

Portland's
White
Community

WHO are they?
WHERE are they going?
WHAT do they want from us?

by Hiram Sunspot



Larry Kirby and Shannon Winston met each other at a White Singles Dance in Southeast Portland.

THE VILLAGE INN RESTAURANT ON NORTHEAST BROADWAY is bustling with people on a typically blustery Portland winter afternoon. Latinos, Asians, and blacks mingle effortlessly. It could be any restaurant in any city in America.

And then a group of whites walks in.

All eyes turn toward them. The normal restaurant buzz turns immediately silent. It takes the soothing ministrations of Chandrita, the restaurant's charming Indian hostess, to escort the whites to a partially obscured table near the kitchen door, averting a possibly violent altercation. Once the whites are safely tucked away in the rear, the loud restaurant buzz resumes.

At one point, a black girl of four or five years old wanders over to the whites' table. She's wary but curious, as if spotting an unknown exotic breed of animal for the first time. She holds out her toy rubber ball for them to observe.

Again the restaurant is silent.

The white people smile. "That's a nice rubber ball," one of them says.

"Honey, get back here," the girl's mother yells, somewhat angrily. "Bring your ball back and leave those damn white people alone."

A few blacks titter. The smiles fade at the white table. The whites quietly don their jackets, pay their check, and leave.

IN A DRAFTY WAREHOUSE across the river from downtown, Trudi Jensen applies blackface to her entire naked body while a handful of bored art-student types watches. "Do ya like me now? Do ya like me now? Do ya like me, NOW THAT I'M BLACK?!" she chants, getting louder with each repetition. She then drinks an entire half-gallon of chocolate milk, defecates on stage, calls it her "baby," and launches into a soliloquy by Hattie McDaniel from *Gone With the Wind*.

A former highway flagger who has built a rabid cult following around her "Happy White Girl" character, performance artist Jensen calls Portland's whites "the invisible people." When a black boyfriend threatened to break up with her if she refused to get a hair weave, Jensen underwent a radical reclamation of her whiteness. She dumped him, shackled up with a white female partner, and began writing the basic outline for Happy White Girl. "It's hard enough being a woman in this world," Jensen tells me in her dressing room after the show. "But when you throw being white on top of that," she says, removing her blackface with a Noxzema-smeared cotton ball, "it's almost impossible to get by sometimes."

Albert Scholz, author of *White Men are From Mars, Black Men Got Big Penis*

"AS A WHITE GUY, I might as well be a Martian in this town," Albert Scholz says in between bites of a "Big Rig" omelette at the Jubitz truck stop near the Washington border. "It's like, people look at you like they've never seen a white guy before." Scholz, who grew up in Canby but now lives in Portland, is riding high on the success of his first book, *White Men are From Mars, Black Men Got Big Penis*. A *New York Times* best-seller, *White Men* is a funny-yet-sharp deconstruction of stereotypes that white males suffer in modern-day America. "What I really hate," Scholz continues, "is when people want to be your friend just because you're white, and they think it's hip to have a white friend now. I have a lot of bitterness issues about being a white guy in this racist country. Imagine being a Martian, but you don't live on Mars, and that's what it feels like to be a white man in Portland sometimes. It's hard to maintain your anger sometimes. You just want to grab some of these people by the collar and say, "LOOK, motherfucker, I may be white, but I'm a PERSON just like you!"

"WE FIND IT HARD TO HANG OUT with other couples because we're white," Shannon Winston tells me as she sits inside her trailer near 82nd St., knitting her newborn son some footies. "When I met my fiancé Larry, it was like a godsend. Wow! Another white person! Somebody who understands what it's like to be white in Portland and what white people go through here." Winston met soon-to-be-husband Larry Kirby at a White Singles Dance in Southeast Portland. Such dancing events are sprouting up all over Portland's white ghettos as a response to the prejudices and pressures that white dancers sometimes face in Portland's interracial nightclubs. "I just hope my son can grow up in a world where it's safe to be a white boy," Winston tells me. "It'd be nice to live in a world where a white boy could go to a dance club where black boys are dancing without being afraid of getting hurt."

"Q: How many white people does it take to screw in a light bulb?
A: One. We're just like everybody else!"

WHO ARE PORTLAND'S WHITES? Where do they come from? What do they believe? And why are they so hated?

Most white people can trace their ancestry to "Europe," which is a continent on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean from us. A few hundred years ago, many white "Europeans" (the word for people who come from Europe) came over here and did a lot of bad things such as killing Indians and making black people pick cotton against their will.

Believe it or not, Portland used to be a predominantly white town. Back in the mid-1800s, whites outnumbered nonwhites by something like eight hundred and fifty billion to one. But whites, as notoriously wild and impossible to tame as they are, proved to be an unreliable labor pool. So Portland's land barons began encouraging a mass migration of nonwhites into the city, and whites have become Portland's Forgotten People ever since.

"SOME PEOPLE DON'T THINK white people are people, but we're people, too," Rex Bitford tells me over a bowl of "macaroni and cheese," a popular white delicacy. Bitford is the rare white Portlander who has risen above his humble white roots and learned to, as he puts it, "use the system which has so sorely oppressed my people and make it help my people." Bitford receives a healthy yearly stipend to chair the White Is A Color Foundation, a Portland think tank devoted to "helping white people speak out for our rights and get noticed." Bitford says that the Foundation is making progress in "helping white Portland lift itself up by the bootstraps and take pride in its Portlandy whiteness." He cites a recent study the Foundation financed which concluded that "if white Portlanders had it to do all over again, sixty-three percent of them would still be white." Every Christmas, Bitford hosts a Walking Tour of White Portland History which has proven popular with whites and nonwhites alike.

Bitford speaks about white issues at colleges and corporate seminars. He says that every crowd is initially skeptical but brightens up after he softens them with this joke:

Q: How many white people does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: One. We're just like everybody else!

"We don't have a problem with any other race," Bitford says. "We're just happy we're white, that's all. White is often perceived as a non-color, an absence of color, when it's actually a rich, beautiful color—some would say the most beautiful of all. And white Portland is a vibrant community with a rich cultural tapestry."

"What do you mean by 'rich cultural tapestry'?" I ask him.

"You know," he stutters, "I mean that it has a rich cultural tapestry and stuff."

"BACK IN EUROPE, their people are eating each other alive," says Amiri Abu-Jabubi, a conservative black nationalist and author of *I Did Yo Mama, White Boy—Now What?* [Black Tiger Books, 1999]. "I mean, let's tell the truth here. Europe is a primitive continent. It's not like we did a disservice to these white Europeans by bringing them over here, with our high standards of

living. Maybe one of these days, these white crybabies will stop their sobbing and get to work on repairing the problems within their community, most of which are caused by the whites themselves. If white America wants to get its act together, it needs to drop the 'white' and focus on the 'America.'" Abu-Jabubi says that organizations such as The White Is A Color Foundation are insulting to "the honest whites who try to fit in and make an honest living."

AT A PARK IN NORTHEAST PORTLAND, a large group of white people gather together for a family-reunion picnic. (Until very recently, white Portlanders were forbidden to assemble in public.) White women serve hot dogs, peanut-butter sandwiches, and hard-boiled eggs dipped in mayonnaise. White men talk about ice hockey and auto racing. White children play with white toys such as the hula hoop and the hacky sack.

"I'm proud to be white, but sometimes it hurts to be white," says Rutherford B. Hayes, a white Portlander who says he wants to move his family to another state because of Portland's racism. "A white man can't ask for the time of day in this town without a dozen cops and District Attorneys going for his throat," Hayes says, biting into a peanut-butter sandwich. "And they always think we want the black women. That's a big one—they all think that white guys want the black trophy girlfriend. I don't know about some of my white brothers, but I'm happy raising a white family with a beautiful white wife. I know that our mass culture, with the mass media and the mass culture, you know, preaches a standard of black female beauty, but I find white women the most beautiful of all." Hayes describes himself as a "racialist" rather than a "racist" but refuses to elaborate. "It wouldn't be fair to say I hate black people and other nonwhites," he says, "but I certainly distrust them. They're sneaky."

ALL OVER PORTLAND, white people are starting to be recognized for their accomplishments instead of their skin color. White Portland has seen some tough times, but it continues to search for acceptance in an often-hostile world. We hope for the day when normal Portlanders don't look at white people as white people, but as "just plain folks." X



Photos, from top: White college girls find unity by rooming together; white family poses outside of their house with their dog; performance artist Trudi "The Happy White Girl" Jensen; white family gets together for picnic; white girl and her white teeth; Rex Bitford of the White Is A Color Foundation.