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## New residents revive racial awareness

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Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement that he headed in the 1960s will be commemorated with the national holiday on Monday, but the thoughts of diversity sweeping the Poconos these days with the influx of new residents is nothing new.

Robert Hillman, who heads the Pennsylvania Relations Commission's Monroe County Advisory Council and the first African-American graduate of what is now East Stroudsburg High School-South, points out that the area has a deep heritage that many will pay tribute to next month during Black History Month. There are many black organizations in the area looking to preserve the black history of the area and to press for initiatives for blacks in the area, such as the NAACP's Monroe chapter, the African-American Network and the recently formed We the People and Pocono Mountains Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club.

The Buffalo Soldiers were separate units of African-American troops formed by the U.S. Army after the Civil War to pursue outlaws and fight Native Americans deemed as hostile on the Western frontier. The Native Americans called them "buffalo soldiers" because their hair and facial features resembled those of the buffalo.

Today, the club bearing the same name has branches across the nation and seeks to keep the memory of the Buffalo Soldiers alive with motorcycle rides and other community events.

Ron Yates, president of the Monroe Chapter of the NAACP, said his and other organizations have been working with the Latino organizations "because we share the same struggles and face the same challenges. In my opinion, we still have a long way to go. We made some steps in the right direction in the 1960s into the early 1970s when men, women, people of all races demanded equality. But then they splintered into coalitions and became more divided instead of united."

Yates said he is participating in a program at East Stroudsburg University on Feb. 16 titled "Africans in the Diaspora" and "Afro-Latino Relations."

Yates feels race relations deteriorated in America after 9/11, particularly because "the media created an environment of fear."

"After 9/11, there has been so much fear in the American psyche and so much hatred and acts of hatred that are on the rise again and then the government's response to it," said Yates, who also pointed out that "our civil liberties are being infringed on by the government. Dr. King tried to warn us of that. His message needs to be re-examined."

That is happening at the Atlanta History Center where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s papers will go on display Monday.

You can only understand what's happening in the present if you learn the history and, in an interesting discussion with Hillman, this corner learned that mass migration of diverse peoples to the area is nothing new. There actually can be considered as many as four waves of migrations to the area of people of different races.

The Dutch settlers driven out of New York about 300 years ago migrated to what is now Middle Smithfield. The black slaves who served only for part of their lifetimes, moved to Stroudsburg when they were freed. But when they died, they had to be buried across the Delaware River in Canfield's Farm rather than the area cemeteries where the whites were buried.

Around the time of the Civil War in the late 1800s, many came to the area from the South. The building that currently houses the Pocono Indian Museum has a sign outside identifying itself as what is believed to be a part of the Underground Railroad of slaves going to Canada.

Hillman said it is believed another local Underground Railroad stopover is the Stroudsburg Little Bethel AME Church, of which he is a member of its historical association looking to restore it as a library and education center for African-American culture. The church was built on Third Street in 1868, 13 years after it opened across the street as a log cabin. "It really needs a lot of work and is estimated to cost \$500,000," said Hillman, who added the organization is working bit by bit toward that goal, having replaced the roof and working on the exterior.

The third wave came in the 1950s. When the Army Depot relocated from Baltimore to Tobyhanna, many black employees moved North with it. And with their well paying jobs in electronics, they wanted to buy houses. Hillman's parents both worked with the Army Depot and were part of that large group of blacks who came to the area in the mid 1950s. A few years later in 1959, the NAACP Monroe chapter opened.

Around that time, Hillman points out, blacks made up .8 percent of the Monroe County population. He said it is around 9 percent today.

But many black families fanned out to other areas of the Poconos around that time when the devastating flood of 1955 destroyed many of their homes and left them discouraged to rebuild. The Little Bethel AME Church also was badly damaged but was repaired.

Hillman recalls how his father in 1957 wanted to buy a house on North Courtland Street in East Stroudsburg from a Jewish family that worked in the furrier business.

"The man was crying when he said he could not do it and my father was crying when he heard the news because people said they would boycott his business if a black family moved to the area," said Hillman, who was in his early teens at the time. "It was before the civil rights movement and it was devastating when they found out the threats and evilness of people who didn't know us."

Eventually, the Hillmans bought their home.

"Things changed over a period of time with people finding out who we are," said Hillman. "It was not that we were 'colored' but that the Hillman family was part of the community. It took time and a lot of dialogue. Once some black people were known, they became anchors of the community."

One person who has done that is Al Wilson, an African-American who heads the Pocono Homeowners Defense Association.

The civil rights movement changed laws to better protect minorities and Hillman said it has enhanced the newest wave of newcomers, some of them black.

"Now with civil rights laws, people feel they have the right to come and live here; they come in empowered," said Hillman. "The Poconos is a great place to live and with great people. The only way to know that is to know

people who are here and to overcome perceptions of people here.

"Some of the highest paid people here are blacks and Latinos who have a college education and good jobs in New York and they are building houses to bring families to an area that is safer, a quiet area and the American dream. And now, local people are forced to deal with diversity because they never had to deal with it before."

Hillman has done his part in that respect in his appointed position, working closely with the state police, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Attorney General's office in Harrisburg. But there are times when he feels other people, both black and white, have to break down division from negative perceptions and unite as one community.

Some have worked toward that goal. Buffalo Soldiers gave a \$500 donation last month to the Pocono Medical Center for diabetes treatment and education.

It was made in the memory of a daughter of a member of the Buffalo Soldiers living in Bushkill. The girl — Ana Lee Jimenez — was a member of a juvenile diabetic support group in New York City who had died from injuries from a motorcycle accident in New Jersey.

Eugenia Craig of the African-American Network that began in 1995, said race relations "always has been a concern. Just when you think it's stabilized, something always comes up."

Craig said a theater group will perform "Kiladelphia," which she calls a "reality play" at East Stroudsburg University's Keystone Room on Feb. 17. Call 570 588-5065 for ticket information.

"We have problems and we need to start communicating and to have a dialogue to get to understand each other," said Hillman. "It's all part of the diversity here and we don't understand each other. Hopefully in Black History Month, we can have that dialogue to understand each other.

"That's one of the things we'll be doing once the Little Bethel church is restored," he said.

An open dialogue is the first step to open hearts and minds.