

In This Giant Colored Man's Establishment, Champagne Flowed Freely

HISTORY NEGLECTS THE FAMOUS RINGO

One of the famous restaurants of Victoria a century ago was, apparently, Ringo's. I say apparently, because very little is known about it today. The Colonist of that period never mentioned it, and I can find nothing about it in anyone's memoirs.

That may have been because Ringo was a Negro, here in the touchy days of the American Civil War.

In 1864 there was this note in The Colonist: "In this city, April 16, Samuel Ringo, a native of Philadelphia, aged 48 years. Friends and acquaintances are requested to attend his funeral on Saturday from the residence of Mr. Grant on Pioneer Street."

That's all there was—no further reference, and no mention of the funeral. Why could that have been, if Ringo was, in fact, the prominent restaurateur that an 1887 newspaper historian said he was?

Perhaps some of the Centennial Pioneers for next year can throw some light on this, one of the minor mysteries of our history.

Ringo very likely came here in 1858, with the first wave of Negroes to the north, from California. Many more came when the Civil War broke out. Here they found more tolerance, though there were some Victorians riddled with color bias, and these people often made trouble, as we see in this Colonist report in 1861:

By JAMES K. NESBITT

"Row at the Theatre—Last night, as the performances at the theatre were drawing to a close, some person threw a package of flour on two colored men, who resented the insult by pitching into an innocent bystander and a general row commenced, during which several persons were knocked down, and trampled underfoot.

"The fire bell was rung, the engines rolled and quite an excitement ensued; but the police, who were present in force, soon quelled the disturbance, and the performances were concluded quietly."

James W. Pilton some years ago did a first-class thesis for his MA at UBC on early Negro settlement in British Columbia. He mentions some of the most prominent Negroes of the time, but not Samuel Ringo.

Pilton wrote: "The first of the Negro immigrants arrived in April of 1858, when the gold rush to the Fraser River was just beginning; while many preferred to try their luck at the diggings, others remained in the town, where they prospered as merchants, barbers, restaurant and saloon keepers and ordinary laborers. Not wishing to live in segregation as they had been forced to do in California, they fitted themselves into the life of the community to a remarkable degree."

Some of these people became powerful in this community, according to Pilton: "The colored townspeople were particularly active in colonial politics; when they voted en bloc they could, and sometimes did, control the outcome of elections, a situation which aroused antagonism toward them. Several Negroes ran as candidates in colonial and municipal elections, and one of them, Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, was not only elected to the city council, but, later, on leaving the colony became the first Negro judge in the United States, and was eventually appointed United States consul to Madagascar."

These first Negroes have a very definite place in the history of Victoria, as Pilton points out: "The first volunteer military unit



LOWER YATES STREET, where, close by the premises with the awning, Ringo, the giant colored man, had his noted restaurant.

on Vancouver Island, the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps, was composed entirely of colored men. After much discouragement at the hands of the white, the Negro soldiers disbanded, but at least they deserve the credit for being the first to volunteer and to prepare themselves for the defence of the colony."

It was not too easy for these people in Victoria: "The colored people had not entirely escaped prejudice by their northward migration, for it followed them from California on every gold rush steamer, and even the British settlers were not entirely blameless. Attempts were made in Victoria to segregate them in the churches and theatres, and to exclude them from the public bars."

The situation for them on Salt Spring Island was better: "On the fringe of settlement, any neighbor, regardless of his color, was a decided asset, and, in the mining country men were generally judged by the amount of money in their pockets, rather than by the color of their skin."

The only reference to Samuel Ringo that can be traced in the Provincial Archives was contained in The Colonist, in May of 1887. It must have been written by someone from personal knowledge, for it rings true, yet there is no way of knowing today the author.

There was a small headline: "Passing Away," and the story went on: "Two old buildings on Yates Street, opposite Langley (where the Goodwill Enterprise stores are today) were sold . . . by auction to Mr. Hayward. They will be torn down and removed immediately. They were erected in 1858 when lumber was \$100 a thousand, other materials dear in proportion, and carpenters' wages \$10 a day. They cost to put up, in the roughest and cheapest style, \$3,300.

And then the now anonymous historian of 1887 told his story: "In the larger of the two buildings was located Ringo's Restaurant. Ringo was a gigantic colored man, deeply pockmarked, with a very pretty, ladylike wife. Ringo himself had been a slave. He nursed his master through an attack of smallpox, contracted the disease himself, and, upon recovering, was given his freedom."

Another noted Ringo of his day is here noted: "Ringo was famed far and wide for his cuisine. The famous John Scranton, who then held the mail contract on Puget Sound,

always made his headquarters, while in Victoria, at Ringo's Restaurant. Champagne was accustomed to flow like water during his stay—'just for grandeur,' according to John's favorite expression."

I believe the historian of 1887, but I find it difficult to understand why there was no newspaper mention of Ringo while he presided over what was purported to be a high-class restaurant.

The 1887 account went on: "Every notable who came to Victoria in those days was escorted at once to Ringo's to get a square meal. This was considered the highest mark of hospitality that could be shown him.

"On one occasion, in 1861, when bad blood began to show itself between north and south, two Americans fell to wrangling one day in Ringo's.

"Blows were exchanged and pistols drawn. Ringo, in the kitchen, heard the row, and running out threw his great long arms about both men and gathered them to his greasy breast. He held them there as in a vise, until they consented to put up their pistols and shake hands."

Our unknown historian shows a small facet of the social life of early-day Victoria: "The early Victorian abominated tall hats and the appearance of a man wearing one was sure to excite unfavorable comment.

"One evening a stranger wearing a shiny plug deposited it on Ringo's counter, and proceeded to a substantial dinner.

"When he came to replace the hat on his head his horror may be imagined to find the juice of half a dozen eggs, and the oil from a pound of soft butter trickling down his face. Some mean wag had broken the eggs and placed them in the hat while the guest unconsciously enjoyed his dinner."

In any event, Ringo, long after his death, received this eulogy in 1887, and it has become a small, but colorful paragraph in the history of the city of Victoria:

"Ringo was a kind, good man . . . very charitable and attentive to the sick.

"The poor old chap, his wife, and many of his former guests have long since been gathered to their fathers; and today the old building which was the scene of his greatest epicurean achievements will follow them to the land of shadows. Sic transit!"