

A Self-Made Man

In 1920, the entire population of California was 3,426,861, which is less than 10% of the population of California today. The population of just Eden Township, which includes the cities of Hayward and San Leandro and all the unincorporated communities of Fairview, Mt. Eden, Cherryland, Ashland, San Lorenzo, Russell City, and Castro Valley, was 17,983. In the two cities in Eden Township, San Leandro had a population of 5,703 while Hayward's population was 3,487. That means that a slight majority of the population lived in an "urban" area while about 8,793 lived in the more rural, unincorporated areas.

The population of African Americans in California at the time was 38,763. Alameda County's black population was just 6,320. Within the city limits of Hayward, there is only one black person on the 1920 census and just over 30 in all of Eden Township. The majority of those 30 individuals were at the Alameda County Infirmary (today's Fairmont Hospital) recovering from or dealing with health issues.

The point is that the African American population in the Hayward area was very small in the early part of the 20th century. This area did not have laws or ordinances officially directed at prohibiting rental or ownership of land or businesses by African Americans in the city or county but racism in the form of discouragement from purchasing property existed. Property owners wouldn't rent to or sell to African Americans in many cases. Some neighborhoods, especially in new developments, had explicit rules about not selling to African Americans at all.

But that doesn't mean an African American didn't own property in the area. One such man was William T. Ewing who lived in Fairview. Ewing had a fascinating life and death but his story is not well known. As with anyone's story, we can't know all the details of a person's life without their words in letters or diaries. But we can piece together a story from primary sources like newspaper articles, census records, and even borrow from previous research. These resources give us a glimpse of a person's life.

William T. Ewing was born into slavery in 1854 in Missouri. Based on his last name alone, it is believed he was one of sixteen slaves owned by William Nathaniel Ewing who had a farm outside of Keytesville. William T. first appears on the Federal Census in 1870 in the same town he was born in working as a farm hand and living with a large group of other African Americans. He was able to read and write but he probably had no formal schooling. Whether he was working on the land he had formerly been enslaved on remains unknown.



By 1880, Ewing was in the employ of E.J. Ingersoll in Iowa. Ingersoll worked with the Hawkeye Insurance Company and according to an article in the Oakland Tribune in 1912, William traveled throughout the east and south with Ingersoll. He was listed as a servant but he could have been more of an assistant to the businessman too. He worked for Ingersoll for many years and no doubt picked up a variety of skills that would benefit him later in life.

In 1887, Ewing headed west, landing in Tacoma, Washington. He staked a homestead on land in King County in 1890. Whether he farmed the land is unclear, but we do know he worked other jobs while living in Washington. He worked for the Tacoma Police Department for a number of years during this period too. Some articles say he was a police officer, others say he drove the paddy wagon.

Continuing to look for either new challenges or better opportunities, in 1896 Ewing decided to head north to Alaska just a few months prior to the big gold strike in the Klondike. When news of the discovery reached Ewing where he was staying down the Yukon River, he joined the rush up the mountain hoping to strike it rich. He was one of the few gold miners who actually did make his fortune in Alaska, though not without years of hard work and smart decision-making. He retained his property in Tacoma and occasionally traveled back there to check on the property before returning to Alaska and working a claim for a while.

Ewing really struck it big when he formed a partnership with D. A. McCarty in 1903 near Fairbanks. Ewing had the capital to invest in McCarty's claim in return, McCarty offered him 50% ownership. Within 90 days of hard work, Ewing made nearly \$40,000 (about \$1,168,349 in today's dollars). Ewing began making savvy investments with his money. He bought empty lots in Fairbanks, which was just beginning to boom, which he turned around and sold at considerable profit. He bought mining claims and interests in claims all of which added to his profits.

Around 1904 Ewing left Alaska, may have stopped in Tacoma for a while but then traveled on to Oakland, California. The exact reason for Ewing's move to Oakland is not entirely clear but he had met, and presumably became good friends with, another African American miner in Alaska by the name of John Walker Nuby, who lived in Oakland. Ewing saw potential in Oakland and proceeded to purchase land on Telegraph Avenue, Chestnut Street, in West Oakland, and along Foothill Boulevard. Combined with his property in Tacoma and mining interests in Alaska, Ewing built quite a fortune.

For years, with Oakland being his home base, Ewing traveled back and forth between all his businesses. In 1908, he spent several months attending to his interests in Fairbanks. Upon his return to Oakland, the Oakland Tribune reported on Ewing's returning from Alaska and his glowing claims on the agricultural growth potential in that region. The article extensively lists all the various fruits and vegetables that could be grown there and were in high demand. He obviously recognized that highlighting the growth potential in Alaska would improve his investments there.

Such was Ewing's reputation as a smart businessman, the Oakland Tribune wrote a glowing short biography and interview with Ewing in January 1912. It contains the only known photograph of a very dapper looking Ewing. The article concludes with "Mr. Ewing is an exceptional example of his race, and his standing in the commercial world is of the highest. His remarkable success in life is due to his indomitable pluck and perseverance, his conscientious and conservative business policy, backed by a natural faculty of financiering. Personally he is a genial gentleman, ever faithful to a friend, and his word is as good as his bond. By his uniform courteous treatment to everybody, and his innate faculty of making and retaining friends, 'Bill' Ewing has the reputation of having more friends in Alaska than any other man during his residence in that territory."

In 1915, Ewing made another land purchase, this time near Hayward. He bought 20 acres on the corner of Maud Avenue and Kelly Street from Manuel and Minnie Garcia. He appears to have taken up farming on the land. There was most likely an existing orchard of some kind on the property, as there were many in that area, but we don't know exactly what he was growing. Ewing seems to have lived a quiet life at his home in Fairview, though he was well-known to his other African American neighbors in part because there were only a few other black families in the area.

There are no further mentions of Ewing in the newspapers until his death in April 1923 at the age of 69. Ewing never married and upon his death, he left his considerable estate to the Tuskegee Institute. Apparently, Ewing's old friend John Nuby, who was also the executor of his estate, had introduced Ewing to Booker T. Washington during one of Washington's trips to the West Coast. Ewing was so impressed with Washington, that he left his estate to the institute.

What should have been a cut and dried probate actually became very complicated when three women came forward to contest Ewing's will. One woman claimed to be Ewing's cousin, another, his fiancée and the third woman, it's a little unclear how she was supposedly related. The three women sought to block the estate going to the Tuskegee Institute. One woman claimed there was another will while another claimed Ewing had promised she would be cared for upon his passing. It took two years to settle Ewing's estate with only Ewing's cousin, Ella Kinkade receiving any money. Ultimately the bulk of Ewing's estate, sometimes estimated at

\$80,000 and sometimes at closer to \$150,000 (\$1,235,553 to \$2,316,662 in today's dollars), went to the Tuskegee Institute.

William T. Ewing was laid to rest at Mt. View Cemetery in Oakland. His grave is marked by a large monument and a headstone which reads "William T. Ewing born 1854-died 1923, a native of Missouri, his estate left to educate his people."

Many aspects of Ewing's life are remarkable. There were many gold rushes in the western

hemisphere in the nineteenth century and only a very few men actually made their fortunes in the gold fields. Even fewer had the business acumen to take that gold and turn it into more wealth while still living modestly. No doubt, Ewing experienced horrendous racism and barriers throughout his life. His perseverance and intellect allowed him to leave money to an institution devoted to providing education to African Americans so they would have the base to succeed as Ewing did.



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