

Stumptown Stumper

By Jennifer Anderson
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(news photo) caption: Denorval Unthank was a prominent Portland physician and civic leader. He also was branded a "Communist Party sympathizer," according to a book published this year. Unthank Park on North Shaver Street is named for him. COURTESY OF OREGON historical society

Every Friday in Stumptown Stumper, the Portland Tribune offers a trivia question and answer that helps you boost your Rose City IQ.

Q: Who is the only "Communist Party sympathizer" to have a Portland park named after him?

A: That description comes from Michael Munk, author of "The Portland Red Guide: Sites & Stories of Our Radical Past," published this year.

It describes Denorval Unthank, the Portland physician and civic leader who's known for his work in breaking down racial barriers.

According to Munk's account, Unthank was a special target of Maj. Lawrence A. Milner, "a full-time paid undercover agent" for Gov. Charles Martin in the Oregon National Guard.

When Unthank moved to Portland to practice medicine in 1929 or 1930 (accounts differ), he and his wife were forced to move five times, being harassed out of Westmoreland, Ladd's Addition and other neighborhoods.

On Aug. 20, 1935, Milner apparently accompanied Esther Murphy, wife of Communist leader James Murphy, to meet Unthank in his offices at Southwest Sixth Avenue and Burnside Street to discuss a meeting of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia to be held at what was then called the Colored Elks Temple.

Munk wrote: "Unthank offered to contact black churches and the YMCA to promote the

meeting and said his wife had just returned from Ethiopia and would speak. Milner's report to the Oregon National Guard concludes: 'Unthank is a party sympathizer, as he has various literature in his office and from his statements he is very anxious to promote any work that is sponsored by the party.' "

Unthank earned several distinctions as a civil rights leader, including being the first black member of the City Club of Portland, president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and co-founder of the Portland Urban League.

In 1966, Portland Parks & Recreation named the park at 510 N. Shaver St. after him. The park had been a hangout for criminal elements for many years, until recently when the park made several upgrades including more lighting.

Next week's Stumper: Which two 1940s matinee idols were married to women from Portland?

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