

Living without civil rights

■ **OAKLAND:** Black retirees weave tales about growing up without equality

By Linda Davis
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A sparse but engaged audience listened Wednesday to the personal stories of two black retirees in a special program, "Civil Rights Tales," presented by Stagebridge Senior Theater Company at the Village Theatre.

The Oakland-based Stagebridge troupe presents musical revues, storytelling, improvisation, singing and acting workshops. The idea behind Stagebridge is to present intergenerational activities, where students and young people can learn the experiences of an older generation, spokeswoman Maryann Maslan said.

Jane Couch, a retired Oakland teacher, spoke of her experiences growing up in a small all-black Texas town originally settled by former slaves.

"I learned to be independent at an early age. I was the oldest of 11 children," Couch said. "We couldn't wait to get out and experience life in another way."

"Nobody could afford a TV set, and the news on the radio was pretty limited about what was going on outside our town."

Couch, now in her 50s, recalled that, with civil rights laws fresh on the books, she was still not allowed to sit and eat at a dime store lunch counter. She talked about a close friend who was beaten by her husband in the 1970s when he discovered she had African-American heritage.

"There were many light-skinned blacks that passed for white, but many of them had to sever all the ties with their family to keep the secret," Couch said.

Andy Montgomery, 83, called the little all-black town he grew up in — Boley, Okla. — "a coon." Civil rights was an unknown concept when Montgomery was a boy.

"We knew to sit in the back of the bus, and not dare walk into places we were not allowed," he



SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/TIMES

"**CIVIL RIGHTS** was the most powerful movement this country has ever seen," says Andy Montgomery, in a Stagebridge Players presentation of "Civil Rights Tales" at the Village Theatre on Wednesday in Danville.

IF YOU GO

- **WHO:** Stagebridge Players
- **WHAT:** "Civil Rights Tales"
- **WHERE:** Barnes & Noble in Oakland's Jack London Square
- **WHEN:** Feb. 19 at 2 p.m.
- **HOW MUCH:** Free
- **CONTACT:** 510-444-4755 or go to www.stagebridge.org

said quietly.

Things improved some when Montgomery came west to work in the Richmond shipyards during World War II. He served the war effort, but was not drafted because one leg is shorter than the other.

Black workers at the shipyards were housed separately. Slowly, Montgomery saw change as the civil rights movement took hold. He helped rally his relatives to march from San Jose to San Francisco at the height of the movement led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A decade later, Couch was doing sit-ins and attending rallies in college.

"Never let your voice be silent about these things," Montgomery said. "Civil rights was the most powerful movement this country has ever seen."

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