Triplett, PSU helped change history

By Lauren Boyer
For the CDT

Before “We Are ... Penn State,” Wally Triplett remembers another slogan:
“We play all or none.”
In 1946, the Penn State football team voted unanimously to cancel a scheduled game against then-segregated University of Miami, rather than play without its two black players, Triplett and Dennis Hoggard.
“I call it ‘that team.’” said the former Penn State halfback, now 82. “That tradition of leaving your colored players at home was going to be tolerated no more.”
Triplett appeared last week at Penn State’s All-Sports Museum to offer his recollections of that game.

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Photo provided/Penn State Archives

Wally Triplett — the first black person drafted in the NFL — also made history with the Nittany Lions. He was one of two black players in the 1948 Cotton Bowl against Southern Methodist University.

Partly sunny
High: 39° Low: 22° A10
Triplette made history as a Nittany Lion

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time as part of a series of talks, "Breaking Barriers: The Story
and Legacy of African-American Athletes at Penn State," being offered at the museum
in honor of Black History Month.

It was 1945 when Triplette became the first black starter on
what was then Penn State's varsity football team.

In 1948, Penn State was set
to play Southern Methodist
University in the Cotton Bowl.
Triplette said he remembers
that rumors circulated that
SMU wanted to meet with
Penn State to discuss the team
not bringing its black players.
During this time, Triplette cred-
tits guard Steve Suhey with
coining the now-famous Penn
State slogan.

"We are Penn State," Triplette
recalled Suhey saying. "There
will be no meetings."

Triplette traveled to Texas
and scored the tying touch-
down against SMU. The game
ended with a score of 13-13.

Triplette recalls fewer than 20
campus during this time.
"It was sort of a lonely life —
a life you had to live carefully," Triplette said. "People didn't
think anything of not including
you. That's what America was
about."

When he wasn't eating broken
pretzels at Graham's Cigar
Store with "that team," Triplette
found other places to be includ-
ed in State College — such as
Lincoln Hall, a five-bedroom
boarding house at 119 N.
Barnard St. that became an
unofficial dormitory for black
men. Triplette said he couldn't
afford to live on campus.

Operated by Harry and Rosa
Gifford, two fraternity cooks,
Lincoln Hall, named after Pres-
ident Abraham -Lincoln, was
one of a few homes downtown
that boarded black students.
"You just expected to hear
the answer 'no' when you went
somewhere or wanted some-
thing," Triplette said.

Triplette couldn't, for ex-
ample, get his hair cut at the bar-
ber shop next to the cigar store
on Allen Street or go to a tea
house downtown.

Wally Triplette paved the way
for many black athletes,
breaking college football
and NFL race barriers.

that you wanted to give fault to,
it was just a different world," he said. "The whole of America
was that way."

But "that team," he said,
wasn't like the rest of America,
Triplette said. Many of its mem-
ers, Triplette said, had just
returned from military service,
and had new views on segrega-
side of Happy Valley.

Following the spirit of this
changing world, Triplette
helped charter Penn State's
Gamma Nu chapter of Alpha
Phi Alpha, the oldest black fra-
ternity that has counted Martin Luther King Jr. and Paul
Robeson as members.

"I always tell people that
when they shake my hand,
they're shaking the hand that
shook the hand of Paul Robe-
son," he said, reveling in the
achievements of the political
activist and actor whom he met
in middle school.

Triplette is no low achiever
himself. He was recruited by
the Detroit Lions in 1949 and
was the first black person to be
drafted and play in the NFL,
which he says, stands for
"Negroes Finally Listed."

Most of this success Triplette
debt to "that team" from
Penn State — a school that he
says doesn't get the credit it
deserves for advancing civil
rights.

The rest was just luck.
"That's what life's about," he
said. "We're just lucky enough