

## **“Porter Talk” Biographies – Episode 3**

### **Interviewer**

**Stanley G. Grizzle**, the eldest of seven children, was born in Toronto in 1918. His parents, both of whom immigrated from Jamaica in 1911, worked in the service sector: his mother as a domestic servant and his father as a chef for the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR). Poverty and a lack of opportunities led Grizzle to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1940, where he began a 20-year career as a sleeping car porter. In 1942, he was conscripted by the Canadian Government, attaining corporal status while he served as a medic in Holland. In 1962, Grizzle left the CPR and became the first Black Canadian to be employed by the Ontario Ministry of Labour. He ran unsuccessfully for the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation before being appointed by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau as a judge in the court of Canadian citizenship in 1978. A devoted activist, Grizzle campaigned tirelessly for reforms in Canadian labour, immigration, and human rights policies. He was also an avid historian dedicated to documenting and preserving Black History in Canada. His [collection](#) is held at Library and Archives Canada.

### **Narrators**

**Raymond Coker** was an industrial chemist as well as a talented musician. Racism made it impossible for him to gain steady employment in either field, leading him to the Toronto Division of the Canadian National Railway (CNR). Here he laboured as a sleeping car porter and a buffet porter until changes in the collective agreement, made possible with the implementation of the *Fair Employment Practices Act* (1951), enabled him to be appointed to the position of conductor. (Source: [417381](#))

**Melvin Crump** was born in Edmonton in 1916 to a family that immigrated to Keystone, Alberta, from Oklahoma in 1911 under the Homestead Act. Uninterested in farming, he became a CPR sleeping car porter in 1936, at the height of the Great Depression. He worked out of the Calgary Division until 1954, where he served as chairman of the BSCP Safety Committee. (Source: [417403](#))

**Oliver Charles Davis** was born in 1917 and began portering for the CPR in 1939, just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. (Source: [417387](#))

**George Forray** was born in Montreal in 1911 to immigrant parents from Grenada and Guadalupe. In 1937, while travelling home from Mount Allison University, the CPR recruited him to work as a sleeping car porter for the summer. Forray never returned to school and remained with the company for 40 years. He was a proud member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) throughout his service on the rails. (Source: [417383](#))

**Harold James Fowler** was born in Dover Township in Kent County, about 10 kilometres from the city of Chatham. He made his first trip as a CPR sleeping car porter in June 1939, running out of the company's Toronto Division to Vancouver. Fowler was a chartered member of the BSCP, serving as chairman of its Entertainment Committee for a period. He also took great pride in providing sound advice and counselling to fellow porters while they were in transit. Fowler was

forced to retire from his job in 1976 due to severe arthritis in his back. Luckily, he had worked enough years to qualify for a full pension. (Source: [417393](#))

**Harry Gairey Sr.** was born in Jamaica in 1898. His father died when he was just five years old, leading his mother to move him and his seven siblings to Cuba. Gairey worked in a sugar mill there as a teenager before moving to Toronto in 1914, where he obtained a job with the GTR as a dishwasher, cook and waiter. He worked with the company until 1932. In 1936, to support his young family, Gairey returned to the rails as a sleeping car porter for the CPR's Toronto Division; he was later promoted to the position of porter instructor. Gairey was a founding member of the Toronto Division's BSCP, taking on leadership roles in the organization throughout his career. He was also a celebrated community activist, serving as a formative member of both the Toronto Branch of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the Negro Citizenship Association. (Source: [417384](#))

**Eddie Green** was part of a large, close-knit family, composed of eight children. Taking after their father, he and his siblings were talented amateur artists who regularly competed against each other in friendly competitions judged by their mother. None, however, could make ends meet with their craft. To support the family, Green's father worked as a cook for the CPR, a job with connections that led to his son's hiring as a sleeping car porter for the company's Montreal Division during the Depression, in 1937. (Source: [417379](#))

**Charles Allen Milton Hog** was born in Montreal in 1921. His family left Canada when he was three years old and settled in Jamaica, the birthplace of his parents. Searching for adventure, Hog returned to Canada in 1946 and got a job one year later as a CPR sleeping car porter in Montreal. He spent the next 18 years of his life on the rails. Inspired by the work that had been done by Jamaica's People's National Party to unionize sugar cane workers, he quickly joined the Montreal Division's BSCP when it was just starting. He served as a local member of its Grievance Committee and routinely counselled Arthur Robinson Blanchette, who conducted all Canadian BSCP business and reported directly to A. Philip Randolph, organizer of the American BSCP and its first president. Hog also served as the BSCP representative for the Quebec Labour Council. In his later years, he was heavily involved in human rights activism, serving as a founding member of the Negro Citizenship Association in Montreal. (Source: [417405](#))

**Leonard Oscar Johnston** was born in Toronto in 1918. Like other Black men, abject racism limited his early employment options, leading him to the CPR, where he began working as a sleeping car porter for the Toronto Division in 1940. His career was cut short at the thirty-seven-year mark as a result of the chronic back problems that he developed on the job; thankfully, he was able to access a disability pension, however meagre. While Johnston was a rank-and-file member of the BSCP throughout his tenure with the CPR, his Communist Party of Canada affiliation complicated his belonging. The BSCP distrusted him; for his part, he maintained distance from its actions. Johnston's worldview was grounded in both ideology and lived experiences, pushing him to understand his labour exploitation as part of a greater race and class struggle. (Source: [417394](#) [part 1]; [417396](#) [part 2])

**Bill Overton** was born in Massachusetts, where he trained as a stenographer. Unable to gain employment in his field, he took to the rails as a Pullman porter for the Central Vermont Railway.

After marrying, he relocated to Toronto in 1909 to join his wife and her family, taking on jobs in a factory paint shop, with the Toronto Steamship Company and at the Grand Union Hotel. Despite gaining full-time employment with the CPR's Toronto Division as a sleeping car porter in 1910, he returned to the United States where he continued to find himself in menial jobs until the end of the First World War. When Overton came back to Toronto in 1919, he committed to the CPR, working there until his retirement in 1954. (Source: [417382](#); [417391](#); [417397](#))

**Willis Richardson** was born in Strathmore, Alberta, in 1913. He grew up and laboured on farms and ranches until 1940, when he made his first trip as a CPR sleeping car porter, running out of its Calgary Division. Richardson took great pride in his position, recognizing the benefits of steady employment and the status it accorded him within his community. He remained a rank-and-file BSCP member throughout his thirty-five-year tenure, helping to grieve and improve unfair labour conditions. (Source: [417389](#))

**Thomas Lawrence Williams** was born in Oklahoma in 1906. He came to Canada with his family four years later, settling in Battleford, Saskatchewan. Building rail lines for the GTR enabled his father to purchase a homestead in 1912; the family stayed there until his death in 1924. Like his father, Williams tapped ties to build a freight line for the CPR north of Battleford before he obtained a job, working summers as a sleeping car porter with the company in 1931. He did not gain full-time employment until after the difficult years of the Depression. (Source: [417401](#))

**Roy Williams** was born in 1903 in Waco, Texas. His large family, which included twelve children, immigrated to Canada in stages. Williams himself came in 1910 as part of the Black Migration movement, settling with his family members in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, before moving to a homestead in Hillside. Seasonal jobs in construction and farming occupied his youth until the job crisis caused by the Depression led him to Winnipeg in 1936 to work as a sleeping car porter for the CPR. One year later, the company transferred Williams to Calgary, where he remained on the job 32 more years. Williams played an integral role in organizing the BSCP in Calgary and later served as Secretary-Treasurer of the union local for sixteen years. His wife, Cordie Williams, was also involved in the union movement, through her participation in the BSCP Ladies' Auxiliary. (Source: [417402](#) [part 1]; [417389](#) [part 2])

\*There is not enough information in the interview conducted with **Philip** to create a biography about him. (Source: [417379](#) [part 2])

### **Scholars, Storytellers, and Community Knowledge Keepers**

**Cheryl Foggo** is an award-winning Black Canadian storyteller who was awarded the Alberta Order of Excellence in 2022. She is an author, documentary film director, screenwriter and playwright whose work focuses on Black history, with a particular emphasis on the prairies. Some of her notable works include *Pourin' Down Rain: A Black Woman Claims Her Place in the Canadian West* (finalist for the Alberta Culture Non-Fiction Award); *One Thing That's True* (finalist for the Governor General's Award); and *John Ware Reclaimed* (nominated for the Writer's Guild of Canada Award). Foggo is descended from the Black Migration of 1910, which saw her maternal great-grandparents leave Oklahoma to settle near Maidstone, Alberta. Her grandfather was a porter, as were several of her uncles.

**Dr. Saje Mathieu** is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Minnesota. She holds a joint PhD in History and African American Studies from Yale University and has been a fellow at the Warren Center and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University, the Center for American Studies at the University of Heidelberg, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Her first book, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955*, details the history of African American and West Indian sleeping car porters in Canada and the social, cultural, legal and political impacts of their employment. Dr. Mathieu's current work is focused on the global experiences of Black soldiers during World War I.