

PREFACE

I MUST NOT FORGET

“My grandfather told me he didn’t know that being a black man was a problem until he moved to San Francisco.”

–Mark Lasartemay

Mark Lasartemay was his grandparents’ caretaker in their later lives. Mark was closer to his grandfather than to his own parents and learned the ways of the world from him. Their conversations yielded aphorisms that became enduring beacons for Mark: “Say hello to everyone to dispel tension,” “Treat others how they expect you to treat them,” “Never ever be late,” and “Above all, keep your word and your integrity.” Mark lovingly lauded his grandfather Eugene Lasartemay as “one of the smartest and most dedicated men I have known in my entire life.”

Born and raised in Kauai, Hawaii, Eugene Lasartemay came to California in the 1920s and began a career as an automobile painter. Not entirely satisfied with this work, he jumped at the opportunity to work on a ship headed for Panama. For more than a decade, Lasartemay traveled the seas, visiting global ports of call. In 1932, Lasartemay became the first black licensed marine engineer to sail from the port of San Francisco. Poignant journals, filled with postcards and his own black-and-white photos, reveal Lasartemay’s passion for documentation.

In 1946, Eugene Lasartemay, along with his wife and several other members of their Beth Eden Baptist Church community, began to collect oral histories, photos and ephemera that documented the lives of African Americans in Oakland and around the Bay Area. Successful in their efforts, they amassed so much material that they literally “had the history of Beth Eden under our bed.” After retiring from his decades-long position with Colgate Palmolive, Mr. Lasartemay embarked on a second and even more meaningful career. In 1965, his church group was formalized as the East Bay Negro Historical Society (EBNHS), an organization that he shepherded for the next 30 years.

Moving their collections out from under their beds and into the public eye was essential. In 1970, the EBNHS rented the first of two storefront properties on Grove Street (now Martin

Luther King Jr. Way). Their museum was open several days a week, and the Lasartemays welcomed school groups to showcase “our history [that has been] purposely omitted.” In 1982, the East Bay Negro Historical Society was invited to bring their museum and programming to the Golden Gate Library. This was their central location for nearly a decade. After the EBNHS became the Northern California Center for Afro-American History & Life, the organization worked with the city to find a permanent home. In 2002, their wish became reality: joining with the city, the organization opened as the African American Museum and Library at Oakland in the Charles Greene Library. This elegant Carnegie-endowed building was the site of Oakland’s second main library from 1902 to 1951.

Since the passing of his grandparents in the mid-1990s, Mark has been the guardian of his family’s vast archives, boxes brimming with journals, photo albums, books, awards, plaques and documents. Eugene and Ruth Lasartemay’s penchant for collecting permeated their personal lives. Eugene Lasartemay, an avid photographer, diligently documented family gatherings, their home through the seasons and many vacations, as well as EBNHS events. I am honored that Mark has trusted me to explore these materials with him and agreed to share the following invaluable documents from a most meticulous and stalwart man.

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