

# MEMO

TO: THE HARLEMS OF THE WORLD

FROM: HARLEM, U.S.A.

DATE: FEBRUARY, 2015

RE: ENGINEERING AN AMERICAN TRADITION

Every Black History Month you might be tempted to just passively listen to all the “moments” describing familiar notable “negroes” of days past, the struggles they went through, and how meager their recognition may have been at the time. It’s a shame; and I know I’ve been guilty of the same perfunctory gloss over of “our” history before too. But this February, especially in light of the darkness of the past year from Ferguson to Freetown, I intend to be more consciously grateful. Grateful for the courageous people of every hue who went before and tried. Grateful for every meal, day, and night in a warm bed. Grateful for every breath I take in the country I love. Grateful for grace. Grateful for space to grow and time to develop my character into somebody who chose to try as well. Grateful for a better sense of the connection between this moment in history and to what James Weldon Johnson meant by the “faith that the dark past has taught us.”

By pursuing the happiness that is the right of the individual in the United States, “our” struggles strengthen that of the collective and demonstrate what the American dream is really all about – uplift. The point of designating a month to raise awareness is also to raise appreciation for all the moments that add up to equal this one. Black History Month reminds us that progress in America is proven by adversity and pressed by history. The tradition comes to us from the elders and ancestors who walked as we do and worked as we should – with respect and admiration for those who went before them. Think about Carter G. Woodson; a man who cared enough about recording the accomplishments of his people to pursue the idea of promoting a “Negro History Week.” Like him, we have ideas that could potentially change a life. And like our rights, our history is personal and informs whatever lives we choose to lead. It connects with us because it is extraordinarily human and so are we.

Recently, I was surprised to learn that one such extraordinary life was very close to mine. I was helping my cousin unpack from a move and saw a little green paperback book with a cover that read, *“BRAINWASHED –? AND IGNORED By Snow F. Grigsby.”* Uncle Snow was our late uncle, but I didn’t know him personally or that he was a writer. I just knew that he lived in Detroit and worked at the post office. But a little research and a few conversations with older family members proved he was so much more than that. A “race man” and deeply intellectual “scholar,” Snow Flake Grigsby moved to Detroit from South Carolina in the early 1920s. With an interest in science, he attended Detroit Institute of Technology where he learned to channel his discontent for the prejudice around him into organizing protests and writing books and pamphlets like the one I discovered.

Unable to find a job in pharmacology – the field of his degree – after college my uncle (like many other college educated black men at the time) took a job as a postal worker. Then he took the label of “civil servant” and redefined it for a community in need of justice. His words, according to the Detroit African American History Project, “exposed the prevalence of racism and argued cogently for its elimination in Detroit and beyond.” The book I found is a compilation of facts about notable “negroes” in the spirit of Carter Woodson. It includes well researched memos, essays, and reflections he had written over the years as a grassroots civil rights leader.

In a section entitled, “Inventors and Geniuses the General Public Doesn’t Know About,” he wrote about a few of the “black geniuses” he knew personally. The first entry noted how the “expertise of Cornelius L Henderson, whose designs are a part of both the Ambassador Bridge and the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel,” literally bridged the divide between two countries and enabled economic growth for citizens of both. With a distinct appreciation for the moment, the second entry gave me a glimpse into Snow Flake Grigsby as a man possessed by gratitude for the people who strive quietly every day. Commending the contribution of an invention by a fellow postal worker he writes:

One, Hersey O. Perry of Detroit, a postal employee, invented an apparatus for sorting mail for cancellation which saved millions of manpower hours and also millions of dollars in the processing of mail for distribution. All of your large post offices in Detroit, Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., have this machine.

All that Mr. Perry received after taxes were taken out was a measly \$800.00. He received a letter requesting him to take a booth to display his machine that he designed at an exposition. (Someone else had it patented.) It was such a letdown to think that he should have gotten a royalty for this invention and should have been a millionaire by now. Had he defrauded, robbed a bank or snatched a purse, you would have read about it in the press, heard it on the radio and seen his picture on television, but positive traits that have been an asset rather than a liability, you never hear about such individuals.

Hersey Perry, your friends and work associates from the postal operation still admire you and want our friends and children to know about you, not just as a retired postal employee, but a genius who has contributed so much that has gone unnoticed. We want school children and generations yet unborn to know about you.

My Uncle Snow was clearly grateful for the tradition of preserving the achievements of **all** citizens. To me, his life is an example of the understated grace of an often underestimated people. Lives like Mr. Henderson’s and Mr. Perry’s prove that everyone has a chance to make a difference no matter their path or profession. As one American family made of many traditions of courage and character, it is *our* collective responsibility to remain connected to those stories if we are to leave a legacy of understanding for the betterment of the next and future generations.

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By Omar L. Douglass