

The history of The Swindall Tourist Inn, a boarding house for black tourists in Phoenix

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG>

KAILA: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions *you* ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

KAILA: Today, we're talking about a piece of Arizona history I'm going to bet you haven't heard before.

Doug Kupel, historian: It's kind of a hidden history sort of thing.

KAILA: We're digging into a local property. It's called The Swindall House, or, The Swindall Tourist Inn. The question comes from...

Laura Woodland: I'm Laura Woodland, and I live in downtown Phoenix. Every day I drive down Washington and I pass this really cool looking house. And, you know, I'm kind of nosy. So one day I decided to look up different houses in the Garfield neighborhood and the history of it. And I saw this one and I saw that it was the Swindall house or the Swindall Tourist Inn.

KAILA: The Swindall House was one of the *only* boarding houses for black people traveling to and through Phoenix during the 1900s.

Booker T. Evans: Historically, it was a segregated city. ... It was pretty clear from signage and things like that that that blacks, Hispanics, certain Asians, others weren't welcome at the hotels, motels

KAILA: Producer Taylor Seely has worked for two months tracking down knowledgeable sources, and let me tell you - this history of this building was difficult to piece together. But we are so excited to finally share it.

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG fades out>

TAYLOR: The story of the Swindall house starts in 1913.

old-time, acoustic music

TAYLOR: That year, a widowed woman named Matilda Steyaert - originally from Belgium - purchased a lot at 1021 East Washington Street. And with the help of her six sons who worked in trades like engineering and carpentry, they built a home with enough rooms for all of them.

But by 1920, her sons were starting to move out of the house. They were getting married and leaving the nest.

Doug Kupel, historian: She started to take in boarders eventually. And that was common for a widow ladies in Phoenix and other places to take in boarders.

TAYLOR: That's Doug Kupel, a historian who would later write the nomination to put The Swindall House on The National Register of Historic Places. We'll get to that part of the story later, but for now, let's go back to 1920.

Doug Kupel, historian: As it turned out, where this house was on Washington Street emerged as an African-American neighborhood.

TAYLOR: From 1910 to 1920, the population of black people in Phoenix increased by 227%. And because of segregation, there weren't many places where people of color could stay when they traveled or moved here.

Doug Kupel, historian: So it kind of developed around her. And then she began taking in African-American boarders.

TAYLOR: Matilda Steyaert didn't advertise her home in newspapers - for example *Phoenix Index* was a black newspaper that other tourist inns used to get the word out. But because discrimination was rampant, word of her boarding home spread quickly among people of color. And her house became a go-to spot for travelers.

music fades out

TAYLOR: But don't forget. The house today is known as The Swindall House. So how'd it get that name? This is the second chapter in the history of the Swindall House. The chapter where the home really cements itself in the history of black people in Arizona.

musical sting

TAYLOR: In 1938, Matilda's health took a turn for the worst. She gave the home to two of her sons before passing away. But her sons didn't really want to keep running the boarding home. So they sold it to a black family: Golden and Elvira Swindall.

Doug Kupel, historian: They were churchgoing folks and so involved in the church...

churchbell sound effects

TAYLOR: Mr. Swindall, AKA Golden, worked as a custodian and Deacon. And his wife, Elvira, was a deaconess. They decided to continue running the boarding home.

Doug Kupel, historian: Yeah, I would imagine, you know, it was a pretty good portion of their income, renting out rooms to visitors, African-American visitors in Phoenix.

TAYLOR: The boarding house was successful enough that the Swindalls saw fit to expand. In 1950, they added a second story to the house, and with it, six more bedrooms.

Doug Kupel, historian: There were three rooms on the ground floor which were rented and then there were another six rooms on the second floor that were rented. So, you know, altogether that's nine rooms in there. So, it could accommodate a lot of folks.

TAYLOR: So, you could kind of guess that the service the Swindall House provided was in high demand. Which makes sense when you think about the era.

Jazz music

TAYLOR: A lot was changing when it came to U.S. race relations. World War II and the aftermath brought an influx of black soldiers and their families to Phoenix for training.

TAYLOR: But segregation didn't dissipate after the war. It wasn't until 1954 that the Supreme Court desegregated public schools in the Brown versus Board of Education court ruling.

Lbj-the-last-interview: Until justice is blind to color, until all education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of man's skin, emancipation will be a proclamation. But emancipation will not be a fact.

TAYLOR: By 1956, the black students of George Washington Carver High School in Phoenix began integrating the schools formerly intended for white students only.

Lbj-the-last-interview: We have proved that great progress is possible.

TAYLOR: Another pivotal moment came with the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

LBJ Interview Documentary: 1964, the act which prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and strengthened school discrimination and fair employment...

Lyndon B. Johnson Speech: Every American citizen must have equal right to vote. *claps*

TAYLOR: But even with these advancements, people of color still faced unfair treatment.

Doug Kupel, historian: You know, history isn't that cut and dry. It takes time for things to evolve. And so even though these practices were ending, they didn't end overnight.

Lyndon B. Johnson Speech: To be black in a white society is not to stand on level and equal ground.

end music

TAYLOR: As black people's struggle for equal treatment continued, they would rely on tools like the Green Book to find safe places to eat, shop and stay overnight.

Doug Kupel, historian: So there was a special guidebook for African-Americans called the Green Book, and it would let African-American travelers know what hotels they could stay at, where they'd be. Welcome. Boarding houses such as this one, uh restaurants, that kind of thing, where they be welcomed and accepted so that they didn't have any conflict when they were traveling.

TAYLOR: I found The Swindall Tourist Inn listed for the first time in the Green Book in 1948. Rumor has it actually, a few famous black people stayed at the Inn, like Count Basie the jazz pianist, and even Jackie Robinson. Maybe that's how they found it.

Doug Kupel, historian: And so, you know, we think about sports figures and we think about Jackie Robinson, you know, integrating baseball in 1948.

The Jackie Robinson Story: Where you going, black boy? We're the welcoming committee. // You'd better get out of here // No, Jackie. // Go on, it just makes it tougher having you here. // We want to have a talk with you. We don't want you in this town, see.

TAYLOR: That last clip you just heard was from The Jackie Robinson Story, a movie from 1950 starring Jackie Robinson himself. It depicted what life was like for him as he traveled the country as the first black player for Major League Baseball.

TAYLOR: I can't 100% verify if Jackie Robinson stayed at The Swindall House. In more recent history, people have tried to track down a guest list from the home's early history but nothing's been found. I can verify, however, that The Swindall House meant a lot to the people who counted on it.

Piano music

TAYLOR: In 1989 and 1990, Elvira and Golden Swindall died. The house fell into disrepair after that. It wasn't until 1992, that a group of people took interest in it.

Booker T. Evans: My name is Booker T. Evans.

TAYLOR: Booker T. Evans is a lawyer and longtime member of the Desert Mashie Golf Club. The golf club formed in the late 1940s by a few black professionals who played together at Encanto Golf course.

Booker T. Evans: Encanto was the only golf course that African-Americans could play on.

TAYLOR: I should say quickly that Desert Mashie Golf Club is open to people of all races -- today and historically. But it started as a sort of rare, safe place for people of color to come together and golf. And in 1992, Booker and his friends from the club decided to put up the money to buy the Swindall House. **Fade out slowly, quietly the piano music*

Booker T. Evans: The Swindall House was kind of a haven for people who were traveling or who were moving here. So it was, it was a very natural connection.

TAYLOR: Some of the other members who joined with Booker in the purchase were two men who had actually lived there in the '60s.

Booker T. Evans: Walker Matthews and Nathaniel Hornbuckle. They were the first and second black engineers hired ever hired by Motorola anywhere in the country. So they assigned them here. And when they got here, they lived at Swindall House till they could find some other place to live.

TAYLOR: If you listened to our episode on redlining, you know about the housing discrimination people of color faced. The Swindall House was a safe haven not only for tourists, but for people like Walker and Nathaniel, who moved here for their careers and struggled to purchase homes.

TAYLOR: In fact it was Walker and Nathaniel's idea to buy it. They wanted to convert it into a clubhouse for kids in the neighborhood to use. So... they bought it on July 21st, 1993. They also hired Doug Kupel, the historian from earlier, to write the nomination for the house to be on the National Register of Historic Places. It earned its historic status July 12th, 1995.

Booker T. Evans: I think the thought was that that it was so much a part of the history of black people in the city that it deserved the historical designation.

TAYLOR: Then they got to renovating. I came across several articles from the Arizona Republic archives documenting the revitalization of the house. One article headline read: "Tribute to black

heritage, golf to be showcased in historic inn.” But ... unfortunately for the golf club, something they didn’t expect happened.

melancholy music

Booker T. Evans: So but we kept working on that. Kept working on the house and I got the house into into really good shape. But by the time they did the neighborhood had changed. There was a development going on everywhere. And there were few, if any, kids in the neighborhood anymore.

TAYLOR: Basically, the house just didn’t serve a purpose for anyone once it was actually usable. And eventually, the Desert Mashie Golf Club decided to sell it. That brings us to Chapter Three in the Swindall House history.

melancholy music fades out

Lance Meilech: You know, if these walls could talk until the stories of those days when they were here, how they were overcoming and their plans and excitement of doing away with racism and discrimination, those would have been very, very interesting times.

TAYLOR: That’s Lance Meilech.

Lance Meilech: And I'm the owner of the Swindall House.

TAYLOR: Lance had owned the home next door and befriended the man who was in charge of coordinating the sale of the Swindall Home: Lincoln Ragsdale Junior. If his name sounds familiar to you, it’s likely because his father Lincoln Ragsdale Senior was a well-known civil rights pioneer in Phoenix.

Lance Meilech: My background is I'm a South African and had the experience of living under apartheid and was quite similar with the racism and discrimination. So it was fascinating for me to be able to preserve this property and to put it to use.

TAYLOR: Lance leases out the many rooms of the Swindall House as office space. And he said to preserve the history of the building, he’s largely kept the layout the same. There’s still the same fireplace, there’s still the same kitchen. It’s just been cleaned up. But here’s a cool tidbit: Lance told me the home has a crawl space and basement, and in that basement, he’s found old, historical items.

Lance Meilech: We've managed to uncover coins and also little bottles that I've kept that is indeed a component of the history of this building.

TAYLOR: Because the Swindall Home is on the national register of historic places, the exterior will never change shape. You can view pictures of it at P H X offices dot com. On that website, you can also see the plaque designating it historic. Lance said he thinks he's done everything in his power to preserve the integrity of the home.

Lance Meilech: There's nothing more that I'm aware of that could be done to preserve this building more than what has been done. I've taken every possible step that I could to optimize the history and keep it as is.

TAYLOR: And as for the Swindall House's legacy? That brings us to the fourth and final chapter.

*Poignant music

TAYLOR: Booker T. Evans from Desert Mashie told me when the club sold the house, they put the money from the sale into a trust and started a scholarship to help kids associated with the golf club attend college. After that was established, the club didn't really think about the house anymore.

Booker T. Evans: And it's always been like for me, a transaction review and paperwork and things like that.

TAYLOR: I asked Booker how he thinks people should remember the Swindall House going forward.

Booker T. Evans: Our society treats the history of minority groups in this country. If you just look at how we don't teach black history as an interwoven part of the history of the country, which it is. We set aside this month and this year and we say, well, this is Black History Month or this is Women's History Month or this is. It should be... It's, it's integrated.

TAYLOR: He said he thinks about how people forget so many important stories from the past.

Booker T. Evans: It needs to be preserved because you think about you, you you think about how people forget what happened. ... So the young people, a community, don't know as they walk past that place or drive past that place. ... You don't know that once. That was the only

place in town of a black person could rent a room. You don't know that.

fade out music

TAYLOR: Then Booker came up with an idea. **cue optimistic music** Remember the scholarships Desert Mashie golf club started out of the sale of the Swindall House?... He said he wanted to propose naming one of the scholarships after the Swindall home.

Booker T. Evans: And the Swindall House is very deep and nobody knows. So unless we, unless we keep it alive by, you know, having a scholarship named for it or something, where periodically you talk to someone about it, it goes away. So it loses its meaning, loses its connection to those of us who didn't have to live there.

Taylor Seely: So what I'm hearing is maybe this scholarship will be named the Swindall House scholarship.

Booker T. Evans: I'm thinking, yeah, maybe we'll name it that. Yeah, we give enough of them so we could easily do that. And that would be that would be a really nice thing to do.

musical interlude

TAYLOR: The Swindall House is old. It's been through many different phases. And there are probably great stories from the people who stayed there that will never get told. - As Lance said, if those walls could talk! But at the very least, I'm comforted by the fact that The Swindall House is registered as a national historic property. I'm comforted that its history might live on through a scholarship in its name. And I'm comforted that all of you who are listening right now know a little more than you did before. And I would encourage you to keep sharing the story. I hope if any listeners out there know someone who knows someone who knows something about this house, they'll share it with me. I hope we get more questions like this from listeners. Questions that aren't easy to answer but that lead us to uncover history that is important to be told.

music fades out

theme music fades in

KAILA: Well that's it for this week. Thanks so much for listening to Valley 101. We hope we can be a fun outlet, a nice little audio escape for you and your family. Please leave us a review and tell a friend about our show. Thanks again. See you next week.

theme music fades out