



WOMPATUCK NEWS

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Friends of Wompatuck State Park

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Winter Running with YakTraks

By Alma Ramos-McDermott

Wompatuck is a wonderful place for cross country running in the spring, summer and fall. Carrying a trail map is a must, as maneuvering from trail to trail without one can make it easy to get lost. If this happens, a trail map can easily lead you back onto the main path. The sounds of birds, and the occasional sighting of wildlife are mingled in with sun dappled views and the silence of a run through the woods.

When winter brings its snow, Wompatuck comes alive in a different kind of way. Now you will see the occasional snowmobile, cross country skier and deer. With a pair of YakTraks strapped to your running shoes and a handy trail map, you will gain a renewed awareness of your surroundings, magnified, sharpened and outlined by the snow.

Running with YakTraks enables you to keep enjoying Wompatuck year round, with the added enjoyment of running through snow without losing your footing. Guess what kinds of tracks were made before you and, if running over pristine snow, make new tracks. The silence of a run through the woods is magnified with the snow.

Wompatuck can be enjoyed year round, with wintertime being a great time to strap on a pair of YakTraks and hit the trails. Don't forget your trail map!

John Richardson Passes Away

John P. Richardson, a resident of Hingham for over 60 years and a well known environmentalist and historian, died February 8. Richardson was a member of the Wompatuck State Park Advisory Council. He contributed valuable records to the park's history. He worked with Bridgewater State College graduate student Dan Barry on the park's history. He will be sorely missed.



J.B. Mills provided this photo of the Hingham Naval Ammunition Band in formation along Beale street during World War II. Area now is the Edward P. Lynch athletic field.

Jazz Legends Once Stationed Here

Soul Sojourn Through The Ammunition Depot

By Jim Rose, FOW News Editor and Historian

Since February is celebrated as Black History Month and April 17 is celebrated as Patriot's Day, this story pays tribute to J.B. Mills of Whitman and other African-American patriots for their sacrifices and talents in service for our country.

When people think of the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot and Cohasset Annex, they usually picture munition production for the United States military. Little do they realize that jazz legends were once stationed there.

Navy veteran J.B. Mills first revealed this important fact during a reunion last summer for former depot personnel.

"I was stationed here at the depot in 1943," said Mills with pride. "We put out a lot of ammo for this country. But, what not too many know is that the U.S. Navy had a great band here with some real top notch performers. And I'm talking about world great performers.

"The most important musician to stay here was saxophonist John Coltrane. He wasn't stationed here; he was temporarily billeted here overnight because the Navy, at that time, did not accept blacks on ships, except for the destroyer escort USS Mason and the sub chaser USS PC-1264. They had a predominately all black crew.

"Coltrane was first assigned to a ship in Rhode Island, but when the the Navy found out he was black, they stuck him in the depot, then sent him to Hawaii where he played in a Navy band.

"Anybody who knows jazz, knows Coltrane. His nickname was 'Trane.' He played with Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie."

John Coltrane was also a composer and band leader. In 1965 he was inducted into the Downbeat Hall of Fame. He died in 1967 at the age of 40.

"Besides Trane, another great musician staying here was trombonist Al Grey,"

continued on page 2

Soul Sojourn Through The Ammunition Depot (continued from page one).



J.B. Mills in 1943



J.B. Mills today



John Coltrane in 1945



Al Grey



Jimmy Witherspoon



Tommy Ridgley

said Mills. "After his Navy duty in World War II, Grey played with Gillespie, Count Basie, Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones and Ray Charles.

"Grey was a good friend of mine. He had dinner at my house in New Orleans where I grew up."

Grey said of his military duty during World War II, "I was shipped out from Great Lakes (Camp Robert Smalls) to Massachusetts to an ammunition depot (Hingham), where we had a band. And then I was shipped to Grosse Isle Naval Air Station in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, very close to Detroit. I used to come into Detroit and go jammin at all the night-clubs. They used to call me 'the Sailor Boy.' They didn't know my name but they said, 'The Sailor Boy comes around and plays pretty good.'"

Grey's trombone music was featured on the award-winning soundtrack for Steven Spielberg's film "The Color Purple." Grey also performed at the White House with Winton Marsalis. He died in 2000.

"As far as blues singers there was Jimmy Witherspoon or 'Spoon' as he was known throughout the jazz world," Mills recalls. "He recorded with Gerry Mulligan and Count Basie."

Jimmy Witherspoon first drew notice singing with Teddy Weatherford's band in Calcutta, India, which made regular radio broadcasts over the U.S. Armed Forces

Radio Service during World War II.

"When stationed here, Jimmy would sing with a quartet at the Protestant churches throughout Hingham," Mills said. Jimmy Witherspoon died of throat cancer in 1997.

"Outside of 'Spoon,' we had stationed at the ammunition depot rhythm and blues singer Tommy Ridgley," Mills remembers. "He was also a band leader in New Orleans where we grew up together."

Tommy Ridgley learned to play the piano during World War II. After the war, he won a talent show at the Dew Drop Inn in New Orleans, where his singing skills landed him a whopping sum of five dollars.

In the 1950s he created his group the "Untouchables." His 1952 release "Tra-La-La" was later made famous by Pat Boone. Ridgley was a regular performer at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival until he died in 1999.

"I was raised with Tommy who grew up in the Jefferson Parish side of New Orleans," said Mills. "We were sworn into the Navy together. We went to Boot Camp together at Camp Robert Smalls, Illinois. We went overseas together. We go back a long way." Tommy Ridgley died of lung cancer in 1999.

"Locally, saxophonist London Bayless from Rockland was also stationed here, says Mills. "He didn't achieve the fame

like the others I mentioned, but he played a fine saxophone for the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot Band.

"Yes sir, we had a lot of great jazz musicians here. The ones I just mentioned were all black. What gets my goat, when World War II first broke out, blacks could only be stewards, orderlies and cooks. German POWs were treated better than us. But Eleanor Roosevelt changed that bad rule (military desegregated in 1948).

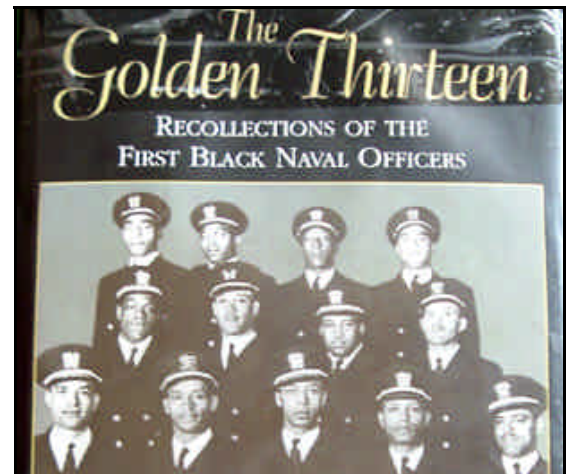
"I remember during World War II being turned away at a USO Club on Boylston Street in Boston because I was black. The white guard said: 'There is a place for you people over at the club in Roxbury.'

"On top of that, my black commander in Camp Perry, Virginia, Sam Barnes, recalls an episode where he entered a mess hall in Okinawa and all the white officers spotted him and then cleared out except for one. It was Steve Belichick, New England Patriot's coach Bill Belichick's father. The two officers had lunch together and the place to themselves. They became great friends. Barnes talks about his experiences in the book, 'The Golden Thirteen,' a book about thirteen black enlisted men who became the first African-American officers in the U.S. Navy.

"We've come a long way. We now have a black president, who by the way, loves to listen to John Coltrane. You can't beat that. No sir." ■



Hingham Naval Ammunition Band with Al Grey on left. Photo provided by J.B. Mills.



Sam Barnes is pictured bottom row, second from left.