

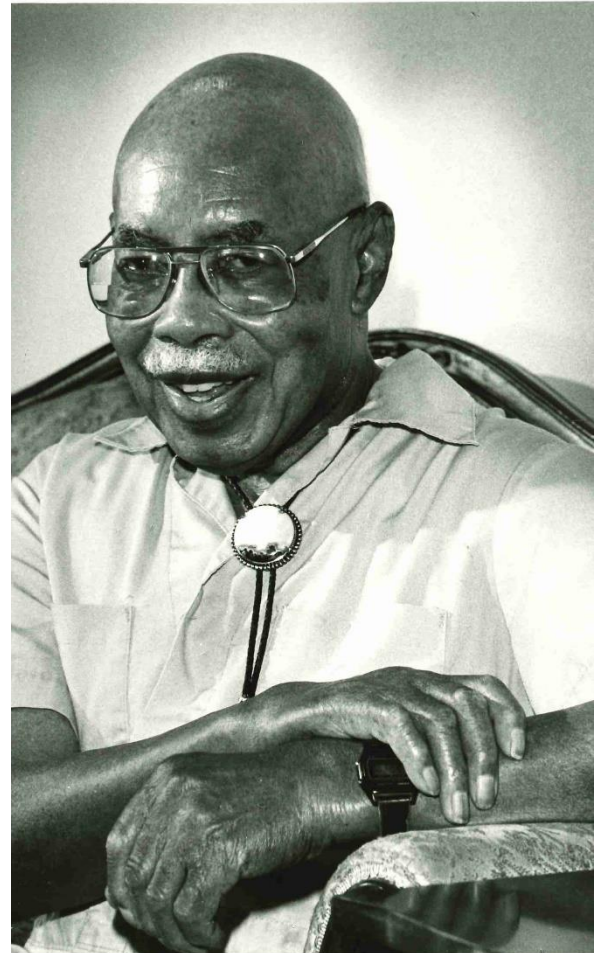
## **Fletcher's Auto Repair: One of Hayward's First Black Owned Businesses**

*Written by HAHS Staff*

Today Hayward can rightfully claim to be one of the most diverse cities in the United States. The community's diversity is often cited as its greatest strength, creating an environment where anyone can start a successful business. But it has not always been smooth sailing, especially for African-Americans and other people of color in the Hayward Area.

It's against this backdrop that we can understand the significance of William Fletcher's story as an ace auto mechanic and successful Hayward businessman. William was born in Stockton, California in 1907 and by the age of 11 moved with his family to Oakland. His father died when he just turned 13. So William dropped out of school and began working full time to help support his family. For several years he worked as a janitor in an East Oakland car dealership. Since childhood, William had a knack for working with cars. When mechanics called out sick, he would step in and repair cars at the dealership. By all accounts he was a skilled mechanic even as a young man.

In 1936, at the age of 29, William Fletcher began commuting from Oakland to Hayward to work at C.R. Spence Auto Repair on A Street. Within three years, he had saved up enough money to open up his own shop, "Fletcher's Auto Service". He rented space for a shop at the corner of A Street and Mission Boulevard, right in downtown Hayward. When he filled out his draft card in 1940, William filled out the "Employer's Name" section as being "In business" for himself. Despite the potential challenges of being one of the few Black-owned businesses in town, at a time when the nation was still reeling from the effects of the Great Depression, William made his shop a success. In a later interview, he could only recall one other Black-owned business at that time--a shoe shine stand near city hall.



*A portrait of William Fletcher, taken for a 1986 interview with the Daily Review Newspaper.*



***Fletcher (left) poses at the Oakland Speedway with (L-R) Bob Thompson, Gene Souza, and Bob Owen, c. 1950.***

In 1947, William decided it was time for an upgrade, so he tried to purchase property from the Oro Loma Sanitation District on Foothill Boulevard for a new shop. After placing a successful bid for the property, the sellers claimed that Fletcher had never actually given them a deposit and cancelled the sale. William believed, once the sellers involved knew he was Black, that they looked for the fastest way to cancel the sale. Rather than forfeit his plan, he decided to rent the same property he wasn't allowed to purchase. From 1947 to 1955, Fletcher's Auto Service continued to be successful in that location. Fletcher eventually became a member of the Hayward Chamber of Commerce and helped sponsor community events. He sold tickets for the annual "Farm and Industry Expo" as well as for school raffles and dances. William also joined with other business owners, taking out full-page holiday greetings in the local newspaper.

During this time, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, William developed a reputation as a skilled race car builder, entering numerous races at the Oakland Speedway with teammates Bob Owen and Gene Souza.

The Speedway was an oval track located where Bayfair Mall in San Leandro sits today. Hayward attorney John Thorpe recalled William as a "skilled auto repairman, race car builder and an

engineer who helped fabricate supercharger installation kits...". William's track partners also recalled his car-building prowess. Driver Bob Owen told the local newspaper, "We always had a car that was always... the fastest. We took a lot of main events."



***Fletcher posing in front of his 820 Smalley Avenue shop in 1986. The business continued using his name for several years after his retirement.***

In 1957, William finally purchased his own property for his shop. Located at 820 Smalley, Fletcher's Auto Service would survive and thrive for almost another 20 years. William finally retired and sold the business in 1975. It was around the time of his retirement that William actually moved to the Hayward area, purchasing a home on Glenn Ellen Drive in the Fairview district. Many black families were steered toward the Fairview district in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, in a deliberate attempt to keep people of color just outside the Hayward City limits. After almost four decades commuting to Hayward, starting a successful business during the Great Depression, and dealing with the realities of discrimination, William finally called the area home. He had built up a strong reputation in Hayward by that point. The shop he owned, at 820 Smalley Ave., continued using his name until at least 1986, more than a decade after he had retired and sold the shop. William Fletcher passed away in 1992 at age 85. We remember him today as a local community leader, entrepreneur, local business owner, skilled auto mechanic, race-car builder and engineer.