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U of L oral history project commemorates Alberta's African-American settlers

After more than a year in the making, a film documenting the lives of black settlers in Alberta and Saskatchewan and their experiences with discrimination will premiere in Edmonton during Black History Month.

We are the Roots: Black Settlers and Their Experiences of Discrimination on the Canadian Prairies was the brainchild of Deborah Dobbins, president of Edmonton's Shiloh Centre for Multicultural Roots (SCMR). After securing funding from the Alberta Human Rights Commission, she teamed up with Drs. Jenna Bailey and David Este. Bailey is an adjunct history professor and senior research fellow at the University of Lethbridge's Centre for Oral History and Tradition (COHT). Este is a professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary.

"Here we are 18 months later and it has been amazing," says Dobbins. "The people we interviewed told wonderful stories and their experiences focus on the positive, but there's lots of adversity, too. Through it all, we're here and able to celebrate our accomplishments."

Bailey and Este interviewed 19 second- and third-generation individuals from the families of the original settlers who left the United States to come to Western Canada between 1905 and 1912. Between 1,000 and 1,500 African Americans came to Canada, largely settling in the small rural Alberta communities of Amber Valley, Campsie, Wildwood, Breton and Maidstone in Saskatchewan.

"It's a fascinating history," says Bailey. "I learned a lot about discrimination in Alberta. What comes through in their stories is resilience. One woman said 'It's just a part of who we are; it's part of our daily lives.'"

"I am a third-generation African-American Canadian," says Dobbins. "My parents were born in Alberta and they were both African-American Canadians. Our grandparents didn't want to talk too much about how they got here because it was terrible. The reason they came to Canada wasn't a positive one. They left because of mistreatment. Whenever *Roots* or anything like that came on TV, my dad said he couldn't watch because it just made him so angry."

While life in Canada may have been an improvement for the pioneers, the African Americans not only faced the same hardships other settlers faced, they were also discriminated against, especially in the cities. Work was scarce; men often started their own businesses or worked as railway porters and women worked as housekeepers.

“What seems to come through in the interviews is the subtle discrimination that people are experiencing on a daily basis,” says Bailey.

Even though they weren’t overtly welcomed to Canada, some African Americans joined the Canadian military to serve in the First and Second World Wars. They helped develop Alberta by building schools and churches and clearing the land. A brother of one interviewee was among the group of musicians who established the Yardbird Suite jazz club in Edmonton.

“For me, what stood out is that most Albertans have no idea about this history and these communities that helped build Alberta,” says Bailey. “In general, I think Canadians like to think that we’re not very racist or a discriminatory nation. And the number of discrimination stories that come through in the interviews through all the age groups is pretty significant.”

Dobbins relates a family story about one of her aunts, [Velma Carter](#), who was a teacher. Carter had signed a contract with a small town to be their teacher. When she arrived, she was told it was a mistake and her services weren’t needed after all. She told them that was fine; she’d go back home and they could pay her for the year.

“They couldn’t afford to do that so they kept her and, of course, she was an excellent teacher and they all loved her,” says Dobbins. “She went on to be a principal after she moved back to the United States. Then she came back to Canada in the 1970s and wrote three books about our history.”

We are the Roots will be shown at the Shiloh Baptist Church located at 10727 114 St. NW in Edmonton on Feb. 24 beginning at 6 p.m. Following the premiere, the film will be available on Bailey’s website at baileyandsoda.com.

“We are hoping that it will lead to more discussion, awareness and education,” says Dobbins. “We’re small in number but we are representing our people and if we don’t do it, who’s going to do it? So, we’re going forward however we can to make sure our story is told.”

This news release is available online at [We are the Roots](#).

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Backgrounder

After Oklahoma became a state in 1907, laws that enforced segregation came into effect and life became much more difficult for black people. They lost the right to vote and segregation applied across the board, including schools, restaurants, washrooms and drinking fountains. Tensions often led to violence.

At the same time, Canada was intent on settling the West. The Canadian government distributed thousands of advertisements in the United States, encouraging Americans to move to the '*Last Best West*' where \$10 bought 160 acres of land. Many African-Americans from Oklahoma, Mississippi, Iowa, Illinois, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri and Texas made the trek north.

When they began arriving in Canada in large numbers, protests began and only grew in intensity. Canada responded first by making things difficult for African Americans at the border. By 1911, the protests were so significant that the Canadian government sent agents to African-American communities in the U.S. to tell them the land was not habitable and the climate was too cold. The migration wave ended.

By the Second World War, many of the African-American Canadians had left the original settlements for work and education opportunities in the cities. There, they faced more discrimination. In 1924, an Edmonton city councillor proposed black people be banned from swimming pools. One family in Saskatchewan, where there were more than 100 Ku Klux Klan chapters between 1920 and 1930, had a visit from the RCMP to warn them that the KKK had them on their radar. Despite the discrimination they faced, Dobbins says people focused on the good, just wanting to get along and be a part of the nation they helped build.

The Shiloh Centre for Multicultural Roots was formed in 2010 to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of Shiloh Baptist Church, the oldest black church in Western Canada.