

Sign My Name to Freedom

In Betty Reid Soskin's 96 years of living, she has been a witness to a grand sweep of American history. When she was born in 1921, the lynching of African-Americans was a national disgrace, minstrel shows were the most popular American form of entertainment, women were looked at suspiciously by many for exercising their right to vote, and most African-Americans in the Deep South could not vote at all.

From her great-grandmother, who had been enslaved until she was in her mid-20s, Betty heard stories of slavery and the difficult times for Black Folk that immediately followed. In her lifetime, Betty has seen the nation begin to break down its race and gender biases, watched it nearly split apart in the upheavals of the civil rights and Black Power eras, and, finally, lived long enough to witness both the election of an African-American president and the re-emergence of a militant, racist far right.

But far more than being merely a witness, Betty Reid Soskin has been an active participant with so many other Americans in shaping the country as we know it now. The child of Louisiana Creole parents who refused to bow down to Southern discrimination, she was raised in the Black Bay Area community before the great westward migration of World War II. After working in the civilian homefront effort in the war years, she and her husband, Mel Reid, helped break down racial boundaries by moving into a white community east of the Oakland hills. There she raised four children—one openly gay, one developmentally disabled—while working to end the prejudices against the family that existed among many of her neighbors.

With Mel, she opened up one of the first Bay Area record stores in Berkeley both owned by African-Americans and dedicated to

the distribution of African-American music. Her community organizing activities eventually led her to work as a state legislative aid, helping to plan the innovative Rosie the Riveter National Park in Richmond, California, then to a “second” career at the Rosie Park as the oldest park ranger in the history of the National Park Service. In between, she used her talents as a singer and songwriter to interpret and chronicle the great social upheavals that marked the 1960s.

In 2003, Betty displayed a new talent, writing, when she created the popular blog CBreaux Speaks. Now followed by thousands, her blog is a collection of Betty’s sometimes fierce, sometimes gently persuasive, but always brightly honest story that weaves both the wisdom of the ages and the fresh enthusiasm of an always youthful mind into her long journey through an American and African-American life, as well as America’s long struggle to both understand and cleanse its soul.