

From
Berkeley Alumni Association
Quarterly Journal, May 1985

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Ruth Acty: Pioneeress by Jerry Shields

Ruth Acty, a long-time Berkeley Schools teacher, and the first minority teacher the school district ever employed, was also the first honorary member of the Berkeley Alumni Association. This biography of Ruth Acty first appeared in the *East Bay Times*, April 19, 1985. It is reprinted by kind permission of the *Times* and of the author, who is an Oakland-based freelance writer.

She was tall and slim in 1933, a vibrant and attractive black girl.

"I'm going to be a teacher," she eagerly told the counselor upon registering at San Francisco State. She stood anxiously, a smile on her face and filled with the boundless optimism of young adulthood. "I've always wanted to be a teacher," she added.

The counselor, a white woman, sat back and looked at her long and intently until, finally, she leaned forward and asked: "But, where do you think you're going to teach, my dear?"

Born black in a white dominated society that didn't permit blacks to teach in the public schools, Berkeley's Ruth Acty and her dream might have been crushed by that first adult experience with the weight of racial prejudice. Instead, ten years later, in 1943, she became the first black teacher and the first of any minority in the Berkeley Public School System. Without missing a year, she is still teaching in Berkeley today.

"I told that counselor I didn't know where I would teach; that I just wanted to teach," says Acty. "I knew that I would go to Africa... to the deep south... anywhere, but, I was going to teach. I had known since the age of six that I wanted to be a teacher and had been brought up to believe that if one door is closed there will be another one that opens."

However, it was this same sense of optimism inspired by her parents which also created a sense of naivete. As a child and a young adult, she was aware in a cursory sort of way, that racial prejudice existed and that blacks were limited in their career opportunities. But, in her heart, she never believed these things applied to her. It took time for her to understand that blacks were not allowed to compete; that they were permitted to work only those jobs nobody else wanted.

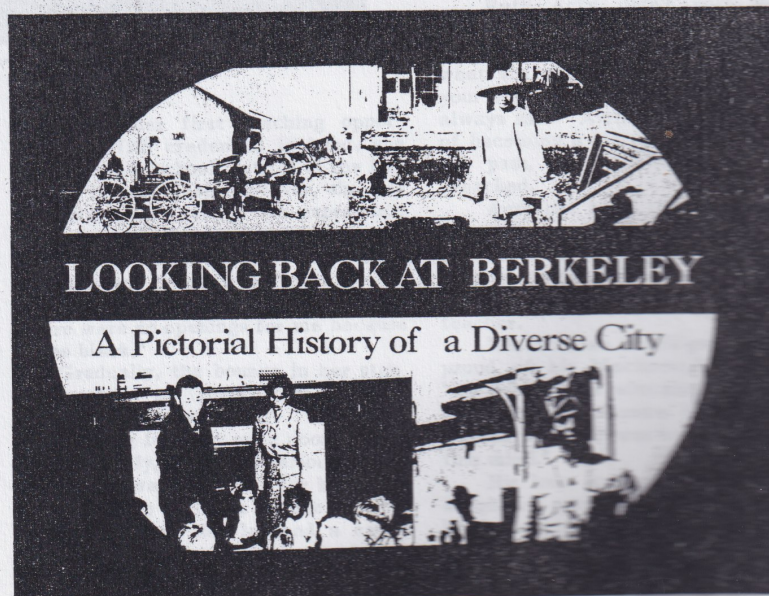
"When I was a child," Acty recalls, "I think we had in all of Oakland one black dentist and two black doctors. Ida Jackson was soon to become the first black public school teacher in Oakland... and my inspiration. It was unusual to find a black lawyer or any black professional. Even black janitors and maids were the exception because Asians and Filipinos took those jobs. Most blacks, including my father, worked for the railroad."

Although the color line had been broken in Oakland, there were no jobs for black teachers in the rest of Northern California. When a "professional" breakthrough was made, it was a source of pride for black adults: "Do you see that woman?" her father had asked as they passed Ida Jackson's yard. "She's a teacher!"

Inspiration, optimism and naivete. Anything seemed possible to the young Ruth Acty. She had been born and raised in West Oakland in a family and neighborhood of racial acceptance. Her own mother, a very fair-skinned woman, might have passed easily as white, but chose to marry a black and live her life as a black - each accepting the other.

West Oakland, at that time was a community of friendly, hard-working, early-generation Americans of Italian, Irish, Polish and German descent. They were the storekeepers, the electricians and the carpenters. They were, as were the Acty's, "poor, but not welfare poor." With her mother and father and her two younger sisters living in the house they owned, the Actys were accepted without consideration of color. When her father was home, when he wasn't serving drinks in the railroad clubcar somewhere between Oakland and Chicago, he would often share his family's dinner with his white neighbors. And, they with him.

Many an evening would be whiled away as neighbors gathered on someone's porch, conversing and enjoying a summer's breeze. The children played tag, hide-and-seek and hop scotch and never knew they were without the yet-to-be-invented television. Sometimes there was the radio or a weekend trip to the movie-house matinee. It was a congenial and harmonious neighborhood but, at the same time, it was sheltered and an unrealistic preparation for Acty's adulthood and career



Ruth Acty's book, *Looking Back at Berkeley: A Pictorial History of a Diverse City*, is available from the Berkeley Historical Society for \$2.00, plus tax.



Ruth Acty with a painting of herself executed by her students.

ambitions.

"I was brought up to believe that if you are a good person, if you are clean, neat and polite, you won't have any trouble," says Acty. "This was absolutely not true. I thought that if you were a good little girl then people would be kind and loving and that just was not true. Everything is alright until you compete and, therefore, you become a threat."

Having ignored the implied warning of her counselor at San Francisco State, Acty pursued her studies and was graduated. Following the required practice teaching, she earned her credential which qualified her to teach at the elementary school level. She was ready to compete for the white person's job but didn't fully realize she would be considered an unwanted competitor and a threat.

Initially, there was a joyous bounce to her step as she began the

quest for her first teaching opportunity. With credential in hand, she visited every school district in the Bay Area. In each case, however, she was told she either lacked the experience or that there were no openings.

"I didn't really believe that there could never be any openings," says Acty. "What they often meant was there were no openings for me because I was black."

Gradually, the bounce in her step disappeared as even the nursery schools turned her away. Still, she kept looking for that open door. And, coincidentally, that mysterious thing called fate was searching for her. An activist group of black women, led by Frances Albrier, had launched a campaign urging the conservative Berkeley School Board to hire a black teacher.

As mothers of children in Berkeley schools, the women claimed that their children's progress suffered, that

the white teachers were unable or unwilling to communicate with or relate to the language and cultural needs of the black children. School Board officials simply responded that there were no black teachers who qualified.

"This was almost true, even though I qualified," notes Acty, "because there were few blacks around at all. In fact, in the classroom there wasn't any segregation of black and white students because there were hardly enough black students to segregate. The blacks who were living here were scattered throughout the area and throughout the different schools."

The women crusaders found Acty and offered their encouragement and support. Because the Berkeley School Board believed a California education was superior, it was agreed that Acty had a better chance than most white women from out of state.

"So, born and raised here and educated here, with the women's support," says Acty, "I interviewed with the Superintendent. He looked at me and said: 'If I took anyone, I would take you.'"

But, he didn't take her, telling her instead to "collect credentials". He didn't bother to explain that a preponderance of credentials, someday, might make it extremely difficult to overlook her. Nevertheless, she decided to shake off the hurt and to take his advice.

"In those days," Acty explains, "If we were told that we could not have a job, then, we didn't have a job. You just were not supposed to push."

Ruth Acty didn't push because that wasn't her way; but, she refused to quit or to accept less in life than what she expected of herself. "Hitch your wagon to a star!" her father had always said. Although his own dream of becoming a lawyer had never come to pass, she believed what he preached.

Acty had been thwarted at every turn but she still had her dignity and her pride. These traits, which she attributes to her father, only served to add to her determination to become a teacher.

"He was an intelligent man and proud of his blackness," says Acty. "He was college educated but found it impossible to become the lawyer he wanted to be. It was such a waste of a fine mind."

His loss, however, was his young daughter's gain. He encouraged her to learn and to attain her highest level of ability. His collection of books, in particular, "the classics", opened up a whole new world for her, when as a mere child, she read them all. Having exhausted that supply, she turned to

Ruth Acty (cont.)

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the library where she "started at the first bottom shelf and worked through to the end." Later, in grade school and beyond, she discovered often that she had already read and learned what the teachers intended to teach.

In order to pass along his sense of pride in his racial heritage, her father one day returned from Chicago with a gift for her. It was a "beautiful black doll," something that was difficult to find in the Bay Area. Together, they built a carriage and her mother made up some doll clothes and ribbons.

Soon after, in the only racial incident of her childhood that she can recall, a young white boy peered into the carriage and called it a "nigger doll." She didn't really know what the term meant, but, sensing it was "bad," she ran home crying to her mother.

"Well, my mother got out the dictionary and read the meaning as it was written in those days," says Acty. "'A despicable person,' it said. She told me what a despicable person was and then asked me if I thought I was such a person. Of course, I didn't think that and never have. But, the point is they were teaching me to be proud of my blackness."

With dignity and pride intact, Acty set out to collect the recommended "credentials". She added Kindergarten and Junior High credentials to the Elementary in hand. Earlier, she had begun work toward a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education at the University of California in Berkeley. She had to drop out when her parents died. Credentials, yes; she had lots of credentials, but, no job.

Then, suddenly, in 1939, there came the break she needed. She was hired to teach at Washington Elementary in El Centro. An agricultural community, the line of segregation was drawn definitively through town with the migrant Chicano workers and the blacks on one side and the whites on the other. She was there to teach the blacks and the Chicanos; it was a job that whites didn't want.

"I had never seen anything like that!" exclaims Acty, of the extent of segregation she encountered. "But, for me, it was like an 'open sesame' to something better. At last, I was teaching."

The experience gained in teaching and the extent of segregation in the Imperial Valley community helped prepare her for her next teaching position. After two years in El Centro, she contracted to teach at Bennett College, an all-girl black school in North Carolina.

"Actually," she recalls, "If the townspeople knew you were from Bennett, you received better treatment. They treated you with respect."

Then, surprisingly, she received the call she had been awaiting. She was offered the opportunity to teach Kindergarten at Berkeley's Longfellow Elementary. Her long list of credentials and recent teacher experience had paid off. However, because she still had a second semester remaining on her Bennett contract, she had to decline. But, in January of 1943, the offer was extended again and she grabbed it.

"This was the place I wanted to be more than any other place," says Acty. "And, the fact I was going to teach in Berkeley - I could have danced I was so happy."

Apparently not the dancing type, however, the hiring superintendent cautioned: "Don't you make any trouble because if you don't make it this year, it will be a long time before we hire another black."

Ruth Acty didn't "make any trouble" and she didn't dance but she did contend daily with subtle and not so subtle abuse. She was well aware that black community pressure, politics and personnel shortages of World War II had prevailed more so than any desire for racial equality. The administration, although caustic initially, proved to be polite and supportive. By example, they urged their fellow teachers to be the same.

"The teachers were sometimes pretty nasty in a nice way... nice nasty... ladies in quotation marks," says Acty of those early years. "But, I was so happy to be at Berkeley that it didn't matter. Yes, I would get angry but I would cope with it when I got away from the situation. If people can make you mad, you will destroy yourself. And, I refused to let this happen."

There were, however, the lighter moments. After teaching her first class on that first day, she walked to the door and pulled it open. There, in the hallway and lined up against the wall, were many of the parents waiting nervously: The ogre had not eaten their children!

Today, Acty looks back at that incident and shakes her head at its apparent irony: "School officials tell me I've taught over 8,000 children and I've enjoyed every one of them and I believe they have enjoyed me. We never had any problems."

Now a mature and sophisticated woman, Acty resides in a Berkeley

Hills home which offers a sweeping panorama of the San Francisco Bay. Reflecting on her career, she is able to see that now in a similar perspective.

"I was naive and probably would have handled some things differently if I had it to do over," she says. "I never thought of myself as a heroine going around opening doors for people. I just wanted to teach and I did not want to be responsible for keeping somebody else out the next year. So, I wanted to make good."

And, she did make good and she did open doors for others. In her second year, she was transferred to Lincoln Elementary to make room for Frances France, a black who was hired to take her place at Longfellow. The next year Sheila Frances Younge, another black, was hired into the Berkeley system as a kindergarten teacher.

"So, when they ran out of kindergartens, I was the first to move into secondary teaching," says Acty, with just a touch of sarcasm. She skipped over the elementary grades because of her credentials and experience working with teenagers in local church theater groups. In 1955, she began teaching at Burbank Junior High which is now called West Campus. Then, from 1964-1971, she taught at Garfield Junior High which was renamed Martin Luther King Junior High.

Today, as she has done since 1971, she teaches English in the Berkeley Adult School, working primarily with foreign-born students seeking professional careers.

In May of 1982, Acty was honored at a special dinner sponsored by the Berkeley City Council and the Berkeley Alumni Association. The occasion acknowledged her as the "first minority teacher to integrate the Berkeley school system". It also noted her many teaching awards and praised her then record 39 years of consecutive teaching in Berkeley.

"It's hard to believe the time has passed," says Acty. "When I first started, I didn't even ask what I would be paid because I came to give rather than get. Whatever the amount was okay because all I've ever wanted to do is teach."

Helping others to help themselves is all Ruth Acty ever wanted. Heroics and a place in history were not a part of her plan. But, in both, she succeeded.

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Berkeley Unified School District, 1943***

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Mike Russell

LONGTIME BERKELEY TEACHER RUTH ACTY
Tracked funds to rewrite book that omitted minorities.

Rewriting history, to add color

Berkeley teacher made sure minorities got into city's official story

By Sharon Bernstein
 Examiner correspondent

BERKELEY — Ruth Acty won't tell you her age, but she's been teaching school in Berkeley for 41 years and she had a short but successful career as an actress before that.

She was the first black schoolteacher in Berkeley. Now, with the help of what she calls her "20th-century miracle," she has rewritten the city's history to include minorities. The book, "Looking Back at Berkeley: A Pictorial History of a Diverse City," starts with the Costanoan Indians, the area's first inhabitants, and goes right up to this year's city fair.

Put together by Acty and co-authors Maggie Gee and Fran Packard, the book grew out of disappointment in the black community that a similar book, commissioned for the city's centennial celebration in 1978, did not include blacks or Asians.

"Black people complained," Acty, a native of Oakland, said. "So, they had \$4,000 left from the original book and they said they were earmarking it for us."

Two years later, the book was finished, but when the time came to go to print she learned that the money had been funneled back into the city budget.

"There we were after 2½ years — no money," she said. Three weeks later the authors had more than \$5,000, most of it

donated.

"We were on BART, a group of friends, going to see 'Dream Girls,'" she said. "A man overheard us talking about the book and followed us to the exit. He said, 'I'm going to write you a check right now,' and he did — right there in the BART station."

She said the rest of the money came in a similar way — \$4,000 from the mother of a friend in New York, another \$1,000 from a woman in Berkeley, all because people overheard talk about the book and wanted to help.

She said Berkeley had come a long way since the day she clenched her fists, held up her head and walked into the school superintendent's office for a job.

"The secretary refused to tell him I was there," she said. "I had a 3 o'clock appointment and I sat there until 5 p.m. When he was going home, he saw me."

When she was finally interviewed, Acty, who has a master's degree from Northwestern University in Chicago and a string of teaching credentials, was told, "We're not ready for a Negro yet, but when we are, we'll be sure to call you."

Finally hired in 1943, she was allowed to teach only kindergarten. She said the superintendent told her that since kindergarten was not mandatory, parents could not complain that their children were being taught by a black. Years later, she

was allowed to teach English in junior high school. Now she works with immigrants at night in the Berkeley school for adults.

On the wall of her Berkeley hills home is her portrait, painted by an artist from China whom she taught English at the night school, and two cartoons of her drawn by Oakland's Morrie Turner, creator of the "Wee Pals" comic strip.

Of the house, she said she never would have moved into the hills if she had read the fine print on the deed before she bought it.

"It said the only blacks who could live here had to be domestics," she said. "I had a whole part of my family annihilated by moving into a neighborhood (in Southern California) where they weren't wanted. I was bold, but not that bold."

She said her parents taught her that "if you were genteel and kind and well-mannered, people would accept you."

She said that was not true.

"We were taught not to rock the boat," she said. "My parents would have been shocked if they knew how persistent I was."

"Looking Back at Berkeley" will be distributed in Berkeley schools next year, "to the children of the people I had in kindergarten," Acty said. It is available at the Black Historical Society in Oakland and the Elmwood Pharmacy in Berkeley.

S.F. Examiner

7/11/84