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## Wanted: African-American stories for Smithsonian exhibit

### Airstream booth rolls into Oakland to record, preserve life experiences

By Annalee Allen

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**OAKLAND** - Executive director Holly Alonso, with Friends of Peralta Hacienda Historical Park, is excited to be hosting field recordings for **StoryCorps Griot**, a year-long initiative to gather and preserve the life stories of African Americans living in the Oakland area.

As reported this week, the ambitious story gathering project is the largest oral history project of its kind since 2,300 former slaves were interviewed during the Great Depression as part of the WPA's Federal Writers Project. It has come to Oakland now for a six-week stint. A mobile recording studio dubbed "The Griot StoryBooth," contained in a shiny Airstream trailer, will be parked at Frank Ogawa Plaza for the duration. However, field recordings off site are also planned, at the African American Museum and Library of Oakland, 659 14th St., and at the Peralta park, 2465 34th Ave., in Oakland's Fruitvale District.

"Griot is the word for a West African poet, or traveling storyteller," says Alonso. "We are very pleased to be selected as one of the field locations for this exciting project, especially because Peralta Hacienda Historical Park is really the birthplace of Oakland, as well as a site of human

habitation dating back many hundreds of years."

Interviewers will be at Peralta Park on Aug. 19 and again on Aug. 26, 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and on Sept. 14, 1 to 8 p.m., according to Alonso. It is necessary to make an appointment for one of the 40-minute slots, she adds, and times are filling up.

"However, we definitely encourage folks to call us, and if we cannot accommodate them, we will refer them to the other locations," she says.

The Griot initiative is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in association with the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) which will eventually open once its Smithsonian building complex is completed in Washington, D.C., says John W. Franklin, who was on hand last week for the project kick off.

The Airstream story booth rolled out in February for its year-long road trip around America. The goal is to collect interviews from at least 1,750 African Americans. World War II veterans' stories, and men and women involved in the Civil Rights struggle will be particularly sought for the project.

As part of the February launch, members of the Congressional Black Caucus stepped in the booth for their personal recordings before the initiative crew, headed by senior coordinator Jennifer Carr, continued to Atlanta. The story booth's final stop will be in Montgomery, Ala.

"We knew our work would not be complete if we did not include Oakland on our tour," said Carr, at this week's press event.

In each of the city tour stops, the StoryCorps project has been partnering with local radio stations, as well as historically black colleges and universities and other cultural institutions to record the stories of African Americans, said Carr.

Matt Martin, general manager of radio station KALW-FM, also was present at the press event, to lend his enthusiastic support. "We are committed to airing the Oakland stories as they are collected over the next six weeks," Martin said.

According to Holly Alonzo, the Peralta Hacienda Historical Park preserves the legacy of the 44,800-acre Peralta rancho that once covered nearly all of present-day Alameda County. Last

year the park celebrated the completion of Phase I of the master plan on what is now a six-acre park near Sausal Creek. Alonzo's friends of the park nonprofit group works in collaboration with the city's public works agency to carry out the master plan vision, designed by landscape architect Mario Schjetnan of Mexico.

The park is listed on the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail as well as the National Register of Historic Places. It offers ongoing programs, exhibits and educational activities, as part of its mission to celebrate the diversity of Alameda County.

As a youth, according to the history files, Don Luis Peralta made the difficult journey from Mexico to Alta California with his family, part of the de Anza 1776 expedition of 240 men, women and children colonists. The files record that among those traveling, a number in the group were of African descent. Seen in that light, says Alonzo, blacks were in the first wave of settlers to California in the 18th century, a story that needs to be told to a wider audience.

To schedule an interview at the Peralta Hacienda, call 532-9142. To get more information on the StoryCorps project, go to <http://www.storycorpsgriot.net>.