Growing up White in Bellingham, Washington

My name is Dan Locke and I grew up in Bellingham, Washington from 1949 to 1970. My parents moved there when I was three years old from Canada, because my Dad had lived there himself as a child in the 1930's. Immigration from Canada was much easier in the 1940s.

In the years I lived in Bellingham, residents were nearly all White, with most people having an ancestry of northern European. There were no African-Americans at all until the early 1960s that I recall, except for one African-American boy I used to see in his front yard on a main thoroughfare – Alabama Street. He may have been adopted, because I did not see any adult African-Americans. When I was small, we would occasionally go to Seattle, where I would see Black people, and my mother told me I would stare at them until she told me to stop. A few years later, I recall seeing a Black man swimming at a lake at Deception Pass State Park, and staring again and wondering why the palms of his hands and soles of his feet were so much paler than the rest of his body. I don't recall my parents speaking negatively about Black people, or speaking about them at all, except my Dad saying he would not want his daughter marrying an African-American. That statement stayed with me, and I was quite nervous about telling him many years later (1984) that I wanted to marry a Black woman.

My next encounter with African-Americans was in the early 1960's when two Black men were hired as professors at Western Washington University (then Western Washington State College). One of these men, Thaddeus Spratlen joined our church, First Presbyterian, on Forest Street. Several White members of this church were also professors at WWU and perhaps they invited him to join. I don't recall much about him except that he was friendly and talkative.

A second man, Mr. Douglas was hired by WWU a few years later. I worked as a boxboy at a local supermarket (Ennen's Thriftway) on Holly Street near the college, and he would often shop there. I was 17 or 18 years old by then. I recall hime being a quiet, but quite dignified man with very dark skin. One day he came through the checkstand where I was bagging groceries. I bagged his groceries and handed the full bag to him. I'm not sure how it happened, but somehow he missed grabbing the bag and it fell to the floor with a thud. He just stood there for a minute, saying nothing. So I picked it up and handed it to him and he left without saying a word. To this day I have wondered if he thought I did that on purpose. I did not, but I do recall wondering at the time if he was testing me somehow, since by this time I was aware of the civil rights activities in the South.

Within the next year or two, I was a student at Western and there was about 10 to 20 African-American students there as well in 1966, '67 and '68. To my young eyes, they seemed “radical”, into civil rights, some wearing all black clothes and red berets. These students were viewed from afar by me and I don't recall ever having a conversation with any of them. In fact, I don't think I ever talked to an African-American until I moved to Houston, Texas in 1971.

Bellingham did have one minority that most residents had contact and interaction with – the Native-Americans of the Lummi tribe. In my childhood years, I heard many negative comments from other Whites. They were often described in negative terms as being “greasy” alcoholic, somewhat dangerous because “they carried knives” and always drove broken down Ford cars. I recall several fights in junior high involving White boys and Lummi boys. They sold fireworks, fished and were poor.

My Dad seemed to have a more positive attitude towards the Lummis and Native-Americans in general and never spoke ill of them. This may have been because as a young teenager in the early 1940s he worked for a Native-American man (not a Lummi) who owned a farm in Whatcom county. This man

and his family treated him very kindly and even offered a piece of land for him to farm on his own when he turned 16. My Dad declined however because World War II was happening and he wanted to join the Navy. Later, when I was a boy of about 9 or 10, he took me on a drive to the Lummi Reservation down a gravel road that paralleled the Nooksack River where people were living in tar-paper shacks. He spoke if them in a sympathetic, but somewhat patronizing way, saying something like "now you see how they live.". He was a devout Christian and although he didn't say it outright, he seemed to imply that they needed Christianity to help them. Around he same time we visited the "Lummi Mission" in Marietta, which was run by a Native-American man (not Lummi). I believe Dad supported it financially. I also recall going to the annual Stommish celebration two or three times on the Reservation and going to out to the reservation a number of times to spend time on the beach. The only other minority group I encountered growing up was Mexicans when I picked strawberries in the summer from age 10 to 13. One family lived in a small shack on this farm, were extremely fast at picking strawberries and seemed quite friendly. Again, I would hear negative comments about them from other kids. The word "Spic" was used as a name for them. Some kids also called anyone of Asian descent, "Chinks"

Overall, in that era, I believe the White Bellingham residents viewed people of other races or ethnic background was one of "other, not one of us", probably a lot of ignorance, but not blatant or rabid racism, with some exceptions of course. However, there may have been more prejudice than I was aware of, since there were so few minorities living there, perhaps because they did not feel welcome.