

WORDS FROM THE WISE: America's oldest park ranger brings Black History to life

Written by New America Media/Richmond Pulse, Profile, Malcolm Marshall
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RICHMOND, Calif.--Betty Reid-Soskin is America's oldest National Park Ranger and one of the most beautiful people I have met in Richmond, Calif., across the bay from San Francisco. I had the pleasure of meeting her recently as she led a bus tour of the Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, honoring the women who did factory work for the war effort.

According to Reid-Soskin, the park is home to the largest concentration of intact World War II historic sites in the country. The tour made several stops at key park sites, while reflecting on the African American home-front experience. Reid-Soskin's charm, knowledge, passion and personal history made for a very special tour.

Born in Detroit and raised in New Orleans, Reid-Soskin's family relocated to Oakland in 1927. During World War II she worked as a clerk for Boilermakers A-36, a Jim Crow era, all-black union auxiliary. A black woman who has seen both the end of segregation and the election of the first black United States president, Reid-Soskin is a Bay Area treasure with a keen understanding of local and national history—much of it observed over her 91 years.

Teach History, Warts and All

As the tour bus traveled from place to place — such sites as the Rosie the Riveter Memorial at Marina Bay, the Maritime Child Development Center, the S.S. Red Oak Victory Ship -- the historic buildings, ships and restored sites, along with Reid-Soskin's narrative, brought the tour to life with stories of blacks and whites, Asians and Native Americans, all living together, not always harmoniously.

Our tour guide didn't shy away from that imperfect history, filled with racism and inequality, while encouraging her listeners to embrace history warts and all, so the future can learn from the past.

"A black man on the sidewalk in Jackson, Miss.," she said, recalling the Jim Crow days, "would be expected, by Southern tradition, to step off the curb if a white person approached. That same man would find himself in Richmond, riding in the front of the bus, 10 years before Rosa Parks."

"Can you imagine what was set in motion here? Under that seriously flawed social system was a situation in which you had white Southerners, mostly sharecroppers, coming here [to

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Richmond] expecting the continuation of white privilege, and black people coming in with raised expectations. [Think of] the interplay of those people--how to negotiate, getting through each day and completing those 747 ships, and to do it without killing each other."

Where some might look and see only a history of racial tensions and conflict, Reid-Soskin recognizes seeds of change that are still bearing fruit today.

"They literally set the pace of social change, accelerated it to the point that social change still radiates out of the Bay Area into the rest of the country, because of what happened here. So not only is this the story of Rosie the Riveter [<http://bit.ly/Ba9aR>], which is the impetus for creating this park, but also of what was set in motion here over that 20-year period between the war and the 60s that changed the course of history. It's that social history that interests me because it is just an amazing story of social change."

Her Long View of a Young City

In Reid-Soskin's long view, Richmond is still a very young city, one made up of strangers. The history of black people in Richmond, particularly, is not yet old enough to have worked its way into school textbooks, she explained, "So the kids have no way to learn what the migration that brought their families to Richmond meant."

She continued, "The people who were brought here were all required to do a very small part of a very large job [during the war]. So until you can provide context in which people can understand their role in the bigger picture, I don't think African American people in Richmond understand their importance."

Reid Soskin sees black history as still being relegated to a subcategory of American history, one that's confined to 28 calendar days a year: "At some point, we need to move that into the national narrative because we are a part of national history."

She said her years have brought the wisdom of insights into the very identity of the city she calls home. "Community comes out of shared history, and we [in Richmond] haven't lived long enough nor shared history long enough with each other to be able to learn from that or have community develop from that."

She went on, "We are too young as a city, and that's true of the whole Bay Area. So we borrow things from other cultures at this point or we dogmatically try to cling to that which is black and it keeps us from becoming part of the larger narrative, because we are still searching for identity — both as a people and as a city."

Reid-Soskin's great-grandmother, Leontyne Breaux Allen, was born into slavery in 1846 and died in 1948. "When she died it was three years after World War II ended, after my experience in the Jim Crow union hall," she recalled.

She reflected, "I was 27 when she died, a full grown woman and a mother of two. My own mother was born in 1894 and died in 1995. My mother was 101 when she died. My

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great-grandmother was 102, and I'm 91. That means that all of this history since slavery happened within the lifetime of three women who knew each other. That's how fast it goes."

Shaping History from Experience

Understanding her place in history, Reid-Soskin now feels empowered to bend it to shape, just by her being alive. She feels compelled to share the lessons she has learned along the way with as many as are willing to listen.

"Last December I was invited to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. I was a panelist for three days [at a] conference for 500 people, all white. The hotel where the conference was held at, the Astor Crown Plaza Hotel, just outside the French Quarter." She added, "My parents could have only entered through the back door, if they had a service or delivery to make. That's how much change has occurred in my lifetime."

Reid-Soskin emphasized, "I want us to be able to go back and recognize that process, because in that lies hope for the change that we still need to go through. I know how far we've come because I've lived long enough to know that. My experience tells me that the arc is bent towards fairness and justice, just as Dr. King said it was."