

HIS LIFE'S A SNAPSHOT OF BLACK HISTORY

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Richard Breland and I sit and talk in Panasci Lounge of Syracuse University's Schine Stu-

dent Center the other day.

We're surrounded by Richard's pictures and pictures of Richard. Our man is the subject of an exhibit of some 49 prints called "Black Syracuse and Beyond." It's at 303 University Place at SU until March 3.

I get him to admit he's a historian of Syracuse's black community. "I guess I was an historian and didn't know it," he says, looking back on a life of 79 years and hundreds of images. He bought his first camera, a Brownie, when he was 9 and has been taking pictures "off and on," including videos, ever since.

His own notion of why he started taking pictures was because he saw them as "remembrances," a way of preserving his recollections of family, friends and neighborhoods.

The Brelands — mom was Ida, his father was Matthew — moved to Syracuse looking for jobs when Rich, as he is called, was 2 years old. Back then, the family lived in an enclave of African-American families, lots of them from the South, along Washington Street. The Brelands were from Orange County, N.C.

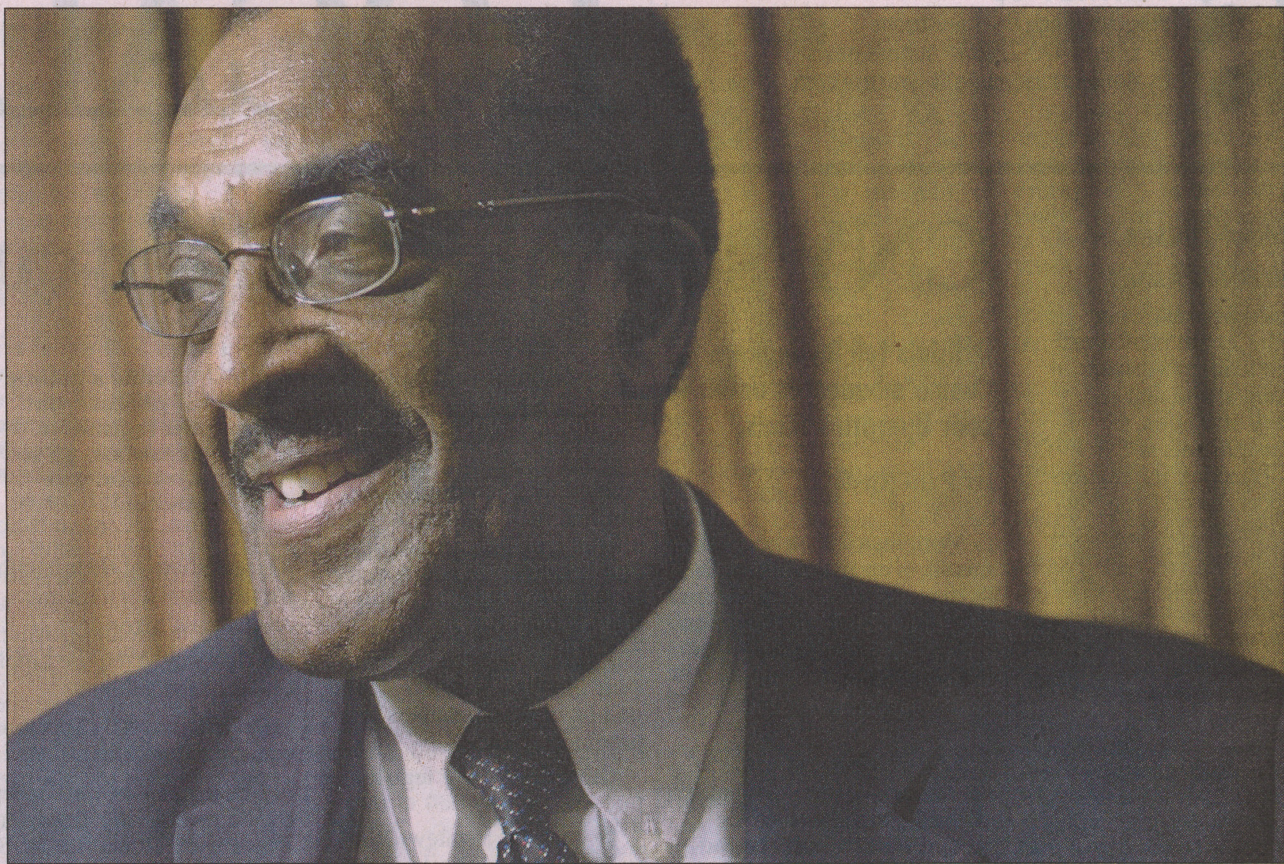
The Breland place, a multi-family home, was at the corner of Walnut, close by the Continental Can factory and the main line of the New York Central Railroad, which cut the city in half, the way Interstate 81 does today.

Rich has vivid memories of growing up in The Ward — he calls it a "vast experience" — including the images of west-bound trains coming out of a tunnel on Washington Street, which were downright scary. "That white beam of light on the engine, all that steam . . . what a sight," he's says.

In 1936, the city elevated the tracks, so they ran through Syracuse without street crossings. Those tracks were replaced by I-690.

This current presentation of Rich's collection — he says it numbers hundreds of prints — stems from a program involving several agencies to pre-

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Li-Hua Lan / The Post-Standard

RICHARD BRELAND, considered a historian of Syracuse's black community, is the subject of the exhibit "Black Syracuse and Beyond," which is on display at Syracuse University's Schine Student Center until March 3.

Rich Watched Ward Fall Apart

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serve the photographs, documents and memories of area residents. His sponsor for the Schine exhibit is SU's department of African-American studies, particularly Joan L. Bryant, associate professor in the department, who joined us in the lounge.

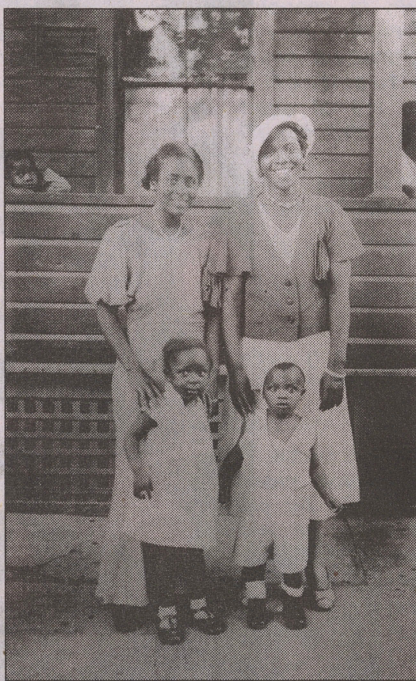
There's a related exhibit of materials from the neighborhood at the Onondaga Historical Association museum downtown (311 Montgomery St.). It's called "Community Collections" and draws on oral histories and documents produced by the Black History Preservation Project. The show closes April 30.

Rich was there to watch the 15th Ward fall apart, through old age, urban renewal and construction of I-81 overhead. His family moved from 418 E. Adams St. to Pioneer Homes, an apartment complex that survived the changes going on around it. One of his housemates at Adams Street was a local photographer, Marjory Wilkins, and her family. Rich says he learned a lot from Marjory and admires her photography skills.

The house backed up to the Dunbar Center back then, Rich explains. Dunbar became his second home, where he joined the glee club and the drum and bugle corps and played basketball, sometimes against his brother, Manny, who went on to become an SU star and school district coach and administrator.

"I played all the instruments," he says of his bugle corps days, "but none of them well. Later, I got to be drum major."

Rich also made friends at the Boys' Club on East Genesee Street, guys he still hangs out with, including Clar-



Courtesy of Beauchamp Branch Library, Syracuse

RICHARD BRELAND (front right) stands in front of his mother, Ida Breland, and Ida Cross (left) and her daughter, Viola Cross, in 1932.

ence "Junie" Dunham, the former county legislator. He often attends Junie's "Que" reunions of 15th Ward pals (he has footage of most of them on cassette) and owns fond memories of the rich mixture of neighbors in that voting district: "Italians, Poles, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, Jews and blacks" all together in a usually harmonious urban melting pot.

The Breland family had nine children and not much money to buy film and pay for processing. Rich recalls having to save up to cover his hobby. He now shoots with a digital camera.

The family tree is a crowded one, lined with plenty of cousins, aunts and uncles. When they gather for a family reunion in Orange County, Rich expects between 200 and 300 kinsmen to show up.

Rich went to Central High School and was drafted into the Army during the Korean War era. He trained in Germany and England. Later, he worked for General Electric as a clerk and retired in 1991 after 35 years on the job.

He's also been a neighborhood activist, serving on the board of the Neighborhood Watch groups and as board president for Syracuse United Neighbors (SUN). He led efforts in Syracuse to force landlords to fix up their properties and pushed banks to invest in poorer neighborhoods. Rich gathered national attention for his involvement with OnBank in 1992 when the lender at first turned down his request to refinance his mortgage.

Rich may be best known in our town as the man with the gentle voice and bright smile who takes our tickets at Regal movie houses. He started at the theaters part time back in 1988.

It's a demanding job for a man of his age (sometimes 12-hour shifts), but Rich says he loves meeting the people who are about to enter those darkened boxes for two hours. He started at the old Fayetteville Mall and trained to be an all-around greeter, usher, ticket seller and concession clerk. He's now at ShoppingTown.

When he's not on duty, he's missed by customers, who ask, "Where's Rich?" A patron recently told him "the only reason she came to this theater was because I'm there. If I wasn't, she said she wouldn't come."

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