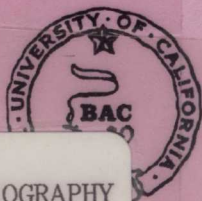


Black Pioneers at the University: 1920–1960

Tarea Hall Pittman

NAACP Official and Civil Rights Worker



BIOGRAPHY
PITTMAN

Alumni Club
University of California, Berkeley



FOREWORD

Since its beginning in 1868, the University of California has welcomed young people of many ethnic and racial groups. They have included men and women whose families were small farmers, shopkeepers, railroad and government workers, as well as the children of doctors, lawyers, and corporation executives. In 1881, Alexander Dumas Jones was the first African-American student to enroll. In 1905, Charles Edward Carpenter was the first black man to graduate, and in 1909 Vivian Rodgers was the first black woman to graduate.

By the 1920s, there were a dozen or more of these young pioneers at the university, determined to win for themselves the best in higher education and to participate fully in the life of the state and nation. During the 1930s, perhaps a hundred African-Americans were attending Cal, in spite of the hard economic times of the Great Depression. Government education benefits for men and women who served in the armed forces during World War Two enabled many more minority students to come to the university in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Economic opportunity laws passed in the 1960s helped more young black people to attend college.

A 1966 census counted 226 black undergraduate and graduate students, who made up 1.02 percent of all students at Berkeley then. By 1988 there were 1,944 African-American students, 6.1 percent of the total. (The designation "African-American" began to be widely used instead of "black" during 1991.) Although the percentage of African-American undergraduates dropped to 5.5 in the early 1990s, the student body overall was a diverse cultural mix in which no one group comprised a majority.

In spite of these encouraging numbers, many young people today do not know any older African Americans who have attended college. Yet the record tells us that there have been minority students in our

colleges and universities since their beginning. Many of these men and women have won the struggle to graduate and have gone on to distinguish themselves in business, government, the professions, and community affairs. The experiences of these trailblazers are a rich part of the university's history. Today's students are continuing a long and valuable tradition.

The story you are about to read is the personal recollection of one outstanding early African-American Cal graduate. It is one of a series of detailed interviews tape-recorded by the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library in cooperation with the University of California Black Alumni Club. The series is designed for use by libraries, schools, and community groups working to encourage young people and their families to continue their education and to think about going to college.

For information about the longer volumes or additional interviews with distinguishing African Americans, please contact the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley 94720.

This series of seven booklets is made available through the generosity of the East Bay Community Foundation and its continuing efforts to reach out to the varied social, cultural, and economic groups of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties and respond to their shared needs and interests. For other titles in the series, see the back cover of this booklet.

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INTRODUCTION

Tarea Hall Pittman, known as "Ty," was born in 1903 and raised in Bakersfield, California, where her parents were among the first black families to settle. Her father, William Hall, had come from a cotton farm in Alabama to the San Joaquin Valley in 1895. Emily Pinkney, her mother, had come fifteen years before that, and had been orphaned with her five brothers at an early age.

William Hall and Emily Pinkney married and raised a family of six children. He worked on the farm they bought and she played the organ at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Bakersfield. William Hall and his four brothers established the first local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in town. The NAACP was to be the center of Tarea Pittman's career.

Tarea Hall graduated from Kern County Union High School in 1923, one of the largest high schools in California, and entered the University of California at Berkeley. In 1927 she married Bill Pittman, who was a student at the University of California Dental School in San Francisco. They settled in Alameda County, where he was one of the few black dentists practicing in the Bay Area.

Although she first majored in education, Tarea Hall switched to social service, completing her undergraduate degree at San Francisco State University and, in 1940, receiving a master's degree at Berkeley. While still in college, Ty began her life's work of helping those who suffered racial discrimination.

As a young girl, she liked public speaking. She was so good at it that in 1935 she was chosen by the Negro Educational Council of the East Bay to be the commentator of a groundbreaking radio program called "Negroes in the News" on radio KLS (later KDIA). She broadcast the radio show well into the 1970s. From 1936 to 1938, she was president of the California State Association of Colored Women's Clubs, and during World War II she worked with the Richmond Travelers Aid Society, which helped people who had come to the area, principally from the South, and were in need of housing and jobs.

After the war Mrs. Pittman was the president of the California Council of Negro Women, and worked to get child care facilities for working mothers. Active in the NAACP during her student years, she was soon a full-time staff member there and eventually became the director of the entire West Coast Region, supervising NAACP programs in nine western states. In the 1950s, she guided lobbying activities that led to the passage of the California Fair Employment Practices legislation. After retirement, she continued her civil rights work as a volunteer until her death in 1991.

Tarea Pittman's oral history was recorded in 1974 by Joyce Henderson. The remarks that follow are taken from those interviews. She begins her story by talking about her childhood and family.

Tarea Hall Pittman: My parents knew all of the people in town. They grew up with the town. When my dad went into the bank, the bankers and tellers would say, "Why, hello, Will. How are you?" By the time my mother and father were married they were able to build a home. We had a nice house and we had things that everybody else had. So we were not depressed in any way.

Was there much discrimination against Negroes in Bakersfield?

It was a very, very prejudiced place. It was terrible. There was no problem in going to school. There was no problem in getting jobs in certain areas. But you couldn't get a job as a clerk in a store or a secretary in an office. None of these jobs were open to Negroes. Domestic work was open to women. The men could get work with the railroads because Bakersfield was a division headquarters for the big railroads. Santa Fe and Southern Pacific had big shops there.

When I hear people talking about busing, this is very interesting to me because busing was the thing that brought about the excellent educational opportunity that we had. All of us around the area in Kern County got together and formed a big Kern County Union High School at Bakersfield, and because of this we had one of the biggest high schools in the state of California. We were able to have every opportunity, all of the languages; all of the departments were advanced because of the school being a union high school, and all of us who lived in the outlying areas rode a bus to the high school.

Was there prejudice against blacks at your high school?

Yes, we had some problems. But we all had friends. You see, we already had our place. Many of the parents of those students that were there had been classmates of our mother and father.

After my father's mother and father came to California, their thirteen sons and daughters lived with them until they married and left. My father's mother lived to be a very elderly woman and she was always the matriarch of that family. They had a terrible time trying to get her to come off that ranch after she was in her eighties. At eighty-five my grandmother was a phenomenal woman. At eighty-five she could just get out and walk to downtown Bakersfield and back better than I could ever think about doing now.

I come from a family of great talkers. My uncle, Mansion Hall, would make speeches, very fiery talks about anything that he was going to talk on. He was a very fiery speaker and my father also; all of them were.

My mother was quieter than any of the rest of them. She believed in very strict discipline. We had things that we were supposed to do. We knew exactly what we were to do and we did it! My father would be out on the ranch. My mother was a very capable woman and did a lot of things in running the household.

What was your motivation in coming to UC Berkeley?

I took a college preparatory course in high school. From the first day I went to high school I was intent on going to college, and I wanted to come to Berkeley.

How did you persuade your parents?

Well, I just kept at it. I just kept worrying them about wanting to come here. Then we had three Negro students from Kern County Union High School who were a little ahead of me who came to Berkeley.

Did you have any problems finding housing when you came to Berkeley in 1923?

The only housing that was available for Negro students was in private homes. There were not very many of them, nor were they close to campus, which created a problem. Some male students got food and lodging at the frat houses where they worked.

What about the white sorority houses?

White sorority houses didn't have Negro girls working in them. A lot of them had Negro cooks.

We made friends very easily. The YWCA cottage, which was then right outside of Sather Gate on the university campus, was a meeting place for students at noon. There were parties and social events given there. It really was a sort of a mecca for students, and Negro students were welcome to a certain degree. I never remember feeling foreign there, like I wasn't wanted. The other place where we felt very much at home and had dances was Stephens Union. It was a very pleasant building, right there on Faculty Glade. We could go out and sit under the beautiful trees. I was entranced with the campus. It was so beautiful!

When we founded the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, the university had an intrafraternal council. Something arose that

we couldn't be represented on this council. We were just a poor group because there were so few of us.

Why didn't the intrafraternal council allow you a spot?

Well, it was just plain prejudice! Most times the people who discriminate do not wish to be identified as discriminating against you because of your race. Even back then they didn't want to say it was because of your race. They did it under the guise that we shouldn't be allowed to belong because we didn't have a house.

We didn't have a fraternity house or a sorority house. We all lived out in the city, with the exception of the men that lived adjacent to campus. But they were working in the frat houses. My husband-to-be, William Pittman, happened to be one who was working at the post office—one of not too many. My husband had untold stamina! Even as an older man, he worked extremely hard and he didn't want to quit practicing dentistry.

Dean Lucy Stebbens was very, very active during this controversy. She was the dean of students and she maintained that we were college women and that as long as our scholastic average was what it was supposed to be that we would have to be admitted. Dean Stebbens was very outspoken in her espousal of the Negro women on campus.

When did you meet your husband and where?

I was in undergraduate school in the College of Letters and Science at the University of California, Berkeley, and he was over in San Francisco at the University of California Dental School. I told you that there were just a handful of Negro students on campus. At the beginning of the semester, Alpha

Phi Alpha fraternity had a party. It was at one of these first-of-school social events that I met my husband.

I didn't think he was that handsome, but a lot of the girls thought he was very handsome. He was, you know, well-dressed and he had access to a car. Very few people had a car at that time.

I've asked Bill a lot of times, "How, at that time, when you didn't see any Negro dentists in Oakland, did you arrive at the fact that you were going to become a dentist?" He can't really explain why he chose dentistry. One just didn't pick that up in college. You know, sometimes you're doing your undergrad work, and still don't know what you are going to be. But that was always his goal.

My husband was very tall, even as a teenager. He even put his age up during World War I and got in the army. At that time you could enlist and say, "I'm twenty-one years old." He had just begun his freshman year before he left. But of course, he did do it. This was World War II 1917! The recruiters didn't care. They had been accused of being biased and not letting any Negroes enlist. I guess they thought, "We'll take one or two to prove that we aren't prejudiced." So they took Bill and the next thing you know they had sent him overseas. He got some mustard gas that gave him quite a time of it, because the sickness it gave him would reoccur.

I met him in 1923 and we were married in 1927.

Had you graduated?

No. You see, the university had told me that I was too underweight. Looking back now, I guess maybe they thought I was susceptible to tuberculosis or something. They finally ended up making me stay out a couple of semesters. When I

came back I decided to change majors. I liked teaching and I had no problem, but I felt a prisoner in that classroom. The thing I was very much interested in was doing field work. I was very interested in people.

I stayed out quite a long time, because I had married and Bill had to get out of dental school. When I went back to college I practically started all over because I built up a completely new major. When I graduated from San Francisco State I decided that I would go to the school of social service at Cal and get my master's degree. So this is what I did. It was quite a circuitous route that I took.

I think I made a good choice but if I had had more insight into what I really might have been capable of doing, maybe I would have gone into law. But I entered the social work field and I was intensely interested in it. During World War II I had a placement at the Richmond Travelers Aid Society and the USO.

What did you do while you were president, from 1936-1938, of the California State Association of Colored Women's Clubs?

We were very anxious to see that Negro families, and particularly Negro women, participated in political activity. Some of them, when women finally got the vote, never bothered about voting at all!

The Fanny Wall Children's Home was another thing that made me want to be able to speak authoritatively as a social worker. It was a project of the association, and I knew it was being run like somebody's private home, and not according to standards. The reason the authorities let it go on for so long was because they couldn't open up any foster homes with Negro parents and they didn't have any place to put all these

Negro children; so they were glad to have a Fanny Wall Children's Home to absorb some of these children who ordinarily would have been in a foster home.

Some of them were delinquents, some of them came over to us from the probation home, and some were just orphans and some of them were abandoned. So we were working hard to see if we couldn't bring the home up to standard.

We were also interested in working with the juvenile court. It came to us that if a group of children were accused of something, they'd take the children to the detention home. Then, somehow or other, all of the little white children and all of the rest of them who were not Negro got bailed out. But the little Negro children were held to answer. So we were very interested in the juvenile court for this reason, and we did a number of very outstanding things.

Even back then there was a lot of agitation in connection with the prisons, and we were very anxious to get a separate prison for women. Finally we got Tehachapi, which had formerly been an all-purpose and a male prison, turned over as a women's maximum security prison.

When did you serve as president of the California Council of Negro Women and what were the council's concerns?

I was president from from 1948 to 1951. The general concerns of this group, which was made up of clubs located throughout the state of California, was to raise the standards of black homes, particularly as it referred to the well-being of women and children. The council is made up of various departments, such as legislation, arts and crafts, music, homemaking, health and housing.

The council is a group of women who are not all alike along a social line or in the upper bracket of economics. Not that there are not some professional women in it. But the rank and file person is interested in the poor, in the disadvantaged, in trying to upgrade women in their jobs and to see that they get additional skills, and to see that their housing is better, their families are better fed, their children are taken care of while they're working. It is a grassroots women's organization.

I understand that in 1947 you served on the Alameda County Grand Jury.

I was on several grand jury committees. I was particularly interested at that time in the condition of the jail and the detention home, which is really the juvenile hall. We visited these places and made recommendations based on our visits and we asked, even at that time, about jail reforms, about that whole juvenile hall setup.

Every year the grand jury makes recommendations and eventually some of the things do get done because year after year people are making these recommendations and the board of supervisors is appraised of the situation because you are trying to get them to do something about the reforms that you want to carry out.

How active were you in the NAACP when you were serving on these committees?

I was very, very active in the NAACP. All of their work is done through committees. This means they set up an education committee, a membership committee, finance, labor and industry committee, a youth work committee, a veterans committee.

The NAACP is an organization set up to serve people, and we would get many complaints that people had applied for positions, taken examinations, and were never called. We would then go to the civil service commission and try to find out why these particular Negroes didn't pass or why they couldn't get placed on the list to be appointed. We would go to the board of education, to the city manager or the city council or the county board of supervisors, or whoever was in charge of that particular institution, and try to find out why this discrimination existed and what could be done about it.

Of course the chief offenders were the police department and the fire department. We really went after that. We finally got a few black men on the police force and a few in the sheriff's department. We finally got several Negro women in the sheriff's department. All in all we broke down much of the discrimination that had to do with housing the prisoners and tried to do away with police brutality.

This was very much talked about at that time and we worked very hard on it, VERY HARD. I don't know any program, outside of trying to place Negro school teachers, that we worked any harder on than we worked on trying to do away with discrimination in the county and city facilities.

We even did some boycotting at that time. We asked people not to patronize a certain place. We were instrumental in getting the civil rights law put on the books where people could be fined. It is true that it was only a hundred-dollar fine and court costs, but this was a step forward. We got that passed in the legislature.

Public accommodations such as restaurants, hotels and motels were a very big thing, high on the agenda then. It was a long time before we could get restaurants, hotels, and motels (motels were the worst) opened to Negroes because they would say that they were full. Then we got the FEPC

[Fair Employment Practices Commission] law passed in 1959. Today there are very few places which will discriminate against people.

We absolutely opened up public accommodations in this country. Of course, we have opened them up even in the deep South, so you know we have opened them up HERE. But it was a very big thing at the time. It was very hard to get that passed, as many of the men in the legislature were so conservative and reactionary.

I was working with the schools trying to get black teachers in the schools, and on the labor and industry committee trying to do something about jobs. When we got around to the war years then we were working very hard because the cry went out that there would be no black people that would work in Kaiser Shipyards, and Kaiser Shipyards was the big employer. There was war housing but they weren't going to let any Negroes live in the war housing. So this became one of our very, very big fights.

We'd meet no less than once a week and we'd generally meet at night because most of our people worked. Our open public meetings were always on Sunday afternoon. We met for many, many years from church to church.

The education committee was set up to try to do something about the schools generally. We were working with the schools, trying to get them not to discriminate against the Negro students. The committee was very instrumental in breaking up black-face minstrel shows. The Elks Club had at one time a yearly minstrel show. Finally the attorney general wrote an opinion that no school could house an entertainment where any race was ridiculed.

For years we were trying to get "Negroes" spelled with a capital "N." We were going to the papers and trying to keep

them from playing up cuttings, scrapes and rapes and writing, "This was a black." This made the public feel that we were sort of a subculture, because the papers didn't play up anything that was good.

You'd think that no Negro ever married or died or anything else because, unless it was someone very, very important, it never got in the news. Death notices have to come out and be published but other than that, there would be no notice of it. It was unheard of to have a Negro wedding picture in the paper!

Finally we got a Miss Delilah Beasley who went to work for the Oakland Tribune, and we had a Negro page in the paper. She was given the position to write the Sunday page of the news about Negroes. This was going on in the 1930s. Maybe the very last of the 1920s.

Then in 1935, the Negro Education Council of the East Bay banded themselves together to put on a radio program, "Negroes in the News." Now the whole intent behind that was that if we could get on the air, we would be able to offset this lack of news about Negroes by having a weekly program that people could listen to and actually hear something other than that someone had cut someone or been arrested in a crap game or something like that. This was the way the radio program began thirty-five years ago and it has never ceased to exist. I was the commentator and I did it just as a hobby. I had had several courses in radio in my college work and I was anxious to do this because this was sort of like a laboratory that I could use in that connection.

Did the NAACP take the leadership in getting an FEPC bill passed in California?

Yes, they did. There were various attempts to get legislation.

In 1953, we began a cooperative effort with church, labor, social and civic groups coming together to get the bill passed. NAACP had a commitment for a strong civil rights bill, one that had sanctions and enforcement provisions. We came together in the northern area and the southern area of the state. Then we worked out of the capitol in Sacramento. For the first time we had a lobbyist that stayed in Sacramento full-time. I was the lobbyist, and we had other people. I was in the capitol working with the author of the bill, with the heads of the two houses, to find out when the bill was before the Committee on Ways and Means.

I also gave testimony at all the hearings. We had other spokesmen at that time too. It wasn't just Negroes who testified. We had many, many other people in labor, the church, the Friends [American Friends Service Committee] had a lobby. Labor had a lobby. Lobbying was a very hard job. We were running up and down the halls and trying to find out where the legislators were. If you were a certified legislative advocate, you could go to the floor. I was the legislative advocate for the Committee for Fair Employment Practices Commission, and that was this cross-section of organizations.

I was a field secretary then. But I put full-time into this. I went to Sacramento and lived. I would come home to the Bay Area on occasion or perhaps weekends because most of the legislators went home on weekends. But mostly I stayed in Sacramento all week because we were so busy and were trying to do so many things.

One of the techniques that we voted to use in March of 1953 was a mobilization. It was the first meeting of that kind that had ever been held, where we would call in the main membership of the sponsoring and co-sponsoring organizations and we would have them to come in to the capitol itself in Sacramento. We had a mobilization for two

days. When they came in we had workshops on how to lobby and how to go and see their legislators.

On Sunday afternoon we called a big mass meeting at one of the largest churches in Sacramento, and had Assemblymen Byron Rumford and Gus Hawkins and a number of others who were co-authoring the bill to attend. We tried to let people know why we had to have the bill, what abuses there were in the field of employment, and this kind of thing.

There were those who felt that we needed to include the field of housing. We knew that there was gross discrimination in housing, but we realized that it would just add to our difficulty in trying to get the legislation on the books.

Throughout the years, what groups were testifying against you before the committees?

There were many, many individuals. I think we had strong opposition from the state Chamber of Commerce and the California Apartment House Owners organization. We had conspicuous opposition from many of the clergy, even though we did have the support of organizations like the Conference for Christians and Jews.

The main push and input into the passage of the FEPC came from the minority-group community, joined by the widest cross-section of people and support that we had ever garnered before or since in this state for a piece of legislation. And it was done around the issue of FEPC.

We were attempting to get statements from outstanding legislators all the way up to the governor's office. We were not successful during the governorship of Earl Warren and after that, Goodwin Knight. They gave statements and answered questionnaires to the extent that they would not push for the bill.

Now Warren would not put himself on record. Goodwin Knight said that if it was passed he would not sign it, that he would veto it. Governor Warren did not make the statement that he would not sign it, but he would not take any leadership in getting it passed. He simply turned his back on the legislative conferences we had and we could not confront him with anything publicly.

Governor Edmund G. Brown, Sr., stepped up front and center and said that he would fight for its passage and he would certainly do everything he could to get it passed and he would sign it into law. And this is what he did. The commission was named by Pat Brown and it was confirmed in 1959.

How many Negroes were appointed to the commission?

Only one, and that was C.L. Dellums.

Do you think your job was particularly hard because you are a woman or do you think you got the same treatment that a man would get?

I think I got the same treatment that a man would get.

When did you become acting director of the West Coast Region of the NAACP?

I became acting director in 1959. One of our problems in the regional office of the NAACP was that we didn't ever have a researcher, and we lost so much because we had no one. This is why I don't have some of the documentation that I should have because we didn't have a researcher in the office who could feed back the information when we came in.

NAACP is a crisis organization and we were just coming and going. We'd come in and think we were going to go one place, and we'd find out something had broken out, and we had to go someplace else. So it was a thrilling thing.

After you retired as regional director you didn't remain retired. What was your next job?

With the Opportunity Industrialization Centers [OIC], raising funds for the western region, working directly under Reverend Leon Sullivan in Philadelphia. I was housed in the West Coast Regional Office of the NAACP, and I worked in the same nine Western states that I was acquainted with and traveled in for twenty years for the NAACP.

The OIC is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, but they also have to raise funds in the private sector. This is an organization that seeks to weld together the interest of industries and corporations with the skills program and interest in the unemployed and unemployable in developing those skills, with a view to having them absorbed by industry.

So I have been working directly with heads of corporations and industries, asking for support of OIC. I want to make it very clear that I still consider myself a retiree. I told Reverend Sullivan that I could not look forward to staying on at any length, but maybe for six months or a year.