The immortal Paul Robeson, one of America's greatest

His New York performance as Othello broke all U.S. box-office records at any theatre

- Paul Robeson has been proclaimed as America's greatest athlete, actor, singer, civil rights advocate.
- He was a three-time All American defensive end at Rutgers University in 1918 and described as the greatest defensive end who ever trod the gridiron.
- In his career of singing and acting Robeson made several fortunes and starred in memorable theatrical productions such as "The Emperor Jones", "All God's Chillun Got Wings", "Show Boat", "Porgy and Bess", "Othello".
- Robeson made more than 300 records of Negro Spirituals and songs of the working people of all nations.
- A scholar, he won membership at Rutgers in America's highest scholastic fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa.
- Robeson spoke Russian, Hebrew, French, Greek, Latin, German and two African dialects.
- His death Jan. 23, 1976 at the age of 77, caused black citizens to reflect upon how far talented, strong-willed men can go against heavy odds.

By Elizabeth M. Oliver, City Editor

It is almost impossible to speak of Paul Robeson without using superlatives. Those who still think of him as the greatest black American, number in the millions here and abroad.

He was the son of a slave and, if he were alive today, he would be 82 years of age.

He is yet today the greatest actor who has ever played the role of Othello. A genius, his scholastic record at Rutgers University is yet unbroken and as an athlete, he excelled all others in his day.

His singing of Old Man River in his unforgettable baritone voice, holds the recording record of all time for this song.

PAUL ROBESON and his wife, Mrs. Eslanda G. Robeson in AFRO file photo June, 1940.

BROKE ALL RECORDS

Paul Robeson's role as Othello in the Shakespearean play is said to have far outstripped the New York record of 57 consecutive performances by Walter Hampdon, and the Epoch - making run of 101 performances of "Hamlet" by the famed and well known actor John Barrymore. Robeson's season in New York is said to have broken all American box - office records.

The performance was one of the season's wonder dramas, and critics said that Robeson made "Othello".

Paul Robeson was a mixture of Negro, American Indian and white. His father in 1860 left his native state in North Carolina and found his way to Philadelphia where he worked his way through Lincoln University and became a Presbyterian minister.

AT RUGERS

Paul, the last of eight children, was born in Princeton, NJ. In high school at Somerville, NJ, he proved himself both an excellent student and fine athlete.

Upon graduation from high school he won a scholarship in Rutgers University at New Brunswick, NJ and was there recognized as a football star, a forceful debater and a ranking student.

His scholastic record won him membership to America's highest scholastic fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa.

He was chosen as one of the four seniors who represented the best ideals and traditions of Rutgers.

Robeson following his graduation from Rutgers, entered Columbia University Law school where he received his LL.B. degree in 1923.

HONORARY DEGREE from Howard University brought great pride to Paul Robeson who loved his own people above all. However, Rutgers University today counts Robeson as its No. 1 alumnus.

LAW SCHOOL

He turned aside his law profession and an offer to train as a prize fighter to become a leading songster and a No. 1 actor of stage and screen. Music critics hailed him as "a singer of genuine power," and as early as 1925 he went to Europe to appear in "Emperor Jones."

IN LONDON

In 1928, Robeson opened in "Show Boat" in London and then made motion pictures of a revival of "Show Boat" and "Emperor Jones," in Hollywood.

TO EUROPE

Then, the actor - singer sick of discrimination practices in the states, took his family, wife and son Paul Jr., and his material belongings to establish a home in Europe where he said he "became as much a part of English life as I now am of American."

In Europe his friends included many Russians, and the Communist ideas of racial equality were in accord with his own. After making several trips to Russia, he decided to endow his young son with such an atmosphere. Paul Jr., was sent to school in Moscow for a year, then brought back to enter a Russian school in London.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO honors were conferred by Marshall Field. Robeson's latest hubbub which assisted him as a world famous singer - actor came in 1939 when a star was imbedded in the "Walk of Fame" on Hollywood Boulevard. The posthumous award was given to his son, Paul Jr. and made in the presence of stars of all races, Sidney Poitier and Los Angeles Mayor Thomas Bradley.

TOWERING OVER six feet and with a deep voice, Paul Robeson as Othello did not present the feelings of a black man but the universal feelings of a human being. Here he appeared on the stage of Shubert Theatre in New York and broke all box - office records, even of those of the great John Barrymore.

Later Robeson and his wife made a trip to Spain as guest of the Loyalists. A public address system was set up outside of Madrid near the battle line and Robeson sang defiant songs in Spanish and through the aid of loud speakers, Loyalists in trenches were inspired.

RETURNED TO U.S.

The Robesons returned to the U.S.A. following the entrance of England into World War II.

"I realized my life was tied up with this country," he said. "Whether I would be barred from certain hotels and restaurants was of minor importance. The important thing was that perhaps I could help members of my race get the kind of jobs they deserved."

Soon after his return, Robeson appeared on the stage in "John Henry," by Roark Bradford and Jacques Wéld. His first radio performance was a singing of Earl Robinson's "Ballard for American."

AS OTHELLO

He rose to real importance with the New York production of "Othello." He explained his success partially by the fact that he took apart bit by bit the play, when it was given to him, "to find out what each work meant. "I listened carefully to directors and Shakespearean authorities, but in some cases their Othello didn't think and act exactly as I believed a great Negro warrior would do, and in those cases I played it my way."

CIVIL RIGHTS ADVOCATE

In the mid - 1930s Robeson first expressed interest in politics. He showed an admiration for Russian communism after making a concert tour of the Soviet Union.

In January, 1947, he announced he would quit his career for two years to "talk up and down the nation against prejudice."

He ran into criticism in the late 1940s when he spoke out against oppression of the black and poor.

He denied charges of communism before a California legislative committee Called before the House Un - American Activities Committee in 1950 he took the Fifth Amendment, citing previous testimony in California.

In August of 1950 the U.S. State Department canceled his passport while he was on tour in Europe addressing "peace" meetings.

It was returned in 1958.

After a self - imposed five year exile in Europe, Robeson and his wife returned to New York in December, 1963.

He had been suffering from a circulatory ailment and had received medical treatment in East Berlin and in London.

His last public appearance was in 1965 at a birthday party for him in New York.

ROBESON'S ABILITY to portray the role of Othello as never before drew the largest audiences Europe had ever witnessed in that day.

Great moments in black journalism

The desegregation of Gwynn Oak Park

Former AFRO editor joined freedom marchers who dared police

By James D. Williams

It is a pretty safe guess most black teenagers in Baltimore and a lot of young adults in their 20s have never have heard of Gwynn Oak Amusement Park.

And really, there is no reason why they should. Gwynn Oak came before their time, and when something comes before your time it is ancient history to you and of no real importance.

That is the pity of it all. Gwynn Oak Park tells us of the nature of our past here in Baltimore and serves as a reminder things were not always as they are now, despite the propensity of the young to believe otherwise.

For them it understandably is difficult not to believe black people always have had jobs as tellers at Maryland National Bank, or as supervisors at the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Co., or blacks always have been welcome at the restaurants down in Little Italy.

They also would find it inconceivable not too many years ago, when Good Humor trucks were coining a mint of money in black neighborhoods selling ice cream to black kids the management of the company said the reason it did not hire black driver-salesmen is it could not find any black college graduates willing to take such a job.

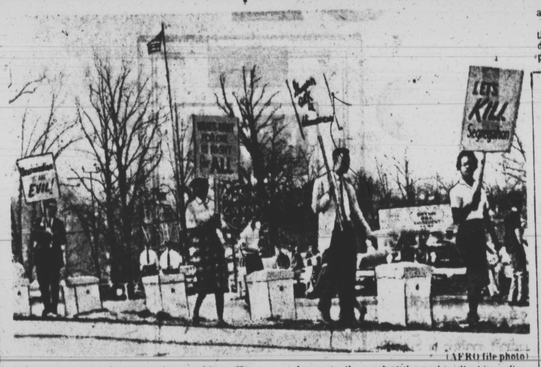
On the other hand, the only requirement for a white applicant was he have a driver's license.

That is a bitter memory to carry around, but it gives a sense of what history for black folks in this town has been. And once you understand that, you understand the odds black people had to struggle against to get where they are — though there still is a long road ahead.

That brings us to the epic of Gwynn Oak Amusement Park.

As amusement parks go, it was not all that great. But it was located in Baltimore County, just outside of Baltimore City, on Gwynn Oak Avenue, which made it awfully convenient to city residents.

Like I said, it might not have been much, but it was the only game in town.



(AFRO file photo)

SPRING COMES TO GWYNN OAK PARK — The 1963 spring opening at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park was greeted by Coppin State College students and CORE members who staged a protest demonstration against the park's all-white policy. After it was opened to all, the park later was closed.

It had a weather-beaten roller coaster, a bump-a-bump midget car contraption, a merry-go-round that had seen much better days, several more rides and a collection of motley concession stands.

Disneyland it was not, but it was all Baltimore had to offer and black folks could not put one black foot inside.

Nobody really got upset about this until the Civil Rights Movement came along.

While black and white folks were marching down South, getting their heads bashed in, going to jail and stuff like that, nothing comparable was going on in Baltimore, which except for the schools, was just about as segregated as any place down South, and probably just as racist.

To be fair, mass meetings were at churches, such as Sharp Street, Bethel and Metropolitan to support the Movement, but that was all that was going on until a bunch of students at Morgan State College lit the fuse.

Their beef was they could not get inside the theater in the Northwood Shopping Center, which only was a brief walk from the campus.

The students began demonstrating and that set other things in motion including an assault on Gwynn Oak Amusement Park — a most appropriate target.

The demonstrations at Gwynn Oak reached a crescendo in the summer of 1961. They followed a strict scenario:

A group of white and black demonstrators gather in front of the ticket booth. The ticket seller refuses to sell them tickets. The demonstrators drop to their knees.

They break out into "We Shall Overcome." The red faced manager, growing redder by the second, runs up and orders them to leave. No response. More singing.

The Baltimore County cops, who always are there, tell the demonstrators to leave. Nothing happens. The cops begin lifting bodies into the wagon.

The television cameras keep rolling. Photographers keep snapping. Exit the wagon. Things go back to normal until the next time.

One day, I am sitting in the office of the AFRO — where I was editor of the Baltimore paper — when I get this brilliant idea that I will join the demonstrators and get thrown into jail.

I figured it would make a good story, and besides that, when my son asked me "daddy, what did you do for the Movement," I wanted to to be able to tell him, "I suffered."

I did not bother to tell my boss, the late Dr. Carl Murphy. I did not see any sense in getting him upset.

I remember the day, it was Sunday, for going to jail, if that is what you had in mind. The sun was not too hot and the sky was clear.

I guess there must have been about 100 people there. I winked to the AFRO photographer, Henry Phillips, who was standing at the edge of the crowd and who I had the foresight to assign to the park that day.

If I was going to jail, I wanted it recorded.

We went through our routine. The cops did their thing and shortly thereafter I am on this school bus headed for jail. The reason they used the bus is there were so many of us, the wagons could not handle the load.

As we traveled toward our destination, I was thinking about what a great story I would get out of this — being thrown into jail and all. But they ran a switch on us.

Instead of taking us to the county jail, they took us to the National Guard Armory out on Reisterstown Road. You talk about cops being polite to us. They were just as polite as they could be.

They invited us off the bus and into the auditorium where they had rising tiers of seats.

I honestly think they did not quite know what to do with us, because they just let us sit. In a short while, we were joined by several more bus loads of demonstrators from the park and still we sat.

We were free to roam wherever we wanted in the building and you got the impression the police were hoping some of us would decide to just walk out and go on about our business.

Finally a captain announced we all were charged with trespassing and if we would be kind enough to give his officers our names, we could leave.

This is it, I said to myself? No jail cell, no finger printing, no police brutality? I could not go for that so I told the cop I insisted upon being locked up for real.

You've got to be crazy, he said. We aren't about to put you in jail and have the AFRO badmouth us.

That ended that. Out of the door I went. Later on, they dropped all the charges.

For that, credit has to go to the black lawyers, such as Robert Watts, Harry Cole and Milton Allen, who really never got all the credit they deserved for all the long hours and hard work they put in on behalf of the Movement.

In retrospect, Gywnn Oak probably was just a footnote to what was going on during those turbulent days.

There were bigger issues being decided. People actually were dying for what they believed in, so in comparison, those of us at Gwynn Oak really did not do all that much.

But in recounting the incident, maybe it will help establish a link between the past and the present, and that is the stuff of which history is made.

All of us need to be reminded, from time to time, we did not get where we are, solely on our own good looks and brains. Somebody had to pay some dues and the history of black folks did not begin when we were born.

There is a lot that went on before, a lot that we should be proud of, and when you know that, you are stronger for it.

The epilogue to all of this is Gwynn Oak was desegregated. Later, the park sunk into a deeper pit of disrepair and now only vacant land remains to mark the spot where once it stood.

It is kind of ironic, but kind of fitting too. Gwynn Oak was a symbol of a time that is past. Its disappearance is no occasion for mourning.

Ex-AFRO Editor writes about Rights movement

In the March 6 edition of the AFRO, former executive editor Moses J. Newsome will recount some of the great civil rights stories from the south.

His exploits in such southern flash points as Clinton, Tenn., Little Rock, Ark. and Wildwood, Fla. will be relived.

James D. Williams

A Black History Month Salute

Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall

Born 1908 in Baltimore, Md., his father was a country club steward and his mother was a schoolteacher.

Marshall graduated cum laude from Lincoln University in 1929 and magna cum laude from Howard University Law School in 1933.

On May 17, 1954 as Chief Legal Counsel for NAACP, he won a major Supreme Court decision desegregating public schools - Brown vs. Board of Education.

Marshall was appointed judge of the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, N.Y. in 1961; U.S. Solicitor General in 1965, and U.S. Supreme Court Justice in 1967. He is the first black to hold this office.

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People made the "Freedom Train"... not cars of steel.
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A Tribute to Harriet Tubman.

A leader. A fighter. A slave. Harriet Tubman, conductor of the "Freedom Train," was born a slave in Maryland, in 1823. With a yearning for freedom, the dauntless Tubman fled from bondage in 1849. Her escape route was known as the Underground Railroad – later dubbed the "Freedom Train." It was not a train, nor was it underground. It was a secret route by which runaway slaves escaped to the free states and Canada. Hiding places along the route were called stations; the people that led the runaways, conductors. The daring Tubman became the most famous conductor of the "Freedom Train." She dared to make at least nineteen forays back into the South, leading more than 300 slaves in their flights to freedom.

In honor of Black History Month, Uncle Ben's® Converted® Brand Rice recognizes Harriet Tubman for her courage and determination.

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Salutes Black History Month