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## FEBRUARY 2007 NEWSLETTER

### Black History and the U.S. Steel Industry

*By Jim Stavis*

Since 1926, February has been officially recognized as Black History Month here in America. This month's newsletter commemorates this event as African Americans have played a significant role in the American steel industry.

Before the Civil War, more than 2,000 slaves worked in the iron mills of the South, creating a skilled workforce that the Northern iron companies were quick to exploit after the war. When a labor dispute shut down the industry in Pittsburgh in 1875, African American workers were brought in to break it, setting a pattern that would continue for decades. Strike breakers

*(Continued Inside)*



## Black History

*(Continued from Front)*

were resented by whites for working for lower wages and at that time, unions were not willing to accept minorities. In 1890, a local union in Pittsburgh ordered 400 of its 500 workers off their jobs to protest African American employees.

African American workers were flocking to the North not so much as strike breakers, but in order to escape natural disasters (the boll weevil scourge of 1914, the floods of 1916), racial oppression and the repressive class system of the South. Like the Eastern

European immigrants who were also moving into the mills at this time, African Americans shared one dream – the chance for equal opportunity.

African American mill workers reached record numbers during World War I and by the 1930s, white unionists depended on African American participation in the Steelworkers Organizing Committee. But union participation did not ensure equality for African American workers. Discriminatory work practices sanctioned by the union, including department seniority rules that kept workers in hazardous, low paying “Negro Jobs” for

decades, continued through the years of civil rights activism in the 1960s.

Through the years of partial gains and tremendous losses, African American activists came to trust the government far more than the steel companies themselves. In 1974 a consent decree was brokered by the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), the U.S. Department of Justice, nine steel companies and the United Steelworkers of America. The decree established goals and timetables for the hiring and promotion of minorities, particularly in supervisory and technical positions within their

companies. These advances truly changed the position of minorities up until the time the steel industry went into a steep decline in the 1990s. At that time workers, both black and white stood together in the unemployment lines as the industry reengineered itself.

This story illustrates how African American workers have advanced through time within our society. In spite of this advancement there still seems to be a dearth of African American owned steel distributors or management within steel producers themselves. There is still much progress to be made in these areas.



## California African American Museum

Recently Paragon Steel built a sign which was erected atop the California African American Museum located in Downtown Los Angeles. It was completed in October of last year. The sign is over 60 feet long and stands 30 feet in the air. It was designed by Theresa Sanchez (Gruen and Associates Architects). The Museum was christened at a fundraiser on October 21, 2006 by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in a media event honoring the museum.

### Quote *of the* Month

*Success is to be measured not so much by  
the position that one has reached in life;  
As by the obstacles which  
he has overcome while trying to succeed.*

*- Booker T. Washington*

