

Wisdom rising out of prejudice

In her first film, Phyllis Caruth documents racism in Utah by interviewing elderly black residents who lived through it

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 02/03/2008 10:44:46 AM MST



Phyllis Caruth, producer of "Wisdom of Our Years,"... (Trent Nelson/The Salt Lake Tribune)

Little Rock native Phyllis Caruth has called Salt Lake home for 13 years. But she never felt fully rooted in the city until she made a documentary about seven elderly blacks who lived through the most turbulent years of 20th century Utah.

Caruth, a first-time executive producer, has compiled transfixing tales of the lives of ordinary blacks who experienced Utah racism in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s.

"When you listen to these stories of the past, you can hear a pin drop in the room," says Caruth, who admits to being "profoundly transformed" by the stories she heard for "The Wisdom of Our Years."

From orphan to filmmaker: Caruth, 64, was born in storied

Clips from "Wisdom of our Years"

Little Rock, Ark., and orphaned at 8.

Her father served in World War II and died of benzene poisoning at age 32, says Caruth. "My mother was so filled with grief . . . that she died six months after my father."

Caruth moved to California after being taken in by her grandmother, who refused to talk about life in the South. But Caruth still has memories of Little Rock.

"I remember the time," she says, "going to department stores with my mother and having to step back when a white woman came by. I saw elderly men say 'Yessah' to a 10-year-old white child. I watched my own father called 'boy' by people younger than he was."

As she grew up, Caruth wondered what her parents' lives would have been like had they lived to see the end of formal, legislated racism.

Caruth herself is a beneficiary of 1960s civil rights laws. Affirmative action enabled her to get a job as a secretary at IBM in California. Soon, though, she moved from secretary to management, ultimately working as an adviser in IBM's software sector.

When Caruth came to Salt Lake in 1995, she had a second career working for Salt Lake City under former mayors DeeDee Corradini and Rocky Anderson, most recently as an Equal Opportunity Compliance officer.

Once retired, Caruth "still had a thirst for stories not yet told." By then she had become president of the Salt Lake chapter of the African American Historical and Genealogical Society. With the support of the AAHGS and the Utah Humanities Council, she led the effort to make a documentary to "help uncover the rich and hidden legacy of . . . African American men and women in this state."

Southern vs. Utah racism: Caruth was interested in how blacks her parents' age had fared in Utah after the end of Jim Crow legislation.

On the books, at least, Utah was progressive. In 1895, the state desegregated public schools. The only overtly racist statutes regarded miscegenation or marriage across the color line.

But what Caruth learned surprised her. "Maybe amazed is an even better word."

Most of the men and women in "Wisdom of Our Years" came from the Deep South, escaping the harsh realities of Jim Crow laws only to find here a more complex, uncodified racism.

Dovie Goodwin, who was 99 when the film was made but has since died, and James Green, 74, told Caruth that blacks could sit only in the balconies of theaters such as the Uptown and the Rialto.

And she learned that often they didn't know the rules until it was too late. "In Utah," says Green, "you'd go places and didn't find out you couldn't go in 'til you got to the door."

Ronald Coleman, associate professor of history and ethnic studies at the University of Utah, says "African Americans . . . had to navigate not *de jure* racism but *de facto* racism." Unspoken restrictions limited where blacks could live. With few exceptions, most of east Salt Lake was off-limits.

Coleman offers this example of a 1948 land deed covenant:

"A Negro is all right in his place, but his place is down below you. You can't treat them as an equal or they will take advantage of you every time. You have to keep them down. Yet, the property around here isn't worth as much since they

moved on the block, but I guess they have to have some place to live. I understand there is some kind of a city ordinance against selling to them, but it hasn't kept them out of here."

Available jobs were largely in domestic service or the railroads. In some cases, they were more than degrading. Eva Sexton's husband's first job, for example, was as a waiter at The Coon Chicken Inn, a restaurant identifiable by a gigantic statue of a black man with classically exaggerated lips and eyes.

Overcoming a legacy of silence: Caruth often gives visiting lectures at BYU. "And the students always ask me "why didn't they [blacks] rebel?" she says. Students don't understand the power of historical racism to silence and disempower, in large part "because the African American population here is so small and there are few opportunities to really educate themselves about our experience."

Education is the purpose of her film.

"I believe," says Caruth, "that the key is opening your heart to other people, hearing their stories. Only then is it possible for African Americans to connect their own experiences and be empowered."

Eva Sexton believes that sharing stories in her own community is good but believes "the state ought to see [the film]. The government ought to see it. Schoolchildren ought to see it. Parents ought to see it," she said in a recent phone interview.

Caruth hopes her documentary will help future generations appreciate the bravery of her subjects.

Their stories remind her of her parents' hardships and of the courage of the men and women who migrated north and paved the way in places like Utah for women like her.

"When I hear these stories," she says, "I can't help but feel as though I am standing on my parents' shoulders."

Premiere screening

* **"WISDOM OF OUR YEARS"** premieres Feb. 10 at 3 p.m. at the Calvary Baptist Church, 1090 S. State St., Salt Lake City. Six of the film's seven subjects will be there, along with the film's executive producer, Phyllis Caruth.

* **FOR MORE INFORMATION** about the Salt Lake Chapter of the AAHGS, contact Karen Jepson at 801- 240-1161 or visit the organization's national Web site at www.aahgs.org.

Dovie Goodwin, 99 (now deceased), Ogden "There was no segregation in the schools but you weren't chosen to do alot of things . . . that the other kids were chosen to do."

James Green, 74, Salt Lake "Sixth South, 5th south, all the way to 9th south and from about 3rd west to 7th east, that's where most of the blacks lived during that time."

Allan C. Jackson, 104, Salt Lake "I got married in 1953, but I couldn't get married here because she was a Caucasian. We we had to go to Nevada. I could pay taxes in this state but I couldn't get married here."

Florence Lawrence, 85, Salt Lake "They always put that label on black people as being lazy and being dumb and not wanting to do, and it was hard to break out of that stereotype."

Frank Satterwhite, 86, Ogden. I remember when they integrated the swimming pool . . . Only the authorities wanted to open it up to blacks on the one day there wasn't a lifeguard."

Eva Sexton, 85, Salt Lake

"Caucasians are ignorant to what our legacy really is."