Man of Color
The Incredible Life of John Alexander Somerville

When Jamaican-born John Alexander Somerville entered the USC School of Dentistry in 1903, his ambition was to train himself for a profession and return to his homeland. But after graduating first in his class and marrying a bright, outgoing USC undergraduate named Vada Watson, he turned his considerable energy and intelligence to improving life in Los Angeles' black community. And in doing so, he helped shape the history of his adopted city.

by Sarah Lifton

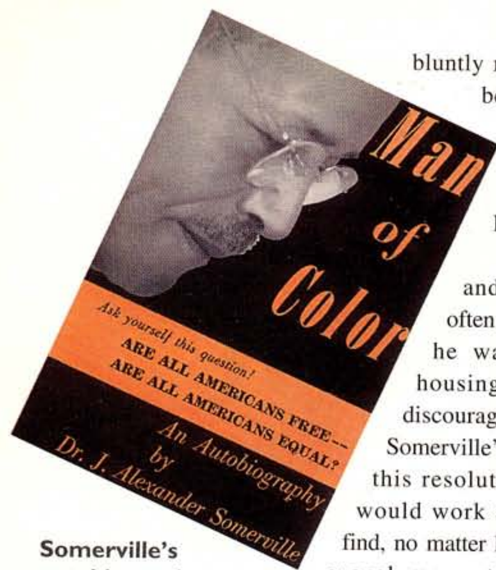
It was just a Chamber of Commerce brochure like countless others from the year 1902: A small, idyllic town was pictured amid groves of orange trees, against a backdrop of majestic snow-capped mountains.

But to the young, homesick Jamaican man thumbing through its pages while sitting in his seedy rooming house, its lure was irresistible. After two weeks in San Francisco, he was almost out of money, and he knew it was time to move on. Redlands, the small Southern California town depicted in the brochure, seemed close in climate and spirit to the tropical paradise where he had spent the first 20 years of his life.

There had been little in John Alexander Somerville's background to prepare him for his present predicament. The youngest son in an educated Jamaican family, he grew up in an integrated environment where friendship and opportunity transcended racial and economic lines. Somerville was an excellent student and a voracious reader, and when he was 18, he fully expected to pass the examination that would entitle him to a university scholarship. To his surprise and dismay, however, he did not. Rather than taking the test again the next year, he left school to work as a bookkeeper with an export company. There he met the ship captains whose tales kindled his desire to see the world. For two years he saved what money he could from his salary until finally he had enough for passage to San Francisco.

Accompanied by a boyhood friend, Somerville sailed to Panama, then worked his way to San Francisco as a cabin boy on a Chilean vessel. Although his first glimpse of the Golden Gate thrilled him, a harsh awakening awaited Somerville once he set foot in the city. When he and his friend attempted to order some food in a restaurant, they were told that the establishment did not serve blacks. Somerville was stunned.

"It is hard to express the emotion that arose in my soul at that moment," he later wrote in his autobiography. "The only difference that I had ever noticed between myself and men and women of other racial groups and nationalities was the degree of culture and achievement. In the new land of my choice, I was



Somerville's autobiography, *Man of Color*, was published in 1949.

bluntly made to understand that, because of the pigmentation of my skin, I was denied even the elementary necessities of life – food and shelter."

It was a bitter lesson, and one that was repeated often in the following days, as he was also denied decent housing and employment. But discouragement only strengthened Somerville's determination. "I made this resolution," he wrote, "that I would work at any job that I could find, no matter how menial, until I saved enough money to enter an institution of higher learning to prepare myself for a trade or profession. I wanted to earn a place where I would not have to ask any other fellow for a job."

The career he set his sights on was dentistry. Dentists were scarce in Jamaica; his plan was to earn a dental degree from Howard University and then return to his homeland. First, however, he had to earn money for tuition. This he aimed to do in Redlands. There he found lodging with a black family and work in a bowling alley, where his boss, H.W. Johnstone, took a personal interest in him. Johnstone's wife had a brother teaching at USC's dental school, and when she learned of Somerville's ambition, she promised to make inquiries on his behalf.

After a year and a half, Somerville had saved $250, and he enrolled at USC. On his first day as a university student, however, he caused an uproar. Although the university had issued a declaration in 1885 that "no student would be denied admission because of race, color, religion or sex," Somerville's classmates did not welcome him. The next morning, a meeting of the student body was convened, and Somerville, who had not been invited, was the topic of discussion. His classmates decided they would threaten to resign en masse unless he was dismissed from the university. They presented their ultimatum to the dean, Garrett Newkirk.

Newkirk called Somerville into the meeting, praised his credentials and invited him to address his classmates. Some of them began to snicker. Undaunted, Somerville began, "I would hardly expect to encounter race prejudice and intolerance in an institution of higher learning," he said. "I am here today for the same purpose that you are – to seek an education leading to a profession through which I can minister to human needs. You are conspiring to keep me from that goal, for no other reason than that the color of my face is different from yours.

"Many of you aspire to be leaders in your chosen line," he continued. "In later years, when you achieve your objective and become mature in thought, you may have reason to be ashamed that during your college days you placed a stumbling block in the pathway of one seeking the same opportunity."

Following Somerville's speech, Newkirk informed the assembly that the university intended to provide him with an education, and that any student who objected was free to resign. No one stepped forward.

Although he had to work his way through dental school, Somerville earned the highest grade point average in the Class of 1907, and six months before graduation, he passed the State Dental Board examination with the highest score up to that time. Qualified to practice dentistry even though he had not yet received his diploma, he set up his office in two rooms at Fourth and Broadway.

Southern California at the turn of the century had been built largely on enthusiasm and real estate promotions. People from diverse backgrounds had flocked here, convinced that the Golden State was also the land of golden opportunities. For most, this meant the ability to purchase a home at a reasonable price. Between 1900 and 1910, Los Angeles' black population more than tripled, increasing from 2,131 to 7,599. The 1910 census showed that 36.1 percent of black Angelenos owned their own homes, in stark contrast to a mere 2.4 percent in New York City. Although discrimination was present, black citizens were widely dispersed throughout the city and generally encountered fewer barriers than Latinos or Asians.

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Somerville attracted patients from all ethnic and economic groups, including some white friends from Redlands, and his practice grew steadily. He purchased a piece of property and became only the second black member of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. He also became a U.S. citizen and was active in the Progressive movement, even taking part in a conference with Theodore Roosevelt.

His industriousness and political interests did not prevent him from cultivating a social life, however. Throughout college,

The Somervilles (Vada is at the far right) at dinner in Earl Carroll's Theatre Restaurant in 1945.

COURTESY OF DORIS HOWARD

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Dr. John poses with his collie Bruce in front of the house at 1800 San Pedro St. that doubled as his dental office and his and Vada's "honeymoon cottage."

he had maintained a friendship with Vada Watson, a bright, outgoing liberal arts major attending USC on a *Los Angeles Times* scholarship. Vada, a native of Pomona, was one of seven children born to Dora Watson McDonald, a family matriarch who had instilled in her offspring a strong social conscience and an appetite for achievement. One of Vada's brothers became one of the first black police officers in Los Angeles, and a half-brother graduated from the USC Law School and went on to an illustrious career in the Los Angeles City Prosecuting Attorney's office.

In 1912, Vada Watson and John Somerville were married. Life was good for the young couple, but things were quickly becoming more difficult for people of color in Los Angeles. The growing black population and the influx of white workers from the South led to more and more discrimination. Restrictive covenants were becoming common in housing tracts, preventing nonwhites from owning property in those developments. Blacks who came to L.A. were essentially forced to live in one geographic area, the Central Avenue district, which led to serious overcrowding.

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By 1913, Somerville and a group of prominent citizens were sufficiently concerned to write a letter to W.E.B. DuBois, the black intellectual who had helped establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1911. In response, DuBois traveled to Los Angeles, where he addressed 2,300 people of all races at Temple Auditorium and spoke to students at Pomona and Occidental colleges and USC. During this visit, he stayed in the Somervilles' guest room, an arrangement that spawned a lifelong friendship between the young couple and the celebrated scholar.

DuBois was very taken with Los Angeles, later writing, "These colored people are pushing and energetic. They are without doubt the most beautifully housed group of colored people in the United States. I saw the business establishments of the colored people. There was a splendid merchant tailor shop with a large stock of goods; a furniture store; two real estate companies; the largest junk dealers' business in the state; a contractor who was putting up some of the best buildings in the city with colored workmen; physicians, lawyers and dentists with offices in first-class buildings and, above all, homes – beautiful homes.... To be sure Los Angeles is not Paradise.... The color line is there and sharply drawn. The hotels do not welcome colored people, the restaurants are not for all that hunger ... [but] the black folk are fighters and not followers of the doctrine of surrender."

The same year, the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP was founded in the Somervilles' living room. John Somerville served as its president for 10 years.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the Hotel Somerville, which opened in 1928 and catered to a middle-class and upscale black clientele. Vada is at the wheel.

COURTESY OF DORIS HOWARD

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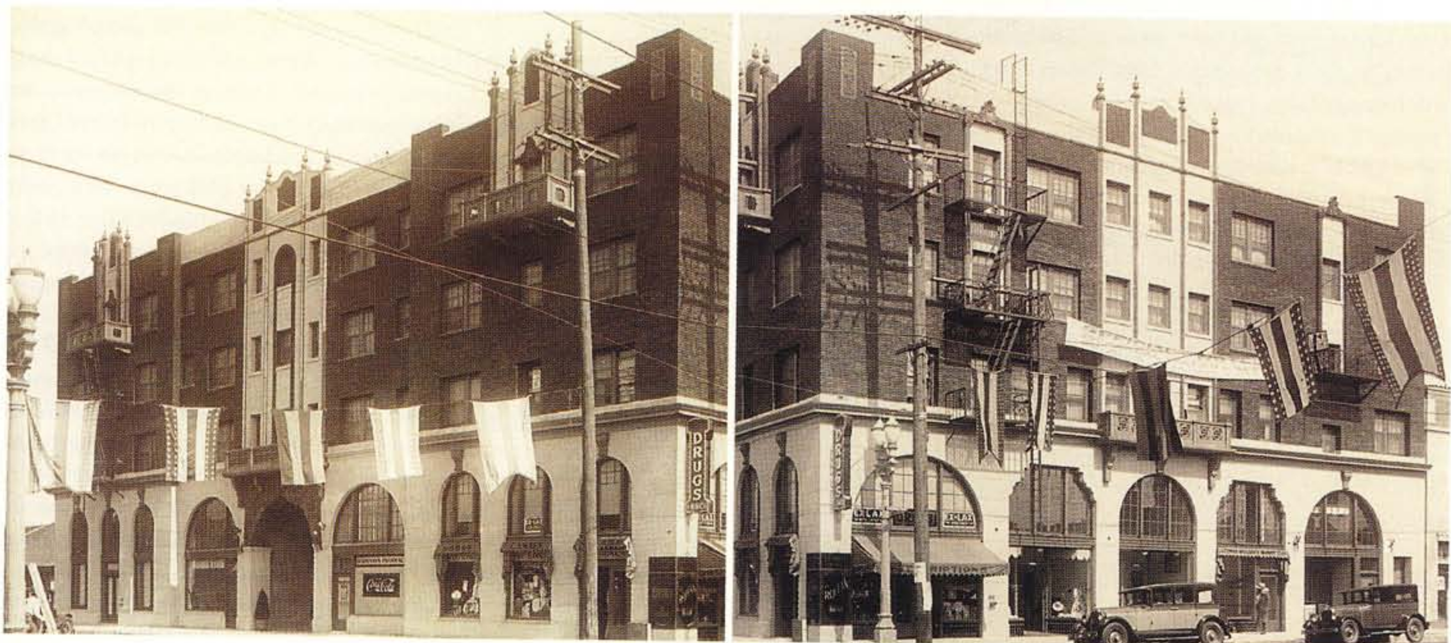
World War I brought new anxieties to the nation and to the Somervilles. There was a very real possibility that John Somerville would be drafted into military service, so Vada decided to study dentistry so that she could continue to treat his patients if he was called up. She enrolled in the USC dental school and, in 1918, became the school's second black graduate. She then became the first black woman to be licensed to practice dentistry in the state of California, and entered practice with her husband.

Somerville was not drafted, and the two Drs. Somerville shared an office for over a decade, until tensions developed when Dr. Vada's



COURTESY OF DORIS HOWARD

The Hotel Somerville, on the corner of 41st and Central. New owners later renamed it the Dunbar Hotel.

patients refused to see Dr. John.

"It was her marriage or her career," explains Doris Howard, the couple's foster daughter, and Vada chose her marriage. She retired from dentistry in 1933 and became a leading light in the city's civic and community organizations, serving on the executive boards of such groups as the Los Angeles League of Women Voters, the Council on Public Affairs, UCLA's YWCA and the USC Half Century Club.

Between Vada's activities and those of her husband, the Somervilles hosted numerous friends and dignitaries, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Kenneth Hahn, Jesse Unruh, Augustus Hawkins, Mary McLeod Bethune, DuBois, William Pickins, Norma Boyd and Rosa Parks.

The prosperity of the 1920s continued to bring more people and more buildings to Los Angeles. Most of the construction activity, however, was centered in Hollywood and what was then the western edge of the city. The eastern section, populated primarily by blacks, was largely neglected, and the housing crisis became severe.

Vada Watson in 1905, and as a member of the School of Dentistry's Class of 1918.

COURTESY OF DORIS HOWARD

Somerville decided to erect a first-class 26-unit apartment building to help meet the demand for rental units in that area. Lenders, however, were reluctant to risk capital in what they considered a depressed area. "I do not think that you can get the class of tenants who are willing to pay the required rental for these apartments," one bank president told him.

Somerville countered with a proposition: would the bank lend him the money if he could secure 26 tenants able and willing to pay for the apartments? The bank agreed, and within two weeks, Somerville had commitments from 30 people eager to move into the as-yet-unbuilt apartment building.

The La Vada Apartments opened in 1925, and the success of that venture led to the project for which Somerville is perhaps best remembered: the Hotel Somerville.

Because L.A.'s fashionable hotels were off-limits to blacks, most stayed with friends and relatives or in run-down rooming houses when they visited the city. Each day, for example, hundreds of black Pullman Company employees were forced to sleep in their cars at the railroad station because they could not find decent accommodations.

Somerville decided to build a modern hotel in the Central Avenue district that would cater to a middle-class and upscale black clientele. After selling the idea to a lender, he mustered his resources and purchased a site at 41st and Central.

The Hotel Somerville opened in June 1928 and attracted more than 5,000 visitors on its first day. In addition to 100 sleeping rooms, it had an opulent dining room with a seating capacity of 100 and a balcony for an orchestra, stores, a barber shop and beauty parlor, a pharmacy and a flower shop.

One of the hotel's first guests was DuBois, who later wrote about the experience. "It was a hotel – a jewel done with loving hands.... It

COURTESY OF DORIS HOWARD

John and Vada Somerville with a group of their friends at the beach in Santa Monica in the 1920s.

was all full of sunshine and low voices and the sound of human laughter and running water. The Hotel Somerville was an extraordinary surprise to people fed on ugliness – ugly schools, ugly churches, ugly streets, ugly insults. We were prepared for – well, something that didn't leak and was hastily clean and too new for vermin. And we entered a beautiful inn with a soul.... Funny that a hotel so impressed us – but it was so unexpected, so startling, so beautiful."

The significance of the hotel was not lost on investors. Within six months of its opening, all the vacant property in the neighborhood had been bought, and capital began to flow into the district. Somerville's success as a hotelier was short-lived, however. His finances were stretched to the limit, and the great stock market crash of 1929 caused them to snap. The Hotel Somerville reverted to the mortgage company, and despite a court case that was decided in his favor, he was unable to reclaim it. Its popularity and success continued, however, even after new owners renamed it the Dunbar Hotel (in honor of poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar). For two decades, until integration and equal housing laws were enforced, it provided lodging for such black entertainers and luminaries as Lena Horne, Joe Lewis, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holliday, Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, Redd Foxx, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, DuBois and Langston Hughes, and it was the locus of Central Avenue's blues and jazz scene.

> In 1949, Somerville was appointed to the L.A. Police Commission. In 1951, President Truman considered him for the governorship of the Virgin Islands, and in 1954, he was awarded an OBE by Queen Elizabeth II.

Somerville continued to immerse himself in political and civic activities. He met many prominent Democrats, including President Roosevelt, and in 1936, he represented California at the Democratic convention, the first black person to do so.

In 1949 – the same year his autobiography, *Man of Color*, was published – Somerville was appointed by Los Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron to the city's Police Commission. Two years later, President Truman considered him for the governorship of the Virgin Islands, and in 1954, Somerville was awarded an OBE by Queen Elizabeth II for his contributions to Anglo-American relations.

Somerville retired in 1963 and lived another 10 years to the age of 91, surviving his wife by only a few months. Vada died in 1972, shortly after their 60th wedding anniversary.

Their legacy, however, remains undiminished. Today, chapters of the NAACP dot the Los Angeles basin, and in 1974, the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board declared the hotel that Somerville built and lost Historic-Cultural Monument No. 131. In the late 1980s, the old hotel was given a facelift and recast as a museum and low-income housing. And in 1988, in recognition of the contributions John and Vada Somerville made to Los Angeles, the Dunbar Hotel Black Cultural and Historical Museum gave a $5,000 scholarship in their memory to the USC School of Dentistry.

Today, portraits of the Somervilles hang in the dental school, reminders of what vision, ambition and perseverance can achieve. The inspiration they offer echoes the conviction contained in a more modest image that hung for many years in Somerville's office and later in his den. It was a small, framed plaque with a watercolor rendering of a sailing vessel, perhaps similar to the one that had carried him to California in 1902. Emblazoned across the center was an inscription that exemplified his life:

"Do not wait for your ship to come in," it read.

"Row out and meet it." ❑