

Assembling a Life

James L. Wasson and Old Portland Hardware

by Greta Smith

BEING INSIDE Old Portland Hardware (OPH) is akin to being in a museum where patrons are encouraged to touch and even purchase the objects on display. An antique and architectural salvage store located in Northeast Portland, OPH holds an eclectic inventory ranging from antique, vintage, and repurposed furniture to a wide range of oddities, curiosities, and historical artifacts. OPH also curates rotating exhibits that are nearly as varied in subject as its inventory. During the summer of 2015, its historical photography exhibit, “James L. Wasson: the Life of an Extraordinary Portlander,” displayed evocative photographs mounted in antique negative trays that were highlighted by other artifacts, the origin of which was an old, unassuming steamer trunk acquired by Bret Hodgert, who owns OPH. Discovered in the basement of a North Portland home, the immaculately preserved trunk was sold to OPH and reportedly contained “a bunch of old papers and stuff,” but nothing of any real value.

The folks at OPH therefore planned to process it as they had done with so many other locked trunks before — drill out the lock, sift through the contents, and refurbish it for resale. It was a handsome trunk, in good condition, and should fetch a nice price. On opening the trunk they were confronted by what, at first glance, appeared to be a “random collection of vintage ephemera from the 20s and 30s.” The near pristine condition of the objects and papers inside indicated they had been important to someone. The assemblage shaped up to be a puzzle consisting of letters, magazines, receipts, small objects, photographs, and negatives that, over time, developed into “the outline of a man named James L. Wasson” who had once owned the trunk.¹

James Lonnie Wasson was African American and lived in North Portland’s Albina area from the mid 1920s until his death in 1980. He was born in North Carolina to a large family in 1899, but little else is known of his early life. The timeline on the contents of the trunk



Samantha Ellis

Artifacts and photographs found in an old steamer trunk were displayed during the summer of 2015 at Old Portland Hardware’s exhibit “James L. Wasson: the Life of an Extraordinary Portlander.”



After serving in World War I as a sergeant with the 372nd Infantry Machine Gun Company, James L. Wasson continued to serve at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Here Wasson (left) poses with a book for a self-portrait with other soldiers.

begin in 1917, when Wasson joined the Army and was stationed along the Arizona-Mexico border in a Cavalry Regiment of Buffalo Soldiers during the last years of the Mexican Revolution. Wasson also served in World War I, stationed on the French Champagne Front as a sergeant with the 372nd Infantry Machine Gun Company. Correspondence found in the trunk details the injuries Wasson incurred while in France (he petitioned to receive a Purple Heart, but it is unclear whether he was ever awarded the distinction). On returning stateside from World War I, Wasson continued serving at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where he earned the Expert Rifleman award — recipients of which received extra pay.² During this time, Wasson's interest

in photography is evidenced by early self-portraits of him posing with other soldiers. It is plausible that Wasson met his wife Marcelita (who was from Texas) while stationed in Arizona. They were married in 1924, and Marcelita was a favorite among his photo subject choices.

The earliest record of Wasson in Portland is found on his 1925 Prince Hall Free Masons membership card, which stated that he was a Mason of the 32nd degree.³ The following year the exclusion clause — which prohibited African Americans from owning property or even being in the state — was removed from Oregon's Constitution. The exclusion clause had been approved by popular vote in 1857 and remained on the books until its

repeal by voters in 1926.⁴ During Wasson's time in Portland he worked as a mechanic and electrician for various automotive companies. Among the ephemera preserved in the trunk was a letter from his one-time employer, the Braly Auto Company. Dated July 6, 1929, the letter was intended to provide Wasson sanction to pilot an automobile across the Canadian-U.S. border:

To whom it may concern:

This is to certify that J.L. Wasson, the driver of this Franklin Sedan — Factory No. 166981-11 License No. 18478 Motor No. E 115085, is an employee of Braly Auto Company, and has permission to drive this car into the State of Washington. The above car is the property of Braly Auto Company — R. Love, Secy⁵

Wasson documented this part of his life in photographs as well, and the

trunk yielded a wealth of negatives. There are pictures from the Twenty-first Annual Portland Automobile Expo that took place at the Portland Armory in 1931 — not only of the cars but also of the things and people on the sidelines — a lion, a giraffe. Also found within the trunk is Wasson's exhibitor's credential to the expo.

Wasson was able to turn his interest in photography into a lucrative profession, doing portraiture for Portland's African American community. Among the negatives are pictures of Prince Hall Free Masons and the portraits of men and women that must have been Wasson's bread and butter. Then there are pictures of Wasson's wife, Marcelita. Pictures of her sitting in the driver's seat of a car, smiling. Marcelita looking



This photograph of the Twenty-first Annual Portland Automobile Expo, held at the Portland Armory in 1931, was one of a number of photographs documenting Wasson's interest in photography and automobiles.

Courtesy of Old Portland Hardware



In Wasson's trunk was a pocket mirror with this photograph of his wife Marcelita embossed on the back.

wearily at the table with a cup of coffee and a newspaper (in this one she looks very much like a woman who does not want to be photographed). Marcelita in bed in her bloomers — a blurry and intimate portrait of Wasson's love for his wife. Also found among Wasson's artifacts is a pocket mirror — with a picture of Marcelita dressed in a beaded evening gown while reclining on a sofa embossed on the back.

A receipt found in the trunk shows that during the Great Depression, in 1932, Wasson spent \$160.00 on professional photographic equipment — a hefty sum. Also found within the trunk is a possible source for Wasson's photographic inspiration — issues of an African American magazine called *The Silhouette Pictorial*. This maga-

zine was based in Los Angeles and between its photo-rich pages readers would find stories, editorials, and images that reflected their own lives and culture. Article and photo editorial spreads bore titles such as "Our Part in Building American Democracy," "Girls from Here & There," "Self-Improvement Art and Social Club," "The Booker T. Washington Postage Stamp," "Spring Activities at Lincoln University in Missouri," and "Pool Tournament Coverage." Write ups of prominent African Americans ran the gamut from W.E.B. DuBois to insurance salesmen, dentists, real estate agents, dining car waiters, college students, and beauty queens. The common thread being that these were all African Americans who strove to improve their stations in life through education and otherwise elevated pursuits. Much of the material within Wasson's trunk — the artifacts of his life — reflect this very idea of "lifting as we climb."⁶

Wasson and Marcelita remained married until Marcelita's death in 1968. James L. Wasson died in February of 1980 and is buried next to his wife in Willamette National Cemetery.⁷

After extending the run of the James L. Wasson exhibit due to the high amount of interest it generated, Old Portland Hardware donated the trunk and the entirety of its contents to the Portland State University Library Special Collections. It is open to the public for research.

NOTES

1. Bret Hodgert, "The Story: Discovering James L. Wasson," *James L. Wasson: the Life of an Extraordinary Portlander*, Old Portland Hardware Exhibit (Summer 2015).
2. Bret Hodgert, "Buffalo Soldier and WWI," *James L. Wasson: the Life of an Extraordinary Portlander*, Old Portland Hardware Exhibit (Summer 2015).
3. Wasson was active in Freemasonry throughout the remainder of his life, eventually going on to become Grand Secretary.
4. Elizabeth McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788–1940* (Portland, Ore.: Georgian Press Company, 1980), 31.
5. The Braly Automotive Letter, in the James L. Wasson Collection, Old Portland Hardware.
6. "Lifting as we climb" is the motto of the National Association of Colored Women, established in 1896. National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, "Who Are We?" available online at <http://nacwc.org/aboutus/index.html> (accessed October 14, 2015).
7. U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935–2014.



Courtesy of Old Portland Hardware

Marcelita Wasson, James's wife, sits in the driver's seat of a car in this undated photograph. This is one of many portraits of African Americans that Wasson saved in his steamer trunk.