too early in time for the committee who wanted the time-frame in the 1900s. He then submitted another piece, a group of people rising over the obstacle of a hill. Roger depicts the different waves of immigrants starting from the Black pioneers from the United States around 1800 who became framers in British Columbia.

The first person in the line of immigrants, is a woman with a hammer her hand. A light is shining from her helmet to lead the way. This represents women getting into non-traditional jobs and leading the way still following the North Star. A teacher holding a globe in one hand and a book in his other follows next; Roger is an art teacher with the Wentworth Board of Education; representing the influx of teachers coming from various parts of the Caribbean. Nannies usually came from Jamaica. The Nanny in Roger’s picture is carrying a spear, representing the African race fighting for social change with the Canadian flag flying proudly. During the 1920s and 30s, the only work Black women could get were as domestic cleaners.

A Lawyer with dreadlocks follows the Nanny. Roger wanted to illustrate that despite being in the corporate world one can be true to their heritage. According to Roger, most Black men shave their heads to “fit in” to the corporate society. He cites that the majority of Black models, actors and businessmen shave their heads rather than show their ethnicity.

A Porter carrying a suitcase is next in line. By the 1930s, the best paid jobs for a Black man was working as a sleeping car porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). One Hamilton Porter was the late Raymond Lewis. (His face appears in the laminated newspaper article entitled “Black Guys in Well-Pressed Suits” located on the Upper Level in the Woodstock Museum.)

A Nurse represents when Canada in 1959, opened its doors to immigration allowing trained and skilled workers from England and the British West Indians. She is carrying a placard protesting better working conditions. A soldier carrying a drum is next. During the First World War Black soldiers were not permitted to fight along side their White

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counterparts until they established their own unit: the No. 2 Construction Battalion 1916-1920. Some Black soldiers volunteered to serve with the British forces during Revolutionary War from 1775 to 1783. These soldiers felt proud fighting against American soldiers in an attempt to keep Canada free.

After the Soldier is a Pioneer. Following the Revolutionary War, about 40,000 Loyalists found refuge in the British provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec then later made their ways to other areas like Kingston, Toronto, Niagara on-the Lake and Amherstburg. Along with these early Loyalists were not only Black soldiers but slaves who would later see an end to slavery in this country.

In Roger’s poster, the line of immigrants extends beyond the Pioneer, however, the rest of the figures are grey. He wanted to focus on those groups of immigrants in keeping to the time frame of the exhibit, the 1900s. Although Roger’s contract has ended after completing his design, he is still associated with the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre. He teaches art classes every Saturdays there for the Immigration Culture Art Association.

The rail train in the background of Roger’s picture is two-fold. It represents the only jobs Black men could work during the turn of the century and it also represents the Underground Railroad. According to an article that appeared in *The Hamilton Spectator* on March 22, 2003 to commemorate this exhibit, writer Graham Rockingham cited the following:

The rail car is a key symbol in Ontario’s black history. The backwood trails, secret handshakes and safe houses of the Underground Railway shepherded runaway slaves from the plantations of the South through the border frontiers of Windsor and Niagara.¹

The exhibit “and still I rise...: A History of African Canadian Workers in Ontario 1900s to Present,” depicts the struggles Black workers had to endure to compete for and obtain employment as well as their working conditions. The title for the exhibit “and still I rise” is from the 1978 poem written by the famous and talented American author Dr. Maya Angelou. The poem describes the adversity Blacks endured during slavery yet they rose up and prevailed. Like Dr. Angelou’s words in her poem, this exhibit portrays how Black workers in Canada also rose from their harsh conditions at times in the workforce.

Due to copyright infringements, Dr. Angelou’s poem can not be cited here but one can read her poem “Still I Rise” at the following website from A Circle’s Presentation: go to <http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/angelou/angelou.html#contents> click “Poem” then click “Still I Rise.” For this reason the WAHC opted only to use the title. The exhibit has four mock railroad cars that illustrate the trails and triumphs of Black Canadians’ struggle for equality in the workforce.

This exhibit centres on the 1900s; however, to tell the story of the experiences of Black workers in Oxford County, we had to go back to an earlier time frame to the 1800s. Like many parts of Canada, Oxford County had numerous thriving Black communities that have since disappeared and are largely forgotten. Few monuments commemorate these

¹ Graham Rockingham. “Black Guys in Well-Pressed Suits...” *The Hamilton Spectator*, Saturday March 22, 2003, p. M12.

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long-gone hamlets of early Black settlers. Black History Month is the one time of year these communities are brought back to life and remembered as the thriving settlements they once were.

In Oxford County, these pockets of thriving communities included Ingersoll, Woodstock, Norwich and Otterville. However, by the turn of the century, the Black communities here stopped thriving and in some areas, they no longer exist.