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Kathleen Mary Davis
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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**FIGHTING JIM CROW
IN POST-WORLD WAR II OMAHA
1945-1956**

A Thesis
Presented to the

Department of History
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

Kathleen M. Davis

December 2002

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IN POST-WORLD WAR II OMAHA
1945-1956**

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts,
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Committee

Charles F. Enders Black Studies

Harold A. Peterson - History

Chairperson Will C. Pratt

Date November 21, 2002

**FIGHTING JIM CROW
IN POST-WORLD WAR II OMAHA
1945-1956**

Kathleen M. Davis

University of Nebraska, 2002

Advisor: Dr. William C. Pratt

Blacks in Omaha developed new approaches to fight Jim Crow practices in the post-World War II era. As a result, substantial gains were made in the areas of public accommodations, employment, residential segregation and education. The *Omaha Star*, a black newspaper, was instrumental in reporting civil rights abuses to its readers, while constantly urging them to unite and fight for their rights.

Civil rights organizations played a crucial role in these efforts. The NAACP chapter was established as early as 1918, but after an initial burst it was relatively ineffective until the 1950s. The local Urban League, however, which dated to 1928, adapted more readily to the changing post-World War II environment. Realizing the need to shift from its earlier emphasis on self-help and recreation, it began to address problems such as employment, housing, and race relations. In 1950, Whitney Young became its executive secretary and played a major role in the fight against racial discrimination over the next several years.

Another important organization in this struggle was the Omaha De Porres Club. It was organized in 1947 on the Creighton University campus under the direction of a priest, Father John Markoe, and a student, Denny Holland. The Club was instrumental in

opening many doors for black Omahans, particularly in the area of employment.

Working closely with the Urban League, its non-violent and direct confrontational tactics such as sit-ins, picketing, and boycotts made a significant contribution to the local civil rights movement.

In 1956, a special election was held to choose the members of a Charter Convention that would draw up a new city Charter, which was became effective on May 27, 1957. It included a civil rights clause, a provision for fair employment, and the establishment of a Human Relations Board. Although there was much more to be done, the 1945-1956 era was marked by a number of important achievements in the realm of race relations in Omaha, some of which occurred years ahead of many other cities.

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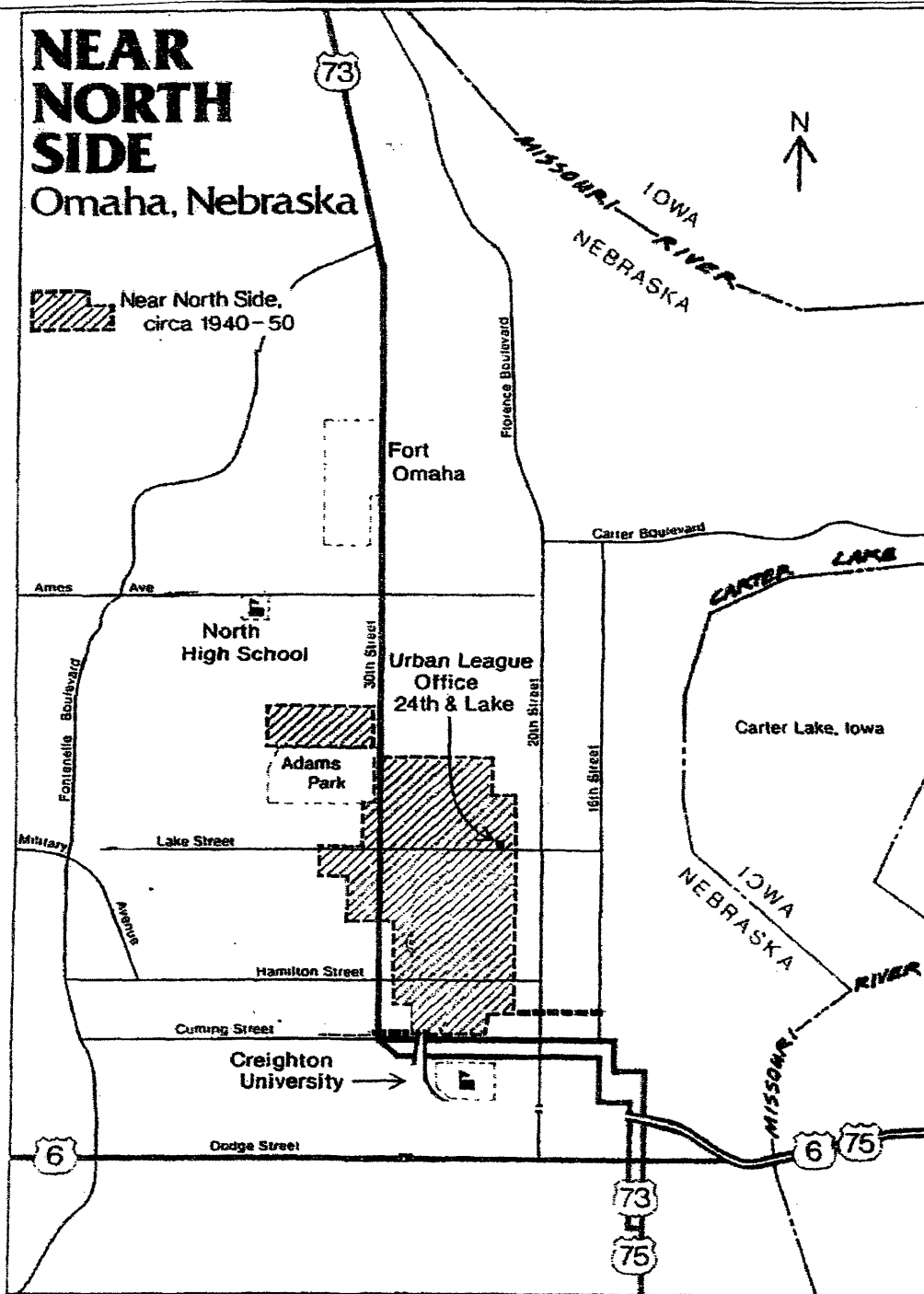
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Dotted line depicts approximate boundaries of Near Northside, 1940-1950.

Source: Adapted from Dennis N. Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League." *Nebraska History* 60 (fall 1979), 405.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Jim Crow Omaha

World War II has immeasurably magnified the Negroes' awareness of the disparity between the American profession and practice of democracy. The majority will return home convinced that whatever betterment of their lot is achieved must come largely through their own efforts.

Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP.¹

In 1945, over one million black American soldiers returned home after World War II, only to continue the fight against oppression and racist ideologies. This time, however, the battles they fought were in their own backyards, and, eventually, with a new type of ammunition. Still treated as second-class citizens, blacks and their white allies confronted the bigotry that denied them fair employment, adequate housing, education, the use of certain public facilities and, in some parts of the country, the right to vote.

While racial discrimination was not practiced as openly in the northern states as it was in the South, the attempt to keep blacks "in their place" was evident. The fight for racial equality in Omaha, Nebraska, during the post-World War II years is of particular interest. The chipping away of its Jim Crow practices toward the end of the 1940s was the result of nonviolent protests that would be used with much more dramatic success in the 1960s. Furthermore, the conditions under which blacks lived exemplify not only a caste repression, but also the indifference of the legal system, which should have protected their rights.

Why, though, did it take almost ten years for mass protests, such as the December 1955 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott to materialize? As the United States entered

into the Cold War, black organizations that challenged racism were often viewed as subversive. According to Manning Marable in his book, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*: “The paranoid mood of anti-communist America made it difficult for any other reasonable reform movement to exist.”²

This study will examine racial discrimination in Omaha and the response to it, from the end of World War II in 1945 to 1956, when a new city charter with a civil rights provision was adopted. Much of the information is drawn from the *Omaha Star*, a black newspaper that focused on the unjust treatment blacks received nationally, as well as locally. Described by Dennis G. Paz as having “a long term commitment to work and religious uplift,” it pledged that it “shall, for the life of its existence, be a militant organ, the true voice of the people.”³

Beginning with its first edition in 1938, the *Star* offered hope and encouragement in what were often frustrating and discouraging situations. Moreover, it not only reported events that the daily newspaper, the *Omaha World-Herald*, omitted, but it also provided a different perspective on the slanted news coverage of racial stories. Its motto, “For The Service of the People That No Good Cause Shall Lack a Champion, and That Evil Shall Not Thrive Unopposed,” stretched across the top of the front page of every edition.⁴ Although Omaha had two other black newspapers, the *Monitor* and the *Guide*, this study will focus primarily on the *Star*. This paper was the voice of an isolated community that otherwise went unheard and, in many ways, unacknowledged.

Omaha was a conservative city that supported segregation in a covert fashion. In some instances, this made it even more difficult for black residents. While southern blacks had separate drinking, eating and restroom facilities required by law, those who ventured outside of their neighborhood in Omaha were always uncertain as to which public facilities they would be allowed to use. Still, it was difficult to challenge this type of discrimination because the individuals who imposed it often provided “legal” excuses for their actions. For example, blacks were sometimes kept from using restrooms by being told there were none. Store employees often intimidated black customers by treating them as if they were going to steal something. As one black woman who grew up in North Omaha said, “sometimes children would point and say, ‘Mama, is that a nigger?’ They learned to talk like that at home.”⁵

Although the focus of this study is on racial discrimination in Omaha in the post-World War II era, it is important to understand how local blacks came to be concentrated in a segregated community subject to Jim Crow policies. Most of Omaha’s black population, as was the case in Chicago and New York, came from the South. Though some came as early as the 1850s, a larger migration occurred after the Civil War. The developing Union Pacific and Burlington Railroads recruited many as laborers, porters, cooks and waiters. Omaha experienced a greater influx during the 1880s when the black population increased from 789 at the beginning of the decade, to 4,566 by 1890.⁶

The new arrivals wasted no time in establishing a firm foundation for their growing community. In 1867, St. John’s African Methodist Church was organized, followed by the African Baptist Church in 1874, and Zion Baptist in 1884. The goal of a

Women's Club, organized in 1895, was to "take an active, decided, aggressive interest in everything that tends toward promoting the welfare of mankind in general, and of womanhood in particular, and of the Afro-American specifically."⁷ Ella (Helen) Mahammitt, the club's leader, established a catering business and cooking school, and later published a cookbook. Fraternal groups such as the Masons, the Knights of Pythias, and the Odd Fellows were also popular among black men.⁸

Many individuals played an active role in improving the quality of life for other blacks in Omaha. For example, in 1880, Matthew Oliver Ricketts became the first black student to graduate from a college or university in Nebraska. After receiving a medical degree from the Omaha Medical College, he opened an office at 201 South Thirteenth Street. He later became the state's first black to be elected to the Nebraska House of Representatives, serving two terms, from 1893 to 1896.⁹

It was not until 1927, however, that blacks again served in the legislature. Ferdinand L. Barnett and John A. Singleton served the Ninth and Tenth Districts. Barnett had started the first black newspaper in Omaha, *The Progress*, in 1889. Before holding office, he was appointed Deputy Clerk of the Probate Court and City Street Foreman. Singleton, a dentist, received his degree from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and was previously the Deputy Registrar of Deeds of Douglas County. He also served as the first president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹⁰

Aaron McMillan, a black physician, served the Ninth District in 1929, but resigned after serving only half his term to accept a position in Angola as a medical

missionary. In 1932, Johnny Owen, a Creighton University law student, became the first black Democrat to represent the district. John Adams, Jr., the first black to graduate from the University of Nebraska Law School in 1929, followed Owen and served until 1941. After the war, his father, John Adams Sr., held the same legislative seat.¹¹

Many black physicians and dentists provided services to their community during the pre-World War I era. In addition to Ricketts, Jesse H. Hutton, a graduate of Howard University Medical School, arrived in Omaha in 1889 and later opened an office in the downtown area. He also helped organize a black Presbyterian church and, in 1928, the Omaha Urban League. L.E. Britt, August Edwards and W.H. Stephenson also practiced in the same vicinity. Other doctors, such as Matthew Williams, and J.B. Hill, established offices in the northern section of the city. Several dentists, such as W. W. Peebles and Craig Morris, also practiced in the same vicinity.¹²

The first black to practice law in the state was Silas Roberts, who was admitted to the Nebraska Bar in 1889. Another prominent black attorney, Harrison J. Pinkett, worked as an Inspector with the Board of Charities in Washington, D.C., before coming to Omaha in 1907. Eleven years later, he helped organize the local chapter of the NAACP.¹³

Several blacks found positions in law enforcement. Emory R. Smith became the city's first black police officer in 1903, followed by Harry Buford and C. C. Dudley. The fire department, however, remained segregated. An all black unit was established during the 1890s at Thirtieth and Spaulding and, later, at Twenty-first and Lake.¹⁴

Despite these accomplishments, racial discrimination was well established as early as the 1880s. The increase in the black population between 1880 and 1890 further intensified racial tensions, resulting in labor disputes and the lynching of a black man. On May 4, 1880, laborers of the Smelting Works refused to return to work until they obtained a 20 percent wage increase. Rather than meet their demands, the managers recruited over one hundred unemployed blacks from Kansas and Missouri. Unaware of the strike until they arrived at the plant, the “scabs” were immediately provided with police protection and, according to the *Omaha Daily Bee*, weapons “to guard against contingencies.”¹⁵

The managers became alarmed by the commotion created from the importation of blacks, and consulted with several prominent local politicians, including George Millard, a former mayor and editor of the *Omaha Herald*. Millard perceived the strike as a “socialist plot, led by the communist agitators among Omaha’s foreign laboring population.”¹⁶ He quickly sent a telegram to Governor Albinus Nance:

A riot is imminent here. The smelting works men have struck and colored men employed. There is a large mob at the smelting works, and the danger is imminent unless we can have help at once. Telegraph President Hayes for the use of two companies at Fort Omaha.¹⁷

The troops Millard requested never arrived, but over four hundred angry men, the entire police force, Mayor Champion Chase, and a large crowd that gathered to watch the events unfold were waiting for the black strike-breakers. All but twenty of the blacks agreed to leave after conferring with a group of laborers who offered to pay their way home. The mob left, and the strikers and remaining blacks negotiated the dispute. Fortunately, what could have been a scene of violence ended without incident.¹⁸

Another racially incited disturbance occurred on October 9, 1891. This time, it involved the lynching of George Smith, who was arrested for the alleged sexual assault on a young white girl. That evening, according to the *World-Herald*, several thousand men gathered outside the Harney Street Jail, demanding that Smith be hanged. The sheriff tried unsuccessfully to calm the mob, claiming that Smith had been removed from the prison earlier in the day. He stated: "If he were here and I was not the sheriff, I'd be the first to make a noose." Unfortunately, he was unable to dissuade the group.¹⁹

Several hours later, the crowd had grown to an estimated five thousand. After almost two hours of ramming the doors and the iron window guards of the jailhouse with heavy logs, they succeeded in forcing their way into the building. According to the paper, "the trembling wretch" was taken out of his cell and hanged at midnight, on the northeast corner of Seventeenth and Harney Streets, in front of approximately fifteen thousand spectators.²⁰ The *World-Herald* described the incident:

Then, in the bluish glare of the electric arc lights, a head, a pair of shoulders, and then a body, rose out of the dense throng. It was steadily raised until it was over the heads of the people, and then it began to sway a little, and turn like a dangling scarecrow. The people remained quiet for a time, hardly recognizing that it was really a lynching that they were witnessing. Then some men grew faint and began pushing their way out, while others began jostling for a closer look.²¹

An hour later, the body was removed and taken to Heafey and Heafey Mortuary, where it was "put into a presentable shape," for the curious to view. This must have been a difficult task, as his clothes had been stripped, his body "badly bruised and lacerated, large pieces of his shins being torn off." The remaining spectators then disbanded, "content with their night's work."²²

Although city officials learned of the plan to lynch George Smith the shortly before it happened, little was done to protect him. Mayor Cushing later admitted: “I heard rumors that the Negro would be lynched and predicted from what I heard that he would be.” He added that he told Police Chief Webb Seavey to expect “a mob,” and suggested transferring the prisoner to the county jail. Despite this warning, no provisions were taken to hide Smith, nor was he even placed under tighter security. Cushing defended his do-nothing approach, saying: “I did not think it necessary to give advice [to the police] that the Negro should be placed in a strong cell, for I supposed that would be done as a matter of course.” Seavey passed the blame to the newspapers for fueling racial tensions with false reports that Smith had killed the victim.²³

The *World-Herald* also claimed that many of the black citizens supported the lynching: “The colored men in the crowd manifested satisfaction at seeing Smith lynched. One of the leaders of the crowd said that 500 colored men from the Third Ward were there and had told them that they could have their help if necessary.”²⁴

Between 1880 and 1920, black homicide defendants in Douglas County were found guilty 85 percent of the time, while 6 percent were found not guilty, and 9 percent of the cases were dismissed. In contrast, 34 percent of the white defendants were convicted, 38 percent were found not guilty, and 28 percent of the cases were dismissed. Furthermore, 32 percent of the black defendants plea bargained, as compared to 5 percent of the whites. In his book, *Homicide, Race, and Justice in the American West, 1880-1920*, Clare V. McKanna Jr. explains that these results represent not only bias, but also the fact that many of the defendants were poor and usually were not represented by an

attorney, allowing them to be “railroaded” into false confessions. Once convicted, the black prisoner was placed in a cell that was “so arranged that white prisoners may be together and colored prisoners confined by themselves.”²⁵

A similar segregation was found in some local cemeteries, as blacks were limited to certain sections for burial at Mount Hope, Forest Lawn, and Graceland Park. Their designated area at Forest Lawn area was similar to the one for whites, and since people wanted to be buried next to family and friends, it posed no problem. At Mount Hope, however, the segregated area was not only the most undesirable land in the cemetery, but the caretaker used it to grow an extensive garden. Crops grew over the graves making it difficult to locate them.²⁶

In 1893, at roughly the same time that the southern states began requiring Jim Crow facilities, Nebraska passed a Civil Rights Law. It stated that all residents were “entitled to a full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, restaurants, public conveyances, barber shops, theaters, and other places of amusement . . . applicable alike to every person.” It also stated that any violation of this law would result in a misdemeanor charge, and subject to a fine ranging from twenty-five to one hundred dollars. The law was rarely enforced, however.²⁷

Blacks continued to face discrimination, particularly in the work force. A 1900 occupational census listed only forty-three black men in professional occupations. These included musicians, music teachers, clergymen and a small number of physicians, lawyers and journalists. Of the 1,392 employed black men, 951 worked in “domestic and personal services,” which included “servants, waiters, janitors, barbers and hairdressers.”

Trade and transportation was the second largest employment category, most of which consisted of porters and helpers. Only fifteen worked as firemen, policemen and watchmen, while nine were engaged in meat and fruit packing.²⁸

Although most blacks had difficulty finding employment outside of service and laboring positions, some did operate successful businesses. These enterprises consisted mainly of barbershops, grocery stores, and restaurants, and were usually small due to the difficulty they had in securing loans. Several billiard rooms, such as one located at 1120 Capitol, and a saloon owned by J. D. Wright, at 105 South Twelfth Street, also served the black citizens. Located downtown, between Capitol Avenue and Farnam Street, east of Fifteenth Street, and along Eleventh and Twelfth and Dodge Streets, and eventually extending north, these businesses received little patronage from the white citizens.²⁹

Black women faced even more discrimination. The census listed 583 who were employed, with 519 of them as servants, waitresses, laundresses, housekeepers and laborers. Other categories included musicians, trade and transportation, and manufacturing, which mainly consisted of dressmakers and seamstresses. Fifteen professional occupations were also mentioned, including two teachers, Lucy Gambol, who was hired in 1895, followed by Eula Overall, in 1898. Although both of the women were allowed to finish their tenure, no additional black teachers were hired in the public school system until 1939.³⁰

By 1910, the number of black businesses had nearly doubled that of 1890. Patronized mainly by members of their own race, services such as shoemakers, hairdressers, laundries, tailors, an undertaker and a cigar store helped to make the black

community self-sufficient. Minnie Patton operated Patton's Hotel at 917 South Eleventh Street, which provided lodging for black railroad workers. Often black residents would rent a room to a traveler of the same race for a small fee.³¹

During the World War I era, northern industries recruited southern blacks to fill the void that was created when many of their laborers became soldiers. Furthermore, a boll weevil infestation and an outdated sharecropping system had left many of these blacks with little choice but to look for work in urban areas. Most importantly, they left in the hope of escaping racial discrimination. During this "Great Migration" between 1910 and 1920, approximately 300,000 blacks left the south, intending to better their lives.³²

Consequently, many northern cities underwent changes as they dealt with the influx of these migrant workers. Their break with the oppressive south gave these blacks, according to social historian Lerone Bennett Jr., "a new gleam in their eye, a new spring in their walk, a new and defiant tilt to the head." This new outlook, combined with their growing numbers and post-war tensions, added to the racial hostility that existed throughout the country.³³

Omaha also felt these changes. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of blacks in the city rose from 4,426 to 10,315. Like the Union Pacific Railroad, Omaha meat packing companies recruited heavily in the South and it was during these years that a substantial number of blacks found employment in the industry. Positions were open to them not only as laborers, but also as highly skilled butchers, chemists and inspectors. At some plants, they were employed as foremen and served as representatives on employee

relation boards. In 1917, approximately five hundred worked for the four major plants in Omaha—Armour, Swift, Cudahy and Morris.³⁴

Although small groups of blacks settled in areas in South Omaha, the majority of newcomers concentrated in an ethnically diverse section of North Omaha where Irish, Scandinavians, Germans and Jews already resided. As the white residents became increasingly anxious, many moved from the neighborhood leaving a segregated ghetto known as the Near North Side. In an area bordered by Thirty-third and Twentieth Streets from east to west, and Cuming and Spencer Streets from north to south, blacks lived, worked, worshipped, educated their children, and entertained themselves in a city whose white majority preferred not to have to deal with them.³⁵

An anti-miscegenation law, enacted in 1897, was another means of keeping blacks segregated. Simply stated, Nebraska forbade marriages between whites and persons of one-fourth black ancestry, and, in 1913, revised the law to “one-eighth or more negro, [*sic*] Japanese or Chinese blood.” While many fair-complexioned blacks successfully passed themselves off as white, those whose racial identities were discovered faced stiff consequences. Even other blacks who guarded the secret of someone who chose to “pass” would shun the person if their true racial identity were revealed.³⁶

In 1919, Clara McCary Dwyer learned how severe the ramifications of hiding her black lineage could become. On March 12, 1916, she and her husband, Francis Patrick Dwyer gave birth to their first child. Three years later, Dwyer became suspicious of his wife’s ancestry and sued for an annulment, claiming that the fair skinned, blue-eyed baby

“bore the unmistakable characteristics of a Negro.” A physician who testified for Dwyer during the court proceedings stated that the “taint of Negro blood might remain dormant for 16 generations and then come active to life.” In response to Clara’s request for custody and child support, Dwyer agreed to provide for the child only if it was “placed in a Negro institution” and raised “as a Negro, not as a white child, in order that he may never marry a white girl.”³⁷

The *World-Herald* and the *Daily Bee* followed the controversy closely, often placing new developments on the front page. Believing that Clara Dwyer was “pure” white, as her father, Douglass P. McCary maintained, the papers supported Judge A. C. Troup’s refusal to grant the annulment. *The Monitor*, a local black newspaper, however, remained uncharacteristically quiet on the topic. Its editor, John Albert Williams, probably was aware of the family’s racial heritage. Although he did not make any direct references to the McCarys, on July 17, he published an article entitled, “Ashamed of Blood,” which coincided with the events of the trial.³⁸

The court eventually ruled in Clara’s favor, but the trial was quickly overshadowed by other racial disturbances that occurred during the “Red Summer of 1919.” Throughout that spring and summer, increased racial tensions due to labor unrest, strikes, and job competition prevailed throughout the United States. In early August, over five hundred blacks arrived in Omaha from cities such as Kansas City, Chicago and St. Louis, hoping to find work as strikebreakers at the South Omaha Union Stockyards and the Chicago and North Western Railroad. The attention the local newspapers gave to

the situation added to the resentment that the newly arrived blacks faced from the already disgruntled, protesting, white workers.³⁹

These papers also shared responsibility for setting the social climate in Omaha during that summer. The crime rate throughout the season was high, and reports of attacks committed by black men on white women were often placed on the front pages of the daily newspapers. Yet, when the suspect was released due to lack of evidence, the papers rarely mentioned it. *The Mediator*, a black paper, cautioned that the white community would take matters into their own hands if the “respectable colored population” could not rid its sector of the offending members.⁴⁰

On the night of September 28, the paper’s prediction came true. Will Brown, a forty-one year old packinghouse worker, was arrested for the rape of a nineteen year-old white woman. At 2:30 p.m., approximately fifty boys, aged ten to sixteen, gathered on the south side of the courthouse, seeking revenge against the prisoner. The police tried to force the mob back by dousing them with formaldehyde and turning water hoses on them. They dispersed, only to return with rocks, with which they pelted the police. Three hours later, the crowd, which had grown to over 6,000, succeeded in forcing its way into the building.⁴¹

Once inside, they set fire to the first floor offices of the Red Cross, County Treasurer, County Recorder, Election Commissioner and the City and County Assessor. Only the County Clerk’s office was spared, due to an American flag that hung over the doorway. The vandals also burned the offices of the sheriff, two judges, and the Clerk of the District Court on the second, third and fourth floors.⁴²

The crowd was not only angry at Brown's alleged assault on a white woman, but also at the authorities who protected the prisoner. One man shouted, "When a Negro gets arrested for assaulting a woman, all he gets is sixty days." Consequently, Mayor Ed Smith, who told the crowd that he would give his life defending the law, was also attacked. Unable to tolerate the heavy smoke in the courthouse, Smith left the building, and was immediately grabbed by a group of thirty to forty men. He was beaten and hanged by his neck on the metal arm of a traffic light. He was later taken to Ford Hospital where he fully recovered.⁴³

According to the *World-Herald*, rumors circulated that "a mob proposed to rush the city and county jails in search of Negroes." The vigilantes did not limit their hostility to blacks who had broken the law, however. One North Omaha resident was badly beaten when he stepped off a streetcar at Fifteenth and Farnam. Another was attacked as he walked along Seventeenth Street. Furthermore, a black man who was chased into a deserted iron factory was rescued when several policemen interrupted the mob's attempt to lynch him.⁴⁴

The police refused all offers of help from blacks. Even William Ranson, a black patrolman, was instructed to stay out of sight. Many blacks fled in fear across the river to Council Bluffs, Iowa. At the same time, many Council Bluffs residents joined the frenzied activity in Omaha. The *World-Herald* reported that even women, some of whom were holding young children, encouraged the mob. One man's wife instructed him to "show them how they do it in the south."⁴⁵

Will Brown was seized by the mob at 10:30 p.m. as police led him down the back stairs of the burning courthouse. After the lynching, crowds cheered while he dangled from a light pole at Eighteenth and Harney. His body was then shot numerous times and dragged through the streets to Seventeenth and Dodge, where it was burned. One youth sold pieces of the rope that was used for ten cents apiece.⁴⁶

Several insurance companies were also quick to take advantage of the violent occurrence. Martin Bros. & Co. placed a large advertisement in the *World-Herald* soliciting “Riot and Civil Commotion” insurance which promised to cover “all damage caused by mob or riot.” Royal L. Stewart & Co. stated that riot insurance was “an absolute necessity,” while the Wilcox-Burns Co. claimed that “fire, burglary or plate glass policies” did not cover damage that occurred during uprisings.⁴⁷

The following morning, city officials took steps to prevent another night of disturbance. Twenty-two black prisoners were transported from the county jail to the state penitentiary for their protection. Troops from Fort Omaha and Fort Crook, armed with machine guns, were ordered to suppress any threatening activities. R. T. Coffey, chief deputy county attorney, stated: “We will prosecute any and all who had anything to do with the formation of that shooting, looting and booting mob. Relatives and friends of the assaulted white girl will not be immune from arrest and punishment.” Police Commissioner J. Dean Ringer promised a “house to house canvas” of certain areas when more manpower was available. No one, however, was ever prosecuted for the murder.⁴⁸

While approximately six thousand white citizens were responsible for the mayhem, in the aftermath, the black community was held suspect. The *World-Herald*

reported: "The military authorities are especially watchful of the Negro residential district, about North Twenty-Fourth Street. It is reported that every colored person in the area is armed. Negroes broke into the Hussey Hardware store last night and stole 200 rifles." The paper further stated: "Machine guns mounted on automobile trucks will patrol the colored belt tonight."⁴⁹

The newly formed local chapter of the NAACP responded to the riot by blaming the lynching on sensational newspaper reports. Through public statements and editorials in the *Omaha Monitor*, Nebraska's black paper, the organization's president, Rev. John Albert Williams, and branch member Harrison J. Pinkett specifically accused the white paper, the *Bee*. A meeting was held to discuss ways of dealing with the negative press the black community received, but little was accomplished due to the many differences of opinion. Unfortunately, this type of conflict became a pattern that continued, and, in combination with the city's relatively small black population, resulted in the NAACP's limited success. One of its early and interesting achievements, however, was the banishment of the "No Colored Trade" signs that were displayed throughout the city.⁵⁰

Another national organization that was established in Omaha was the Urban League, which began in 1928 in a building owned by the telephone company. For an annual fee of one dollar, members were able to use the gymnasium, offices, clubrooms, auditorium, and the kitchen. It was instrumental in providing blacks with job skills and helping them find employment. Other goals were to improve the housing conditions of the Near North Side and to promote better education for black citizens.⁵¹

Other organizations were also formed during the 1920s in response to the blacks' poor living conditions. The Colored Commercial Club, which preceded the Urban League, was established in 1920. Its purpose was two-fold. First, it selected and trained both men and women for prospective employers, and, second, it encouraged the establishment of black businesses in North Omaha. In the spring of the same year, the North Side YWCA began in a building at Twenty-second and Grant Street. Serving as a community center, it provided classes in art, cooking, and sewing, reading and writing.⁵²

The North branch worked closely with the central YWCA, which, according to Harrison Pinkett, a black attorney and the author of "An Historical Sketch of the Omaha Negro," allowed for "a better understanding" of the black community. He further added that the "Colored women on the Board of Management of the Northside 'Y' have always been given the fullest cooperation and support by the Board of the Central 'Y.'" The building also offered a meeting area for local groups, including the NAACP, to conduct their business.⁵³

The presence of other groups created specifically for black citizens, such as the Colored Free Employment Bureau, the Negro Chamber of Commerce and the Coordinating Committee on Negro Health, exemplify the effort made to address Omaha's segregation problems.⁵⁴ References to these groups are mentioned frequently in the *Star*, but any surviving records or minutes of meetings have not been located.

Jim Crow still affected blacks in every aspect of their lives. By the 1930s, segregation in schools and employment was well established in Omaha. The majority of

black high school students attended Technical High School. One former black student recalled his educational experience:

They would send all blacks to Tech, as many as they possibly could, to learn trades or homemaking trades or something like that, because it would tell us that we weren't going to college and the college preparatory course was not for us. So not too many were channeled to Central [High School], unless they were exceptional, or just insisted, the parents insisted, or whatever.⁵⁵

In an attempt to devise a plan to help improve living conditions for blacks, the Public Affairs Committee of the North Side YWCA sponsored an Interracial Conference on February 16, 1933. Social workers and civic leaders of both races attended the meeting. They included religious leaders Rabbi David Goldstein and Rev. Lawrence Plank, pastor of First Unitarian Church, Charles C. Charvat, Professor of English at Creighton University, J. G. Masters, principal of Central High School, Harrison J. Pinkett, a black attorney from Omaha, and B. Joe Brown, a black attorney from Des Moines, Iowa.⁵⁶

Brown contended that racial prejudice was becoming less evident in the south, yet was spreading in the north. He was optimistic, however, that "it is gradually disappearing and will be entirely obliterated within the next twenty-five years." Other topics discussed were "Interracial Relations and the Press," "Workers and the Race Problems," and "The Myth Behind Racial Superiority."⁵⁷

The importance of this meeting was that it not only brought to the foreground many problems, but that blacks and whites came together for a united cause in Nebraska. As a result, a study entitled the *Economic Life of Negroes* was produced. It found that blacks suffered from limited opportunities in the job market, a decreasing demand for

them in domestic services, a high rate of unemployment, competition with white employees, discrimination in trade unions, and a low standard of living.⁵⁸

The reasons given for these problems were that employers did not want to hire “inefficient” black workers, and black employees frequently faced a negative attitude among those with whom they worked. Moreover, black workers were considered extremely disorganized. To alleviate these conditions, the conference offered five broad suggestions, including the organization of black unions, citizenship training for black youths, and vocational training with an emphasis on “increasing their efficiency.” It also promoted educating the public on the effects of racial discrimination, the publicizing of “their achievements,” and encouraged “friendly interracial attitudes.”⁵⁹ It is apparent from the results of this meeting that the city recognized the problems blacks experienced as a result of discrimination, yet the fact that these problems were still in existence in 1956 demonstrates the degree to which Jim Crow persisted in Omaha.

The black press often adopted a more militant tone in the 1930s. An example of this is the *Star*, which addressed many of the problems blacks faced in North Omaha. Its publisher, Mildred Brown, an active crusader for civil rights, encouraged readers to report acts of discrimination to the police and advised people to take legal action based on those incidents. In addition, she urged support of organizations such as the NAACP, Urban League, and many of the smaller, grass roots groups that voiced black concern over racial discrimination.⁶⁰

Some blacks were able to break through the color line. As mentioned earlier, John Adams, Jr., the first black graduate of the University of Nebraska law school, served

in the state legislature from 1935 to 1937. He represented a district bound by Cuming, Pratt, and Forty-Second Streets, and the Missouri River. When Nebraska implemented its one house legislature, the Unicameral, in 1937, the area was enlarged both to the north and south. As a result, this district now consisted of approximately 14,000 white voters and about 3,500 black voters. Though he was concerned that the large number of white voters would threaten his chances for reelection, Adams defeated Harry A. Foster in 1936, receiving 80 percent of the vote. Foster, a white dentist, previously served 6 two-year terms in the House of Representatives between 1905 and 1931.⁶¹

After his defeat, Foster challenged the election results, claiming, “the large majorities received by Adams in several precincts, populated mostly by Negroes, were ‘unreasonable.’” The counting boards in the precincts which received seven and eight to one majorities were questionable, Foster believed, since they were “composed entirely of Negroes and that may have been responsible for the large majorities Adams received.”⁶² He later stated: “Election boards in predominantly Negro populations should have some white members.” Believing that “every man is entitled to his day in court,” Adams requested a committee be named to investigate the allegations, and Foster’s request was dismissed.⁶³

In an interview with the *World-Herald*, Adams stated that “although discrimination was rabid” in Omaha and Lincoln in the 1930s, serving in an otherwise all-white legislature did not present a problem. His goal was to help the people of his race. He did not believe this was attainable through “aggressive organizations,” but rather by “collective accomplishment.”⁶⁴

Yet not even Adams could escape the hostility blacks encountered on a daily basis. During the 1930s, he and his wife went into a restaurant near his downtown law office. The man behind the counter ignored them at first, and then told them he would not serve them. When Adams reminded him of Nebraska's civil rights law, the man called the police, reporting a "disturbance here by a colored person." The officer who responded to the call told the man to take their order and left. Adams and his wife were served their hamburgers after a large amount of salt was poured on them. When Adams complained, he was told: "I'm serving you."⁶⁵

Adams took the burgers with him and went to the police station to file a civil rights complaint. He was instructed to devise his own form, as there was none available for that purpose. With his self-prepared civil rights complaint and the testimony of a chemist who examined the meat and found a high salt content, Adams was ready for a court battle. The restaurant's lawyers, however, asked him to withdraw the complaint on the condition that the restaurant would change its policy. Adams agreed. The cook, who had been arrested and pleaded guilty, was fined forty dollars. "All I'm interested in," Adams said, "is having the law obeyed." The fine was never paid.⁶⁶

Downtown eateries varied in their policies on serving blacks. One North Omaha resident recalled that the Walgreen's lunch counter was always a place where blacks could eat. On the other hand, they were not allowed in Woolworth's cafeteria. Kresge's Five and Dime at Sixteenth and Harney reportedly restricted blacks to one side of one lunch counter as well.⁶⁷ Rather than openly refusing to serve a black customer, the management of some restaurants avoided confrontations by not waiting on them. Harold

Tibbs, who also lived on the Near North Side, remembered an eatery that he had frequented asked him to sit away from the window, out of view. He refused to return. In another instance in 1942, forty-five black soldiers were denied service at the train station when they tried to order coffee and donuts.⁶⁸

Recreational facilities also were segregated. Neighborhood theatres, such as the Corby, the Minne Lusa and the Lothrop, reportedly refused to admit blacks, while the larger downtown theaters would allow them only in the highest balcony, which was referred to as the “crow’s nest.” Furthermore, they were not permitted to use the concession counters. Unable to utilize the white community’s swimming pools, roller-skating rinks and other recreational facilities, the need for their own pool and community center was a frequent plea throughout the 1940s.⁶⁹

The high crime rate among the Near North Side’s youths was attributed to the lack of recreational facilities. According to a 1931 study by T. Earl Sullenger and J. Harvey Kerns, many young boys spent their spare time in the Near North Side’s fourteen pool rooms. It was here, the report stated, that many of them were “seasoned with crime.”⁷⁰ Ten years later, the problem remained. An editorial in the February 14, 1940 edition of the *Star* pointed out that while blacks were 5.4 percent of the city’s population, black youths made up 14.2 percent of the city’s juvenile court records. This disproportionate figure, it stated, could be attributed to the fact that the community had no recreational facilities for teenagers. Another editorial in the same edition complained that since “other sections of the city are well provided for with adequate recreational facilities,” the black community should also “have what is needed.”⁷¹

The relatively high crime rate among these youths could also be attributed to the lack of adequate housing for blacks. As the population within the Near North Side grew, the conditions of their homes worsened. Not only was there no space to build additional houses, but the existing ones were deteriorating. One North Omaha resident protested:

By libeling [blacks] with the charge that they cheapen property, unscrupulous landlords and real estate men have built a system that makes them live in a restricted area where demand is high and prices accordingly. In Omaha, it is safe to say that not over three new homes have been built by a single rental agency or realty company for Negro occupancy in over twenty years. Most of the homes occupied are more than thirty years old, and as run down as homes are certain to be where they are because of the high demand, rented to Negroes, regardless of their condition.⁷²

Another reason blacks faced difficulty in finding and maintaining adequate housing was unfair employment practices, which resulted in low incomes. In 1938, the *Star* complained that although the black community provided 75 to 95 percent of the business for establishments along Twenty-Fourth Street, few blacks were hired: "Let a campaign be started in Omaha that will ultimately result in the placing of Negro clerks in every business establishment," read one editorial.⁷³ Blacks were called upon to help their race by supporting businesses that were owned by other blacks. Business owners were encouraged to give those with specific job skills a position they were qualified for, rather than a "mop and broom."⁷⁴

Those with college degrees also found it difficult to obtain positions that met their qualifications. For example, in 1939, four black teachers were hired by the Omaha Board of Education. One was placed in the physical education department; one served as a part-time music instructor; the third was used as a substitute teacher, and the fourth was

assigned the position of Dean of Negro Girls at Technical High School. In fact, it remained the practice of the school board not to hire full-time black teachers in the high schools until 1957. Meanwhile, black elementary teachers were limited to schools on the Near North Side.⁷⁵

The hiring of a “race woman” as an assistant custodian at Lothrop Elementary School in 1940 was an attempt to fulfill a request by the Omaha Negro Chamber of Commerce, which had asked that blacks be hired for the vacant positions of six school teachers, two school nurses, two stenographers, and six assistant custodians. Only the assistant custodian quota, however, was filled.⁷⁶ A 1942 editorial in the *Star* protested:

In the State of Nebraska we have proven ourselves as students, upon us you have put your stamp of approval. From your schools we have come armed with diplomas [and] degrees. We pay our taxes as good citizens should do, we contribute our part to live. We have and will fight side by side with our classmates for world democracy. Then why shouldn't we fight for the right to teach side by side with them in the schoolrooms of our schools?⁷⁷

Sometimes light skinned blacks obtained better jobs if they passed for white. Mattie Kennedy, one of the first black people hired at the Douglas County Election Commissioner's Office in the 1930s, noticed several examples of this “professional passing” while reviewing voter registration papers. When her boss asked her to identify some of the blacks who had listed themselves as white, she refused, fearing they would lose their jobs if their race were revealed.⁷⁸

Even black taxicab drivers often faced discrimination. All cabs were segregated, with whites riding with black drivers only as a last resort. Along Sixteenth and Farnam Streets, an area where people frequently caught cabs, some white people would hold

signs that read, “NCD,” which meant “no colored driver.” Dispatchers would also use this code over the radio when sending a cab to pick up a rider.⁷⁹

Unfair hiring practices even occurred within the Near North Side. Eastern European Jews owned many of the businesses in the North Omaha area, and frequently depended on family members to work in their stores. They maintained an amiable relationship with their black neighbors and often extended credit to those in need.⁸⁰ Friction arose, however, in the early 1940s, over the hiring of “foreign-born aliens” who found employment while “thousands of loyal black Americans” could not find work.⁸¹ In response, the Negro Chamber of Commerce urged that “intelligent” rather than “violent” action be taken. It told citizens to consider the slogan “don’t spend your money where you can’t work” for the year 1940-1941.⁸² Furthermore, the “what is white is right” philosophy and the patronizing of businesses owned by those who did not live in the black community were referred to in a December, 1940 *Star* editorial as “economic lynching.”⁸³ As one resident complained: “They want our business, but not our company.”⁸⁴

The paper encouraged the hiring of black men by commending good employees and touted the businesses that hired them. For example, in 1941, Roberts Dairy was congratulated for employing three blacks.⁸⁵ The Paramount Radio Shop was referred to as “a high class firm [which] has served the public and is noted for quality merchandise,” for providing one black man with a job for the previous five years.⁸⁶ The management responded by assuring the public that this man is a “capable and dependable employee.”⁸⁷

In 1940, the government issued a contract to Glenn L. Martin Company of Baltimore, Maryland, for a long-range bomber assembly plant, which was to begin operation south of Omaha. The company's policy did not allow for the hiring of "colored workers," contrary to the directive of the government's National Defense Advisory Commission, which earlier declared: "Workers should not be discriminated against because of age, sex, race or color."⁸⁸ As a result, the Omaha Negro Chamber of Commerce sent a questionnaire to the Martin Company, which, along with the response, was published in the February 14, 1941 edition of the *Star*:

1. Would you be favorable towards hiring Negroes under normal conditions?
Answer: Yes, for certain services.
2. Will you employ Negroes in execution of the contract (or contracts) which have been or will be awarded you in the National Defense program? Answer: Probably not.
3. Will you employ skilled and semi-skilled Negroes as well as unskilled ones?
Answer: Prefer White but would hire skilled Negroes if necessary.
4. How many Negroes do you employ? Answer: one. [Question]: Skilled, semi-skilled, [or] unskilled? Answer: Unskilled.
5. How far will the policy of your plant permit Negro workers to rise if his ability merits promotion? Answer: Difficult to say—circumstances might permit going above skilled workers but doubt it.
6. Has your experience in the employment of Negroes been Good, Fair, Unsatisfactory? Answer: Good.⁸⁹

Believing that the Martin Company sought "to prevent both the training of Negroes in Omaha and their integration into the work program," the *Star* called to its readers to "wake up and fight" against discrimination in defense projects.⁹⁰ Although two hundred "race men" had been hired at the plant by May of 1941, none held skilled or

semi-skilled positions. Seven months later, six blacks had been advanced to clerks in the stock room. An editorial in the black paper predicted a shortage of skilled and semi-skilled labor in defense operations in the near future and asked its readers if they were ready to meet the crisis. It urged that teenagers, along with employed and unemployed blacks, be properly trained to meet the need as it arose: “[T]he Negroes . . . now employed at the Martin Bomber Plant and other defense industries, should fight to be admitted to training programs within the plant.”⁹¹

Pressured by blacks who were angered by the refusal of defense industries to integrate their forces, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 on June 24, 1941. It prohibited racial discrimination by defense contractors and in job training programs. The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) was established to enforce the order. It stated:

There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries because of race, creed, color, or national origin.⁹²

As a result, a clause was placed in all defense contracts that prohibited discrimination. It was not long, however, before blacks realized that even this measure did not stop the ongoing and widespread discrimination it was designed to prevent. While the *Star* vehemently fought for the opportunity for blacks to work in defense programs, it chastised those who were unwilling to take the training required for this kind of employment. Citing the example of three young local men who had enrolled in a sheet metal class and then dropped out, and a fourth student who showed poor attendance, it

stated that their lack of perseverance was a “gross injustice” against those who fought for them to be enrolled in the program.⁹³

One method blacks sought to obtain higher wages and better working conditions was through unions, but they often found that door closed to them. Some were even reluctant to join, for fear they would not be given the same opportunities as the white members. Furthermore, some blacks who had previous experience in unions in other cities found that they were the “last to be called” and received a limited amount of work. Therefore, they felt more secure in the open shop.⁹⁴

Some progress in the fight against racial discrimination in unions was made in the spring of 1941, when Senator John Adams, Jr. was successful in winning approval for Legislative Bill 504, which passed by a 22 to 8 vote. Originally written by Senator Bevins, it called for the regulation of union dues for common labor. Senator Adams, however, struck the original contents and substituted, “no labor organization may discriminate because of race or color.” The exception was railroad unions, as they were regulated by congress.⁹⁵

The *Unionist*, the local labor paper, described LB 504 as “controversial.” It also added that “the bill passed bore very slight resemblance to the original bill and had almost all of the objectionable features removed.” The “objectionable feature” Adams originally called for would have “denied unions the right to act as collective bargaining agencies if they discriminated.”⁹⁶ In defending his bill, Adams cited incidents in which black painters were not hired to work on a black housing project because they did not have union cards and in which they were hired to work in a theater in their community despite union objections. The theater was later hit with a barrage of “stink bombs.” He also mentioned the problem of blacks not being hired for skilled and semi-skilled

positions at the Martin Bomber Plant.⁹⁷ As passed, the bill merely stated that “it was against public policy” for unions to discriminate, resulting in a much weaker law.⁹⁸

Several months after the bill was passed, approximately 1,500 people came to Zion Baptist Church to listen to A. Philip Randolph, International President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Looking ahead to the post-war era, he predicted that when the defense industries closed and the men returned home, an employment crisis would hit the black population especially hard. Randolph advised the audience: “Mass pressure is the most effective method and strategy to win constructive concessions in our present [society].” He promoted the use of “picketing, boycotts and mass demonstrations for jobs, better housing, more educational opportunities, and the elimination of police brutality. We need a million men in one movement, whose voice will be heard in government and industry and labor unions.”⁹⁹

At times, it appeared that blacks were beginning to overcome racial prejudice in the labor movement. An editorial in the 1941 Labor Day edition of the *Star* read, “one only has to visit the packing house worker’s CIO union meeting to find that there is a new day dawning upon the horizon in the field of labor. There you will find overwhelming incontrovertible evidence of lessening friction between the races.”¹⁰⁰ While the paper acknowledged those who still “adhere to the damnable clause, ‘Only Caucasians shall be eligible for membership,’” it proclaimed: “Prejudice is being gradually but surely blitzkrieged into oblivion within the ranks of labor.”¹⁰¹

While the passage of Adams’ bill was a step in the right direction for blacks in unions, the problem remained that not all unions were receptive to black membership. For example, most black painters in Omaha were unable to find work in the defense industry. From 1939 to 1941, they fought, without success, to be either admitted into an already existing local or be given their own local. This battle was brought to the attention

of the FEPC. Communicating through telegrams, AFL president William Green was asked to inform the committee as to why blacks were refused the right to work. The *Star* observed: "Already painters are working overtime at the Bomber Plant due to a shortage of men in their craft who are members of a union. This condition exists while Negro painters go without opportunity to work."¹⁰²

In October 1941, the problem was further addressed at a meeting at the Omaha Urban League. Earl Dickerson, a member of the FEPC, Lawrence Oxley of the Social Security Board, Washington, D.C., Joseph Gross, general organizer of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America, a special investigator of the Nebraska State Labor Department, and three members of the Northside Building Trades Council attended. Although they were unsuccessful in obtaining a separate charter from the local council of painters, it was agreed that the men would be allowed to work at the bomber plant if they were "qualified painters" and followed the "same rules, regulations and requirements of the unionized painters with the exception that they will not pay dues." The agreement further stated that they would be allowed to continue their attempt to obtain membership or a separate charter in the painter's union.¹⁰³

Theodore R. Poston, a labor investigator with the FEPC, was sent to look into further complaints from Omaha black painters regarding their exclusion from the local painters union. During a meeting with the Omaha District Council No.7 and several local unions, Poston learned "no colored local union was wanted in Omaha."¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, they could not be forced to include them due to a section in the council's general constitution which stated that "the general executive board cannot institute a charter in any locality without the consent of the local unions or district council already established."¹⁰⁵ The FEPC subsequently concluded that it was not within its power to force a union to grant a charter to any group, nor include as members any individual or

individual parties, but only to be able to remove restrictions preventing qualified workers from being hired for defense projects.¹⁰⁶

John Newton, secretary of the Painters Division of the North Side Building and Trade Council, lamented:

It is indeed distressing that a group of white Americans in these perilous times denies a group of black Americans the right to work. One cannot hope to build a great labor movement in this country until a deepening sense of justice and fair play becomes evident and until these existing highly placed individuals, whose duty it is to change these existing conditions, manifest some decisive sense of intentions to cure these evils.¹⁰⁷

Poston again intervened when the Armour Packing Company, along with several other companies, specifically refused to hire black women.¹⁰⁸ Raymond Brown, executive secretary of the Omaha Urban League, Geraldine Jarrett, President of the Home Defense Girls Organization, a local organization to help promote the employment of black women during the war years, and a committee of former Armour employees filed a complaint with the FEPC. On March 10, 1942, for the first time since the company had been in operation, two black women were hired to work in the sheep-dressing department.¹⁰⁹

The investigator also obtained several verbal agreements that, it was hoped, would lead to the employment of black women in the local defense industries. In February 1942, the director of the Nebraska State Employment Service agreed that all black, single women or whose husbands were in the service, and who could provide a birth certificate, would be eligible for enrollment in training courses for “light assembly work” at the Martin Bomber Plant. Lincoln Scafe, vice president of the plant, also

promised that all those who had successfully completed the defense-training program would be hired.¹¹⁰

In an attempt to address the employment problems blacks were experiencing in the defense industries and in the armed forces, a two-day conference was held at the University of Omaha in May 1942. Approximately five hundred people listened to speakers from organizations such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Protective Order of Dining Car Waiters, and the Hotel and Restaurant Employers Local 732. Other speakers included Gordon C. Preble, president of the Omaha Central Labor Union, Frank Fenton, Director of Organization of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Mordecai Johnson, President of Howard University. The local labor paper, *The Unionist*, reported that it was “an unusual sight to see these diners [at the banquet] white and colored, sitting side by side and talking and joking with one another.”¹¹¹ Almost eight months later, approximately one hundred black women were working on the assembly line at the Martin Bomber Plant. The *Star* hoped “that this is the dawn of a new day for both Negro women and men in industry whether in time of war or peace.”¹¹²

Still, discriminatory hiring practices continued. In 1943, a reporter from the *Omaha Star*, acting as a black looking for employment at the Patrick Drapery Company, reported this phone conversation:

Me: I understand that you have a defense sewing project there.

First voice: We certainly do.

Me: Are you in need of power machine operators?

First voice: Yes, single and double.

Me: Will you consider hiring blacks?

First voice: Well, I don't know. We have never hired any. I'll let you talk to the floor lady.¹¹³

After a repeat of the above conversation, the caller was referred to the owner of the factory, Mr. Patrick:

Me: Mr. Patrick, I understand that you have quite a bit of defense sewing at your factory. Are you in need of power machine operators?

Mr. Patrick: I don't know. I did hear them say that they needed a double needle and buttonhole operator; otherwise, I believe most of the machines are filled.

Me: Would you consider hiring colored?

Mr. Patrick: . . . I might if we could get in a number of new machines.

Me: Why wouldn't you consider hiring them to work along with the whites?

Mr. Patrick: It might cause friction. The workers might object.¹¹⁴

The *Omaha Star* responded by saying that any employer who "wished to think and act American" should show some "intestinal fortitude" and follow the President's executive order by hiring and training blacks in defense programs.¹¹⁵

The black community showed great support for its members who worked in the defense industry. A January 1, 1943 edition of the *Star* was dedicated to the "Negroes on the Home Front." It emphasized the progress that was made by black men and women who started as "helpers or common laborers," and were advanced to positions that required skill and training. Furthermore, the paper commended the "democratic policy now being practiced by the management of the Glenn L. Martin Bomber Plant and only hope this is the dawn for both Negro women and men in industry. . . ." ¹¹⁶ The following

spring, approximately 600 people attended a special Sunday morning service at St. John A.M.E. Church honoring the black employees of the plant. The gathering was attended by Mr. G. T. Willey, vice-president and general manager of the company, who thanked the black employees “for all you have done.”¹¹⁷ By January of 1945, 765 blacks were employed at the plant out of a total of 13,217 workers.¹¹⁸

In April 1943, newly elected state senator Harry Foster, whose district included the Near North Side, was successful in obtaining the passage of an anti-discrimination bill, L.B. 263. This measure made it unlawful “to refuse employment to any person in the production of military or naval material because of race, color, creed or religion.”¹¹⁹ Furthermore, a violation would result in a penalty of 500 to 1,000 dollars and a 30 to 90 day jail sentence.¹²⁰

In 1943, the 1893 Nebraska civil rights statute was published in the *Star* with specific instructions on how to handle any violations of it. After determining that an act was an actual case of discrimination, readers were advised to bring the statute to the attention of the manager or proprietor. Further problems were to be reported to the local branch of the NAACP or the Urban League. Unfortunately, this piece of legislation was rarely enforced. Although some cases were brought to court, most were either dismissed or the offender was fined a miniscule amount.¹²¹

In the meantime, some blacks sought to establish their civil rights through the ballot. A 1941 article in the black paper entitled, “Every American Citizen Has the Right to Vote-Why Abuse That Right,” reprimanded those who, unlike the blacks in the South,

had the right to vote but did not take advantage of it. The story pointed out that although eight thousand blacks in Omaha were qualified, only four thousand had voted in the last election:

No wonder the weeds are allowed to grow abundantly in our community. No wonder the lighting is so poor in our section, being turned on thirty minutes after those in adjoining sections, where all white reside, and turned off thirty minutes before. No wonder our police protection is so lax that cars occupied with men are allowed to cruise through our neighborhood molesting our mothers, our wives, and our daughters. No wonder when representative Negroes appear before our City Council and ask that plans be drawn for an adequate community center that our children as well as adults may have [they] are informed that there are no funds, despite the fact that funds are available for sections of the city where the residents are predominately white. No wonder we are being barred from local defense projects by private holders of defense contracts.¹²²

The *Star* offered a solution to the black community's apathy. First, it suggested the formation of an organized voters league, strong enough to reach all citizens of North Omaha. Secondly, it advised that a representative be nominated to "articulate and epitomize our needs and, with the power of the vote, stand solidly behind him with our total strength." It urged its readers to assume responsibility for the condition of their neighborhoods. If the black community continued its indifference to voting, the paper predicted: "We shall continue down the road leading to degradation and poverty."¹²³

In November 1941, the *Star* again urged its readers to become politically active. Black Omahans, it said, were "definitely behind in both visible demonstrations and in the use of the ballot." This time it suggested a neighborhood block system, headed by a several captains who would relay the importance of voting to the members of their respective blocks and see that they vote "one hundred percent" at every election. A "Citizenship Pledge" form was placed in the paper, which asked all readers over the age

of twenty-one to agree to become a member of the Voters' League and encourage others to join.¹²⁴ The success of this drive was not reported.

While the *Star* was a civil rights advocate, other news media often projected a negative perspective of blacks. A case in point is when Foster May, a broadcaster for radio station WOW, reported that a black man was struck by a car while "pursuing" two white women. According to the paper, his race was mentioned eight times. This, the *Star* claimed, was "designed to stir up race hatred. Too long have we been satisfied with what is said about us." It also urged all housewives to boycott G. & W. Sugar, a sponsor of KOWH radio station, after it aired a racial joke.¹²⁵

The black paper became more militant after the United States entered into World War II, when an editorial called for North Omaha residents to "declare war ourselves." While it expressed sympathy for the state of the rest of the world, it called out for an "internal war," to fight for better education for black children, better and more diverse jobs, and the "enjoyment of all the rights and duties of citizenship." It also demanded "development of group self-respect and discipline which will bring us to pool our economic resources, to have confidence in our intelligent leadership and to adopt the standards that are appropriate for a people in our position."¹²⁶

Racial incidents that were covered by both the *Star* and the *World-Herald* often presented two different viewpoints, with the latter paper sometimes contributing to the already negative stereotyped image the white community had of blacks. An example of conflicting news coverage of race related stories is illustrated in a 1942 incident between an Omaha police sergeant, Jack Graham, and a local black woman, Ruby Eldridge. A

front-page story in the *Star* said that the officer was called to the Eldridge home because of a dispute between her and one of her tenants. In a sworn statement, Eldridge alleged that the officer “had me almost down to the floor by the arm. The only way I could get out of that position was to bite his hand, whereupon he struck me such a blow, until I screamed. For a moment I lost consciousness and everything went black.” Her husband tried to “reason with the officer,” and was arrested along with Eldridge.¹²⁷

The *Star* reported that Graham struck her husband when they arrived at the police station. Eldridge also claimed that the policeman again struck her in the eye, knocked her down, and kicked her. She was then taken to a cell where she again temporarily lost consciousness. Her injuries, according to the *Star*'s account, included a “lacerated right wrist [which happened before the officer arrived at her house], sprained left thumb and hand, contusions of the left eye, left leg, left side of the chest, right buttock, right side of the abdomen and left thigh.”¹²⁸

The paper showed a photo of the woman's bruised and swollen face. It also reported that this was the second time in two years officer Graham had been charged with police brutality. Previously, he was charged in the beating of two Creighton University students. Following the Eldridge episode, the NAACP filed charges, which resulted in Graham's suspension, pending an investigation of the charges. The *Star* expected action on the part of its readers by saying, “the law-abiding and fair minded people of Omaha must now vow vengeance against Jack Graham. All red-blooded Negroes are going to help in this without being asked.”¹²⁹

The *World-Herald* placed the story in the middle of the front page under the headline, “Police Sgt. Graham Stripped of Badge.” It stated that the Omaha branch of the NAACP was bringing charges against the officer for beating and kicking Mrs. Eldridge, who was arrested for “drunkenness, disturbing the peace, resisting arrest, and assault and battery.” None of her injuries were listed nor were any details given regarding her testimony of what took place at the police station. Graham’s prior history of using excessive force was also omitted.¹³⁰

Two days later, the *World-Herald* reported that the city prosecutor sought a warrant against Eldridge’s husband, charging him with “interference with an officer in the performance of his duty.”¹³¹ The officer told the court that Ruby Eldridge had bitten him when he tried to take her to a hospital for her cut arm. The paper also stated that Graham’s bandaged hand was “badly infected” and needed “daily treatment.” Again, no mention was made of the injuries Eldridge received. Graham testified at his hearing that while at the station she “attempted to kick him while backing him into a corner. To protect himself he caught her foot during one of the kicks and caused her to fall.”¹³² In spite of the charges, Graham was “restored to duty with full pay for time lost.”¹³³ The fact that this incident occurred when black soldiers were fighting for their country added to frustration on the Near North Side. The *Star* observed it had happened when “both Negro and White women [were] sending their sons, husbands and other loved ones to spill their blood for our ‘Democratic Way of Life.’”¹³⁴

In its 1944 annual report, the Omaha Urban League commented on the black community’s growing resentment and, consequently, its resistance to Jim Crow policies:

Omaha, too, felt the impact of war nerves which brought with it race tensions. People were restless, more aggressive, less satisfied with the status quo.—The world is changing and so are its people! Discriminating practices that were unchallenged before were now met head-on by citizens of this community.¹³⁵

Did World War II magnify the “Negroes’ awareness” of the nation’s hypocritical treatment of its black citizens as NAACP President Walter White claimed? It seems impossible to think that they could be any more aware of the country’s double standards after the war than before it. Its emphasis on democracy and the fight for freedom, however, fueled the tensions that were already burning. In other words, it was a catalyst that changed resignation into defiance, and anger into a more united effort to achieve civil rights. Furthermore, it is true that any improvement in race relations came as a result of their “own efforts,” which meant abandoning the traditional ways of dealing with discrimination and adopting more direct and confrontational methods. Although Omaha continued to compartmentalize its black citizens to the Near North Side, their “head-on” approach to abolishing Jim Crow practices over the next decade was impossible to ignore. The remainder of this study will examine that struggle in detail as their efforts slowly eroded segregation.

¹ William H. Chaffe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 29.

² Manning, Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, 2d ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), 18.

³ D[ennis] G. Paz, "The Black Press and the Issues of Race, Politics, and Culture on the Great Plains of Nebraska, 1865-1985," in *The Black Press in the Middle West, 1865-1985* ed. Richard Suggs (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 238, 240; *Omaha Star* (hereinafter referred to as *OS*), 18 September 1942.

⁴ Later this heading was changed to read "Dedicated For The Service . . ."

⁵ Sarah Nelson, Omaha telephone interview by writer, 16 December 1998. Ms. Nelson was born in 1924 and has always resided in North Omaha.

⁶ Garneth O. Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape: Heritage Conservation in North Omaha* (Omaha: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, 1984), 34, 42; Clare V. McKanna, Jr., *Homicide, Race and Justice in the American West, 1880-1920* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 49; T. Earl Sullenger and J. Harvey Kerns, *The Negro in Omaha: A Social Study of Negro Development* (Omaha: Municipal University of Omaha, 1931), 1.

⁷ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 39.

⁸ Ibid., Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 205.

⁹ Donna Mays Polk, *Black Men and Women of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Black History Preservation Society), 41; Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 39.

¹⁰ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 44.

¹¹ Ibid; *Omaha World-Herald* (hereinafter referred to as *OWH*), 28 August 1982, Douglas County Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as DCHS) file clipping. Additional information on Aaron McMillan can be found in Linton wells, "Jungle Doctor," *Readers Digest*, July 1942, 103-06, DCHS file clipping.

¹² Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 39-40. In 1911, George E. Hayne and Eugene Kinckle Jones combined three committees—the Committee for Improving the Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York, the Committee on Urban Conditions and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women to form the National Urban League in New York City. Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 6th. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 517.

¹³ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵ Roland M. Gephart, “Politicians, Soldiers, and Strikes: The Reorganization of the Nebraska Militia and the Omaha Strike of 1882,” *Nebraska History* 46 (June 1965): 94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁹ *OWH*, 10 October 1891.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha Nebraska* (New York: Munsell & Company, 1894), 138.

²¹ *OWH*, 10 October 1891.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *OWH*, 10 October 1891. For additional information on the Smith lynching, see David L. Brustow, *A Dirty, Wicked Town: Tales of 19th Century Omaha* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2000).

²⁵ McKanna, *Homicide, Race and Justice in the American West*, 61, 63, 52.

²⁶ Robert L. Myers, Interview by Dennis Mihelich, 1 August 1984, Part II, Number 8, Sponsored by the Douglas County Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska, 20-21.

²⁷ Bertha W. Calloway and Alonzo N. Smith, Ph.D., *Visions of Freedom on the Great Plains: An Illustrated History of African Americans in Nebraska* (Virginia Beach,

Virginia: The Donning Company Publishers, 1998), 54; *Revised Statutes of Nebraska*, 1943. Reissue of Volume 1A, 1962. Published by the Revisor of Statutes, 1962, 591.

²⁸ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 34-35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35, 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35; Rudy Smith interview by writer, 3 February 1999, Omaha Black History Museum, Omaha.

³² Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 42; Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 344.

³³ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 42; Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 344, 347.

³⁴ William C. Pratt, "Advancing Packinghouse Unionism in South Omaha, 1917-1920," *Journal of the West* 35 (April 1996): 45; Sullenger and Kerns, *The Negro in Omaha*, 7.

³⁵ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 41-42. Peterson defines the term "ghetto" as "a territory that houses primarily one minority group." She also quotes Harold Rose, author of *The Black Ghetto*, who describes it as "the territory which is occupied by black people in American cities and which has evolved out of a system of residential allocation permitting no freedom of choice."

³⁶ Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "The Perils of Passing: The McCarys of Omaha," *Nebraska History* 71 (summer, 1990): 64, 67; Calloway and Smith, *Visions of Freedom*, 57.

³⁷ *OWH*, 26 July 1919; Gatewood, "The Perils of Passing," 68.

³⁸ Gatewood, "The Perils of Passing," 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; Michael L. Lawson, "Omaha, a City of Ferment: Summer of 1919," *Nebraska History* 58 (fall 1977): 396-98.

⁴⁰ Lawson, "Omaha, a City of Ferment," 413.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 415; *OWH*, 29 September 1919.

⁴² *OWH*, 29 September 1919.

⁴³ Ibid., 1-2; Calloway and Smith, *Visions of Freedom*, 67; Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 43.

⁴⁴ *OWH*, 29 September 1919.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 43; *OWH*, 29 September 1919.

⁴⁷ *OWH*, 29 September 1919.

⁴⁸ Ibid; Calloway, *Visions of Freedom*, 68.

⁴⁹ *OWH*, 29 September 1919.

⁵⁰ David McMahon, "The Origins of the NAACP in Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska, 1913-1926." (master's thesis, Creighton University, 1993), 44, 57, 78. According to McMahon, the NAACP was founded in 1909-10 in an attempt to improve the impoverished conditions of blacks in the United States, through the guarantee of their legal rights. Harrison J. Pinkett, "An Historical Sketch of the Omaha Negro" (unpublished typewritten manuscript, 1937), 5. Article contained in file of articles on black community life, Works Progress Administration Files, University of Nebraska at Omaha Library, Omaha Collection. Later, Pinkett sought protection for blacks in the wake of a racial clash in North Platte, Nebraska, when a local black man allegedly shot a white police officer. *New York Times*, 14 July 1929; *New York American*, 17 July 1929; *Bee News*, 13 July 1929.

⁵¹ Frank Wilkerson, "The Impact of the Urban League on a Community" (master's thesis, Municipal University of Omaha, 1953), 21; *Omaha Guide*, 2 November 1933.

⁵² Pinkett, "An Historical Sketch of the Omaha Negro," 56-7.

⁵³ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁴ For additional information on black organizations, see Pinkett, "An Historical Sketch of the Omaha Negro," 55-60.

⁵⁵ Myers-Mihelich interview, 6. Sarah Nelson also made this point.

⁵⁶ *Bee News*, 17 February 1933.

⁵⁷ *OWH*, 17 February 1933.

⁵⁸ Federal Writer's Project of the Works Project Administration, *The Negroes of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Woodruff Printing Company, 1940), 17-18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6, 18.

⁶⁰ Mildred Brown founded the *Silent Messenger*, a Sioux City, Iowa, newspaper, in the mid 1930s. In 1937, she and her husband, Edward Gilbert, moved to Omaha, where she began selling advertisements for the *Omaha Guide*, a black newspaper. Approximately one year later, she started the *Omaha Star*. Brown died in 1989. *OWH*, 20 February 2001.

⁶¹ *Nebraska Blue Book* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1942, 1944, 1948), *OWH*, 28 August 1982, DCHS file clipping; *Ibid.*, 1 March 1937. Foster later would serve in the legislature from 1943 to 1946, and again in 1948, representing the same district.

⁶² *OWH*, 20 January 1939, DCHS file clipping.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *OWH*, 28 August 1982, DCHS file clipping; *Ibid.*, 1 March 1937, DCHS file clipping.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28 August 1982, DCHS file clipping.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Hessicia Steward, Omaha telephone interview by writer, 13 February 1999.

⁶⁸ Harold Tibbs, Omaha telephone interview by writer, 17 December 1998, Omaha; *OS*, 3 June 1942.

⁶⁹ *OS*, 3 June 1942; Myers-Mihelich interview, 8.

⁷⁰ Sullenger and Kerns, *The Negro in Omaha*, 25.

⁷¹ *OS*, 14 February 1940.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 17 January 1941.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1938.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Jeffery Harrison Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis, Creighton University, 1967), 77-78; OWH, 9 September 1993, DCHS file clipping.

⁷⁶ OS, 20 September 1940.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13 March 1942.

⁷⁸ Gatewood, "The Perils of Passing," 64; OWH, 1 February 1995, 1-2.

⁷⁹ Harold Tibbs interview.

⁸⁰ Rudy Smith interview. For additional information on the settlement of Jews in North Omaha, see Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape: Heritage Conservation in North Omaha*, 30-32.

⁸¹ OS, 7 June 1940.

⁸² Ibid., 14 June 1940. This campaign began in Chicago in the early 1930s in an attempt to pressure white employers, who received significant income from black consumers, to hire black employees. Nonviolent, direct-action techniques such as picketing, and boycotting were used. Businesses such as diners, bakeries, movie theaters, and dime stores were targeted. By the "mid-thirties, this Buying Power movement" was practiced by blacks throughout the country. Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 360.

⁸³ OS, 20 December 1940.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 18 October 1940.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 9 September 1941.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 19 July 1940.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 19 July 1940.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4 April 1941; 14 February 1941.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 14 February 1941.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 14 March 1941.

⁹¹ Ibid., 9 May 1941; 19 December 1941.

⁹² John Hope Franklin, and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 388-89.

⁹³ Ibid.; *OS*, 15 August 1941.

⁹⁴ Sullenger and Kerns, *The Negro in Omaha*, 12.

⁹⁵ *OS*, 9 May 1941; 30 May 1941.

⁹⁶ *The Unionist*, 30 May 1942.

⁹⁷ *OS*, 9 May 1941.

⁹⁸ *The Unionist*, 30 May 1941.

⁹⁹ *OS*, 21 November 1941.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 9 September 1941.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 3 October 1941.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 23 January 1942.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ *OS*, 6, February 1942.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*; 20 March 1942.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27 February 1942.

¹¹¹ *The Unionist*, 22 May 1942; *OS*, 29 May 1942.

¹¹² *OS*, 1 January 1943.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 19 March 1943.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 January 1943.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24 March 1944.

¹¹⁸ George A. Larson, "Nebraska's World War II Bomber Plant: The Glenn L. Martin-Nebraska Company," *Nebraska History* 74 (spring 1993): 39.

¹¹⁹ *OS*, 26 March 1943.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 17 September 1943.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 17 October 1941.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28 November 1941.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 June 1941.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7 August 1942.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 27 March 1942.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ *OWH*, 23 March 1942.

¹³¹ Ibid., 25 March 1942.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ *OS*, 3 April 1942.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 27 March 1942.

¹³⁵ Omaha Urban League Annual Report, 1944. Quoted by Dennis N. Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League, *Nebraska History* 60 (fall 1979): 416.

CHAPTER 2

Postwar Omaha, 1945-1947

I've had white people tell me, "This is a white man's country, a white man's country." They don't sing that to the colored man when it comes to war. Then it's all *our* country, go fight for the country. Go over there and risk his life for the country and come back, he ain't a bit more thought of than he was before he left.

Leon F. Litwack, "Trouble in Mind"¹

Racial discrimination persisted in Omaha in the postwar years. In fact, in some ways, it became worse. The city's black population rose from 12,015 in 1940 to 16,311 in 1950, a 35.8 percent increase, yet the majority remained segregated on the Near North Side, an area already severely overcrowded. Those who found work in war industries often were laid off, and many local businesses and industries remained reluctant to hire skilled blacks. Some remained unwilling to hire blacks at all. The struggle for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee and an effective civil rights law continued. Jim Crow practices persisted in preventing blacks from using many of the city's public facilities, restaurants and recreational facilities. Despite their earlier success in obtaining jobs in defense programs, their military service, and their proven ability in highly skilled occupations, blacks continued to be regarded as second-class citizens.²

What did change was their willingness to remain satisfied with the status quo. Organizations such as the NAACP and the Omaha Urban League continued to fight their battles through the court system or the with the art of persuasion, while the more confrontational groups such as the National Negro Congress took a direct, aggressive

stand against discriminatory practices. New, interracial grassroots organizations, led by individuals who attempted to bring about racial equality in various ways, were formed. Blacks also became more active in politics. Realizing it had a voice through the ballot, the black community encouraged its residents to study the candidates' records and vote.

Historian Lawrence B. DeGraff points out:

World War II greatly influenced the attitudes of black Americans. Many became more aware of the discrepancies between America's professed ideals and its practices and of their ability to bring about change. Black Americans in the West reflected this increased assertiveness, which historians regard as an essential precursor of the Civil Rights Movement.³

Pride fused with anger as black veterans returned home to a country that still failed to recognize them as full Americans, despite the contribution they had made during the war. An editorial in an October 1945 edition of the *Omaha Star* read: "Through the study of their own history throughout America, the Negro is awakening from his state of lethargy. They are discovering that it is a record to be proud of." An editorial cartoon in the same issue depicted a white soldier whose shirt read "Status Quo Hate," standing on American soil and raising a gun toward an incoming ship marked "Returning Negro Soldiers."⁴

The *Star* featured many articles depicting the achievements of black servicemen. Hawaii's Negro Navy Marching Unit was shown performing in the island's V-J Day parade. Another story was headlined: "1,241 Negro Units Helped Achieve European Victory." Louis R. Lautier was pictured receiving the Meritorious Civilian Award in Washington, D.C., for his role in successfully integrating black civilian employees in all divisions of the War Department.⁵

Few blacks, though, received the Congressional Medal of Honor despite their heroic actions. The *Star* complained that a California army sergeant, Edward A. Carter, “who although wounded eight times . . . killed twenty-six German infantrymen, destroyed two enemy machine gun nests, wiped out one mortar squad and captured two prisoners” was denied the Congressional Medal of Honor, despite the recommendations of his superior officers. Why? Because, the paper explained, “He was a member of the Negro race.”⁶

Local veterans also received substantial attention in the black newspaper. Allen Brewer, who fought in four major campaigns, including the invasion of Normandy, was pictured after he returned to Omaha. The ordeal Woodrow Morgan experienced while a prisoner of war in Germany was detailed. Air force Captain Alfonza Davis, Tech High School 1937 valedictorian, led a group of black airmen on five strafing attacks before being reported missing in the Mediterranean theater.⁷

The *Omaha World-Herald*, however, gave relatively little attention to the blacks who served their country. In 1947, the paper ran a column entitled “Men and Women in Service,” or, “Men and Women of War.” It featured those who had earned medals of honor, received promotions, transfers, or were being relocated. Others who were returning home were welcomed back. Few, if any, blacks were featured in the articles.

As in other cities, Omaha suffered a severe housing shortage as veterans returned home. Young families made their homes in garages, basements, and crowded homes where sometimes three to seven members of a family shared one bedroom. The Omaha Housing Authority (OHA) set up temporary barracks-like units in city parks to alleviate

the problem. An American Legion Housing Fund was established through the *World-Herald* in the hope of raising \$50,000 to provide additional emergency housing.⁸

Finding a place to live was especially difficult for blacks due to forced segregation. Restrictions even existed in the public housing units. Logan Fontenelle Homes, located just north of Cuming Street, housed its black residents west of Twenty-second Street, its whites to the east. The OHA quickly realized, however, that additional public housing was needed and plans were made for three new projects in North Omaha.⁹ The Omaha Urban League sought to utilize vacant lots in the area for temporary housing. It also compiled a list of homeless black veterans, and worked out an agreement with the city that provided them with a share of temporary lodgings.¹⁰

Not only was there a shortage of homes in the black community, but also many of the existing homes were aged and deteriorated. At the suggestion of Henry Doorly, publisher of the *World-Herald*, Mayor Charles W. Leeman organized a City-Wide Planning Committee in August of 1945 to study the city's most urgent problems. Doorly was concerned that Omaha was beginning to look "run down" and unattractive to outside industry and would suffer economically as a result. Consequently, fifteen committees were organized to make improvement recommendations based on municipal needs. One of these was a thirteen-member Housing and Slum Area Elimination Committee headed by Alan McDonald, a local architect, Arthur L. Coad, president of Packers National Bank, and Theodore H. Maenner, president of T. H. Maenner Real Estate Company. Alfred C. Kennedy, vice-president of the McFarland & Kennedy Real Estate Company, served as project chairman. It also enlisted the help of area residents.¹¹

The Omaha Chamber of Commerce not only strongly endorsed the renewal movement, but also was also instrumental in gaining the support of many other organizations. The list included the City Planning Department, the City-County Health Department, the Real Estate Board, the Associated Retailers of Omaha, the AFL and the CIO of Omaha, the Omaha Central Labor Union, and the League of Women Voters.¹²

Seven months later, an assessment of existing conditions and recommendations for improvements entitled, *Improvement and Development Program Recommendation for the City of Omaha*, was issued. The report, which was referred to as “comprehensive” and “unbiased” by the *World-Herald*, found two areas in “urgent” need.¹³ One was in South Omaha and ran from M to Q Streets, then west of the business district, from Twenty-fifth Street to the packing plants. Since this area was zoned for commercial use, the report simply recommended that the houses be condemned and torn down. The area north of downtown, however, from Cuming Street to Bedford Avenue and from Sixteenth Street to Thirteenth Street, posed a more serious problem.¹⁴

According to the report, the north district had 2,490 “blighted” homes. It recommended that 375 houses be condemned, and indicated that another 232 homes were in need of major repair, and 635 needed minor repairs. Crowded conditions existed, as two houses often shared one lot with more than one family living in each house. While the document commended residents who had made repairs and improvements to their property, it pointed out six “causes of blight” in the area:

1. Most of the houses are quite old. (Probably the average age is 40 years or more.)

2. Many houses are built too close to each other due to small lots or too many buildings on one lot (some being in the rear of others.)
3. Many are without sufficient plumbing and other conveniences.
4. In many, there are too many families occupying one building.
5. Many houses are owned by speculators, who are bleeding the property by taking the highest possible rent, making no repairs. It has been almost impossible to obtain mortgage loans in this district.¹⁵

Some blame for the area's disrepair was placed on slumlords who took advantage of the fact that blacks had nowhere else to live, forcing them to pay high rent for inadequate housing. Another complaint was that in comparison to other parts of the city, the black community was not provided with equally "good streets, sewers, utilities, lighting, police and fire protection, safe schools, etc. It is quite evident that in the past the city has neglected this area and failed to serve it properly."¹⁶

The City Planning Committee also studied parks, recreation and schools. Kellom Elementary, located at 1311 North Twenty-fourth Street, was described as located in a neighborhood that was "congested, and terribly deficient in open space and playfields." The study suggested that the school be replaced with a building that could accommodate over 800 students. Approximately fifteen acres of vacant land surrounded the school, half of which was publicly owned. Consequently, the report suggested that the city purchase the remaining parcels of land and develop them as a site for "a new school, swimming pool, playground, playfield and an expanded garage and repair shop." Two other neighborhood elementary schools, Lake and Long, were also in need of being replaced due to limited size and poor conditions.¹⁷

The need for additional recreational facilities was nothing new to those who lived on the Near North Side. One resident complained in the *Star* of the teenagers' choice of "entertainment:"

The behavior of our . . . teens, along 24th street, between 7:00 P.M. and 7:00 A.M., is nothing to write home about, and the language they use could not be put in print. . . . Puzzling indeed is their insane desire to destroy property. In several residential sections, a favorite pastime is the breaking of streetlights, and mutilating trees seems to bring sheer delight.¹⁸

In addition to the North Side YWCA, established in 1920, the YMCA opened in a newly constructed building in 1946 on Twenty-fourth Street. These facilities, along with the Omaha Urban League, sponsored a "Vacation Play School" during the summer for children six through fourteen years of age. The Charles Street Center, at Twenty-fourth and Charles, provided the residents of the Logan-Fontenelle public housing project with shuffleboard, ping-pong, and a pool table. Girls were offered weekly classes in sewing and cooking. Although these "separate but equal" facilities helped to provide some constructive activity, they were not enough for the over-crowded population of North Omaha.¹⁹

The Mayor's Housing and Slum Committee was optimistic in its approach to solving the problems that it found. There were, however, several obstacles. First, it was difficult for residents on the Near North Side to obtain mortgage loans to finance new construction, the purchase of a new home, or to repair an existing home. Second, the condemnation of dilapidated homes and moving the occupants to 'some other older house' would displace many families. In addition, how would these families afford "new" homes? Compensation for those in particular need would be necessary, yet the

committee felt no public funding was necessary to alleviate these conditions, and that “other lending institutions or the neighborhoods themselves should alleviate the problems.”²⁰ The report also maintained that there was enough vacant land in the Near North Side where “well planned houses can be built and sold on a basis so that construction can be economically sound and completely self liquidating.”²¹

In fact, in 1945, the first new single-family units to be constructed on the Near North Side in twenty years were built at Thirtieth and Parker by the Wilson Real Estate Company. The firm began developing an area known as Bedford Park, located at Wirt and Spencer Streets, between Twenty-seventh and Thirtieth Streets. Some of the first residents in Bedford Park were U. S. Matthews, who worked for the Police Department in North Omaha, and Warren A. Alston, a fireman who was stationed at Thirtieth and Lake. Unfortunately, these additions were not enough to help the majority of the black community.²²

In March 1946, while the Mayor’s Improvement Committee proposed the development of a sixty-five acre neighborhood park on Bedford Avenue, the Omaha City Council was already debating whether to accept a bid from the Coca-Cola Company to build a \$250,000 bottling plant on five and one-half acres of this ground. One City Council member realized “a real need for doing something for the colored people” but others favored rezoning the area from residential to industrial use.²³

During a City Planning Commission meeting, Durward R. Crooms, executive director of the Urban League, complained of the lack of recreational facilities available for blacks and, consequently, the “disproportionately high rate of juvenile delinquency in

that area.” The park, he said, would serve the “ten thousand persons in the congested area” who have no recreational facilities. Leella Simmons, a representative of the Howard Kennedy School Parent-Teacher Association, stated that her group had “no fight” with the Coca-Cola Company; it just wanted to see that the children had a safe place to play. Donald M. Larson, president of the Chamber of Commerce Improvement Council, told the Coca-Cola representatives to “consider the [commission’s] plans as well as your own. There must be other possible sites for the building.”²⁴

In favor of the bottling company was C.C. Galloway, publisher of the *Omaha Guide*, a local black newspaper, who felt “no obstacles should be placed in the way of an industry that will build a new plant and provide jobs.” A real estate agent representing the bottling company and its manager, Mac Gothard, argued that the park “would be better if the front five acres are taken off,” thus removing the entrance from heavily traveled Thirtieth Street.²⁵

The Young Citizens Forum, a small, local group that was formed in 1945 under the guidance of the Urban League, also protested the Coca-Cola Company’s request to re-zone the area for industrial use. Several members, including Robert Myers, Durwood Crooms, Ryland Melford, and Rev. E. W. Gordon addressed four areas of concern in a letter to the City Planning Commission. First, if the district were to be re-zoned, it would only be a matter of time before developments that are more industrial were added. Second, the only area of expansion in the “Negro ghetto” was between Binney and Pinkney, and Twenty-fourth and Thirtieth Streets. The group felt that the City of Omaha “should protect the expansion of the better class residential section in the Negro ghetto

with the hopes of relieving the conditions in the more congested section of the area.” Next, it proposed that the undeveloped area remain designated for residential or recreational use. Last of all, it recommended that the areas in North Omaha deemed unsuitable for residential or recreational use be zoned industrially.²⁶

In a letter published in the *World-Herald* “Public Pulse,” a reader opinion column, Melford referred to the possible rezoning of the area as an “insult and a challenge to the Negro citizens of Omaha.” Concerned about the possibility of the plant being built adjacent to new homes in the area, the writer continued: “Negro citizens of Omaha, now bottled into a ghetto, desire that this area develop into a residential district which all citizens of Omaha can point to with pride and not a district which will become the victim of industrial encroachment.” Fearing the approval of the Coca-Cola operation would hurt its image, the Improvement Council decided to postpone a decision until the Mayor’s Improvement Committee’s report was released.²⁷

Mayor Leeman received the study several days later. He praised the committee and stated: “I am sure the results of your efforts will be seen in your city within a few years.” Unfortunately, no measures were taken to correct the poor living conditions on the Near North Side. Prior to the November 1946 city elections, rumors circulated that the recommendations would delay construction of private housing or commercial buildings in the white community. Although the Mayor’s City-Wide Planning Committee had earlier defined “urgent” as “to be done immediately,” its chairman, E. F. (Gene) Agee, thought otherwise. He stated that the committee’s recommendations should progress “on a gradual basis, and then only by fitting into the

over-all community building activities so as not to contribute to any abnormal manpower or material problems.”²⁸

The Housing and Slum Elimination Committee’s findings, however, received little attention prior to the November election. Although eight of the sixteen proposed City-Wide Improvement Plan projects were approved, no bond money was allocated for the housing situation described by the report. One reason was the fact that Mayor Leeman was against public interference in the housing industry. To make matters worse, the *World-Herald* reported that the committee was swayed by the housing shortage, and consequently, referred to the recommendations as “over-zealous.” In addition, it claimed that many of the homes were repairable.²⁹

Furthermore, despite the pleas of the black community, the City Council approved the plans for the bottling plant. The following summer, however, the Good Fellows, a charity organization sponsored by the *World-Herald*, “acted wisely” when it built a playground at Twenty-fourth and Corby. At a ceremonial opening, Mayor Leeman cut the ribbon that stretched across the entrance, allowing approximately one thousand eagerly awaiting children to try out the merry-go-round, teeter-totters, swings, and a concrete wading pool with a “modern sprinkling apparatus.” Teenagers climbed on the “junior jungle” which was constructed especially for them. The mayor stated he hoped “similar playgrounds will be built in every neighborhood in which the need exists.”³⁰

One year after the construction of the new playground, the *Star* thanked the Good Fellows charities for their “kindness, generosity and understanding.” It also admitted that the need to depend “on the kindness and generosity of God-fearing men for the

improvement of our community” was not a comfortable situation.³¹ For others it served as a reminder of the city’s segregated practices. A letter addressed to the *World-Herald* “Public Pulse” stated: “We, members of the younger generation, are faced with the problem of recreational facilities. When I say we, I mean the colored boys and girls of Omaha. Why not eliminate race prejudice and let us use the recreational equipment which is available?”³² In response, another reader wondered if the City Council even noticed the child’s letter, or if the city’s recreational director cared about “such trivialities.”³³

In an effort to help the community help itself, the *Star* encouraged “Negro Omaha to unite. Because now we are living in that wonderful post war world for which our sons, brothers and husbands fought . . . for equality in education, employment and social welfare.” Children were encouraged not only finish high school but to go to college. Furthermore, when a black competed with a white for a job, it was stressed that “the Negro will win only if he is at least ten times more qualified than the white.”³⁴

The paper also urged its readers to take a more active role in the community. One editorial read: “Omaha, like many large towns . . . has a staggering lack of colored leadership. Approximately 25,000 colored adults are strangely bewildered and definitely isolated because they have no real organized plan of action as a group.”³⁵ It encouraged its readers to join organizations that fought for racial equality such as the Omaha Urban League and the NAACP. In addition, smaller civil rights groups were urged to band together to create larger and stronger ones: “We can join forces with these groups and

make their fight our fight. All small organizations can band together with others that have the same purposes, and in this way make one strong group.”³⁶

In October of 1946, the Omaha Urban League, which had focused primarily on “recreation and community center activities,” followed the advice of Julius Thomas, industrial relations secretary of the National Urban League, and set forth in “new directions.” Several new recreational facilities which included the Near North Side YMCA Community Center, the Charles Street Center and a USO, in addition to the already existing YWCA, now served the black community. According to local historian Dennis N. Mihelich, the organization realized that it needed to shift its attention from “group-work,” in which individuals were helped through “clubs, classes and recreational and social activities,” to “community-work organization.” This meant that specific committees or “self-help groups” worked on problems in the areas of employment, housing, health welfare, research and statistics, and race relations.³⁷

Within a year, the Urban League not only changed its agenda, but it also moved its offices out of the Nebraska Telephone Company’s Webster Exchange Building, located at 2213 Lake Street, to the downtown business district. The new site provided the advantage of being closer to the businesses, agencies and other organizations that were important in promoting the League’s causes. Under the direction of Executive Secretary Leo Bohanon, one of its goals was to accomplish what the mayor’s House and Slum Elimination Committee had advocated. This involved “slum clearance, improvement of owned and rented homes, and increased opportunities for Negroes to buy and rent decent dwellings.”³⁸

These “new directions” in achieving racial equality, however, were not in step with the militant postwar atmosphere. The League remained dependent on the financial support of the Community Chest, which limited its methods of fighting racism. In addition, the NAACP, which was more aggressive than the Urban League, never gained a strong following in Omaha. Jeffery Smith, a scholar of mid-century race relations in Omaha, explained that many of those involved in the fight for equal rights found the “educationist approach” of the League and the “legalistic approach” of the NAACP frustratingly slow and sometimes ineffective.³⁹

The Omaha Council of the National Negro Congress was organized in 1946. Its mission was “to [integrate] the Negro into the full cultural, civic and industrial pattern of Omaha” by focusing on the areas of employment, better housing, opposition to restrictive covenants, representation in government agencies, and the inclusion of black history courses in the public schools. It not only focused on local issues, but also on problems blacks experienced throughout the country. Although its effectiveness on a national level ended in 1940, local chapters were established in seventy cities including Omaha. Rumors of its affiliation with the Communist Party and the jealousy that existed among many of the civil rights groups prevented it from receiving support from larger organizations such as the NAACP. Still, it succeeded in focusing attention on many Jim Crow policies within the city.⁴⁰

The president of the organization was Anita Harper Blackburn Hayes. Born in 1906 in Georgia, she came to Omaha in 1940, where she was employed as the executive secretary at the North Side branch of the YWCA until 1945. An outspoken crusader in

the fight against racial discrimination, Hayes was involved in other civil rights groups, including the NAACP and Urban League. Her strongest commitment, however, was probably to the Negro Congress. In the fall of 1947, she traveled to Washington, D.C., where she served as a delegate to the “American Crusade to End Lynching” conference and demonstration. The event was co-sponsored by performing artist-activist Paul Robeson and Albert Einstein. Other sponsors and participants included Lloyd Garrison, Orson Wells, W.E.B. DuBois, Joe Lewis, and Adam Clayton Powell.⁴¹

Hayes’ direct and often abrasive approach to addressing racial problems made her a controversial individual. One acquaintance referred to her as a “chauvinist” who, “if she does not like someone in a crowd, will come right out and say why. She is very stubborn and bullheaded and her ideas must reign supreme or she will not go along with the opposition.”⁴² Once, after being accused of “always trying to stir up trouble,” she replied: “Some go so far as to call those who fight for equal opportunities, equal accommodations and equal rights, communists.”⁴³

There was truth in her statement. After the war, many black civil rights leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, Adam Clayton Powell and Paul Robeson supported progressive and left-wing politics. Consequently, blacks were often suspected of subversive behavior during the post war anti-Red scare.⁴⁴ In 1947, the *Star* editorially cautioned readers against associating all blacks with un-American practices:

Today, many different social organizations, labor unions, clubs of various orders, heads of enterprises, are being classified as communists. The Negro, as a whole, searching for freedom, for economic relief, has often been classified as in sympathy with communism. True, many are communists, but comparatively they are small in number, and the Negro race can be congratulated on this point.⁴⁵

In fact, that year Hayes, who allegedly joined the Omaha Branch of the Communist Political Association (CPA) in 1944, was one of the thirteen Near North Side residents who the FBI listed as Party members.⁴⁶ According to a Bureau report, she served as co-chairperson for the local CPA until January 1945, and was one of five women who were appointed to the membership and social committee. It further stated that during this time, “membership committee meetings” and “study sessions” were held at her home.⁴⁷

Several months later, the *Star* claimed that Hayes served as chairperson “and was given the limelight” at a CPA gathering at the Rome Hotel. Approximately eighty of the one hundred people who attended were black. They included “professionals, representatives of both Negro papers in the city, [the *Star* and the *Omaha Guide*], packing house workers, [and] trade union leaders.” The main speaker, who the black paper identified as William Patterson, the director of Adult Education at Abraham Lincoln High School in Chicago, told the audience: “we cannot stop anyone from hating you, but by process of law we can stop them from lynching you.” Another speaker stated that blacks must “obtain benefits not by demanding anything special for the Negro alone, but . . . through teamwork of all races and creeds.”⁴⁸ The *Star* referred to the meeting as a “Workers’ Press Club,” whose interests and activities were “tied up with the integration of all people into the American pattern and way of life.”⁴⁹

The Omaha Progressive Youth formed a local chapter in 1947. According to R. F. Poindexter, a reporter for the *Star*, its second meeting opened with 150 members. They consisted of “veterans, students [and] young workers who, regardless of race, creed,

national origin or political parties,” hoped to obtain racial equality and improve educational and housing opportunities, especially for veterans. Referring to Omaha as a city where discrimination was “rampant without resistance,” he explained that the group planned to publicize and protest violations of civil rights in addition to lobbying legislatures and organizing rallies: “The time has come when we shall have colored bank tellers, city government officials, etc.”⁵⁰

The De Porres Club was another organization that was strongly committed to solving the social and economic problems in North Omaha. Named after Martin De Porres, a black Peruvian priest and social reformer who later was canonized in 1962, its goal was to remedy “the lack of social justice for the Negro in post-World War II Omaha.”⁵¹ It focused on the areas of employment, housing, education, and public accommodations. Furthermore, it pressured the older, more established organizations, such as the local NAACP and the Urban League, to take a more aggressive role in addressing racial problems. Its organizer, Father John P. Markoe, a Creighton University Jesuit priest, avowed “to do business with the devil himself if this would help defeat the terrible evil of discrimination.” In the beginning, some blacks questioned the priest’s intentions but eventually they came to understand his philosophy and trusted him. One member of his group recalled that Markoe often criticized many of the members for “dragging our feet, for being frightened too easily.”⁵²

The club originally consisted of a small interracial group of Creighton University students who shared his concern about Jim Crow practices in Omaha. With the use of non-violent methods such as sit-ins, picketing and boycotting, the De Porres Club was,

according to Jeffery Smith, “fighting for civil rights in Omaha long before it became fashionable to do so.” Although started by Creighton students, membership was open to everyone; therefore, it never became officially connected with the university. In fact, due to its controversial nature, the school’s president, Father Carl Reinert, told the group to conduct its business off campus. Until it disbanded in 1961, the club attracted social workers, students from other universities, and civic-minded citizens. Its membership “numbered in the hundreds” and branches reached as far as Denver, Colorado.⁵³

Students at the Municipal University of Omaha, now the University of Nebraska at Omaha, also became involved in fighting discrimination. During the fall of 1947, the *World-Herald* reported that three black football players, Archie Arvin, Ruben Pierce, and Hugh Jackson, would not be permitted to participate in a game at Missouri State Teachers College in Maryville, Missouri. Virgil Yelkin, director of Athletics at the University of Omaha, told a reporter from the *Gateway*, the school newspaper: “all contracts for the 1947 season were signed in November, 1946, before the personnel of the football team was considered.” He added that he was unaware of the legislation that barred blacks from participating against Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas university teams when he scheduled the game. He agreed, however, that no future football games “would be accepted with any team, in any state, which sanctions racial intolerance in any form.”⁵⁴

Members of the University of Omaha’s Student Council supported the athletic director’s decision. In a letter to the *Gateway*, it stated that the institution was “founded on an honest acceptance of racial equality . . . [and therefore, the university] was the victim of intolerance rather than the perpetrator of such.”⁵⁵ Some groups, however, felt

the university should have taken a stronger stand against Missouri's Jim Crow law.

Marcell Johnson, a University of Omaha student and Chairman of the Omaha chapter of the Young Progressive Citizens of America (YPCA), sent a letter to the *World-Herald*, demanding that the president of the University, Roland Haynes, cancel the game in protest:

It is needless to state that this state of affairs represents a low level of our American "Democracy." We have no words to stress the viciousness of this particular type of discrimination—we can only condemn it as being un-American, un-democratic, and intolerant. We, of YPCA, therefore call upon you, as President of Omaha University, to exert your vested authority and prestige, to cancel this game if it must be played under conditions that are not consistent with the spirit of our democratic, American principles.⁵⁶

The *Star* not only viewed the controversy as an act of racial discrimination, but also as an attack on democracy. It stated that what was really at stake was a person's rights as an American citizen. Furthermore, it believed that if the coach was being honest, he would have admitted that he "completed the schedule but forgot what millions of men and women died for a few years ago."⁵⁷

In an editorial in the *Gateway*, the Student Council responded to the YPCA's demand to boycott the game. While it praised the organization for its "alertness and for the content of their basic arguments," the council stated that it "overlooked a complicated interplay of moral obligation and good sense."⁵⁸ It further stated:

Events of the past week have demonstrated the needless confusion which can ensue when serious problems are tackled with judgment based on suspicion and pride rather than fact and consideration. They go farther. They vividly portray a basic fallacy in the current methods of many American groups in their attempt to promote greater racial equality. . . . The demand for cancellation of the game overlooked a complicated interplay of moral obligation and good sense.⁵⁹

Ralph Adams, President of the local branch of the NAACP, and Leo Bohanon, executive secretary of the Omaha Urban League, also became involved in the issue. Speaking at an Urban League meeting in Lincoln, both men praised the student council members at Omaha University for their attempt to abolish racial discrimination, and elaborated on the need to create a democratic environment within the “Big 6” universities. Bohanon urged greater “individual and group support and participation” in the fight against discrimination. The Lincoln Urban League executive secretary stressed the importance of individual and group involvement in the fight for civil rights and the need for a “permanent student group to fight against discrimination.”⁶⁰

Another conflict occurred when the University of Omaha Student Council, led by Harold E. Poff, “unconcernedly approved” a constitution for a local chapter of Delta Beta Phi Fraternity, which allowed only “Caucasian Christian students.” Bill Beebe, another member of the Council and the YPCA, was the only dissenting voice.⁶¹ An editorial in the *Gateway* referred to the decision as a “passive acceptance of the race barrier of the student’s most important legislative body.”⁶²

Still, the Council wondered about the advantages of having a prestigious fraternity on the campus: “Should Omaha University maintain its principles to the extent of stopping progress? Or must we become ‘commercial’ and scrap our principles for the mere sake of prestige?”⁶³ In a letter to the *Gateway*, the Council explained that it did not take the time to study the conditions before approving it, but it added:

A national fraternity lends itself character to a university because of the stimulation derived from contact with other schools who have similar interests. It is regrettable that discriminatory tendencies are present, but they are unavoidable and cannot be rectified at this time.⁶⁴

The fraternity was recognized when the faculty committee agreed to delete the wording, “Christian and Caucasian,” from the bylaws. While the *World-Herald* referred to the decision as “wise,” the *Gateway*, reiterated an earlier editorial in the school paper that stated: “An honest rejection of the charter would have done far more to build a good university.”⁶⁵

Yelkin came under fire again when it was discovered that a newly organized intramural bowling league refused to accept two black students “for no apparent reason.” A letter carrying thirty-five student signatures, addressed to the school paper, requested him to explain the Athletic Department’s policy regarding discrimination. He responded, stating: “I do not form the policies of the University of Omaha, [I] merely recommend.”⁶⁶ Consequently, a committee of five students, Chairperson Marjorie Mahoney, YPCA members Marcell Johnson and Bill Beebe, along with Doris Biggs and Bob O’Hara agreed to study the problem of racial discrimination on the university’s campus. It was to report its findings at the next meeting. While the “problems of prejudice and intolerance” were addressed at several Coffee Hour gatherings, little more was said of the problem.⁶⁷

Small, less organized, local groups were formed to fight racial discrimination in Omaha. Discouraged by the high unemployment rate blacks faced, especially in skilled and semi-skilled occupations, Welton Hogan, a North Omaha resident, headed the short-lived Community Employment Council for the Betterment of Colored People. The public was invited to attend its weekly meetings, held at the Urban League office, to discuss “the most severe problems confronting our people.” In addition to unemployment, these topics included inadequate housing, the limited employment of black teachers, poor

streets and juvenile delinquency.⁶⁸ He encouraged involvement, stating that through “organizing ourselves we can demand the things we are entitled to.”⁶⁹ Hogan also instructed the public to patronize businesses that were either owned by blacks or which employed them. The names of the North Omaha establishments that depended upon blacks for business, yet refused to hire them, were published in the *Star*.⁷⁰ In one article he asked:

Why don't we wake up as a race and do something that will help pull us out of the condition that we have been in for so many years? We have fought wars . . . some have given their lives for democracy and all [we] received in return was a lot of promises which haven't and probably never will be full-filled unless we get together as a race and demand that they be granted.⁷¹

Another way blacks organized was through politics. In the summer of 1946, a five-member “Negro delegation,” traveled to Hastings, Nebraska, to attend the state Republican convention. Ray Williams, an Omaha attorney who attended the event, stated that “the day has passed when Negroes get out and work to elect men to high office and, when elected, fail to give Negroes their equal representation” in government. Furthermore, a committee was being organized to investigate Republican candidates and their attitudes toward the employment of blacks.⁷² Referring to the ballot as a “weapon,” the *Star* published instructions for voter registration and encouraged close examination of the candidates' stands on racial equality. One editorial read: “It is up to you to weigh and consider the evidence in the light of the possible betterment of our race and the city as a whole, and then go to the polls and vote intelligently.”⁷³

Politicians realized the importance of the black vote. Local candidates who placed advertisements in the *Star* not only asked for the reader's support, but also

indirectly showed their awareness of the racial discrimination that existed in Omaha. Republican William G. “Bill” Singer, whose advertisement was paid for by “Colored Civic Leaders,” promised to be “fair to all people regardless of creed, color or race” if elected as sheriff. Lou Adams, another Republican, said he would provide “representation without discrimination” if reelected as County Surveyor.⁷⁴

County Attorney James J. Fitzgerald, a Democrat who was seeking reelection, claimed to be “a true friend of the colored people,” and interested in the problems blacks faced. He believed in “a square deal for everyone regardless of creed, color, or race.” Furthermore, he said he “represented many colored people from time to time and knows them personally.”⁷⁵ In fact, one large political advertisement claimed: “The Democratic Party is a True Friend of the Colored People.” Above the pictures of its candidates for state office and Congress, it stated: “The Republicans have deserted the principles set up by Abraham Lincoln. Franklin Delano and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt have done more for the colored people than anyone else since the death of the great emancipator.”⁷⁶

Blacks still found it difficult to secure political positions, even in their own community. John Adams, Jr. was elected to the Near North Side’s Ninth District in 1934 and later served in the Unicameral legislature from 1937 until he resigned in 1943. His father, John Adams, Sr., served seven terms in the legislature, from 1948 until his death in 1962. He lost his first fight for the seat in 1944 to Harry A. Foster, a white dentist. Foster previously served two terms in the House of Representatives in 1905 through 1907, and again in 1931-1932, and 1943-1948.⁷⁷

Two months before the 1946 election, Nebraska's governor, Dwight Griswold, designated September 22-29 as "American Teamwork Week." In accordance with that year's National Urban League Annual Conference theme, which emphasized "American teamwork" in fighting bigotry, Griswold issued a proclamation urging Nebraskans to "take a stand against racial hostility." Although he acknowledged the contributions blacks made during the war and the discrimination they faced, it was unclear what, exactly, what he expected citizens to do.⁷⁸

The proponents of the "Right to Work" amendment sought the black vote in November 1946. Contrary to its title, it actually endorsed the right to not join a union. Its sponsor, the Small Business Men's Association, was formed in 1946 by a group of Omaha businessmen and proposed that "no one can be forced to join a union against his will, or be fired because he joins a union."⁷⁹ Committee members chairman C. D. "Neal" Hascall, secretary Lloyd Skinner, an executive of the Skinner Manufacturing Company, and treasurer A. C. Scott, executive of the Scott Tent and Awning Company, placed an advertisement in the *Star*, urging readers to vote "yes" and "end all discrimination against Negro workers." It stressed: "Through "closed memberships" and "closed Shop" contracts, Negroes are denied employment in many trade unions. Negroes will, under Amendment 302, be able to gain employment without having to beg for union membership."⁸⁰ The amendment won by a three to two majority, with the greatest opposition in Douglas and Lancaster counties.⁸¹

As blacks became more assertive and visible through organizations and politics, whites fought harder to restrict them. According to historian John Hope Franklin:

The black ghetto that had become a fixture in the urban America earlier in the twentieth century gained a measure of permanence during the black migration of the war and postwar years. While Supreme Court decisions barred both the exclusion of blacks from certain sections or blocks in the city and covenants that restricted residential occupancy to certain preferred groups, usually white, race-based housing patterns remained the same.⁸²

During 1946, the housing crisis blacks faced in Omaha was exacerbated when residents of Kountz Place, a white section of North Omaha which ran from Locust to Pratt Streets, and Sixteenth to Twenty-fourth Streets, signed a restrictive covenant. It stipulated that homeowners or their real estate agents would not sell their properties to any minority:

It is further covenanted and agreed that the lots hereinafter described shall not be sold by the owner thereof or his agent to any person or persons of any race other than those of the Caucasian race, nor shall any other person or persons other than those of the Caucasian race use or occupy any buildings or any lot hereunto described. It is further covenanted and agreed by the persons acknowledging this indenture that they will not permit use or occupancy of their land by other persons other than that of the Caucasian race and that this restriction shall be incorporated into all covenants.⁸³

Despite the fact that restrictive covenants were ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1948, the agreement remained effective due to the Jim Crow mentality that was so prevalent. Consequently, it remained difficult for blacks to live outside of North Omaha.⁸⁴

Another concern for many residents was the prejudicial treatment they received from the police department. In October 1945, several NAACP members, including its president, Rev. C. C. Adams, filed a complaint, stating that the constitutional rights of a young woman were violated when the police broke into her house and arrested her instead of the person they were looking for originally. They also argued that this was a

“common practice” and requested that some measures be taken to prevent this from happening again. The police officials assured the group that “some action would be taken, and that the problem would be brought to the entire department’s attention.”⁸⁵

Moreover, the black community believed that the courts regarded crimes committed by blacks against each other as of little consequence and quickly dismissed such cases. The *Star* editorially stated:

It has been said that more significance is attached to traffic violations than murders committed among Negroes. Unfortunately this seems to be true, for just recently a murder was committed in this community and it is alleged that the judge [said] that “all Negroes are armed with guns, knives, and razors with which they cut and shoot each other at will.” Consequently, [he] must not have remembered that we too are taxpayers and large ones.⁸⁶

The Near North Side residents also felt that they received little support from the police department. Another editorial complained that it was out of the need of protecting themselves that “knives and guns have been prevalent among many in our group . . . because the teeth are not in the law.”⁸⁷ Three months later, the *Star* compared the robberies and assaults that occurred “in broad daylight” along North Twenty-fourth Street to a “Wild West Show.” Pointing out the fact that the crime rate was much higher on the Near North Side than in other parts of the city, it further stated: “Arrests can be made, but as long as they are not prosecuted to the full extent of the law, it is a needless procedure. . . . We must continue to ask for proper law enforcement.”⁸⁸

In addition to living in a segregated community, black youths continued to attend overcrowded, segregated schools. According to a 1945 Omaha Public School (OPS) census, 842 black students attended Long Elementary, 542 went to Kellom, 404 were at Howard Kennedy, while Lake Elementary enrolled 342. Saint Benedict the Moor, a

Catholic school and parish, located at Twenty-fifth and Grant Streets, enrolled black students exclusively. It was founded 1918 to serve the blacks in Omaha who otherwise “might have been ignored in the parishes in which they resided.” As Jeffery Smith said, “it was a case of Christian ideals inadvertently accepting segregation.”⁸⁹

In 1946, the OPS system hired eleven black instructors for Long Elementary and five for Howard Kennedy. The *Star* viewed these events as “another great step in the progress of the Negro in education,” just as it had the previous year when four additional black teachers were hired: “It means that [those] who learn to be teachers will no longer have to wander far from home to make use of their education. It means that our teachers will have a chance to prove their ability in their field. It means that the color line is weakening.”⁹⁰ Activist Anita Hayes did not share the same opinion. She later complained: “By their continued silence and evident gratitude, the [black] teachers who are already assigned to positions in predominantly colored schools are admitting their satisfaction and inferiority.”⁹¹

The local affiliate of the National Negro Congress (NNC) arranged a meeting with the local school board in March 1947. Hayes, along with Fred McDaniels and Earl Wheeler of the Ideal Improvement Club, the Reverend F. S. Goodlet, and Mildred Brown, publisher of the *Star*, brought up three areas of concern:

1. [Whether] the school board condoned the rental of school buildings to groups whose aims had been proven to be for the purpose of promoting racial discrimination and instituting restrictive covenants. In connection with this issue, the board was asked to take immediate steps to prevent a group such as the Kountz Park Improvement Association from holding further meetings in Lothrop school.

2. That Colored teachers be assigned to teach in schools throughout the city system and not be relegated to two schools attended only by colored pupils, Long and Howard Kennedy. The reason being given that such a move would promote better racial understanding and ease existing racial tensions and barriers.
3. That courses in Negro history be instituted in the school curriculum in order that both racial groups may become conversant with the contribution of Negroes in all fields of our civilization.⁹²

One request was honored. The following September, the school board refused to allow the Kountz Park Improvement Association to hold its annual meeting at Lothrop School. Board member Richard Collins recalled: “at least fifty Negro people have complained about this group.”⁹³ Still, the battle to employ additional black teachers in the system continued.

On May 2, 1947, the local NNC had a meeting with Omaha school superintendent Harry A. Burke. He rationalized the placement of black teachers at Long Elementary, saying: “there was a feeling that the colored teachers understood the colored children better than they did the white children.” Yet he was unable to explain why black students were assigned to white teachers. When asked about the possibilities of a black teacher being employed at the high school level, Burke replied: “there have been no vacancies in the high schools for some time [and] persons applying for such positions would have to be exceptionally qualified.”⁹⁴ He added an especially insulting comment, stating that Marian Anderson, a nationally known black opera singer, would make an acceptable music teacher in the Omaha schools.⁹⁵

Hayes observed that the comments Burke made at the May meeting made him a “changed creature” in contrast to his remarks at a gathering with the residents of the Near

North Side two months earlier. At that time, he stated that he was in favor of the integration of black teachers throughout the city's schools, and supported the addition of black history classes in the school curriculum. In an article in the *Star*, she also pointed out that the newly hired black teachers replaced sixteen white teachers who were relocated to predominantly white schools.⁹⁶

In the fall of 1947, Eugene Skinner, who held a Masters of Arts degree but taught physical education, became the first black principal in Omaha when he was promoted to the position at Long Elementary School. Although there were eleven openings for principals throughout the city, Skinner was placed in a black school where there was no vacancy, and its white principal was transferred to a school in the white community.⁹⁷

While the *Star* simply mentioned his promotion, Hayes angrily complained:

Some may feel there is reason for cheering over a recent appointment of a Negro principal, but only those of our group will cheer who live up to the hated classification of "The Child Race," a term used by white Supremists to characterize the Negro Race. Congratulations are in order to the principal because he qualified for the position. On the other hand, condolences are in order because his qualifications render him suitable only to head a Negro school. Those like [Burke] who seek to camouflage "White Supremacy" by the appointment of one Negro Principal and some twenty odd teachers to two schools populated wholly by Negroes is rather a slap in the face to the other 25,000 Negroes who live here.⁹⁸

Catherine Fletcher, a black teacher at Long in the 1940s, recalled that many blacks who were hired at the elementary school level held degrees not only in secondary education, but also master's degrees, while approximately two-thirds of the white teachers had received only two years of formal training. Prior to receiving a contract from OPS, black teachers were required to work as full-time, substitute teachers, earning less pay and receiving no benefits. At the end of each school year they were terminated,

then rehired in the fall. Black teachers were hired only when Burke believed that “an emergency existed and they could not do any better.”⁹⁹

From a national perspective, job discrimination against blacks who held college or graduate degrees often discouraged students from staying in school. Black men, in particular, found having a good education futile.¹⁰⁰ What appeared to be apathy in many blacks was an ingrained resignation to the Jim Crow practices to which many had experienced in the South for several generations. As Leon Litwack pointed out:

The aspirations and ambitions of black youths were almost certain to have been deflated by the time they reached maturity. Growing up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were exposed to the popular self-help messages and the dominant success creed, but they knew from personal observation and from the stories they had overheard that successful blacks existed mostly at the toleration of whites and within rigidly circumscribed limits. They knew, too, that the evidence of black success all too often provoked white resentment rather than respect.¹⁰¹

The same attitude was evident in Omaha during the postwar years. Robert Myers, a former local Urban League board member, recalled a black pharmacist at Methodist Hospital who, being male, “had two strikes against him and he didn’t last.” He was, however, followed by a black woman who held the position of “head pharmacist” for many years. Myers also pointed out that the inability of black men to find decent employment not only affected their economic status, but their family structure as well:

Until recent years that’s the way it was. The black female had a much better chance of making it than a black male. For the educated black male to have a position of authority, society frowns upon that for some reason. The black male has always been held down to the point that the black family has always been disrupted because the black male had no respect for him, not even the family, Daddy can’t do anything, and he says, “what’s the use of me training to do something, be a professional, nobody is going to hire me to supervise any whites.” So the black male has never had any ambition over the years. Had nobody to look to. Porters on the railroad cars with college degrees back in the 40’s.¹⁰²

Still, the black community sought to motivate students to remain in school and obtain a good education. During the week of March 16, 1947, the Urban League sponsored its fifteenth annual Vocational Opportunity Campaign. This effort was part of a nation-wide program to help black youths and young adults prepare for jobs and increase employment opportunities. The theme that year was “The future is yours. What are you doing about it?”¹⁰³ Robert Myers remembered the difficulty of convincing black youths of the importance of a good education:

“If you keep trying, doors will open sooner or later.” You were trying to convince young people of this at the same time you were trying to get those doors open so once they got the training they could step in. That’s where the hard part came, to get those doors open so they could step in. . . . Their parents, their friends got training only to get jobs as porters, packinghouse workers, etc. This discouraged them. You could get those jobs without all the extra work. That was an awful thing to try to counteract, to break that defeatist attitude.¹⁰⁴

Between the years 1948 and 1950, some doors did open. As the next chapter will show, organized interracial groups such as the De Porres Club began to break down Jim Crow practices in employment, businesses, education, and residential segregation in Omaha. Stronger leaders also emerged from the black community to wage a more effective fight for their rights, including a permanent Fair Employment Practices ordinance.

¹ Leon F. Litwick, "Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience," *Journal of American History* 74 (September 1987), 325.

² John P. Zipay, *The Changing Population of the Omaha SMSA 1860-1967 With Estimates For 1970* (Omaha: Omaha Urban Area Research Project, 1967), 13.

³ Lawrence B. de Graff, "Significant Steps on an Arduous Path: The Impact of World War II on Discrimination Against African Americans in the West," *Journal of the West* 35 (January 1996): 31.

⁴ *Omaha Star* (hereinafter referred to as *OS*), 12 October 1945.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 September 1945; 26 October 1945.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26 October 1945.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 September 1945; 28 September 1945.

⁸ *Omaha World-Herald* (hereinafter referred to as *OWH*), 17 March 1946.

⁹ Garneth O. Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape: Heritage Conservation in North Omaha* (Omaha: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, 1984), 54-55.

¹⁰ Dennis N. Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League," *Nebraska History* 60 (fall 1979): 417.

¹¹ Donald Louis Stevens, Jr., "The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha, 1954-1970" (master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1981), 19-20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 54; Stevens, "The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha," 20; Mayor's City-Wide Planning Committee, *Improvements and Development Program Recommended for the City of Omaha* (Omaha, Nebraska, 1946), 160.

¹⁶ Stevens, "The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha," 20; Mayor's City-Wide Planning Committee, *Improvements and Development Program*, 160, 162.

¹⁷ *City Plan: Omaha Nebraska, Parks, Recreation and Schools* (City Planning Committee, 1945), 17. The new Kellom School, which also housed the City-operated Kellom Community Center, was opened in 1952. Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 57.

¹⁸ *OS*, 30 November 1945.

¹⁹ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 48; Mihelich, “World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League,” 419.

²⁰ Mayor’s City-Wide Planning Committee, *Improvement and Development Program*, 162; Stevens, “The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha,” 20, 21.

²¹ Mayor’s City-Wide Planning Committee, *Improvement and Development Program*, 162; Stevens, “The Urban Renewal Movement,” 21.

²² Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 56; *OS*, 28 September 1945; 14 September 1945.

²³ Stevens, “The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha,” 22-23; *OWH*, 13 March 1946.

²⁴ *OWH*, 13 March 1946.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Mihelich, “World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League,” 413; *OS*, 15 March 1946.

²⁷ *OWH*, 17 March 1946; Stevens, “The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha,” 23.

²⁸ *OWH*, 21 March 1946; 1 November 1946.

²⁹ Stevens, “The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha,” 23-25; Donald L. Stevens, Jr., “Government, Interest Groups, and the People: Urban Renewal in Omaha, 1954-1970,” *Nebraska History* 67 (summer 1986): 136; Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 55. In the November 1946 election, voters were offered a package that included the necessary bonds and provided for five city commissions—the Omaha Improvement Commission, Sanitation Commission, Airport Commission, Auditorium Commission, and Park and Recreation Commission. Although it gained voter approval, the creation of the special commissions resulted in much confusion due to the overlapping of the appointed commissions and those of the elected commissioners. For this reason, a new city charter was adopted in 1957. Harold T. Muir, “The Formation and Adoption of the 1956 Omaha Home Rule Charter 1954-1956” (master’s thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1969), 6-8.

³⁰ *OS*, 7 June 1946.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20 June 1947.

³² *OWH*, 6 September 1947.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12 September 1947.

³⁴ *OS*, 22 January 1946.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 December 1946.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 November 1946.

³⁷ Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League," 418-19; *OS*, 25 October 1946.

³⁸ Mihelich, "World War II and transformation of the Omaha Urban League," 419-20; *OS*, 25 October 1946. The Nebraska Telephone Company's Webster Exchange Building is now the Great Plains Black History Museum.

³⁹ Robert Myers, Interview by Dennis Mihelich, 1 August 1984, Part II, Number 8, Sponsored by the Douglas County Historical Society: 32; Jeffery H. Smith, "The Omaha DePorres Club," *Negro History Bulletin* 33 (December 1970): 1.

⁴⁰ *OS*, 6 December 1946; Lawrence S. Wittner, "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," *American Quarterly* 4 (winter 1970): 887.

⁴¹ Anita Hayes, Federal Bureau of Investigation (hereinafter referred to as FBI), 100-3741-1A5, 20 April 1949; 100-3741-6, 26 July 1944; *OS*, 20 September 1946; *OWH*, 21 September 1946.

⁴² Anita Hayes, FBI, 100-3741-28, 13 January 1947.

⁴³ *OS*, 26 September 1947.

⁴⁴ Marable Manning, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, 2nd ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1986), 23.

⁴⁵ *OS*, 31 October 1947.

⁴⁶ Anita Hayes, FBI file, 100-3741-28, 13 January 1947; The American Communist Party became the Communist Political Association in 1944. Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15.

⁴⁷ Anita Hayes, FBI file 100-3741-6, 26 July 1944; 100-3741-9, 23 December 1944. In 1949, the FBI reported that Hayes had not held a position nor been active in the Communist Party “for some time” and, consequently, was no longer considered “a threat to the Internal Security of this country.” FBI file 100-3741-3, 16 February 1949.

⁴⁸ Anita Hayes, FBI file, 100-3741-16, 10 May 1945; OS, 20 April 1945. Patterson was affiliated with the Communist Party and edited the *Sunday Worker*, a Communist newspaper, in the late 1950s. David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), 354.

⁴⁹ OS, 20 April 1945. The Workers’ Press Club supported the Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. For further information, see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War*, (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

⁵⁰ OS., 31 July 1947.

⁵¹ Jeffery H. Smith, “The Omaha De Porres Club,” *Negro History Bulletin* 33 (December 1970): 194.

⁵² Stephen Szmrecsanyi, *History of the Catholic Church in Northeast Nebraska: Phenomenal Growth From Scannell to Bergan (1891-1969)* (Omaha: Catholic Voice Publishing Company, 1983), 292.

⁵³ Smith, “The Omaha De Porres Club, 194. For more information on Father John Markoe, see Jeffery Harrison Smith, “The Omaha De Porres Club” (master’s thesis, Creighton University, 1967), p. 4 of preface; Szmrecsanyi, *History of the Catholic Church in Northeast Nebraska*, 293.

⁵⁴ OWH, 22 September 1947; *Gateway*, 30 September 1947.

⁵⁵ *Gateway*, 30 September 1947.

⁵⁶ OWH, 25 September 1947.

⁵⁷ OS, 3 October 1947.

⁵⁸ *Gateway*, 30 September 1947.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰ *OS*, 5 December 1947. In 1946, the Omaha Urban League hired Bohanon as its executive secretary. He previously served as the manager of the Phyllis Wheatley House in Minneapolis and representative to the United Nations Relief Administration.

⁶¹ *Gateway*, 11 November 1947.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 18 November 1947.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9 December 1947.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9 December 1947; 3 March 1948.

⁶⁸ *OS*, 29 March 1946.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 12 April 1946.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19 April 1946.

⁷¹ Ibid., 26 April, 1946.

⁷² Ibid., 30 August 1946.

⁷³ Ibid., 31 October 1946; 20 September 1946.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 31 October 1946; 24 October 1946.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 24 October 1946; 31 October 1946.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 31 October 1946.

⁷⁷ John Adams, Jr. resigned from the Nebraska legislature on September 30, 1935, when he moved out of the district he represented. He served again in the Unicameral in 1937, but resigned in 1943 to serve in the army. *OWH*, 30 September 1935; 7 April 1943; *Nebraska Blue Book* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1998-1999), 396; *OS*, 31 October 1946.

⁷⁸ *OS*, 13 September 1946.

⁷⁹ William Pratt, "Employer Offensive in Nebraska Politics, 1946-1949," in *Politics in the Postwar American West*, ed. Richard Lowitt (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 137; *OS*, 17 May 1946.

⁸⁰ Pratt, "Employer Offensive in Nebraska Politics, 1946-1949," 138-39; *OS*, 31 October 1946.

⁸¹ *OWH*, 6 November 1946.

⁸² John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 420.

⁸³ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 56; Miscellaneous Records Book 222, p. 317, Douglas County Register of Deeds Office, Omaha/Douglas County Civic Center.

⁸⁴ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 56.

⁸⁵ *OS*, 12 October 1945.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 December 1946.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 May 1947.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 29 August 1947.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Mary McMahon, "Negro Education in Omaha, Nebraska" (master's thesis, Creighton University, 1947), 70; Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," 34.

⁹⁰ *OS*, 30 August 1946.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16 May 1947.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 11 April 1947.

⁹³ *OWH*, 16 September 1947.

⁹⁴ *OS*, 16 May 1947.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*; Telephone interview by Kathleen Davis with Catherine Fletcher, Omaha, Nebraska, 18 November 1999.

⁹⁶ OS, 26 September 1947.

⁹⁷Ibid., 8 August 1947.

⁹⁸Ibid., 19 September 1947. Eugene Skinner moved to Omaha at the age of seven from Lexington, Missouri. In 1945, he was awarded a fellowship from the University of Iowa, his alma mater, where he earned a master's degree in school administration. Skinner also served as principal of Lothrop elementary and Horace Mann Junior High School in Omaha. Donna Mays Polk, *Black Men and Women of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Black History Preservation Society, 1981), 45.

⁹⁹ Fletcher-Davis interview, 18 November 1999.

¹⁰⁰ Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 420.

¹⁰¹ Leon Litwick, *Trouble In Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 27-28.

¹⁰² Myers- Mihelich interview, 8-9.

¹⁰³ OWH, 21 March 1947, Douglas County Historical Society file clipping.

¹⁰⁴ Myers-Mihelich interview, 9.

CHAPTER 3

A New Kind of Warfare, 1948-1950

In 1948, Omaha elected a new mayor, Glen Cunningham. Sympathetic to blacks, he attempted to increase the city's awareness of racial discrimination through unprecedented measures such as his appointment of a Human Relations Committee. Meanwhile, the black community continued to fight Jim Crow practices through legal channels and grass roots civil rights efforts, but most attempts were futile. In fact, as postwar tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States escalated and the country entered into the Korean War, the fight against segregation lost momentum. The nation's attention turned to other issues such as the threat of communism, and the fear that oppressed blacks would be susceptible to its propaganda grew.

Yet, in 1950, the Omaha De Porres Club and the Urban League together led the local civil rights crusade in new and more aggressive directions. Using persistent, direct, non-violent methods such as sit-ins, picketing and boycotts, which civil rights activist and Committee of Racial Equality (CORE) member Manuel Talley called "a new kind of warfare," the movement targeted businesses that excluded blacks or practiced unfair hiring policies.¹

The demoralizing Jim Crow practices blacks experienced were nothing new, but their dissatisfaction about them escalated. In an article entitled "It is up to us," Lawrence Lewis, a writer for the *Omaha Star*, described an incident at the B&C Cafe, located at 5110 South Twenty-fourth Street. After placing his take-out order, "a young man looked me over and made no effort to even start frying the hamburgers." When a woman sitting

at the counter finally nodded, the cook informed Lewis that the burgers were twenty-five cents apiece. He replied: "It's OK with me, I just want three hamburgers." The price was repeated, and, bewildered, he again stated his order. Lewis then noticed the menu price for a burger was fifteen cents. He also noticed a sign that read: "Notice – No Colored Trade Solicited."²

Suddenly, Lewis understood the problem. He wrote: "There is no in-between. In our city we must rid ourselves of such degrading incidents."³ Although he felt helpless to change the biased attitudes of certain whites, he refused to feel belittled by them. "It is immaterial to me, because God gave me enough knowledge to overlook those who, through their ignorance, . . . feel they are superior."⁴

This "ignorant" and "superior" attitude Lewis witnessed is again demonstrated in a letter to the *Omaha World-Herald's* "Public Pulse." While the contributor claimed "about 90 percent of this much-touted 'discrimination' is poppycock," he supported a separate but equal philosophy:

While it is undoubtedly true that a colored person cannot patronize certain hotels and bars and cafes that cater exclusively to white folks, just what is there to prevent the well-to-do among the colored folks from building their own hotels, cafes, etc.? . . . The colored person complains that he must (?) live among his own color. Just what does this mean? Are they ashamed of their fellow Negroes? Just why do they moan and groan incessantly because they cannot live among white folk? . . .

Nearly all Negroes are members of some church, lodge or club. And what difference does it make that the church, for instance, is composed entirely of colored folks? [Do they] think that Christ will first come to those churches composed of white folk?⁵

Moreover, the fight against white supremacy was further complicated as the dread of communism intensified after World War II. Angry blacks, subjected to the hypocrisy

of participating in a war for democracy against Hitler's master race state, yet forced to live as second-class citizens, became likely targets of communist propaganda. This, according to historian Manning Marable in addition to the fact that civil rights demonstrations were almost nonexistent from 1945 to 1954, are the reasons why these years have received little attention in the study of black history:

The impact of the Cold War, the anti-Communist purges and near-totalitarian social environment had a devastating effect upon the causes of blacks' civil rights and civil liberties. . . . the paranoid mood of anti-communistic America made it difficult for any reasonable reform movement to exist.⁶

In 1948, Harold Anderson, a reporter for the *World-Herald*, wrote a five-part series on communism. In one article entitled "Red 'Fronts' Denied Here," he asserted: "Nebraska has its share of organizations, which nationally have been called 'communist fronts.' Many of them are in Omaha."⁷ Although he did not indicate who made these accusations, Anderson reported that almost all of the spokespersons for these organizations denied any anti-American affiliations. Among the list of suspected groups were the Omaha League of Women Shoppers, Omaha's CIO Fireman's Union, Nebraska's Henry Wallace for President organization, the YWCA, and the local chapter of the National Negro Congress (NNC).⁸ According to Harold Cruse, the NNC, which maintained a chapter in Omaha until the late 1940s, was "the main front organization in the Negro community."⁹ Anita Hayes, past president of the local chapter, however, told Anderson that she was unaware of any evidence that the local branch operated as a "front."¹⁰

The red hysteria accentuated the hypocrisy inherent in the country's commitment to democracy and its Jim Crow practices. One black woman interviewed by Anderson

stated: “Americans wouldn’t have to worry about communism or any other ism, if they made democracy work the way it’s suppose to.”¹¹ Another said: “Whatever integrates the minorities and gives them equal rights and prevents people from lynching me because my skin is dark, I would favor it—whether it be communism or something else.”¹² Lawrence P. Lewis, in the *Star* column, “Along My Way,” described why blacks could become susceptible to communistic propaganda:

If you have ever had to sit and listen to our Congress raising their voices to enact vital legislation to help save other nations, other groups; if you had to sit back and watch them spend millions of dollars to rebuild, to help other nations keep their freedom; if you had to read about German prisoners of war being treated better than Negro soldiers during wartime; if you had to accept insult after insult from your fellow Americans daily, then you would understand why the Communist would think that the American Negro would be a soft touch. But they were never more mistaken. . . . Such hate will not turn him traitor to his beloved America.¹³

Others found their patriotism shaken by the treatment they received. In a letter to the *Star*, Peggy Wall, Bertha Calloway, Alma Hodges, and Mary Clare told of their experience when they entered a downtown restaurant one evening to enjoy some hot chocolate and donuts after viewing the Freedom Train, an exhibit honoring America’s fight for liberty. They were refused service because two of them were black: “It made no difference that we were quiet and well behaved, respectably dressed, that we had money to pay for our order.”¹⁴ Nor did it matter that the two white women went into the kitchen and quietly spoke with the manager, who agreed that the customers sitting in the restaurant would not object if he served them, and, if he did, he would not be “overrun with colored trade.” He simply would not serve them. Omaha was a city where “enlightened, progressive city government” did not apply to all citizens.¹⁵ The women reminded readers of the Nebraska state law that prohibited discrimination, and asked:

Are you going to go through that train and yet make it a mockery in your lives? Are you going to be as stupid and petty and prejudiced as that café proprietor? Or are your intentions good and fine but you don't know what to do about the whole situation? . . . You have a new city administration just come into office, a new mayor. Will you write to him, petition him, individually and in civic groups to set up a Mayor's Committee on interracial matters? . . . It's up to you!¹⁶

When blacks were denied their rights in establishments in the Near North Side, the *Star* declared it was "too close for comfort." Readers were reminded of two business operations on Twenty-fourth and Cuming Streets that "do not cater to Negro trade. Of course, they will sell you anything if you are willing to take it out."¹⁷ As usual, the paper encouraged its readers to take proper action against these practices:

There are those amongst us who do not wish to be insulted, so we do not try to eat or drink in places that do not cater to our trade. And there are those who are ignorant of certain facts so we continue to trade there, but in the way the management wishes to receive our trade. In our community there are many of us that will yell about such action being unfair but that is all we do, yell at one another. The last action of course is characteristic of many of our race.¹⁸

Many fought Jim Crow policies through the legal system. According to civil rights historian Emma Lou Thornbrough, racial discrimination was difficult to prove and when the offenders were found guilty, the penalties were often minimal. Furthermore, few blacks could afford to spend the time and money that these seemingly hopeless court battles cost them. If, by chance, the defendant felt he would be found guilty, he often settled out of court, as the publicity of the trial might have encouraged more black customers.¹⁹ Still, those who did challenge Jim Crow practices, whether they won or lost, represented a significant effort in the fight for civil rights.

A restaurant located at 4022 North Twenty-fourth Street was fined twenty-five dollars when a black couple traveling from Utah pressed charges after they were refused

service.²⁰ In another case, the *Star* congratulated Leroy Lewis who “stood his ground and won his victory” when he and four friends sued Sam Longo, manager of the Metropolitan Billiards and Cafe, located at 2938 Franklin, for refusing to serve them.²¹ When Longo did not show up for the hearing, Lewis signed an arrest warrant against him. Longo was later fined twenty-five dollars in addition to court costs. The conviction was appealed, but the paper pointed out that “if the establishment was fined twenty-five dollars every day of the month it would not be long before they would be out of business.”²²

On the other hand, Marvin Kellogg was not successful when he and four companions pressed charges against Frank M. Clay, the manager of the Harkert Café, located in the Greyhound Bus depot at Eighteenth and Farnam Street. Clay refused to allow them in the dining room “because they were Negroes.” They were told “if they wanted to take the food out, he might serve them.”²³ Kellogg filed suit with the support of the NAACP, Negro Elks, Negro Ministerial Alliance, and the Negro Shriners. The case was delayed when the manager did not appear in court for the hearing and his lawyer was issued a continuance. Attorney Ralph Adams, who appeared as a “friend of the court” argued against the court’s decision. Adams stated that Clay’s refusal to serve blacks “was objectionable in view of the fact that interstate passengers and others were denied their constitutional rights, in addition to Harkert’s organization directly violating the Nebraska civil rights statute.”²⁴ The case apparently was never tried.²⁵

Lawrence P. Lewis wrote in the *Star* of the importance in taking legal action for the injustices blacks suffered, even if, in some cases, it served nothing more than principle:

Once again the members of our race faced insult and intimidation from owners of eating establishments. And most of us are shocked by the excuses given. Human rights must come before material rights, but we are having a hard time in making a few investors understand this. . . .

Due process of the law is a falsity when it concerns the minority. But the time has come when we must wake up or fall deeper into the already prepared pit. . . . Civil suits must come and we must back them if it takes [all] our needed dollars. 27,000 Negroes all wanting the same thing can be a powerful force. Let's either make it together or go down fighting for what is right and just.²⁶

Mildred Brown, publisher of the *Star*, continued to stress unity in the pursuit of equal rights. Unlike Lewis who did not believe the law was on the side of the black community, she argued that the city's courts were "fair." They both agreed, though, that legal action should be taken against Jim Crow policies and chastised the passive individuals who made excuses for their behavior. In an editorial she stated:

The next time that a trying situation faces a member of our group, we will expect the persons involved to carry out the task that confronts all of us. And even though only one person is involved if we find our courage is wavering just repeat over and over again, "I am not alone."²⁷

Omaha blacks did not need to go to court to learn the law was not on their side. It was evident on the streets where they lived. On a summer evening in 1948, fourteen-year-old William Rose was arrested on charges of destroying property and disturbing the peace. Witnesses said the 125 pound boy was thrown to the ground by two officers, "[beaten] in the face, and kicked in the groin."²⁸ His injuries were serious enough to

require hospitalization. The policemen who arrested Rose claimed the youth repeatedly struck one of the officers, causing them to forcefully subdue him.²⁹

The *Star* reflected the black community's outrage and its confidence that the policemen would be reprimanded: "Force is sometimes necessary in subduing any man by the arresting officer, but brutality certainly cannot be condoned. Certainly they will take action against the using of such force against children."³⁰ Another editorial in the black newspaper read: "We can no longer sit with our hands folded and let disturbing influences chase us from the street. Congested we may be, but tolerating insults is not a necessity, and those responsible will be brought to light."³¹ Although Ralph Adams, president of the local NAACP, and Charles F. Davis, chairman of its legal redress committee, stated legal action would be taken, the case apparently was never brought to trial.³²

Complaints also arose over the raids made by the city's moral squad on alleged gambling operations in the Near North Side. While the *Star* did not defend these "clubs," it did protest the method taken by the police:

Enforcing the law is a necessity. But [enforcing] the law in one district and not in other districts does not hold any part of fair and impartial law enforcement. At these clubs it is not necessary for the Morals Squad to break down the door or take patrons by surprise. All they have to do is walk in. But they probably don't get a kick out of it unless they are able to frighten somebody. . . . Such unfair acts against our community must stop.³³

Anita Hayes, an outspoken advocate for civil rights in the city, questioned the legality of the "shakedowns." Like Lewis and Brown, she stressed unity in the fight against racial discrimination. In addition, she urged blacks to "at all times, no matter who or where they are, be aware and know their inalienable constitutional and civil rights."³⁴

In 1950, the local branch of the NAACP also spoke out against the raids. It stated that these acts made “guilt racial instead of personal,” and it expressed concern regarding the possibility of “abuses” on the black suspects by the police. The organization suggested that the sale of guns be regulated, and that its comments be expressed to the police force and judges.³⁵

Meanwhile, the Omaha Urban League centered its focus on the poor living conditions, employment discrimination, and increased racial tensions within the black community. In the spring of 1948, its executive secretary, Leo Bohanon, wrote to William Sahl, director of the Omaha Community Chest, voicing his concern about the living conditions in the Near North Side and the need for a new approach to solving the problems:

The increase in over-crowding with an extension of the slum area with all of its attendant social ills, the increase in dependency, crime and juvenile delinquency, and poor health and last, a growing resentment among the Negro population that all is not as it should be, bring a real and a serious challenge to Omaha. These problems cannot be solved by ignoring them or a policy of laissez-faire, nor by providing more group work and recreation services.³⁶

At the same time, Bohanon commented on some of the problems of the Near North Side in a letter addressed to the editor of the *World-Herald*. He pointed out that although the population of blacks in Omaha had increased from twelve thousand in 1940, to an estimated twenty-two thousand in 1948, less than twenty new homes had been built in the neighborhood within the past thirty years. Furthermore, he expressed concern over the “resistance” many businesses showed in hiring blacks in areas other than “unskilled, common labor, domestic service and menial capacities.”³⁷

In an effort to address these issues, the Omaha Urban League sponsored a Human Relations Institute at the Rome Hotel, where ideas for solving racial inequalities were shared with social workers and business leaders. Speakers included Creighton University professor and founder of the De Porres Club, Father John Markoe, Russell A. Hand, manager of the State Employment Office, and the League's Leo Bohanon. Concerned about the dilapidated areas in North Omaha that the city "took for granted," Father Markoe told the group: "It is no more reasonable to keep our blighted areas than for a man with an ulcerous tooth or a cancerous hand to go without having the diseased member removed." He also expressed concern that over the way Omaha residents "take these conditions for granted."³⁸

Eight months later, Mayor Glen Cunningham appointed a Human Relations Committee to investigate complaints of racial discrimination. Charles Davis, an Omaha attorney, was the only black appointed to the fourteen-member commission.³⁹ According to the *Star*, its purpose was:

1. To investigate conditions in the community which adversely affect inter-group relations.
2. To report findings to the community.
3. To recommend corrective measures.
4. To carry out a program of community interpretation for the improvement of inter-group relations.⁴⁰

Although it merely served as an advisory board to the mayor, it was a start in the right direction. The *Star* commended Cunningham for acknowledging "something is wrong," and supported the committee by promising to "stand ready to do all that we

can.”⁴¹ To some people, however, the mayor’s actions were another example of the city’s ineffective response to Jim Crow practices. Two months after Cunningham initiated the Humans Relations Committee, Anita Hayes wrote an article in the *Star* discussing what she felt was mere lip service to Omaha’s racial problems:

The naming of committees for the purposes of study and investigation lend nothing toward the solution of these problems and the lessening of existing racial tensions. Only legislation and set maximum penalties for the violation of such laws by fines and jail sentences can be effective where the practices of discrimination have gone unchallenged for so long.⁴²

In May 1949, the City Council endorsed the mayor’s committee, adding that the eradication of racial prejudice was necessary for the city to “grow in strength.” It also stated that the Council’s policy was “not to discriminate in any of its fields of employment on the basis of race, creed, or color,” and that “fair and impartial consideration will be given to all applicants” who sought city jobs. Furthermore, it encouraged all private employers to also establish fair employment practices.⁴³

Discrimination in hiring practices that occurred in the Near North Side especially offended the area’s residents. In 1948, a young black woman answered an advertisement in the *World-Herald* for a “counter girl” on North Twenty-fourth Street, and was rejected because “that position was open only for white girls.” The *Star* bitterly complained:

It is bad enough when the merchants out of our district refuse to employ men and women because of their race, creed or color. But when a merchant in our district, where his survival depends on our patronage, refuses to employ because of a person’s color, that is an insult to every member of our group and must be opposed. It is a challenge all of us must meet. Oppression and exploitation must not thrive in our district. And we can and will do something about it.⁴⁴

Still, many Omaha blacks resigned themselves to the city’s Jim Crow practices and most of the white community chose to remain ignorant of their problems. Bohanon

expressed his frustration with the situation in a letter to Lester Granger, the executive secretary of the National Urban League. He complained that one of the organization's greatest challenges was awakening both the whites and the blacks from their "lethargy." The whites believed that race relations were better in Omaha than anywhere else in the country, and the blacks were content with their situation because they thought that it was worse in other states, particularly in the South. This, he said, in spite of these four facts:

1. 97% of all employed Negroes work in common laborers, menials, domestic and unskilled capacities.
2. 26 % of the homes in which Negroes live should be condemned as unfit for human habitation.
3. Overcrowding among Negroes is the worst in the city. Only 15 new homes have been built for Negro occupancy during the past ten years to take care of a population increase of 10,000.
4. Negroes are still barred from white hotels and all but a few restaurants, as well you know the pattern here.⁴⁵

In the summer of 1948, a reader of the *World-Herald*, Gordon Burke, wrote to the "Public Pulse" stating that racial discrimination in Omaha was actually worse than in the South. He accused the paper of "[choosing] to close its eyes to and ignore" past racial disturbances. In particular, he criticized its recently published "anti-sectional editorials," which he believed carried a "holier than thou attitude," and, at the same time, ignored the city's Jim Crow practices.⁴⁶

Omaha blacks were not only denied admittance to many business establishments, they were often refused permission to establish places where, according to *Star* columnist Lawrence Lewis: "[we] would not have to worry about socializing with other groups. We would not have to worry about being insulted because of our color."⁴⁷ In July 1948,

the city council denied requests for two liquor licenses on North Twenty-fourth Street. The reason, it said, was to keep the total number of licenses at 624.⁴⁸

The denial of the opportunity to establish these businesses in their community was, as Harrison J. Pinkett, an Omaha black attorney, said, “an act of arbitrary limitation.” He filed a memorandum with the council, arguing that the decision was in keeping with its position that “Negroes can have only inferior places.” Therefore, he insisted that it either break the “liquor monopoly or that you notify all hotels, bars and restaurants of Omaha that they must serve all persons in their places without regard to color.”⁴⁹

In 1950, when the State Liquor Commission granted a liquor license to a Lake Street business that apparently was owned by someone who did not reside in the Near North Side, *Star* writer Columbus McNorris called it “an outright policy of discrimination.” The decision, he felt, was an attempt to take more money out of the black community and that “by their stupidity, even the most unconcerned” have been woken up. The fight against such acts, he warned, “may come sooner than you think.”⁵⁰

The barbers of the Near North Side also fought against discrimination when they helped finance a lawsuit that was filed by twenty-one year old Warren A. McGee against the Nebraska School of Barbering in Omaha for refusing to accept him “on account of race.”⁵¹ An article in the *Star*, written by R. C. Price, informed readers:

The barbers are waging a fight against discrimination. The management of the school has repeatedly refused Negroes, but advises we should have a separate school. The barbers are resisting the attempt on the part of anyone to establish a separate or Jim Crow school for their race. . . . We as a race should fight Old Man Jim Crow anywhere seen, although small as it may seem, it is a germ, and will infest the entire city and state if not fought down. . . .⁵²

The attorney for the school motioned to dismiss the case. He argued that it was a private school and, therefore, could not afford to hire a special instructor to teach students how to cut black people's hair.⁵³ McGee's attorney countered that the school was public and the motion to dismiss was overruled. Four months later, when the case still had not come to trial, the *Star* suspected that Harvey Hall, of the Nebraska School of Barbering, had been given time to "scheme around for the purpose of establishing a Jim Crow barber school for our group."⁵⁴ One year later, the case was dismissed on the grounds that the plaintiff's case did not constitute a legally enforceable claim.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, there were other ways to fight discrimination than through the legal system. This was demonstrated in the attempt to acquire better health care in the black community, as some white physicians actually refused to see black patients. One North Omaha resident was shocked to learn the extent to which Jim Crow practices affected his race:

Some doctors will not treat us because we are a different color. . . . Unless it has happened to you or your family, it is hard to understand. It happened to me when my daughter was sick. She was just four years old. The doctor I called would not come out in the district I lived in. We called another doctor and he came. And he said, "If we had waited a few more hours our child would have been dead." Anyone should understand how I felt about the first doctor I called.⁵⁶

In 1948, a black physician, Aaron McMillan, and his wife returned to Omaha after serving in Africa as medical missionaries. Realizing the need for better medical care for Omaha blacks, McMillan established People's Hospital. Located at 1844 North Twentieth Street, its purpose was to serve the black community. The small, twelve to fourteen-bed institution was referred to as an "open hospital," and physicians throughout

the city were invited to use its equipment and facilities. After only five years, the facility closed, but the McMillans remained active in the community, participating in the Omaha Urban League and the NAACP.⁵⁷

In 1949, a black state senator again represented Omaha's Fifth District. John Adams, Sr. succeeded Harry Foster, a white dentist, and became the first black member of the Nebraska legislature since Adam's son, John Jr., represented the district in 1935 and again from 1937 to 1943. Adams Sr. held this position until his death in 1962. A practicing attorney and an active member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, he was well known throughout the black community.⁵⁸

Many black women also attempted to improve the social and economic conditions of the Near North Side. The outspoken Anita Hayes continued to act as the community watchdog after serving as president for the local chapter of the National Negro Congress.⁵⁹ In 1950, the *Star* described her as "one of the most prominent women in civic circles."⁶⁰ The same year, Elizabeth Davis Pittman, an attorney, was the first black elected to the Board of Education. Pittman won the support of the Omaha League of Women Voters, Bethel Baptist Church, and the *Star*.⁶¹ During the campaign, *Star* columnist Lynwood Parker explained why, if elected, she would benefit the Near North Side:

Our school situation has become so corrupt that something must be done or we will face total anarchy in our school system. For an example, approximately 100 new teachers were hired in the public schools . . . [but] not one new Negro teacher was hired. . . .

Mrs. Pittman will know why certain Negroes are dropped from the system just prior to receiving their permanent tenure, and just why certain teachers are hired for purely political reasons. . . . Now is our chance to get a person on the School

Board to represent the people, all the people. Now is our one chance to rise from the corruptive and despicable shape we're in to one of hope and opportunity.⁶²

Pittman won the election by a considerable margin. An article in the *World-Herald*, entitled "Mrs. Pittman School Victor-Attorney First Negro on Board," pointed out that among the six elected candidates, she received 36,670 votes, which placed her third in the balloting. Due to health problems, however, she was never able to hold the position. It was not until the 1960s that another black, Robert Myers, served on the board.⁶³

While many black individuals worked independently to overcome Jim Crow practices, others supported existing civil rights organizations, or formed new ones that focused on various problems in the Near North Side. Unfortunately, due to the time commitment, lack of finances and the hardships of daily living, most were short-lived.⁶⁴ The Ideal Improvement Club, which began in 1949 under the direction of Jessie McGee, a mechanic for the Metropolitan Utilities District, was dedicated to correcting the eyesores that existed in the impoverished North Omaha neighborhoods. It encouraged homeowners to invest in a "quart of paint, a pound of grass seed, and a handful of flower bulbs" to make their property more attractive.⁶⁵ Unpaved streets were also a problem. One black resident wondered why "the roads in the north end of town, only two or three blocks from the main street," were in such poor condition that horses and wagons were needed one muddy, spring morning to transport a funeral party to the cemetery.⁶⁶ In conjunction with the Omaha Urban League, McGee sponsored a public meeting, encouraging the community to take more pride in their neighborhoods by repairing broken doors and windows, planting flowers and keeping lawns cut. The group also

urged Mayor Cunningham and the City Council to provide better alley maintenance, garbage clearance, traffic control, and bus and streetcar service.⁶⁷

The United Political League took a militant approach to solving many of the social problems. Durwood R. Crooms, who previously served on the board of the Urban League, was president of the organization. Although he believed that “there are far more important issues at stake than a few die-hard owners of eating establishments,” he was confident that by working together, the problem could be corrected easily. Of greater concern, he stated, was the refusal of many Near North Side businesses to hire blacks. Speaking at a meeting one evening, he stated:

This draining of the community’s wealth, year after year, must cease. Jobs must be made available where we spend our money. . . . Here in our community we must form a united organization that will place pressure where pressure will do the most good. It must be a hard-hitting organization that doesn’t know what the word compromise means. It is no easy task, but it can be accomplished and will be done. . . .

The only reason we have not progressed is that we have failed to organize and exert our pressure. We must do this on government officials, and on businesses that will not cooperate, and upon some of the members of our own race that place food and a few dollars above equal opportunity and freedom.⁶⁸

The diversified flurry of local civil rights clubs and organizations in the late 1940s often netted more frustration than positive results. One North Omaha resident, Edward Wright, felt that the black community not only spread itself thin among the “several hundred Negro clubs” that were formed and then abandoned, but also the rivalry that existed between them and their small size proved counter-productive. One organization that consisted of “five-hundred members or more,” he reasoned, would be more powerful than many, smaller ones. It would also reduce the number of meetings group members of

various clubs attended throughout the week.⁶⁹ Therefore, he and several members of the Rattlers Club, another local group, proposed a consolidation of all other groups to form the Inter-Council of Clubs.⁷⁰

The Inter-council of Clubs never met its goal. Neither did the United Political League. According to historian Jeffery H. Smith, pressure groups, designed to meet a specific goal, either “solve the problem or are conquered by it.”⁷¹ Unfortunately, due to the extent of racial discrimination in Omaha, most of the groups in the Near North Side were quickly conquered. One of the few grass roots civil rights organizations that did accomplish some success in the fight for social justice was the Omaha De Porres Club. In 1948, one year after Father John Markoe founded the organization, it moved from the Creighton University campus to 1914 North Twenty-fourth Street. Located in the heart of the Near North Side, the new location enabled members to interact more closely with the black citizens by helping to renovate and repaint dilapidated homes, providing food and clothing to the needy, and finding employment for those who were out of work. Later, the *Star* provided an office for their meetings.⁷²

Believing prejudice stemmed from ignorance, the club’s primary goal was to educate people to think along lines of “charity and justice” in interracial matters.⁷³ Its new center contained a library filled with books, pamphlets and magazines that pertained to interracial information. A large reading area and several discussion rooms were also available. The De Porres Club sponsored programs such as a lecture series for the public. Guest speakers who were knowledgeable in interracial situations provided valuable insight into the city’s Jim Crow practices.⁷⁴

The Club worked closely with the Omaha Urban League, NAACP and *Star* newspaper, but its financial support came from membership dues and contributions. Leo Bohanon, executive director of the League, often spoke at the meetings. Although he mainly focused on unemployment and housing restrictions, he suggested members familiarize themselves with the problems blacks experienced by becoming personally acquainted with the community's religious leaders, doctors and lawyers. He also stressed the importance of "group political action."⁷⁵ This meant supporting important legislation such as an anti-lynching law and a fair employment practices law. Members of the De Porres Club were also encouraged to investigate and report any complaints of racial discrimination in public places to state and national authorities.⁷⁶

Using non-violent, direct approach tactics such as sit-ins, picketing, and boycotts in its fight against discrimination, the De Porres Club preceded major black civil rights demonstrations such as the sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960.⁷⁷ According to Jeffery Smith:

Perhaps of greatest historical significance is the fact that its members . . . employed techniques which were to become part of the mid-century American street scene. The De Porres Club had demonstrated that these weapons made up an effective arsenal for peaceful revolution. This lesson was not soon to be forgotten.⁷⁸

While the De Porres Club took immediate action against complaints of discrimination, the NAACP used a legal approach that was not only slow, but also often ineffective. Consequently, the local chapter suffered from low membership, financial limitations, and poor community support. For example, approximately six hundred people attended a meeting in April 1950, but only eighty new memberships were

obtained. This was, according to the unnamed publicity chairman for the organization, “encouraging, but a very small percentage.”⁷⁹

In an attempt to strengthen the organization, the *Star* frequently reported its activities and encouraged readers to attend the NAACP’s weekly meetings. One editorial pointed out that despite the topics the organization addressed, such as “voting, public housing, and segregation,” the turnout was low.⁸⁰ Another article read:

Notwithstanding the lack of interest shown by the majority, there are still the faithful few who are still carrying on. As the problems of the Negro grow, the NAACP is trying to build a bigger and better Executive Board. The Executive Board now consists of 5 ministers, 4 attorneys, one editor and Dr. A.L. Hawkins. These are all very busy people who are willing to sacrifice their time and efforts for your benefits. Dear public, won’t you come out and do your part?⁸¹

The executive board consisted of highly respected community leaders of the Near North Side, such as Long Elementary schoolteacher Wanasebe Fletcher, *Star* newspaper owner and publisher Mildred Brown, and attorney Elizabeth Pittman. Yet Lynwood Parker, writer for the *Star*, blamed the magnitude of Omaha’s racial problems on what he believed to be the organization’s poor leadership. He pointed out that while the NAACP had the power to legally represent teachers who were unemployed due to racial discrimination, obtain proper police protection in the black community, and enforce “general sportsmanship” in city government, it did nothing. The reason, he claimed, was because “they are afraid they will lose their jobs if they speak out. For the past five years, Omaha also suffered the paralysis of ‘no progress’ because of these leaders.”⁸² In another column, Parker described Omaha as “a little worse than a typical example of a poor working relationship with the national office.” He also found it difficult to

understand why a city with a black population of 27,000 should have such a “shamefully” low NAACP membership.⁸³

The Omaha Urban League also suffered from a lack of community support. Like other organizations, it contended with apathy among the city’s black population. Its move in “new directions” in 1946 produced new problems that continued to plague it throughout the late 1940s. First of all, its shift from providing recreational and social activities for the black community to fighting racial discrimination confused both the whites and blacks.⁸⁴

Consequently, Leo Bohanon, the League’s executive director, was consumed with the task of interpreting its program. At one point, William Sahl, the director of the Community Chest, which controlled the League’s finances, not only thought the League and the NAACP were the same agency, but did not realize that the League was a Community Chest member, which it had been since 1928. In May 1948, Bohanon wrote to Sahl in an attempt to provide an understanding of the organization’s goals and achievements. He explained that while the League and the NAACP were interested in civil rights, the NAACP used “investigation, fact finding, collecting of legal evidence and presentation before a court of law” to achieve its goals. On the other hand, the League “[attempted] to improve the industrial, the economic, and the social welfare conditions of the Negro [through] the social service method of research, interpretation, education, conference and persuasion in the solution of community and minority problems.”⁸⁵

In a letter to the editor of the *World-Herald*, Bohanon also wrote:

The Omaha Urban League, a Community Chest Agency, like its 56 sister organizations spread throughout the United States, is working to improve the

living standard of the community's Negro citizens. It is our sincere belief that by so doing we contribute to total community progress and betterment.⁸⁶

Bohanon also worried that the Chest, which supplied over 90 percent of the organization's funds, would drastically cut or even abandon all of its support. Although the funding continued, it remained at the same level from 1944 through 1950, despite high inflation. This greatly impeded the League's activity.⁸⁷

The League's decision to move out of the Near North Side to the downtown business district at the end of 1947 was another factor in its decreased effectiveness. Not only was it inadequately staffed, but also the employees were not prepared to meet their new goals. Bohanon, however, thought that the new location was "ideal," as it made the Urban League more accessible to "those we're trying to influence." He added, "Incidentally, we are the only downtown office housing a Negro staff, business, etc."⁸⁸

The League also suffered from internal problems. According to realtor Nathan Phillips Dodge, III, who joined the organization in the mid-1940s, the friction was not racially motivated:

You could see splits among the black members just like on occasion you could see similar splits in the white group. Frequently you'd find certain blacks and whites on one side of an issue; in other words, it wasn't all white and black confrontation.⁸⁹

Robert Myers, a black businessman who served on the Urban League board during the 1940s, however, felt that many of the white board members could not be trusted. He stated that some of them "would say one thing on the board but to put it into practice out in the community or out among their friends, you don't know what they would say." He also added that the two races never socialized outside of the meetings.⁹⁰

Despite the problems the organization incurred, historian Dennis Mihelich pointed out that by 1950 it emerged as a “recognized leader of the black community:”

[T]he forces unleashed by World War II produced a major [Omaha Urban League] transformation. It entered the era as a dispenser of social services, but it emerged from it as a mediator for social justice. In the former capacity it enhanced the quality of life for a significant number in the black community; in the latter capacity it helped to initiate the struggle to include blacks in the mainstream of American life.⁹¹

In, 1949, Leo Bohanon accepted the offer to executive director of the St. Louis Urban League. He turned to Lester Granger, executive director of the National Urban League, for help in finding his replacement. In a letter to Granger, he said the new executive needed to be “a salesman, initiator and an administrator. . . . I believe the board would be willing to consider a much younger man than me, in spite of his lack of experience, if you thought he showed promise.”⁹² The national office provided Bohanon with a list of six candidates, the youngest of who was thirty-year-old Whitney Young, the industrial secretary of the St. Paul, Minnesota Urban League.⁹³

In Minnesota, Young served on the board of the NAACP, the Associated Negro Credit Union, and was also one of the first black members of the Jaycees. He joined the YMCA Men’s Club and participated in the No Name Club, a group of twelve black men who met to discuss employment problems, along with local and national issues. A native of Kentucky, Young graduated from the University of Kentucky and received a master’s degree from the University of Minnesota. He had a reputation for getting along well with white as well as black people. Young was described as a man with “an outgoing personality, a quick grasp of situations, and an ability to plan and carry out programs.”⁹⁴

The *St. Paul Sun* referred to him as “one of its greatest young Negro leaders of the past decade.”⁹⁵

On February 1, 1950, Young began his position as executive director of the Omaha Urban League at an annual salary of \$4,000. Dodge described the impression Young made on fellow League members when he took over his new position:

He was a well-educated, well-informed and articulate man who recognized he had to speak out openly about the unmentionable. . . issues of segregation, discrimination and racial imbalance. . . . I think it frightened a great many people because it was a new view.⁹⁶

James Paxson, chairman of its personnel committee, labeled him a “charmer.” Eugene Skinner described him as “the kind of guy I think would impress whites.”⁹⁷

Young not only faced the challenge of solving Omaha’s racial discrimination problems, he also inherited some conflicts that began in the previous executive’s term. In an article published in the *California Eagle*, a black Los Angeles newspaper, Anita Hayes wrote:

A pitiful plight faces the new executive Secretary of the Omaha Urban League, because of the kind of Board of Directors with which he will have to work. More pitiful is the fact that the Negro members of the board, with one exception, are either yes people, figure heads or placed there specifically as background to make unthinking people believe that the board accepts the league’s policies and believes in interracial integration and cooperation.

The present board is composed of members, with two or three exceptions, who are reactionary anti-Negro, anti-labor, most insincere and wholly unacquainted with the program and policies of the National Urban League. The present president of the board, who boasts of his christianity and three generations in the church and real estate in Omaha, hires no Negroes in his business and buildings in any capacity, boasts that he doesn’t and is a strictly anti-Negro, anti-labor reactionary, who holds the controlling board and the decisions.⁹⁸

The “anti-Negro” president of the board Hayes referred to was a prominent realtor, Alfred Kennedy, of McFarland Kennedy Real Estate. The other “key persons” who served on the board were Rev. John Cyrus, pastor of the First Unitarian Church, attorneys James Paxson and Ralph Adams, Eugene Skinner, principal of Long Elementary, an all-black elementary school, and physician Herbert Wiggins. Adams, Skinner and Wiggins were black.⁹⁹

Another controversy arose when Hayes learned that the Urban League planned to honor the superintendent of Omaha Public Schools Harry Burke for “improving the curricula and educational techniques in public schools attended by Negroes.”¹⁰⁰ Twenty black teachers taught in the Omaha Public School District, and eighteen of them were hired while he was superintendent. The *Star*, however, accused Burke of segregating two elementary schools on the Near North Side, which were the only schools where black teachers were employed. In addition, no black teachers were hired above the elementary level.¹⁰¹ In a February 1, 1950, telegram to Lester Granger, Hayes warned:

The Omaha Urban League board of directors continues in their plans to give a citation to superintendent Harry A. Burke for his race relation contribution in the Omaha school system despite the protests and opposition of labor groups, pro labor groups, business and professional groups, community organizations, ministers and church groups. Supt. Burke’s record is nil on any concrete stand and contribution to eliminate the pattern of discrimination and segregation in the Omaha Public Schools. Instead, his efforts though subtle have been to perpetuate segregation and discrimination. Colored teachers are placed in schools populated only by Negro pupils and there is a differential in salaries paid them and the requisites for their becoming permanent teachers. The opposing groups plan to publicly air this thing out at their annual dinner meeting of the Omaha Urban League on Feb. 14 unless the plan for citation is cancelled. This to my mind would be detrimental to the National program and disintegrate community support and thinking. I would like to see you come to Omaha very soon, however, I am preparing an analytical factual conclusive report to send to you on thinking policies and procedures here in Omaha.¹⁰²

Although Young agreed with Hayes to a certain extent, he still thought it was in the League's best interest to continue with their plans. In a letter to Granger, Young discussed his diplomatic method of handling the conflict with Hayes, and the controversial award to Burke:

You assumed correctly when you said I would be greeted by Mrs. Hayes upon reaching the city. In fact, she came in the first day I was in office and went into a tirade regarding the matters you have read in the press and also in her telegram.

Regarding the citation of Mr. Burke, which was a board decision prior to my arrival, I feel there might possibly be some question; though the charges of Mrs. Hayes are greatly exaggerated and some only hearsay. . . . Without giving any commitment to [her], I did assure her that I would take the matter under advisement. I pointed out at the time, that I thought that any public protest would be in poor taste and would reflect on the Urban League.¹⁰³

Hayes called Young several days later, saying that she no longer planned a demonstration and was willing to cooperate with him. Although Young was skeptical, he admitted that her complaints were somewhat validated. Still, he planned to present the award to Burke, as to renege, he believed, would not only have made the League look bad, but also "would have set a precedent which would have made my future work quite unpleasant."¹⁰⁴

The Urban League's annual meeting was a "huge success," as approximately 80 percent of the audience was black and expressed support for the organization. Much to Young's relief, Burke's award was not protested. In fact, he felt Hayes' attack on the League actually helped, as it "provided an issue that served to remove some of the lethargy and complete indifference on the part of the Negro community."¹⁰⁵

In another letter to Granger, Young complained of the “many” problems in Omaha, several of which “take precedent over the school situation.”¹⁰⁶ One problem Young felt needed urgent attention was unemployment. Approximately two-thirds of employed blacks in Omaha worked as laborers or as service workers. When Sidney A. Jones, a Chicago attorney, addressed the Urban League’s 1950 Annual Dinner, he commented: “One look at the department stores, banks, insurance companies and other institutions here makes one wonder how the 25 thousand [blacks] make their living.”¹⁰⁷

In the spring of 1950, Young complained of the ongoing problem of black college graduates leaving the state to find employment. He stated: “Opportunities are numerous in Omaha but are restricted as to race. As a result, nine out of ten Negroes qualified for better positions have to look elsewhere.”¹⁰⁸ He was also concerned about the negative effect this had on teenagers, as four out five black students left high school before graduating.¹⁰⁹ Marion Taylor, League industrial secretary, was also clearly disappointed that most black college students were unable to find employment in Omaha:

We are losing nearly every one of these professionally trained persons. . . . The school system is not employing them, the social agencies are not utilizing our sociology majors, and no one is employing our professional graduate accountants.¹¹⁰

A major obstacle in the Urban League’s placement of blacks in particular places of employment was the lack of a fair employment practices law. In February 1949, John Adams Sr. introduced LB 117, which stated: “there shall be no discrimination between applicants or employers because of their race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry.”¹¹¹ A total of fourteen people spoke in favor of the bill, including representatives of the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Council of Churches. Frank

Cronin, the state director of the CIO, Gordon Preble, president of the State Federation of Labor, Ethel Matode, chairman of the anti-discrimination committee of the Nebraska CIO Council, and Edgar Palmer, a faculty member of the University of Nebraska, also favored the legislation.¹¹²

Charles Peters, field secretary for the Nebraska Small Businessmen's Association, however, argued that the bill interfered with the businessman's "right to manage his own business." He also complained that it had been "open season on employers for the past fifteen years." F. H. Chappelle, spokesperson for the Railroad Brotherhoods, also felt that the bill would interfere with the "union's right to elect their own members." S. Allen Seline, a field secretary for the Associated Industries of Nebraska, referred to those who supported the bill as "professional troublemakers, who, following the familiar pattern of agitation among the minority groups, can set the stage for conflict where there was none before." Adams responded, calling the statement "meaningless, prejudicial and wrong."¹¹³

The Labor Committee killed the bill by a six to three vote. It reasoned that education, not legislation, was needed to end discrimination; that the bill would place the burden of ending discrimination on the employer, and that it would "make the State Labor Department investigator, prosecutor, and judge."¹¹⁴ Adams declared that the measure was "in no sense a race bill," and that its rejection greatly affected the "morale of a 'suffering group.'"¹¹⁵

Three months after Senator Adams introduced the legislation, the mayor's office issued a cursory response to the problem of unfair employment practices. It declared that it was not the administration's "official policy" to practice racial discrimination, and that

the City Council recognized the fact that it was within the best interests of the city to hire only according to the applicants' qualification, with no regard to race, color or creed.

Moreover, it promised "fair and impartial consideration" to anyone who applied for employment. It further added:

The City Council, believing in the democratic process and institutions, and being firm in the conviction that our city can grow in strength only through the elimination of all forms of bias and prejudice, urges all private employers to institute fair employment practices so as to give every citizen in Omaha the opportunity for utmost development process and service according to his ability.¹¹⁶

In the fall of 1950, Adams fought against a subcommittee report, recommending that the Legislature let the City Council members handle the problem of employment discrimination. Adams argued that "a local-option law" would not be effective. He also questioned whether the state "[had] nerve enough" to enact and enforce a statewide fair employment practices law. Senator Arthur Carmody of Trenton suggested that Adams' presence in the legislature indicated that Nebraska did not discriminate against "so-called oppressed races."¹¹⁷

Even without the passage of the bill, Omaha slowly made progress. The *Star* commended the Calandra Camera Company for hiring a young black man as an office manager and accountant. Creighton University became the first university in Omaha to hire a black woman as a secretary. According to Marion Taylor, Albertine Chandler was chosen from numerous candidates, "which was a fitting testimony to [her] secretarial proficiency."¹¹⁸

In her book, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Nancy J. Weiss stated that Young and Taylor were instrumental in making the Urban League's

presence better known. Furthermore, during Young's first year in Omaha, they visited prospective employers three times more often than League officials had done the previous year. Young's approach to helping blacks find employment was two-fold. First, he attempted to "sell management on the value of the Negro employee, especially the skilled and educated." His next step was instill in them the idea that with increased opportunities came more and greater responsibilities.¹¹⁹

Young skillfully convinced many of Omaha's businessmen to hire blacks. According to Milton Abrahams, an attorney and League board member, he came prepared with the facts and presented them in a persuasive manner. Not only did he point out the qualifications of many hopeful black employees, but he also demonstrated how job discrimination was economically harmful to the city. Moreover, Young proved that "it was possible to sit opposite a black without bringing a blemish upon themselves."¹²⁰

In March of 1950, the Urban League was finally successful in changing the hiring plans of the Metropolitan Utilities District, Omaha's publicly owned gas and water utility. Its new policy read: "Negroes may work in each and all departments and they are to be upgraded and promoted on the basis of their ability to perform."¹²¹ As a result, two blacks were hired, one as an order-clerk and another as a typist. A smaller step towards fair employment was achieved when officials at the Omaha Public Power District "indicated a sincere interest in the efforts of the Urban League" and agreed to give black employees and applicants equal consideration "in the future."¹²² In addition, a stenographer found employment at the County Health Department. Young pointed out in his 1950 Executive Secretary's Report that "these jobs represent unusual placement in

that it is either the first time a Negro has been hired in such capacity, or it represents a better type of job than we are usually able to acquire.”¹²³

In June of 1950, Marion Taylor wrote to Maurice Moss, associate director of the National Urban League. Taylor reported the recent success he and Young had achieved in the fight against employment discrimination and the respect and recognition the organization was gaining throughout the city:

Whitney Young and I have teamed up to render effective service to the people of this community and I can honestly say that progress of a major and significant nature is being made. We are getting results that up to a few months ago were considered almost unbelievable; especially is this true when we consider that Omaha has a reputation for being extremely prejudiced and conservative. . . .

Congratulations are pouring into our office from the Negro ministry and from other groups in the Negro neighborhoods and they are joining the Urban League in large numbers. The same can be said concerning the white people. Industrialists and educators who had been somewhat suspicious of our motives and activities are beginning to exhibit a friendly and sympathetic attitude.¹²⁴

Doors continued to open for blacks in the area of employment. Methodist Hospital set a precedent when it accepted two black nursing students for its fall semester in 1950. The women shared a room at the students' dorm, and had no problems getting along with the other students. Moreover, the *Star* listed eight “trends” in which Taylor reported progress was steadily being made:

1. The Northwestern Bell Telephone Company employs about twenty-six Negroes in several departments, including office workers and telephone operators. More will be employed.
2. The Metropolitan Utilities firm employs about seventeen Negroes, including two recent elevator operators and three office workers. Two employees have been recently upgraded and promoted.
3. The Omaha Public Power firm hired Miss Charlene Dudley, who represents the first Negro office worker to be employed. Following Miss Dudley's

employment the OPPD hired Miss Margaret Fowler also an office worker. And others will be hired as openings occur. The firm employed two Negro mechanics and a Negro Public Relations man is being contemplated.

4. At the Strategic Air Command, Fort Crook, several Negroes have been employed in skilled and semi-skilled capacities and several have been upgraded to skilled positions.
5. The Coca-Cola Company has agreed to hire four Negroes as soon as business and openings permit. Mr. Harold Donaldson has been selected as the first to be employed.
6. Mr. George Staton was employed on August 24, 1950, as a photographic technician by the Paramount Paper Company. A very good position, this becomes the first time a Negro has been employed in this particular occupation.
7. Two downtown buildings have recently mixed in Negro girls as elevator operators within the last few weeks.
8. The Nebraska State Employment Service . . . now employs two [black] interviewers, a stenographer and a typist.¹²⁵

Young and Taylor were very selective in the blacks they placed in these jobs. The “crusaders,” as Young called them, were instructed on personal appearance, punctuality, accountability and how to get along with white employees. In his annual report Young stated that “the importance of placing Negro workers in these skilled jobs where they can be observed by the public carries tremendous value in effecting better race relations.”¹²⁶

The increased number of blacks hired for certain positions in 1950, as compared to those in 1949, showed that clerical workers rose from thirteen to forty-five, and the number of those hired for skilled jobs went from fourteen to thirty-two. In semi-skilled positions, the figure grew from thirty-three to fifty-six, professional positions from three to seven, and semiprofessional, from zero to six. Although these gains were small, it was

apparent that the Urban League had begun to break down the racial barriers in employment.¹²⁷

In contrast to the League's approach, the De Porres Club used much more confrontational and direct techniques in the fight against job discrimination in Omaha. Still, the two organizations complemented each other as they worked together to bring about integration in the work force. For example, Young sometimes told businessmen who were reluctant to hire blacks that he heard the De Porres Club was considering picketing them. In fact, he spent much time instructing the Club members on demonstrations, and showed his support by attending their protests and meetings. According to the Club president, Denny Holland, "Young helped guide us to the concept that setting fire to some building wasn't going to help a lot."¹²⁸

With the help of the De Porres Club, the black community began an organized resistance to discrimination and pushed open the doors to employment and acceptance in public facilities and establishments. Their first battle against unfair hiring practices was with the Edholm-Sherman Laundry, located on the Near North Side. Although approximately 70 percent of its customers were black, the owner, Mrs. Edholm, refused to hire any of them because she feared that "the white people might object to a Negro waiting on them."¹²⁹ When asked if their black customers might object to white employees, however, she stated that the employment policy "has not been a problem for us."¹³⁰

At first, the *Star* was hopeful that Edholm could be reasoned with, thus avoiding a boycott and the temporary loss of a business that served many blacks in the community.

The paper's publisher, Mildred Brown, supported the owner's right to hire any qualified person that she chose. Edholm did not, however, have the right to discriminate against applicants because of their race. Brown further added that it was not the paper's "intention to put anyone out of business," and she was confident that Edholm would change her policy. If not, she declared, "this newspaper, with every resource that it can command, must abide by the will of the people."¹³¹

Members of the De Porres Club then circulated flyers informing the Near North Side of the business's hiring practices and urged the public not to patronize the Edholm-Sherman Laundry. The *Star* not only encouraged its readers to support the boycott, but also chastised anyone who did not join in the protest:

This publication has no choice but to ask the Negroes of this city for a boycott against this business. The Negroes in this city have been insulted. Each and every one of us. . . . This newspaper is asking everyone to stop doing business with the Edholm-Sherman Laundry. Their policy, openly stated, certainly leaves the Negroes in this city in one position only. That position is to oppose. It is unfortunate that we waited so long. The people in Omaha will be watching the results of this test of strength. And any Negro that continues to do business with the laundry has a small concept of decency, fair play or race pride.¹³²

Despite the attempts to persuade her, Edholm refused to change the hiring practice. Two months after members of the De Porres Club approached the owner on her unfair employment practices, Edholm-Sherman Laundry went out of business. Club president Denny Holland stated: "Let those who say and act as though we in this area are divided and weak, take note. The De Porres Club expects to go one business place at a time and work to see that they do adopt a decent policy or lose the trade of all those who have a sense of justice."¹³³

The Club also confronted the “lily-white” employment practices of the local Coca-Cola plant, which had not fulfilled its promise to hire four blacks “as soon as business and openings permit.”¹³⁴ Although the De Porres Club did not achieve immediate results, the Near North Side’s YWCA followed its example and replaced the Coke machine with one that dispensed Pepsi-Cola.¹³⁵

The De Porres Club also staged an aggressive fight against the Roman Catholic Church in Omaha, which practiced Jim Crow by providing a separate church and school for its black members. Founded by Father Francis B. Cassidy in 1918, Saint Benedict Church, located at Twentieth and Grant Streets, was intended to serve blacks who, according to the priest, “might have been ignored in the parishes in which they resided.”¹³⁶ Eventually, it followed the city’s pattern of segregation and became the only Catholic Church in the city where blacks found acceptance.¹³⁷

In 1948, the members of the De Porres Club surveyed the attitudes of some of the city’s priests regarding the admittance of black students into their parish schools. They found that several of them considered those they admitted or rejected to be their “private business.”¹³⁸ Father William Corbey, pastor of Saint John’s, a parish located south of Saint Benedict, stated: “I will accept them if I want to, I will refuse if I choose.”¹³⁹ Father Joseph A. Osdick, pastor of Sacred Heart, which was located at Twenty-second and Binney Streets, refused to accept black parishioners under any conditions. He rationalized his decision by saying: “I would not want to deprive the Negroes of the support which [Saint Benedict] received from the Negro and Indian Collection sponsored by the church.”¹⁴⁰

The investigation into Jim Crow practices within the city's Catholic churches resulted from a visit to the De Porres Club center by Robert Collins, a resident of the Near North Side. Collins wanted his daughter, who was to graduate from the eighth grade at St. Benedict, to continue her Catholic education at Sacred Heart High School. Although the family lived within the boundaries, it was the school's policy not to allow blacks. As a result of the persistent urging by the club's members and the presentation of its survey of racial prejudice among Catholic parishes to Father Paul Schneider, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, two black girls were accepted for the 1948 fall term at Sacred Heart High School.¹⁴¹

The fight against Jim Crow policies gathered limited support from many of the religious leaders in the black community as well as some Catholic priests. Although many of the churches in the Near North Side were used throughout the week for political and club meetings, some people felt the ministers provided little more than a place for these gatherings. Lawrence Lewis addressed the lack of leadership among black ministers in one of his weekly columns in the *Star*. He stated that they should "take a peak outside the door" and openly oppose the social injustices that were so prevalent.¹⁴²

A much greater problem than discrimination in the church was that of housing. As the Near North Side became increasingly overcrowded, the area's boundaries slowly expanded. In the spring of 1950, residents of the Kountze Place, a white section in North Omaha, received unidentified post card messages that represented the irrational fear some people held of blacks as American citizens, neighbors, and political leaders:

If you want to stop communism in the USA, see that restrictive covenants are enforced!

Protect your home—if you don't no one else will. . . . Only by the united efforts of Kountze Place ministers and their church boards, backed by restrictive covenants can they [homeowners] expect to save their churches and homes.

Inhibitions of the 14th amendment are directed against state action only, not against individuals; and the amendment erects no shield against private conduct however discriminatory or wrongful.

What are you going to do to protect your home against Negro invasion in this restricted area? Remember this is your fight, you cannot remain neutral. Protective covenants cannot be enforced if YOU will not cooperate and contribute.

Why must homeowners in the Kountze Place vote for a Negro to represent white folks in the legislature?¹⁴³

In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled restrictive covenants unconstitutional, yet rhetoric such as this continued, making it difficult for blacks to live outside of the increasingly overcrowded Near North Side. Omaha realtor and Urban League board member Nathan Phillips Dodge, III, recalled how the League attempted to improve the housing situation for blacks:

We worked with the Real Estate Board to open the doors of housing in various neighborhoods, but most of it was people going from neighborhood to neighborhood to help blacks move into formally white neighborhoods, through working with the whites. Father Markoe at Creighton was a tremendous help in those days. . . . but it was slow and discouraging, just the way the job market was for blacks.¹⁴⁴

Father Markoe and members of his De Porres Club often worked closely with the Omaha Urban League in the fight against racial discrimination in housing. For example, in 1950 Woodrow Morgan, a black World War II Army Air Force veteran, bought a home in an all-white neighborhood at 1822 North Thirty-first Street. His new neighbors greeted him with threatening letters and phone calls. Rocks were thrown through the

windows of Morgan's new house and he and his family members were physically threatened. The previous owner, the mortgage company and even the agent who sold the house received angry phone calls. When the *World-Herald* refused to print the story, the League's executive secretary, Whitney Young, turned to the De Porres Club for help.¹⁴⁵

The day the Morgans planned to move into their new home, Father Markoe and Denny Holland, the club's president, waited on the porch. Several neighbors asked the priest if he was looking for the old residents. "No, we're waiting for the new owners. We're helping them move in," he replied. The neighbors could only watch, amazed, while more members of the De Porres Club arrived, and, together, the young black and white men moved the furniture into the house. Within a few months, the Morgans were well accepted in the neighborhood.¹⁴⁶

Much of the blame for the black's housing problem fell on the real estate people. Nathan Phillip Dodge III, however, felt that they were often used as the scapegoat. He explained that if a real estate agent showed a house in a white neighborhood to a black family, the homeowner often received a backlash from his neighbors. This, he stated, was not the fault of the realtor, but the result of "an attitude . . . and you can't reform a whole group."¹⁴⁷

On the other side of the issue, Robert Myers, a black businessman and Omaha Urban League board member, believed that realtors were responsible for the housing situation:

I was bitter towards real estate men. . . . I feel they were causing more of the problem than helping. It was money for them. If they could get white flight going, they tell the white people, "blacks are moving in and the values going down," buy the place from them and turn around and tell blacks, "Hey, we've got

a nice house, used to be a white area, real good,” sell it for more money and make a real good deal. Very profitable, good way to make a buck.¹⁴⁸

Myers also believed that the realtors who served on the board were not sincerely interested in helping the black community and that they only told the blacks what they wanted to hear. He also wondered if “they weren’t just keeping tabs on us, to see what we were up to.”¹⁴⁹

The De Porres Club again used non-violent methods of protesting racial discrimination when it objected to the black face “comedy” minstrel shows that were being presented at Creighton University and Central High School. Letters sent to the president of Creighton University, the principal of the Central High School, and the Omaha Board of Education complained that these types of presentations were largely “responsible for the stereotype that many people have of Negroes.”¹⁵⁰

When black students were not permitted to perform in an opera at Central High, members of the De Porres Club passed out four thousand handbills in front of the school on the three nights of the performances in early December, 1950. The statement read:

This is discrimination. Negroes at Central are not allowed full and equal participation in some activities of this school.

How is it that the opera tonight, put on by the student body, has no Negro students in the cast? The last road show here humiliated the Negro students by presenting a degrading black face in the show.

Isn’t it about time for public school officials to catch up with public opinion on this matter?

With democracy on trial all over the world is it not time to eliminate on the local scene that which is against the spirit of democracy and thus weakens her at home and abroad?¹⁵¹

Unfortunately, some people showed little empathy toward the situation. One man who was handed a leaflet in front of the school swore and threw it back at the person who gave it to him. The Omaha police chief, Fred Franks, commented that he “would not take any responsibility as to what would happen because such a thing, while the country was at war, was giving aid and comfort to the communists.”¹⁵² *Star* writer Lynwood Parker replied:

If giving “aid and comfort” is an issue, then it seems that Central High was quite high on the list for doing so and was getting official sanction by the police. . . . is asking for a chance for democratic participation in a democratic organization giving “aid and comfort” to communists?¹⁵³

At the same time the De Porres Club began protesting the high school’s Jim Crow policy, the topic of racial discrimination was addressed at the April 15, 1950 session of the University of Omaha’s “Coffee Hour,” a weekly event that gave students an opportunity to discuss current problems. Marcel Johnson, a black panel member, reminded other students of the employment difficulties Omaha blacks faced. He also pointed out that there were no black instructors or teacher assistants on the campus. Guest speaker Marion Taylor, industrial secretary of the Omaha Urban League, however, presented an optimistic view. He stated that the city was “behind other cities in solving the Negro problem, but that the trend has definitely changed.” He also predicted that Omaha would not only “catch up” with other cities, but would surpass them.¹⁵⁴ The school’s newspaper, *Gateway*, listed four steps the students proposed to help fight racial prejudice:

1. Encourage your congressman to pass the FEPC bill.
2. Investigate prohibitive clauses in constitutions of organizations.

3. Severely reprimand people who perpetuate ideas of the Negro as inferior or make pointed jokes.
4. Investigate the politician's viewpoint on the subject before casting your vote.¹⁵⁵

Unfortunately, the interest in racial injustice at the university was limited. When candidates for the student council board were asked what they would do, if elected, to improve the campus, one student responded, "I will work for the legalization of card playing on the campus." Another felt the "creation of a humor magazine" was an important goal. Although several mentioned they were "for the best interests of the students," no one addressed the racial issue.¹⁵⁶

In May 1950, a small group of residents from the Near North Side gathered at Zion Baptist Church to hear Manuel Talley, a CORE member from California, discuss a "new kind of warfare" that was being used to fight racial injustice. Talley gave examples of how the organization used methods inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, such as boycotts, distributing handbills and staging sit-ins, that were successful in breaking down discrimination in businesses.¹⁵⁷ He told the Omaha audience what they already knew, and presented methods of fighting racial segregation that they were already using. Over the next three years, the De Porres Club and other organizations would challenge Jim Crow practices with increased resistance and defiance, as this "new kind of warfare" intensified.

¹ *Omaha Star* (hereafter referred to as *OS*), 12 May 1950.

² *Ibid.*, 16 January 1948.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Omaha World-Herald* (hereafter referred to as *OWH*), 17 March 1948.

⁶ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, 2d ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), 18.

⁷ Harold Anderson, "Red Fronts Denied Here," *OWH*, 17 March 1948, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Lawrence S. Wittner, "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," *American Quarterly* 22 (winter 1970): 883.

¹⁰ Anderson, "Red Fronts Denied Here," *OWH*, 17 March 1948, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *OS*, 22 April 1949.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 May 1948.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9 July 1948.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Emma Lou Thornbrough, "Breaking Down Barriers to Public Accommodations in Indiana, 1935 to 1963," reprinted in Kenneth L. Kusmer, ed., *Black Communities and*

Urban Development in America, 1720-1990, 6 vols. (New York: Garland Publishers, 1991), 258.

²⁰ *OS*, 11 June 1948.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7 January 1949.

²² *Ibid.*, 31 December 1948; 7 January 1949.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9 April 1948.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ There is no record of Marvin Kellogg on file at the District Court of Nebraska.

²⁶ *OS*, 22 July 1949.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 October 1949.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23 July 1948.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² There is no record of William Rose on file at the District Court of Nebraska.

³³ *OS*, 17 September 1948.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 April 1948.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 April 1950.

³⁶ Leo Bohanon to William Sahl, 5 May 1948, Urban League of Nebraska file, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereafter referred to as NSHS).

³⁷ Leo Bohanon, "Omaha Urban League Aims at Negro Uplift," *OWH*, 5 May 1948, Douglas County Historical Society file clipping (hereafter referred to as DCHS).

³⁸ *OWH*, 23 May 1948; 27 May 1948; *OS*, 28 May 1948.

³⁹ *OWH*, 28 January 1949; *OS*, 28 January 1949. According to the *OWH* article, the other appointed members were W. O. Swanson, Kermit Hansen, Rabbi Israel Mowshowitz, Rev. Austin Miller, S. J., Milo Bail, Alice Keogh, Mrs. J. F. Lucas, Mrs. C. W. Hamilton, Jr., Albert Witzling, Milton Abrahams, Reverend John Cyrus, Rev. Chilton Powell and Frank Cronlin.

⁴⁰ *OS*, 28 January 1949.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18 February 1949.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31 March 1949.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27 May 1949

⁴⁴ *OWH*, 30, September 1948.

⁴⁵ Leo Bohanon to Lester B. Granger, 2 June 1948, Urban of Nebraska file, NSHS.

⁴⁶ *OWH*, 14 July 1948.

⁴⁷ *OS*, 9 July 1948.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 July 1948.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9 July 1948.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1950.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23 April 1948.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 18 June 1948.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9 July 1948.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15 October 1948. Harvey Hall's position with the Nebraska School of Barbering was unclear in the article.

⁵⁵ *McGee v. Nebraska School of Barbering*, Doc. 413, 9. 167, District Court of Douglas County, Nebraska.

⁵⁶ *OS*, 6 June 1949.

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- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 October 1948; 30 September 1948, 13 January 1950; 7 April 1950; *Greater Omaha City Directory 1950*. (Omaha: R. L. Polk & Co., Publishers, 1923).
- ⁵⁸ *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1998-99, compiled by the Clerk of the Legislature, Room 2018, State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska; *OWH*, 21 April 1962, DCHS file clipping.
- ⁵⁹ Fletcher—Davis interview.
- ⁶⁰ *OS*, 28 May 1950.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 23 June 1950.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 29 September 1950.
- ⁶³ *OWH*, 8 November 1950; *OS*, 3 November 1950; Robert Myers interview by Dennis Mihelich, 1 August 1984, part II, number 8, DCHS, 3.
- ⁶⁴ Denny Holland, Omaha telephone interview by Kathleen Davis, Omaha, Nebraska, 20 March 2000.
- ⁶⁵ Polk's Omaha (Douglas County, Neb) City Directory, 1948; *OS*, 15 April 1949.
- ⁶⁶ *OWH*, 22 March 1948.
- ⁶⁷ *OS*, 15 April 1949; 23 September 1949.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 October 1949. Durwood Crooms served as the executive secretary of the Omaha Urban League in 1945. He resigned after one year to assume a position with the *Omaha Guide*, a black newspaper.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1950.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1950.
- ⁷¹ Jeffery Harrison Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis, Creighton University, 1967), 23.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ Jeffery H. Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," *Negro History Bulletin* 33 (December 1970): 194-95; Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 19, 28.
- ⁷⁴ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 20, 21.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 21, 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 22, 23.

⁷⁷ For information on the civil rights movement, see James Farmer, *Lay Bare My Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New American Library, 1989).

⁷⁸ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," 198.

⁷⁹ OS, 21 April 1950.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 11 March 1950.

⁸¹ Ibid., 15 December 1950.

⁸² Ibid., 8 September 1950.

⁸³ Ibid., 30 November 1950.

⁸⁴ Dennis N. Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League," *Nebraska History* 60 (Fall 1979): 419, 420.

⁸⁵ Ibid; Letter to William Sahl from Leo Bohanon, 5 May 1948, Urban League of Nebraska file, NSHS.

⁸⁶ OWH, 5 May 1948, DCHS file clipping.

⁸⁷ Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha League," 420.

⁸⁸ Ibid; Letter to Lester B. Granger from Leo Bohanon, 2 June 1948, Urban League of Nebraska file, NSHS.

⁸⁹ Nathan Phillips Dodge III interview by Dennis Mihelich, 21 March 1979, Part I, Number 5 (Douglas County Historical Society: 1985), 14.

⁹⁰ Myers—Mihelich interview, 7.

⁹¹ Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League," 421.

⁹² Letter to Lester B. Granger from Leo Bohanon, 27 October 1949, Urban League of Nebraska file, NSHS; Nancy J. Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1989), 46.

⁹³ Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr.*, 46.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44, 46-47.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁶ Dodge—Mihelich interview, 1, 2.

⁹⁷ Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr.*, 47, 46.

⁹⁸ Urban League of Nebraska file, DCHS.

⁹⁹ Letter to Lester B. Granger, 27 October 1949, Urban League of Nebraska file, DCHS.

¹⁰⁰ *OWH*, [n.d.] 1950, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁰¹ *OS*, 17 February 1950.

¹⁰² Telegram to Lester B. Granger from Mrs. G. Anita Hayes, 1 February 1950, Urban League of Nebraska file, NSHS.

¹⁰³ Letter to Granger from Young, 6 February 1950, Urban League of Nebraska file, NSHS.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 21 February 1950.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 6 February 1950.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*; Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr.*, 48; *OWH*, 15 February 1950, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁰⁸ *OS*, 12 May 1950. In 1931, Earl Sullenger and Harvey Kerns discussed the problem black college graduates experienced in finding employment in Omaha, forcing them to either leave the city or accept lower skill level positions. *The Negro in Omaha: A Social Study of Negro Development* (Omaha: Municipal University of Omaha, 1931), 20.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1950.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 15 September 1950.

¹¹¹ *OWH*, 11 February 1949, DCHS file clipping.

¹¹² Ibid., 15 February 1949, DCHS file clipping.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 18 February 1949, DCHS file clipping.

¹¹⁶ *OS*, 27 May 1949.

¹¹⁷ *OWH*, 15 November 1950.

¹¹⁸ *OS*, 29 February 1949; 11 March 1949.

¹¹⁹ Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr.*, 48.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹²¹ *OS*, 10 March 1950.

¹²² Ibid., 31 March 1950.

¹²³ Executive Secretary's Report, 9 May 1950, Urban League of Nebraska file, NSHS.

¹²⁴ Letter to Maurice Moss from Marion Taylor, Urban League of Nebraska file, NSHS.

¹²⁵ *OS*, 9 August 1950; 15 September 1950.

¹²⁶ Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr.*, 49.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹²⁹ *OS*, 30 June 1950.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 7 July 1950.

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- ¹³² Ibid., 11 August 1950.
- ¹³³ Ibid., 6 October 1950.
- ¹³⁴ Ibid., 15 September 1950; 6 October 1950.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid., 3 November 1950.
- ¹³⁶ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 34.
- ¹³⁷ Ibid.
- ¹³⁸ Ibid., 36.
- ¹³⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid., 38.
- ¹⁴² OS, 27 January 1950.
- ¹⁴³ Ibid., 24 March 1950.
- ¹⁴⁴ Dodge—Mihelich interview, 3.
- ¹⁴⁵ Peterson, *Patterns on the Landscape*, 56; Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 42.
- ¹⁴⁶ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 42.
- ¹⁴⁷ Dodge—Mihelich interview, 8.
- ¹⁴⁸ Myers—Mihelich interview, 16.
- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 16-17.
- ¹⁵⁰ OS, 14 April 1950.
- ¹⁵¹ Ibid., 8 December 1950; 22 December 1950.
- ¹⁵² Ibid., 15 December 1950.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ *Gateway*, 18 April 1950.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 2 May 1950.

¹⁵⁷ *OS*, 12 May 1950.

CHAPTER 4

Louder Voices, 1950-1953

On December 10, 1953, Whitney Young submitted his resignation as executive secretary of the Omaha Urban League, to accept a position as dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work. Although he expressed pride in the achievements the League made during the three years he served, he realized that much more work remained. As a result of his effort, and the perseverance of several civil rights organizations, blacks in the Near North Side found employment in fields that had previously been closed to them. Increased attention was now given to their poor living conditions, but Omaha remained a segregated city, with blacks contained in an area where the white community did not have to see the effects of its Jim Crow practices. While television viewers were “entertained” with the racially insensitive television program “Amos and Andy” that portrayed blacks as buffoons, and physical attacks continued on black leaders who threatened the status quo, the Near North Side continued to fight racial discrimination at home.¹

The De Porres Club, with its direct, non-violent tactics, was responsible for much of the breakdown in job discrimination. Using non-violent, direct approach tactics such as sit-ins, picketing, and boycotts in its fight against racial discrimination, the Club anticipated civil rights efforts that later gained national attention. The community was kept abreast of the Club’s activity through the *Omaha Star*, a black newspaper that published the minutes of the meetings in its weekly editions. Its first

successful campaign was waged against a company with which it had tried to negotiate earlier.²

In 1950, Mac Gothard, manager of the Coca-Cola plant located at 3200 North Thirtieth Street, promised to hire four blacks as soon as openings occurred, assuming the decision would not “upset any of their old employees.”³ By spring, 1951, however, it was apparent that he did not intend to keep the agreement, and the Club refused to be stalled any longer. On May 1, club president Denny Holland sent a letter to Gothard informing him of an impending protest if its discriminating hiring policy continued. He also demanded a public statement that the company would “hire some Negroes according to their abilities.” Gothard did not respond, and, consequently, one week later, the “Don’t Buy Coca-Cola Campaign” began.⁴

The Club distributed approximately ten thousand handbills throughout the city, asking Omaha residents to “refuse to support discrimination by not buying Coca-Cola.” Businesses in the Near North Side actively supported the protest. Petitions signed by forty-three owners of cafes, drug and grocery stores and other businesses agreed not to sell the product until all levels of employment became available to blacks. Even some students at the University of Omaha refused to buy Coke. Club members also picketed in front of the bottling company under the watchful eyes of the police department and sympathetic employees who, according to the *Star*, “lined the plate glass windows to watch the activity.”⁵

Gothard finally agreed in June 1951 to hire two blacks for assembly line work. He denied, however, that the decision resulted from the pressure put upon him by the De

Porres Club. In an interview with a reporter from the *Star*, Gothard stated, “We just hired. We had openings so we hired.”⁶ Club member Harold Tibbs referred to the jobs as “token positions,” since the *Omaha World-Herald* continued to run ads for drivers and carriers. Gothard also refused to contact the Club officials. Comparing the campaign to the biblical figures David and Goliath, except “the giant in this case has only been stunned,” Holland refused to end the boycott. He stated, “Until such contact is made, the ‘Don’t Buy Coke’ Campaign continues.”⁷

The protest successfully ended one month after it began when Gothard met with Whitney Young, the Urban League’s industrial secretary, Marion Taylor, and several De Porres Club members. He announced that the policies of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company had changed, “allowing two qualified blacks employment at the production level.”⁸ He also stated: “In the future, equal consideration in employment will be given without regard to race, creed or color.”⁹ The boycott received national publicity and Gothard later admitted that, during the protest, he was concerned about his “public relations and good moral standing” within the community.¹⁰ The June 1951, issue of *Interracial Review*, a national magazine published monthly by the Catholic Interracial Council in New York, wrote:

By enlisting themselves wholeheartedly in the cause of social justice and charity, the De Pores Club has advanced that cause not only in Omaha, but also in all the world. We have advanced in their advance. And, like the De Porres Club, we must continue that advance until justice is achieved not merely in token but in truth.¹¹

Not all of the members of the black community supported the protest, however. The De Porres Club accused Peter Doss, advertising manager of the *Omaha Guide*, a

local black newspaper, of “Uncle Toming” after he met with Gothard and tried to convince him that “most Negroes didn’t feel that a boycott was necessary.”¹² In addition, while an editorial in the *Star* later praised the community for the cooperation it gave to the protest, it also stated that a “number of ‘leading’ businessmen had to be pressured into following behind the band wagon.”¹³

A more difficult challenge awaited the De Porres Club when it resumed the fight against the unfair hiring policy of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company. In 1949, the Club’s attempt to change the company’s hiring policy by picketing and passing out handbills proved futile. Despite the fact that blacks drove buses in cities such as Tulsa, Denver, Philadelphia and Los Angeles, the company claimed that if they employed black drivers, “no one would ride the bus or street car.” It also stated that it would rather discontinue lines than hire black drivers.¹⁴

In the fall of 1951, Club members again tried to change the transportation company’s hiring policy. When all attempts to contact officials failed, they distributed handbills throughout the city that explained the Railway Company’s unfair hiring practices and asked the public to write letters of protest to Vice-President James P. Lee. According to a De Porres Club report, several thousand handbills “literally blanketed the city of Omaha to protest the lily-white employment policy of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street and Railway Company.”¹⁵

The company tried to divert blame to the Transport Workers Union of America, CIO local 223-228, which represented bus and streetcar operators, claiming it presented a “major obstacle” in the hiring of blacks. When confronted by the De Porres Club with

this accusation, Union President Wesley Durst argued that “not only does our Constitution guarantee no discrimination . . . but our record, particularly in the cities of New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., proves that we practice what we preach.”¹⁶

In an attempt to alert the public to the situation and the Club’s intentions to combat it, a public rally was held December 14, 1951, at the Zion Baptist Church. The mayor, Glen Cunningham, and Nebraska Governor Val Peterson received a special invitation. In fact, all interested groups were invited to attend “with the exception of communists and communist front groups.”¹⁷

In addition to circulating handbills and urging the public to boycott buses and streetcars, the De Porres Club notified the local radio stations and newspapers of the protest. The goal, it said, was to “do all that is legal and lawful to discourage the public from riding at all. . . .”¹⁸ The Club also mailed post cards, containing the same information as the handbills, to “key firms and personalities locally and to periodicals and publications both locally and nationally.”¹⁹

Citizens were encouraged to contact Lee through letters or phone calls to express their disapproval of the policy. Use of the streetcars was strongly discouraged and car pools were organized. Those who still found it necessary to ride the bus were encouraged to pay the fare in pennies, a tactic that frustrated the bus drivers, sometimes putting them into a “helpless rage,” according to a De Porres Club member. Businesses in the black community passed out handbills to their customers and posted them in their windows.

Club president Denny Holland stated: “We must hit them with every weapon we have. Jim Crow must and shall go.”²⁰

The protest gained the support of several prominent community and national civil rights leaders. Frank Cronin, CIO Regional Director, YWCA Executive Director Ruth Campbell, George Bancroft, president of the Omaha Council of Churches, and Rabbi Lou Silberman sent the transit company letters, stating their disapproval of its hiring policy.²¹ Civil rights leader and national NAACP staff member Roy Wilkins promised to “possibly intervene” if the problem was not rectified, and members of the Omaha Urban League met two times with the company’s board of directors.²²

De Porres Club officials also met with members of the Interclub Council, an organization that attempted to merge many of the small, grassroots organizations in North Omaha into a united coalition. By May 1952, however, only the “Flamingos” and the “Servitudes” actively supported the cause. Hoping to gain additional backing, the De Porres Club pleaded, “We must have more, more and still more support from the people of the Near North Side Community.”²³

It also turned to the mayor and city councilmen for help. Mildred Brown, owner and publisher of the *Star*, spoke at a meeting in June 1952:

If our boys can drive jeeps, tanks and [fly] jet planes in Korea, in the fight to save democracy, make democracy work at home. Make it work in Omaha. . . . I say to you, your honor, the mayor, if the tram company will not hire Negroes as drivers, we prevail on you to remove the franchise of the bus company.²⁴

After a long pause, Cunningham referred the Club to the Mayor’s Human Relations Committee. No comment was made from the six attending councilmen.²⁵

Although the Committee agreed to investigate the company’s hiring policy, it did not

intervene.²⁶ In fact, despite the Club's intense effort to educate the public about the unfair hiring practice, its organized protests, and its appeal to city government officials, the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Car Company did not hire blacks until August 1954.

Meanwhile, fair employment practices were being initiated in other cities. For example, the *Star* informed its readers that due to the "persistent campaign carried on by the Urban League and other groups over the years," the St. Louis Public Service Company was now accepting applications for bus and streetcar operators "on the basis of need and qualifications, regardless of race or color."²⁷ Several months later, its Urban League reported that the drivers were fully accepted by the St. Louis citizens, and that the company hoped to "someday be employing two-hundred Negro operators."²⁸ This, the *Star* said, should set an example for the people of Omaha.²⁹

While the fight against the Omaha and Council Bluffs Railway continued, the De Porres Club began a campaign against Reed's Ice Cream, located at 3106 North Twenty-fourth Street. The store had been urged several years earlier to hire blacks, but no progress had been made. In November 1952, a Reed's outlet in St. Louis finally hired blacks after months of picketing and negotiating with local Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) members. Still, the firm refused to hire blacks in Omaha.³⁰

The Club applied the same strategy it utilized against the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company. On January 12, 1953, Club president Denny Holland sent a letter to the store's manager, informing him of the impending boycott. It stated:

In April of 1951, after a series of telephone conversations, a committee of the De Porres Club met with Mr. Becker, who, we were told, was Reed's personnel

manager. Mr. Becker told us he would not consider hiring Negroes at that time, but that later in the year [1951] he might give it some consideration. We are still waiting for an indication of a change in this unfair policy. This unfair policy of denying equal job opportunities to Negroes, especially because of your large number of Negro customers, has far too long stood in complete violation of the American ideal of equal opportunity. . . .³¹

De Porres Club members then urged North Omaha residents to boycott the store. Ministers were encouraged to notify their congregations of the action. Letters were sent to the Near North Side's churches and businesses, and handbills were distributed to the public, explaining the campaign and urging the community to participate in the protest. Becker, however, remained steadfast, insisting, "we don't care if they buy our ice cream or not."³²

While some black residents actively supported the refusal to buy Reed's Ice Cream, others were apathetic. One reader felt the lack of interest was gender-based, as women seemed to be more supportive of the boycott than men.³³ Another wrote in the *Star's* "Readers Speak" column: "Last Thursday afternoon I was shocked to see a Negro man buying ice cream. . . . That's the main reason why so many of our battles are lost, because some of our own people would rather do as they want, than join the crusade."³⁴

Another contributor addressed a letter to the manager of Reed's:

When we moved to Omaha last fall we thought one of our great fortunes was the good Reed Home Made Ice Cream and we drove out of our way to pick up some. . . . Then a few weeks ago we found out about the discriminatory employment practice of your company and its refusal to use any Negro help. That day marked our last purchase of Reed Ice Cream.³⁵

Club members compiled a list entitled "Seen Buying Reed's Ice Cream," which contained the names and the times people were seen in the store, and their car license numbers. They threatened to publish it, along with photographs, in the *Star*. The name

of a North High School student who lived near Twenty-fourth and Binney was added to the list when, after making a purchase, she said, "You're boycott is o.k. in the winter, but I don't go along with it now that the weather has warmed up." One member complained that some people were embarrassed only because they were seen by De Porres Club members, not because they bought ice cream from Reed's.³⁶

A *Star* editorial lamented that it was "sad to see these people are so lacking in race pride, in any kind of pride, that they have to be urged into doing the right thing, but we look forward to the list of names."³⁷ George Barton, a De Porres member, suggested that the name of the "Uncle Tom" list should be changed to "Less Than Uncle Toms," since "Uncle Toms get something for bowing to white supremacy, but these people are paying to support white supremacy."³⁸

As the boycott continued into summer, the most profitable time of year for the ice cream store, the De Porres Club added a new tactic. On July 6, 1953, members began picketing the nearby plant in addition to the North Omaha store. Some protesters carried signs that read, "Your Cooperation Can Help End Racial Segregation," while others passed out handbills that urged support of the boycott until Reed's hired blacks.³⁹ One protester said that most black potential customers turned away, except for a few who were "too lacking in pride to be considered." He also reported that many whites left the store after reading the handbills.⁴⁰

One person who was obviously very unhappy with the boycott was Becker. He called the police several times, hoping to have the pickets arrested. As long as they were not blocking the sidewalk or the store's entrance, however, they were within their legal

rights. Once, he told officers that the demonstrators were carrying bricks and baseball bats, which the Club spokesperson denied. A confrontation occurred one evening when Becker threatened to call the police after he thought a picket had stepped into the store's driveway to hand someone a flyer. According to the *Star*:

The picket told him to go ahead and call the police as it sure wouldn't be the first time he had. Mr. Becker then stood on the driveway with his arms crossed and loudly proclaimed he would hire who he pleased and the De Porres Club couldn't make him hire colored clerks. He said Reed's had a colored janitor. The picket pointed out the janitor wasn't an employee in the full sense because he was just a contract janitor. . . . Mr. Becker said some people like janitor work because it gives them a chance to really earn their money by the sweat of their brow.⁴¹

Although the police usually remained impartial to the Club's demonstrations, an altercation occurred when an officer responded to a complaint that youths were tapping on the ice cream store's windows. He ordered the group to leave. A police lieutenant soon arrived and explained that they were not breaking the law. The first officer then grabbed Karl Watson, a Central High School student, and arrested him for vagrancy. Watson was later released after a fifty-dollar bond was posted. Meanwhile, an angry crowd of several hundred people gathered across from Reed's, while five police cars lined the other side of the street. The crowd dispersed when they learned the teenager was released, but as one observer stated, "feeling throughout the community has run high because of the arrest."⁴²

In July of 1953, the De Porres Club reported that Reed's had lost approximately 85 percent of their summer business, while support for the boycott grew. Club member George Barton stated that there have been "almost no Negroes going into Reed's and hundreds of whites have turned away when they learn [*sic*] of the Un-American

employment policy.”⁴³ Not only did Barton receive letters from various parts of the city pledging support of the campaign, but even residents in Des Moines, Iowa, where several Reed’s stores were located, requested flyers.⁴⁴

Support for the direct, confrontational approach the De Porres Club took remained a controversial issue in the black community. Several members of the North Omaha Rattler’s Club, a recipient of a 1953 Urban League award, joined the picket lines in the summer of the same year. Another group that joined the picket lines consisted of volunteers from the Holy Name Society of Saint Benedict Catholic Church.⁴⁵ In addition, Rev. Felix C. Williams, pastor of Zion Baptist Church, became the first minister in Omaha to take an active part in the fight for civil rights. Carrying a sign that read, “Negro G.I.s drive trucks, tanks and Jeeps in Korea but Negroes can’t work at Reed’s,” he marched with other demonstrators in front of the store.⁴⁶ Club president Denny Holland supported Reverend Williams’ participation in the demonstrations, stating, “We are thrilled to find a local minister interested enough in his congregation to picket for them.”⁴⁷

Other ministers in the Near North Side condemned the protest. What was thought to be apathy might have sometimes been fear of repercussion for displaying rebellious activity. In a letter to the *Star*, one church leader, who called himself “a minister,” complained: “It’s a disgrace to see the pickets with their signs. There are church meetings every night in Omaha. Let those who are so interested in opening up better jobs come out and pray rather than make nuisances of themselves. Don’t they realize we must be careful?”⁴⁸

In response, another reader answered: "I wonder, sometimes, if our religious leaders have become a bunch of cowards, thinking in turn of self [*sic*]"⁴⁹ Another wrote: "How can an Uncle Tom have courage enough to say those pickets at Reed's should spend time in church? Maybe that's our trouble now, we've spent too much time in church asking the Lord to do all our work for us."⁵⁰

De Porres Club members realized their campaign would continue throughout the winter and, if necessary, resume again in the spring. Unfortunately, Omaha provided them with other challenges. In addition to fighting unfair employment practices, they focused their attention on discrimination in the city's recreational and eating facilities. On November 6, 1952, Denny Holland, Air Force sergeants English Webb, Jr. and Claude Smith, and Creighton University student Bob Blackwell, tested the admission policy of the Crosstown Roller Rink after learning that blacks had been refused admittance. Holland, the only white person in the group, was sold a ticket while the remaining three members were turned away.⁵¹

According to the *Star*, rink owner Ralph Fox informed the blacks that "they could not come in, and that they knew why."⁵² A police officer sided with Fox, but stated he could not intervene, as he was only hired to check tickets. Webb filed a complaint against Fox and, eight months later, the case was brought to court. Municipal Court Judge Patrick J. Lynch found Fox guilty and fined him twenty-five dollars. Fox's lawyer appealed, claiming: "The Nebraska Civil Rights Statute was passed in 1893, before there were skating rinks, and could not have meant to include them."⁵³

The case was postponed until July, when the District Court judge ruled in favor of the De Porres Club. Three blacks were then admitted to the Crossroads Skating Rink without incident. Holland told the *Star* that when he commended Fox on his “democratic” behavior, Fox angrily replied: “Democratic hell, you forced us to do this and that’s not democracy. You know you caused us to lose an awful lot of money, but you don’t care. . . .”⁵⁴ The Club offered assistance in any integration problems the skating rink experienced, but it also promised to intervene if any new racial discrimination complaints were made.⁵⁵

The De Porres Club also challenged the Jim Crow practices many restaurants followed. These were brought to the members’ attention either by complaints from residents, or by testing the policies themselves. Other times it was inadvertently discovered that a restaurant catered only to whites when the racially mixed group gathered after a meeting for something to eat.⁵⁶

One of the De Porres tactics was the sit-in, where they refused to leave a restaurant until they were served. Other times they would attempt to reason with the owner or manager. If this proved unsuccessful, a member would have a warrant sworn out for his arrest. Some cases were won, but many were dismissed. According to Jeffery H. Smith, in his article, “The Omaha De Porres Club,” discrimination was “hard to prove legally.”⁵⁷

Two club members, Bill Ried, a black, and Chet Anderson, a white, found this to be true when they were arrested at the Cuming Street Restaurant, located at Fortieth and Cuming Streets. According to Smith, they “vociferously protested” Ried’s food being

served on a dirty plate, while Anderson's meal was served on a china plate. Although they were not found guilty, the proprietor merely received a lecture from the judge on the state's civil rights statute.⁵⁸

The Omaha Urban League also worked closely with the De Porres Club in the fight against Jim Crow policies. Although the League took a diplomatic approach in the fight for civil rights, the two organizations often supported each other in their campaigns, and memberships overlapped. Focusing primarily on employment, education, housing and health, the League made some real advances from 1951 through 1953.

In his 1952 annual report, Executive Secretary Whitney Young wrote: "Apathy, indifference and rationalization are being replaced with sincere interest and concern and in many cases, positive action."⁵⁹ Like the De Porres Club, the League also gained individual memberships from many civic and social North Omaha organizations such as the Severettes, Beau Brummels, Modernettes, Debonnaires, and the Rattlers Clubs.

Young credited "an all time high" in memberships to the support from these organizations.⁶⁰ Between 1950 and 1953, the League's numbers rose from seventy-five to almost one thousand. One reason for the growth was that the annual budget of the Community Chest increased from twelve thousand to twenty-eight thousand dollars, and the number of full-time staff members went from three to five people.⁶¹

During the 1951-53 era, the League also had a turnover in its officers. In 1952, Nathan Phillips Dodge, a prominent realtor, replaced Alfred Kennedy, another Omaha realtor, as president.⁶² Several months later, Secretary Marion Taylor accepted a

position as executive director of the Tulsa, Oklahoma Urban League. Milton Lewis, of Erie, Pennsylvania, took over the Omaha position. Lewis held a bachelor's degree from Wilberforce University and a master's degree from the University of Cincinnati. He was the director of special programs for the Health and Tuberculosis Association in Erie. Young approved of Taylor's replacement, stating that the League was "fortunate in securing the services of such a well-qualified person."⁶³

Although Young's association with the League lasted only three years, his accomplishments were many. Dodge credited him as "the man most responsible for prying my eyes open to the disease of segregation and discrimination in our own community."⁶⁴ According to Nancy J. Weiss in her book, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights*:

The years in Omaha gave Whitney Young the chance to test his skills, develop his gifts as a communicator between the races, and establish some of the patterns he would return to again and again throughout his professional life. "Here he had the opportunity to stretch his wings and learned to fly," [his wife] said years later.⁶⁵

From 1951 through 1953, the League helped blacks in the area of higher education. Three nursing scholarships, consisting of 250 dollars each, were awarded to qualified students through the organization. Ralph Selby, a University of Omaha senior, was accepted into Omicron Delta Kappa, a national organization that only admitted male students who ranked in the upper third of their class. He was also the first black student to join the school's varsity debate team. Like many other local black graduates, Selby left Omaha to further his career after the University of Michigan Law School awarded him a full tuition scholarship.⁶⁶ Another example was the "Negro bacteriologist" hired

by the University of Nebraska Medical School. The League considered this “an excellent and unusual job opening.”⁶⁷

Black women as well as black men benefited from the fight against racial discrimination in employment in the early 1950s. The placement of a black woman in the circulation department of the main branch of the Omaha Public Library “pleased” Arthur Parsons, head librarian of the branch located at Nineteenth and Harney Street.⁶⁸ The Omaha Public Power District hired two additional black women, one as a mail messenger and another as an elevator operator. Marion Taylor of the Urban League stated that he hoped “several more jobs at the utility firms will be available real soon for young Negro women because they have such few and pleasant jobs of this type.”⁶⁹

Most black females, however, found that despite their education or training, employment outside of menial labor was almost impossible. Celestine Lightner shared her experiences with listeners at a De Porres Club meeting. After graduating from the University of Nebraska, she worked as a secretary for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and as a civil employee for the city’s police department. Despite the fact that she received good recommendations, she had difficulty finding employment when she moved to Omaha. Until she found secretarial work for a law firm, her prospects looked grim.⁷⁰

When she applied for a job with the Omaha police department, she was told that they “were not ready yet to use a Negro secretary.”⁷¹ The only position the telephone company offered her was that of an elevator operator, with the possibility of working her

way up to a higher position in several years. Her secretarial position for a rabbi ended when a member of the synagogue saw her in the office, and insisted that she be fired.⁷²

Although the Skinner Manufacturing Company did not discriminate against black women, it was not until 1951 that it hired four black men in semi-skilled positions. Owner and League board member Lloyd Skinner finally realized: "I can't be going around asking other people to employ blacks unless I do it myself."⁷³ Fred Stageman, plant supervisor, commented that "the men are satisfactory in every respect, and in all probabilities others will be hired."⁷⁴ Businessman Otto Swanson, who, like Skinner, also served on the Urban League board, began hiring blacks at the Nebraska Clothing Company.⁷⁵

Gilbert Lewis was finally able to use the journalism degree he earned at Creighton University when he was hired by radio station KFAB as a news writer. The position consisted of writing news stories aired during the evenings. Two main taxicab companies, Yellow and Checker, abandoned their Jim Crow hiring policies when they realized that not only did the public accept the change, but also that "most of the drivers were reported as cooperative."⁷⁶

In the League's 1953 annual report, Young stated that placing blacks in these positions had become "accepted and satisfactory practice." He lamented, however, that attempts "to secure skilled and clerical opportunities with Omaha banks, large insurance companies, Union Pacific headquarters, and the Street Railway Company have been unsuccessful."⁷⁷ He also reported that the League's Industrial Relations and Vocational Guidance Department interviewed 1,421 prospective employees and made 920 referrals,

but only 311 people were actually employed.⁷⁸ In 1951, the *World-Herald* praised the League for the “one hundred new jobs, not held before, [that] have been opened to Negroes,” yet it rarely mentioned the organization’s campaign for black employment as sales clerks in the major department stores, as streetcar and bus operators, and in various areas of government.⁷⁹

Although the League was an interracial organization, its presidents remained white. This was probably a strategic move, as the League realized that with a white leader it carried more influence in dealing with whites. For example, an out-of-town baseball team that had arranged to stay at a local hotel was refused lodging when the management discovered that one of the players was black. Young called Dodge who, in turn, notified Gene Eppley, owner of the Fontenelle Hotel. Eppley provided rooms for the team, including the black player, without incident.⁸⁰

Dodge was also influential when pressure tactics were implemented. He described his role as a mediator when he and Young tested various establishments:

I would call on different employers with Whitney. Frequently, it would be the first time an employer would have the experience of talking across the table to a black that was well educated and possibly a good deal more informed than he was. Yes, I was instrumental in bringing that experience to a number of Omaha employers. Or Whitney would call and say, “Hey, let’s have lunch today and let’s try the so-and-so café because they wouldn’t feed two or three of my friends yesterday.” So I’d go down there with Whitney and sit down and expect service, and we got it. And if I knew there was going to be a problem, I’d call Otto Swanson or Al Kennedy and say, “Hey let’s take Whitney to lunch at the so-and-so.” We didn’t get thrown out, but sometimes we got darn poor service. But the follow up to that was that after once or twice, then Whit could go in there and take a friend; it might be a white friend or a black friend, but that was the next step.⁸¹

They were not always successful, however. After many failed attempts to encourage the Union Pacific Railroad to hire blacks, Dodge arranged for a visit between himself, Young, and the railroad's president. An agreement to hire a black engineer was finally reached, on the condition that a see-through partition would be constructed to separate him from the white ones. Young refused the proposal, and the railroad continued the Jim Crow practice for several more years.⁸²

Having a white League president often proved advantageous, but it occasionally placed him in the position of fence-sitting. Speaking at a Mason's meeting one evening, Alfred Kennedy commented: "There not only exists a problem of educating whites into adopting a better attitude toward Negroes, but one of teaching Negroes to improve their relationship with whites." He also referred to an editorial in the *World-Herald* that stated: "Negroes would be surprised at the reservoir of good will most whites have for [the Negro] race."⁸³

Sometimes the optimism the League showed in their achievements and its complaints of ongoing discrimination in Omaha was contradictory. The reason for this is explained in a letter to Denny Holland, president of the De Porres Club, from Lester Granger, executive director of the National Urban League. Granger offered advice on relating to the public both the progress that had been made in the fight for racial equality and the barriers that lay in its way:

Take an honest, searching look at the present balance sheet in race relations. Where progress has been recorded, let it be played up dramatically as an example of the vitality of the democratic progress. Where failure and lags are recognized, let these be admitted frankly, not in a shameful spirit, but rather with the determination to correct unsatisfactory situations as rapidly as possible. Let regular reports on gains and losses be made to the community so that the public as

a whole will remain aware of how far it has gone, how fast it is moving, and what will remain to be accomplished. . . .

Every effort should be made to avoid community splits on a racial basis. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that colored Americans are automatically on the side of interracial progress, and that all of the opposition is provided by white Americans. You and I know how false any such idea is There should be more publicizing of the "American teamwork that works," which is the Urban League synonym for interracial effort.⁸⁴

In his last Urban League annual report, Young stated that 1953 would probably be recorded as the most important year for the organization. Not because "a large number of dramatic experiences were recorded," he said, "but because we believe a firm basis for effectiveness and long range community planning was laid."⁸⁵ He also warned that despite the progress that was made in interracial relations during his three years in Omaha, much more work was needed.⁸⁶

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which took a legalistic approach to racial problems, distanced itself from both the De Porres Club and the Urban League. Although memberships in the organizations overlapped, the NAACP received less support from the black community than the other civil rights groups. According to Dodge, the reason for this is that the League not only received better news coverage than the NAACP, but its interracial board carried more "clout." In addition, the League's executive directors demonstrated stronger leadership.⁸⁷ Rev. S. H. Lewis, minister of St. John AME Church and president of the NAACP, spoke out against the community's lack of interest in the Association. He stated: "Any Negro citizen who does not support or cooperate with the NAACP does not deserve the opportunities which it secures."⁸⁸

Some people, however, complained that the NAACP did not actively support other groups in their fight for racial equality. A letter to the editor of the *Star* from a reader in Seattle stated:

I . . . asked my friends why the NAACP merely endorsed the [Reed's Ice Cream] boycott and did not take an active part. They said it wasn't the place of the NAACP. . . . Though I am white [I have] had the privilege of taking part in some NAACP projects and I know that it is within the policy of the association to not only endorse but to initiate direct finance and actively campaign on this type of project. If your branch leaders are too darn lazy or too scared to admit this . . . you should kick them out.⁸⁹

At the beginning of 1953, the NAACP had ninety-six members. In an attempt to raise the number to one thousand, volunteers canvassed the Near North Side, going house-to-house, to solicit memberships. In addition, the *Star* encouraged people to join by publishing the names of new members. Campaign workers pledged to not take a summer vacation until the goal was met.⁹⁰ Still, the list grew slowly. A *Star* editorial complained:

It should not be necessary for the NAACP to set up campaign organizations and teams to beg and plead with Negroes to join. . . . It seems incredible that people who are so vocal about wanting first-class citizenship in America are so slow about paying for it. Two dollars a year is a petty amount to spend for one's rights. . . . If civil rights are worth having, they are worth paying for.⁹¹

The *Star* continued to sponsor advertisements for the organization in the paper, explaining the need for contributions to the "'Minute Men' [who] stand ready to defend all Negroes who suffer legal injustice because of their race or color and cannot afford to employ help."⁹² Another one referred to many blacks as "outlaws" who, because of Jim Crow policies, are "outside of the law and unable to gain their constitutional rights."⁹³

In a December 4, 1953 letter to the editor of the black paper, one resident noted, “with a heavy heart,” that only two churches had contributed to the NAACP fund campaign.⁹⁴ Saint Benedict Church later added a twenty-dollar donation, apologizing that the “already financially burdened” black parish could not contribute more.⁹⁵ By the end of the year, approximately three hundred new memberships were obtained, less than one-third of its goal.⁹⁶

One way the civil rights organizations expected to change Jim Crow hiring policies was through Fair Employment Practice (FEP) legislation. As he did during two previous sessions, Senator John Adams introduced legislation in 1951, which specified that it would be unlawful for employers, labor unions and employment agencies to discriminate on the grounds of race, religion or nationality. It further stated:

The denial of equal employment opportunities because of such discrimination and the consequent failure to utilize the productive capacities of individuals to their fullest extent deprive large segments of the population of the state of earnings necessary to maintain decent standards of living, necessitates their resort to public relief and intensifies group conflicts, thereby resulting in grave injury to the public safety, health and welfare.⁹⁷

The bill also stipulated that Omaha Public Schools would provide students with a program that was designed to teach the origins of prejudice and the harmful effects it had on society. With proposed enforcement by the Department of Labor, violators would be subject to a fine of not more than one thousand dollars, one year in prison, or both.⁹⁸

The De Porres Club, which was involved in the campaign against the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street and Railway Company at this time, also urged the Mayor’s Human Relations Committee to support the establishment of a Fair Employment Practice Committee in Omaha. In response to the request, the Committee “sent a resolution to the

Mayor urging the passage of a strong FEP ordinance as soon as possible.”⁹⁹ The bill won the approval of Omaha Archbishop Gerald T. Bergan, who stated in a letter to Adams that “the day has long since passed when restrictions should be placed on our fellow Americans because of race or creed.”¹⁰⁰

In the summer of 1952, a group of citizens, including Denny Holland, Harold Tibbs, Mrs. Jack Gordon, Eva Hanna, Ethel Killingsworth, Whitney Young, Seymour Kaplan, Rev. S. H. Lewis and Coroline Ronhovde, formed the Omaha Council for Equal Job Opportunities (OCEJO). Realizing the importance of both state and local FEP legislation to obtain equal employment opportunities, the organization pushed for an FEP City Ordinance. The group gained the support of many local organizations such as the De Porres Club, the Anti-Defamation League, the Urban League and the NAACP.¹⁰¹

One of the ways the Council attempted to inform the public of the need for legislation was through a public forum. Everyone, whether in favor of the Adam’s bill or not, was invited to a meeting held at the YWCA, which presented a panel to discuss the issue. Appealing to the emotions of the public, it stated: “What better way can we combat the evil of communism than by coming together . . . to make an even stronger America in the ideological war against enemy concepts[?]”¹⁰²

As a result of their organized fight against Jim Crow policies, the *Star*, the De Porres Club and the OCEJO received letters from the Mayor’s Human Relations Committee commending them on their fight against the local Jim Crow policies. The paper was praised for its “fearless presentation of facts dealing with racial discrimination,” and the De Porres Club was recognized for its “activity in behalf of and

support of the Nebraska State Law against racial discrimination in public places.”¹⁰³

Unfortunately, the Mayor’s Committee did little else, lending support to the accusation by Robert Myers, a black businessman and Urban League member, that its members only gave “lip service” to racial problems.¹⁰⁴

In a televised debate presented by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Whitney Young and John Tate, an Omaha business consultant, presented opposing views on Adam’s bill. Young, who described himself as “an American citizen who wanted to preserve American democracy,” explained both the need for and the potential effectiveness of the measure. Tate, however, represented the opinion other businessmen expressed in previous fair employment legislation. He stated that employers should retain the right to hire whom they pleased, adding that discrimination was “the mark of high intelligence.” During the exchange, Tate commented, “If I had interrupted [Young], someone would say I was taking advantage of a Negro.”¹⁰⁵

FEP legislation suffered a blow when Senator John Adams, the frequent sponsor of such bills, inexplicably decided in January of 1953 not to introduce such a measure in that legislative session. Stating that it would show “lack of appreciation [where] good, voluntary progress toward the elimination of job discrimination” had been achieved, he left its supporters feeling abandoned and angry.¹⁰⁶

Mary Fredericks, chairperson for the OCEJO, immediately defended the purpose of FEP legislation, as did many other civil rights supporters. She pointed out that “of the eight thousand employers [in Omaha], only 806 employ Negroes in any capacity, and most of them are on the service level.” She cited the example of a black female who,

although she earned a master's degree from the University of Omaha, was employed as an elevator operator.¹⁰⁷

Letters to the editor of the *Star* also reflected the outrage caused by Senator Adams' decision. One reader said it was "most disgusting" that Adams would not support a fair employment bill. He wondered "who is left to help fight for the right to be employed in positions that people are trained for."¹⁰⁸ Another stated:

I feel certain that nothing has done the cause of equal opportunity for Negroes in Omaha as much harm as Senator Adams' statement. . . . The harm would have been much greater if Whitney Young, Rev. Lewis, Father Markoe and others had not promptly given true facts.¹⁰⁹

The *Star* was also both angry and bewildered by Adams' remark. It stated:

[W]e have pointed out time and again in our editorials [that] the advancement of the Omaha Negro has been retarded by the constant adherence of the Negro "leaders" to the law of the jungle. . . . So far as we have been able to ascertain, Senator Adams did not consult the various groups and individuals who worked faithfully in helping to elect him and in helping him to sponsor a state FEPC in the last two sessions of the legislature. The interesting fact about this statement is that there is job discrimination but we should bow our heads and thank the powers that be for the goodness they have bestowed upon us. . . . The most deplorable thing about the whole mess is the fact that the foes of Negro progress have been given a weapon to use against the young people of Omaha for God knows how long.¹¹⁰

The fury that resulted from the senator's decision even reached California. A serviceman who referred to himself as "one of a number of disgusted G.I.s" in a letter to the *Star*, wrote:

It is my opinion that if we allow people like Adams to continue his folly, then those that have died, died in vain. . . . If he continues to make such asinine statements, as in the past, against those who put him there, then he should be impeached.¹¹¹

Senator John Larkin, Jr., an Omaha insurance agent, was a strong supporter of Adams' past FEP bills. He introduced Legislative Bill 558 in the 1953 session, which was heard before the Labor Committee in March of 1953. Although Larkin was optimistic that it would be more favorably received than previously, the bill was killed in a six to two vote. The damage Adams' earlier statement caused was apparent even before the debate began. Neither the advocates for the bill nor their opponents anticipated a heated debate. Unlike previous hearings where supporters crowded the room, only a small gathering arrived to back Larkin. The Labor Committee presented the same arguments as they had in the past, this time in what one observer referred to as "friendly opposition."¹¹²

A representative of the Associated Industries of Nebraska argued that an educational program and time, not legislation, was needed to bring about fair employment for minorities. He also claimed the bill would result in "harassment of honest employers, which, in turn, would spread and promote intolerance and resentment." H. L. Van Amburgh, Vice-President of the Omaha Stock Yards, stated that the meat packing industry was among the largest employers of blacks and, although there was "room for improvement," he did not feel that FEP laws were a solution. They also used Adams' reasoning to help kill the bill.¹¹³

In defense of the bill, Senator Larkin stated: "Discrimination definitely exists in Nebraska. There have been some improvements, but the progress just isn't fast enough for the times." Seymour Kaplan of the Anti-Defamation League disagreed with the belief that the bill would "force employers to hire anyone."¹¹⁴ Two black Omaha residents,

both with graduate degrees, described their inability to find employment suitable to their level of education. Several labor union spokesmen also testified. Gordon Preble, speaking on behalf of the American Federation of Labor, James Fellows of the United Packing Workers of America (CIO), and O. J. Johnson of the State CIO offered examples of their efforts to eradicate racial bias and explained the importance of an FEPC (Fair Employment Practice Committee.) Another supporter stated that FEP legislation would help rid the country of “one of the favorite communist issues.” He told the committee that racial discrimination in the United States was a frequent topic during his travels to other countries. Even Adams asked that the bill be allowed to reach the floor of the Unicameral where the entire legislature could vote on it.¹¹⁵

With the defeat of the proposed state FEP legislation, the OCEJO intensified its campaign for a city FEPC. Operating on a local level, it would be responsible for “investigating any complaints of job discrimination by way of race, creed or color.”¹¹⁶

The *Star* encouraged residents to support this ordinance:

The need for such legislation here is plain to anyone aware of the situation in Omaha. . . . At the rate we are going, at least four more generations of Negro families in Omaha can plan on sending their sons and daughters through high school and even college to find jobs in Omaha as waiters, maids and toilet attendants.¹¹⁷

Another editorial in the *Star* complained that Omaha businessmen were not to be trusted. With possible reference to Urban League board member Lloyd Skinner, an executive of Skinner Manufacturing Company, and an active member in the Small Businessmen’s association, it stated:

They tell us “we would like to employ Negroes but our workers wouldn’t stand for it.” Then the front man and spokesman for the Small Business Men’s

Association shows up to oppose federal FEP because it gives the federal government too much power, state FEP because it should be done on the local level and we feel certain he will be there to oppose a municipal FEP with ready "reasons."¹¹⁸

Mary Frederick, OCEJO chairperson, sought to overcome the apathy prevalent among many discouraged residents of the Near North Side. At meetings, she introduced speakers from cities that had successfully enacted city FEP legislation. For example, George M. Jensen, a Minneapolis businessman and chairman of the city's FEPC, told of how the ordinance was established and its effect on business.¹¹⁹

Governor Robert Crosby attempted to address the Jim Crow tactics through the establishment of a Governor's Human Relations Committee. Its purpose was to examine the extent of racial discrimination within the state and direct any problems to the appropriate committees. Father John Markoe of the De Porres Club and Whitney Young were among those chosen to serve on the board. Crosby explained his decision to establish the board:

Nebraska has a wonderful heritage of freedom. We were never a slave state. We have a state civil rights law and in most ways we are ahead of many of our states in the promotion of freedom and opportunity to all our citizens. . . . I want to see the state of Nebraska maintain its gains and correct whatever inconsistencies that exist. . . .¹²⁰

At the first meeting, one member suggested that they move slowly and cautiously. Using an analogy of a man pushing a stalled truck with flat tires up a steep incline, Father Markoe responded: "The very nature of the problem would guarantee that any program adopted would proceed slowly enough."¹²¹ Although the Governor's Human Relations Committee had good intentions, it was no more effective in combating discrimination than the Mayor's Human Relations Committee, established under Glenn Cunningham.

Due to long periods of inactivity, it was sometimes unclear as to whether the mayor's group was still functioning.¹²² Furthermore, the Mayor's Committee lacked the necessary clout it needed to investigate any complaints it received concerning racial discrimination. Robert Myers, a black businessman and Urban League Board member, recalled his experience while serving on the board:

[T]hey'd come up with suggestions and programs and have to take it before the City Council or propose it to the Council, and they'd either look at it or not, or chances are they wouldn't do much about it. . . . Some of the people on the board at that time I don't think should have been there. . . . They were there either to impede progress or just because they were asked to serve. . . . They weren't interested in Civil Rights or progress as such. They were more of a stumbling block than anything else. And they'd get to the board meeting and give a lot of lip service and agree, but then on the other hand you'd get wind that they were doing just the opposite, saying just the opposite, depending on where they were and who they were talking to. . . .¹²³

One reason the Mayor's Human Relations Committee was ineffective was because the mayor had little power. In fact, Cunningham complained that "the mayor has power to investigate affairs and departments of the city, but if he finds anything, he has no power to do anything about it." Consequently, he considered not running for reelection in 1952.¹²⁴

One incident that proved especially frustrating for Cunningham was when, according to the *World-Herald*, "the City Commissioners stole the ball from the mayor to put through two new members." On January 25, 1951, council members met without Cunningham and, within a matter of minutes, appointed two new commissioners, Richard Robertson and Louis Kavan.¹²⁵ Several weeks earlier, a petition had been submitted asking that Johnny Owens, a black resident who served as a Nebraska state legislator from 1933 through 1934, be appointed to fill one of two vacancies in the City Council.

The petition was signed by approximately ten people and submitted by NAACP president, Rev. S. H. Lewis. It is unclear if Cunningham wanted to appoint Owens, but it is apparent that the Omaha City Council was not ready to have a black member.¹²⁶

The City Council was also instrumental in maintaining a segregated fire station, located at Twenty-second and Lake Street. In 1951, the local chapter of the NAACP filed a petition, requesting that the station be integrated. The Council voted 6-0 against it. Fire Commissioner A. W. Olson promised to give “deserved promotions and salary increases,” a compromise Charles Davis, an attorney for the NAACP, complained was only meant to appease and delay the issue. Davis also accused the council of refusing “to stand up and be counted and face the issue squarely.”¹²⁷

The two new commissioners, Robertson and Kavan, visited the station and stated that they found the firemen to be content with the situation. Robertson added, “We cannot change the system long in effect overnight.” Mayor Cunningham only replied “no comment” when Kavan asked for his opinion and suggestions on the matter.¹²⁸

Some Omaha residents, however, voiced their disapproval of the commissioners’ actions. In the *World-Herald’s* “Public Pulse,” one reader stated:

Their lack of action regarding Omaha’s Jim Crow Fire Department is scandalous. How many more votes do they expect to receive for assuming that jelly-like, do-nothing stand? Certainly not as many as if they had abandoned their cowardly, cowering position and had taken instead, a stand for justice.¹²⁹

The *Star*, however, did more than complain. It vowed to keep the public informed of any discriminatory actions the commissioners made. Repeating its motto that ran across the top of every edition, “That no good cause shall lack a champion and that evil shall not thrive unopposed,” it pledged, “This paper . . . will keep a detailed

record of the attitude of every councilman toward the Negro group, and will unflinchingly give back to the citizens of Omaha, the record of each, at the conclusion of said term. . . .”¹³⁰

Yet, several blacks were successful in acquiring responsible positions. In 1951, two black officers were promoted to patrolmen, making them the first blacks to be appointed to “cruiser car duty” in Omaha. They lacked the authority other policemen had, however, because black officers did not have sirens on their cars.¹³¹ Two years later, Governor Crosby appointed Arthur McCaw as State Budget Supervisor, the highest governmental administrative position held by a black in Nebraska. McCaw, an art teacher in the Omaha Public School System, was actively involved in the NAACP, the Urban League, and the OCEJO. According to the *Star*, the position offered him “the greatest opportunity ever given to a Negro in Nebraska to dispel some of the misconceptions about the ability of Negroes to hold high administrative [positions].”¹³² Furthermore, Rev. John Favors, a teacher in the Omaha Public Schools and a pastor at Pilgrim Baptist Church, and Claude Organ, an intern at St. Joseph Hospital, joined Whitney Young as members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce.¹³³

While blacks were making gradual progress in breaking down Jim Crow practices throughout the city, they still faced their biggest challenges within their own community. Since black physicians were not welcomed in most of the city’s hospitals, adequate medical care continued to be a major problem. In 1953, the city forced People’s Hospital, a North Omaha facility established to meet the needs of the black community, to close due its inability to meet safe building requirements. Although the area was left

without proper medical care, no new hospital was built, and the difficulty blacks faced in obtaining health care continued.¹³⁴

The Colored Old Folks Home, located at 933 North Twenty-fifth Street, provided custodial care for the area's elderly. In 1953, it received a new name, the Martha T. Smith Home. It also received a new gas furnace, providing the residents with a long-needed adequate heating system. Although it received funding from the Community Chest, the dilapidated building still needed additional major improvements such as roof repair, exterior work, and, according to one board member, "enough painting to keep a whole crew of men busy."¹³⁵

As the city's black population grew, the Near North Side became increasingly congested. To help remedy the situation, the Omaha Housing Authority (OHA) opened three new public housing projects. The Hilltop Homes, located between North Thirtieth and Thirty-third Streets, Grant to Lake Streets, opened in 1951 and provided 225 units. The 175 unit Spencer Homes stretched three blocks, from North Twenty-six Avenue to Twenty-ninth Streets, and opened one year later. The largest complex was the Pleasantview Homes, which contained two six-story buildings. Opened in 1953, it was located on North Thirtieth Street between Parker and Burdette.¹³⁶

In addition, the segregation policy under which earlier built project homes existed was terminated. In the summer of 1951, members of the Urban League, including its president, realtor Alfred C. Kennedy, met with Mayor Cunningham and OHA representatives to convince them to end the practice in low rent public housing. League Executive Secretary Whitney Young stated that the new projects provided a "unique

opportunity to start off on an integrated basis.” Attorney Charles Davis, chairman of the League’s housing committee, added, “the assignment of quarters in the seven hundred new units should be based on need and availability rather than on race.”¹³⁷

The racial tensions that resulted from segregated housing was exemplified when a League member drew a comparison between the Mason-Dixon Line and North Twenty-second Street, which divided the whites and the blacks who lived in the Logan Fontenelle projects. John Larkin, OHA member and the father of Senator John Larkin Jr., assured the group that he supported them “100 percent.” Realtor Harold C. Payne acknowledged that the blacks had housing difficulties, and promised to help them.¹³⁸

Two months later, the OHA voted unanimously to integrate the new public housing units. The decision represented an important victory for the Urban League and its new executive secretary, Whitney Young. Due to Larkin’s “courage and conviction, the League later recognized him as “the citizen making the most important contribution to racial relations in Omaha.” According to the *Star*, the end of segregation in public housing was “the most important step to be taken in Omaha to improve social and economic conditions of Negro citizens.”¹³⁹

The addition of approximately seven hundred living units, however, was not nearly enough to remedy the severely overcrowded living conditions and the dilapidated homes in the Near North Side. In an area where the population grew from twelve thousand to twenty-two thousand in the previous ten years, only twenty new homes had been built. State Senators Charles F. Tvdkik, John Adams, Jr., and John Larkin Jr. introduced Legislative Bill 469, and the federal government then approved the request of

from Omaha for funds of approximately \$1,200,000. Not only did this spike the interest of Omaha realtors in redevelopment, but the bill also allowed private industry to construct any housing approved by OHA.¹⁴⁰

Although the Council did pass an ordinance that allowed OHA to conduct a slum clearance program in 1951, it did not pass a resolution to renovate the areas designated by the Authority. Therefore, the slum clearance proposal remained inactive.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, the area that was finally chosen for redevelopment was considered by the League as having the “greatest incidence of illness, crime, delinquency and definitely a fire hazard. . . . A third of the homes are without inside toilet facilities, a tenth without hot or cold running water and less than forty-five percent are occupied by the owner.”¹⁴²

Still, attempts to carry out the redevelopment plan continued. At a January 1952 NAACP meeting, OHA attorney Dave Beber presented the federally funded plan, entitled “The Effect of Slum Clearance,” to the black community.¹⁴³

It was not well received. First, the term “slum clearance” drew strong objection. Several weeks later, a meeting was held at the Paradise Baptist Church for black residents to voice additional complaints. Rev. C. C. Adams stated that he was afraid the plan would “lead to more public housing and the forced sale of homes people have spent years paying for.” He added that in the past, homes cleared to make room for public housing were sold at “depression” prices. Another resident was against federal funding for the renovation project. He suggested that negligent homeowners be held responsible for maintenance. Some felt having their property “studied” was invasive. Furthermore, the

Urban League was criticized for “supporting the program without consulting the home owners in the area.”¹⁴⁴

In the spring of 1952, the City Council and the Urban League together asked OHA to examine the area and again outline possible areas for redevelopment. Still, there was disagreement among the members. Committee Chairman Alfred Kennedy believed that the area previously considered was too large, while G. P. North, another member, urged that the areas should be made larger. He added, “If we start this study and find other sections that should be included, we won’t be able to go back for more money.” OHA attorney Dave Beber agreed to begin work immediately.¹⁴⁵

Two weeks before the July 1952 League meeting, however, Kennedy expressed frustration at the lack of support its Redevelopment Committee received. While he believed there were still many things the program could accomplish, they needed to “determine if the members still have sufficient interest to carry on. If they don’t, then it might as well be kicked out.”¹⁴⁶

During the summer of 1952, news of the housing problems in the Near North Side reached Reginald Johnson, National Urban League Director of the Department of Housing Activities in New York City. After studying the situation, he contacted Frank S. Horne, Assistant Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency in Washington, D. C. In a letter to Johnson, Horne shared his regret that the City Council did not approve the study area. He remained optimistic, however, that, in time, the plan would be implemented. He also commented on the negative influence some outspoken members of the Near North Side had on other residents:

[W]e are nevertheless inclined to believe that this setback may actually be, in fact, converted into an opportunity for launching a sound attack upon the housing conditions of [Omaha]. Certainly it has served to focus the attention of community leadership upon the complex problems attending the slum clearance program. . . .

It is apparent that those organizations which are doubtless generally accepted as responsible and representative supported the program—the League, the Ministerial Alliance, the Federation of Women’s Clubs, the NAACP, etc. On the other hand, it appears that certain white landlords, “jack-leg” Negro ministers and “a political hanger-on” succeeded in developing and corralling a degree of Negro opposition.¹⁴⁷

Many North Omaha residents did not wait for the city to make the needed repairs to their property. Residents who lived in a three-block area, bounded by Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Streets and Caldwell and Seward Streets initiated the Home and Neighborhood Improvement Plan. On the morning of July 25, 1953, over one hundred people converged to paint houses, repair broken fences, and rid the area of piles of debris and even the charred remains of a house.¹⁴⁸

Young called the effort “one of the most inspiring things I have seen in Omaha in a long time. . . . I see this as a clear indication that we are moving in the direction of a better community.” Dodge, Chairman of the Omaha Real Estate Board and newly elected president of the Urban League, also approved. In an interview with the *Star*, he stated: “any time you folks run into trouble on this thing, by all means, come to the Real Estate Board and let us see if we can help you. At all times we stand ready to assist you.”¹⁴⁹ This comment was interesting, as Dodge was in a position to greatly help the group.

Although the City Council again rejected the redevelopment of the designated areas, the *World-Herald* reported that “an Omaha life insurance company” pledged

\$150,000 for FHA-insured mortgage loans for black residents. The money provided for the construction of new homes on lots near Thirty-sixth and John Creighton Boulevard.¹⁵⁰

Young summarized the often-successful approach he took in dealing with local realtors, builders and lending agencies in a letter to Reginald Johnson, Director of the Department of Housing Activities of the National Urban League in Washington, D. C.:

[We have made] an effort to sell them--in some cases individually--on the seriousness of this problem and the role which they must play as respected citizens and businessmen. In each case we started off on the assumption that none of them are hostile to the idea of better housing conditions and the problems which they believe exist are [not only] real problems but ones that must be met and can be satisfactorily resolved. . . .

I believe that all too often many of our staff in the Urban League Movement adopt a hopeless attitude with regard to real estate men, bankers, etc. My experience has been that there are individual realtors like individual employers who may be educated in spite of the policies of the national Real Estate Board . . . which in many cases we are opposed to.

I regret that I can give you no dramatic gimmicks which have produced miraculous things in housing. You know much better than I that there 'just ain't no such animal.'¹⁵¹

Racial discrimination remained prevalent in Omaha's Catholic Church in the early 1950s. Some progress was made earlier when the De Porres club successfully fought to allow the admittance of two black students to Sacred Heart High School. Still, the only parish that admitted blacks, regardless of where they lived, was Saint Benedict's. The problem one woman had when she and her husband wanted to attend another Catholic church's function exemplifies the extent of racial discrimination in the Omaha Catholic Churches and the difficulty black Catholics faced if they tried go outside of their boundaries:

One Sunday we read about a dinner at a Catholic Church so we went. The lady at the door asked what was on my mind. When I asked for tickets she said she could not sell us any unless we took our dinners out. So, we went to see the priest. . . . He said he was busy and would see us some other time. We went ahead and told him what happened and he just smiled. . . . I am from the deep South, but I have never ran [*sic*] into so much discrimination among priests in the South as I have in Omaha.

Most of us are ready to fight when treated in this manner without a reason, other people don't understand as they have never experienced it as we have in so many ways. . . . They ridicule us in every way they can and only offer us menial work no matter how well we can do other things. I could not go to confession to a priest that felt that way.¹⁵²

The *Star* praised Saint Benedict for the education it provided for the city's black youths, but it remained critical of its existence as a "Negro Catholic Church." An editorial in the November 21, 1952 edition complained:

The existence of St. Benedict on the present basis, without parish limits, regardless of the good it does, leaves Negroes in the main, being segregated to "their own" Catholic Church and their own Catholic school regardless of where they live. To this extent St. Benedict's promotes racial segregation, which is morally evil.¹⁵³

The paper later charged that the small number of religious leaders who had spoken out against Jim Crow had been "ostracized or branded as crackpots" by other pastors.¹⁵⁴

Speaking to the Omaha Ministerial Union, Whitney Young joined the *Star* in criticizing religious segregation. He pointed out that the only schools in Omaha that barred black students were those affiliated with the church, and the only school that was established strictly for blacks was parochial. He also stated that only the city's religious affiliated hospitals maintained racially segregated wards. In fact, Young told his audience that the ministers, in general, were guilty of being "indifferent" toward racial

injustice. He added: "One of the reasons I am reluctant to depend solely upon the moral approach is the record of the churches."¹⁵⁵

According to the *Star*, "the St. Benedict's priest" responded to the paper's stand against the Jim Crow rule, by telling his congregation the paper was "persecuting the followers and imitators of Christ." He further stated: "The Omaha Star cannot be allowed to appear to pressure the Catholic Church, or its official representatives and leaders."¹⁵⁶

Three months later, however, on Easter Sunday, news that Archbishop Gerald T. Bergan determined that the church would establish parish limits reached the members of Saint Benedict's. Although most blacks lived within the new boundaries, those who did not could now attend another Catholic church. In addition, black students could attend other parochial schools.¹⁵⁷ The Archbishop also spoke against the degree of racial discrimination in the city at a rally sponsored by the Omaha Metropolitan Council of Holy Name Societies. He complained: "[Blacks] can labor at menial tasks and die in Korea for the land they love, but rights, God given, are denied them-even here in Omaha."¹⁵⁸

Whitney Young believed that Omaha was maturing in its social and humane outlook. It could be argued, however, that the city was not willingly changing, but responding to the voices of the blacks and their allies who had finally found a way to be heard. In the next three years, 1954 through 1956, with the use of their new-found voice, blacks would make themselves heard in a way that the white community was finally able to hear.¹⁵⁹

¹ In June 1951, the home of Percy Julian, a Chicago research chemist, was bombed when he moved into a white community. *Omaha Star*, 22 June 1951. Harry T. Morgan, a Florida resident and NAACP executive secretary of the Progressive Voters League, was killed and his wife injured, when a bomb exploded beneath their home. *Ibid.*, 28 December 1951.

² Jeffery Harrison Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis, Creighton University, 1967), xi.

³ *Omaha Star* (hereinafter referred to as *OS*), 8 June 1951.

⁴ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 58.

⁵ *OS*, 25 May 1951.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 June 1951.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 59.

⁹ *OS*, 15 June 1951.

¹⁰ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 60-61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹² *OS*, 11 May 1951.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23 January 1953.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 October 1951; 21 December, 1951.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21 September 1951; 28 September 1951; 19 October 1951.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 November 1951.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1951; 16 November 1951; 30 November 1951.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 April 1952.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2 May 1952.

²⁰ Ibid., 18 April 1952; 2 May 1952; 6 June 1952.

²¹ Ibid., 21 December 1951.

²² Ibid., 2 May 1952.

²³ Ibid., 9 May 1952.

²⁴ Ibid., 20 June 1952.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 26 September 1952.

²⁷ Ibid., 30 April 1953.

²⁸ Ibid., 26 June 1953.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jeffrey Harrison Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," *Negro History Bulletin* 33 (December 1970): 194-95.

³¹ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 70-71.

³² OS, 6 February 1953.

³³ Ibid., 12 June 1953.

³⁴ Ibid., 6 March 1953.

³⁵ Ibid., 8 May 1953.

³⁶ Ibid., 15 May 1953.

³⁷ Ibid., 30 April 1953.

³⁸ Ibid., 5 June 1953.

³⁹ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 73.

⁴⁰ *OS*, 10 July 1953.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23 October 1953.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 31 July 1953.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31 July, 1953; 4 September 1953.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 September 1953..

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 August 1953; 11 September 1953.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4 September 1953.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 September 1953.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 August 1953.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 September 1953.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11 September 1953.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 14 November 1952.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14 November 1952.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 14 November 1952; Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 48.

⁵⁴ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 48; *OS*, 24 July 1953.

⁵⁵ *OS*, 24 July 1953.

⁵⁶ Jeffery Harrison Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," *Negro History Bulletin* 33 (December 1970), 196.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 50.

⁵⁹ *Omaha World-Herald* (hereinafter referred to *OWH*), 13 February 1952.

⁶⁰ *OS*, 29 August 1952.

⁶¹Whitney M. Young, 1953 Annual Omaha Urban Report, Urban League of Nebraska file, Douglas County Historical Society (hereinafter referred to as DCHS).

⁶² OS, 22 February 1952.

⁶³ Ibid., 19 June 1953.

⁶⁴ Nancy J. Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1989), 54.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ OS, 31 May 1951.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 22 May 1953; 13 March 1953; 22 May 1953.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 16 March 1951.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 8 June 1951.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 16 October 1953.

⁷¹ Ibid., 16 October 1953.

⁷² Ibid., 16 October 1953.

⁷³ Weiss, *Whitney M. Young Jr.*, 53.

⁷⁴ OS, 4 April 1951.

⁷⁵ Weiss, *Whitney Young Jr.*, 53.

⁷⁶ OS, 27 February 1953; 22 May 1953.

⁷⁷ Whitney M. Young, 1953 Omaha Urban League Report, Urban League of Nebraska file, DCHS.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ OWH, 7 February 1951, DCHS file clipping; OS, 25 May 1951.

⁸⁰ Nathan Phillips Dodge III interview by Dennis Mihelich, 22 March 1979, Part II, Number 5, DCHS.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁸³ *OWH*, 15 February 1951, DCHS file clipping.

⁸⁴ Lester Granger to Denny Holland, 22 April 1953, Urban League of Nebraska file, DCHS.

⁸⁵ Whitney M. Young, 1953 Omaha Urban League Annual report, Urban League of Nebraska file, DCHS.

⁸⁶ *OWH*, 11 November 1953, DCHS file clipping.

⁸⁷ Dodge—Mihelich interview, 8.

⁸⁸ *OS*, 12 April 1951.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 March 1953.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 April 1953; *Ibid.*, 12 June 1953; *Ibid.*, 5 June 1953.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5 June 1953.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 6 November 1953.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 20 November 1953.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 December 1953. A *Star* article reported that St. John AME Church and Christ Temple contributed fifteen dollars and five dollars respectively to the NAACP Legal Fund. *Ibid.*, 27 November 1953.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1953.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 April 1953. The *Star* published approximately fifty-two additional names on 22 May 1953, and forty-two names on 12 June 1953.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 January 1951.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 February 1951.

⁹⁹ Smith "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis), 65.

¹⁰⁰ *OWH*, 15 February 1951, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁰¹ *OS*, 22 August 1952.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 12 December 1952.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 5 September 1952.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Myers interview by Dennis Mihelich, August 1984, 25, DCHS.

¹⁰⁵ *OS*, 9 January 1953.

¹⁰⁶ *OWH*, 26 January 1953, DCHS file clipping

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 January 1953, DCHS file clipping; *Ibid.*, 27 January 1953, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁰⁸ *OS*, 30 January 1953.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1953.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1953.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13 February 1953.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 6 March 1953.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6 March 1953. Following this hearing, the De Porres Club discussed what they considered to be a lack of interest in the fight against racial discrimination by the local labor unions. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20 June 1952.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3 April 1953.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 October 1953.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 October 1953.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 6 November 1953.

¹²¹ *OS*, 13 November 1953.

¹²² Ibid., 2 March 1951. The article also stated that the De Porres Club planned to send a letter to Mayor Cunningham asking the status of the Human Relations Committee, as it had been inactive for several months.

¹²³ Myers interview, 1 August 1984, 26.

¹²⁴ *OWH*, 11 February 1951, DCHS file clipping.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 26 January 1951, DCHS file clipping.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 9 January 1951, DCHS file clipping.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 4 April 1951, DCHS file clipping.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ *OWH*, 25 April 1951.

¹³⁰ *OS*, 31 May 1951.

¹³¹ Ibid., 21 November 1951; *OWH*, 10 March 2000.

¹³² *OS*, 2 January 1953.

¹³³ Ibid., 3 April 1953.

¹³⁴ *OWH*, 16 January 1953, DCHS file clipping.

¹³⁵ *OS*, 9 October 1953; In 1953, the Martha T. Smith Home was allotted approximately one thousand dollars. Report and Recommendations of the Budget Committee, Community Chest (United Way of the Midlands), 1953.

¹³⁶ Garneth O. Patterson, *Patterns on the Landscape: Heritage Conversation in North Omaha* (Omaha: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, 1984), 55.

¹³⁷ *OWH*, 15 June 1951, DCHS file clipping.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 11 February 1953, DCHS file clipping; *OS*, 23 November 1951.

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¹⁴² Frank S. Horne, Assistant Administrator, Housing and Home Finance Agency, Washington, D. C. to Reginald A. Johnson, Director of the Department of Housing Activities, National Urban League, New York, 9 October 1952, Urban League of Nebraska file, DCHS.

¹⁴³ *OS*, 18 January 1952, 1.

¹⁴⁴ *OWH*, 16 May 1952, DCHS file clipping; Ibid., 28 June 1952, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁴⁵ Stevens, "The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha," 28; *OWH*, 16 May 1952, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁴⁶ *OWH*, 20 July 1952, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁴⁷ Frank S. Horne to Reginald Johnson, 9 October 1952, DCHS, Urban League of Nebraska file DCHS.

¹⁴⁸ *OS*, 17 July 1953; Ibid., 31 July 1953.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 17 July 1953.

¹⁵⁰ *OWH*, 23 October 1953, DCHS file clipping.

¹⁵¹ Whitney M. Young to Reginald Johnson, 15 December 1952, Urban League of Nebraska file, DCHS.

¹⁵² *OS*, 21 November 1952.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 27 March 1953.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 16 January 1953.

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CHAPTER 5

Doors Are Opened

1953-1956

The *Star* ended 1953 with a list of “hopes” for the coming new year. These included greater involvement of the NAACP and community members generally in the fight for equal rights. It also wanted to see successful battles waged by the Urban League, particularly in the area of fair employment. Goals included the hiring of black teachers in the city’s high schools, and the end of segregation in the fire and police departments.¹ In the three years that followed, some of those goals were achieved. The local NAACP began taking a more active role in civil rights cases, and both the De Porres Club and the Urban League staged several successful campaigns against employment discrimination. Although the De Porres Club suffered a severe decline in membership in 1954, new organizations and, consequently, new approaches to fighting prejudice emerged. Two years later, Omaha voters adopted a new charter that changed the form of city government from a commission to a mayor-council system. Moreover, it included a civil rights clause and prohibited discrimination in city employment. Despite these advances, some of the earlier racial conflicts dragged on, while new ones arose.

In January 1954, Reed’s Ice Cream store finally succumbed to the year-long boycott and picketing organized by the De Porres Club, and agreed to employ blacks. Virginia Dixon, a black woman, was hired to work the five p.m. to midnight shift. Club members offered an “olive branch” to the store’s management by eating ice cream there after a meeting. They warned, however, that if its new employment policy was

discontinued, “the matter will be considered again for action.” News of the club’s success reached the East coast, where it was the lead story in the *Coralator*, a New York publication.²

Several other protests that the De Porres Club initiated also were resolved. In 1949, it initiated a campaign began to persuade the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company to hire blacks. Despite picketing and boycotts, the company held fast to its unfair hiring policy. Four years later, however, the company had to re-negotiate its contract with the city, and that presented an opportunity for proponents of an anti-discrimination clause.³

Other organizations also joined the fight against the Street Railway Company’s unfair hiring policy. The Urban League’s Omaha Metropolitan Community Council (OMCC), which was organized under the direction of its community service secretary, Ted Cobb, developed a three-fold plan. First, it sent a letter to James Lee, president of the company, asking it to change its position on hiring blacks. Each member of the Council also sent letters to Lee, Mayor Rosenblatt and the city council, urging support in the matter. Next, a two hundred dollar donation was sent to the NAACP for legal expenses. Individual members were urged to send five-dollar donations to the organization. Last of all, representatives from local civil rights organizations were encouraged to attend the first franchise hearing held by the city council.⁴

Little encouragement was needed, however. Approximately two hundred people attended the meeting, including representatives from more than two dozen community groups such as the De Porres Club, the Omaha Council for Equal Job Opportunities

(OCEJO), the Urban League, the Omaha Ministerial Alliance, and Phil Allen, who was a local news commentator. Contributions to the NAACP grew as the organization took an active role in the fight for the anti-discrimination clause. After a speech given by Charles F. Davis, an attorney and North Omaha resident, the mayor indicated that the City Council would give the matter “favorable consideration.”⁵ Meanwhile, the transportation company suddenly hired three black bus drivers just before the council received the new proposal. Lee claimed that the timing was “merely a coincidence.” He insisted that the new employees were simply “the first Negroes able to pass our requirements.” The *Star* argued: “Was it ‘merely a coincidence without any connection’ that now, with a new franchise being sought, the first Negro applicants are able to pass a ‘rigid physical, mental, eyesight and reactionary test?’”⁶

Civil rights activist and *Star* reporter Charles Washington also refused to see this as “a great step forward.” He questioned whether the men were really hired, or just “temporarily employed or borrowed,” thus eliminating the need for the anti-discrimination clause. The fact that a number of black people who had applied for positions several years earlier and who should have been at the top of the waiting list were not contacted supported his argument. Harold Tibbs, for example, pointed out that he applied for a job with the transit company in 1948. He was not given any tests and was told the company did not hire blacks. Vice-president Fred Hamilton, Jr. told Bertha Calloway, another North Omaha resident who also applied for a job with the streetcar company, that it would “discontinue certain routes rather than hire Negroes.” Although

Lee remained “absolutely opposed” to an anti-discrimination clause in the new franchise, he denied the company was ever unfair in its hiring practices.⁷

Four blacks who the Street Railway Company refused employment because of their race between 1945 through 1949 were interviewed on Phil Allen’s Sunday afternoon program, “Here’s Allen,” on WOW-TV. Thomas Chandler, Harold Tibbs, and James Copeland stated that they were told the company did not hire black drivers and that they should look for jobs in the maintenance department or the stockyards. Helen Woods, another applicant, said she responded to an advertisement in the paper for men or women drivers. She also was told that it was against company policy to hire blacks. Guest speaker Milton Lewis, industrial secretary of the Omaha Urban League, explained that the organization’s goal was to “change the thinking of the tram officials.”⁸

Charles F. Davis deemed the sudden hiring of the bus drivers “too late.” He further stated: “[It] is a confession of company guilt as to the things we charge.” An added concern was the fact that without an anti-discrimination clause, the company could fire the black employees after the new franchise went into effect. Furthermore, the NAACP threatened to “do everything in its power” to defeat the contract if the clause was not included.⁹

Mary Frederick, chairman of the OCEJO, supported the NAACP’s stand, adding that her organization would also back or initiate any means necessary to guarantee fair employment. She sided with Davis, stating, “It is rather significant that this belated hiring of Negro operators came on the day that company’s proposed new franchise was

filed with the City Clerk and on the eve of the city council's first reading of the franchise."¹⁰

Washington was also angry that the *Star* was not informed of the hiring, as were other media sources. Moreover, the company refused to tell the black newspaper the names of the new employees or the circumstances under which they were hired. Washington also believed that the company "hired" the men only because they were black. Opposing this mentality, he announced: "We simply ask that if a Negro has the ability to fulfill a job that is open that he be given the consideration for it as [they] would any other person."¹¹

The Urban League viewed the situation from a different perspective. In a letter to the mayor, the organization's president, Nathan Phillips Dodge, III, stated that the hiring of several black bus drivers represented a "progressive attitude." He added, although some people thought otherwise, that the League was sure that the hiring was the result of "good business." Still, he believed that an anti-discrimination clause was desired as a sign of "the good faith of both contracting parties."¹²

Some city officials saw no reason to insert the provision. Despite the fact that Mayor Rosenblatt agreed to "keep an open mind" until the City Council hearings, the company's sudden hiring of three black bus drivers obviously influenced his opinion. He commented that he was opposed to excessive legislation in business or industry, and felt confident that "a change of mind" had occurred. Although he had never interfered with the company's unfair hiring practices in the past, he now claimed: "The streetcar company is too big to renege on their word. I think they are sincere. And let me tell you,

if they ever went back on their word, I'd be the first to see that the clause would be inserted.”¹³

Public Property Commissioner Warren Swigert also did not want the anti-discrimination clause in the new franchise. He reasoned that it would discriminate against the streetcar company, especially since other local businesses do not operate under any such agreement. Although he believed many businessmen were opposed to being forced to “hire a certain amount of Negroes,” he did say that considering the “unfairness and unreliability” the company had exhibited, he understood why some groups felt it was important. An unnamed commissioner, speaking “off the record,” informed the company that the clause was important if it wanted the new franchise to pass.¹⁴

In September 1954, the City Council agreed to include a provision in the proposed contract that stated: “in the company’s employment division, there shall be no discrimination on the grounds of race, color or religion.” The resolution passed. Company president James Lee placed an advertisement in the *Star*, thanking its readers for their “vote of confidence” and their “wonderful support.” Consequently, blacks were regularly hired as drivers.¹⁵

The success in achieving fair employment at the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company coincided with a decline in the De Porres Club’s activity, as the young adults who formed the organization graduated from college, married or joined the military. In 1954, the remaining members decided that, after eight years, it was time to take a break. Several months later, Denny Holland resigned as president, due to a

conflicting work schedule. According to the “De Porres Club News,” published in the *Star*, “The only thing that makes it all bearable . . . is the fact that Father Markoe will continue as Moderator.”¹⁶

Mary Frederick, chairman of the OCEJO succeeded Holland, and was later followed by Wilbur Phillips. Frederick asked for suggestions from readers of the *Star*, and encouraged them to “help finish the job of running Jim Crow out of Omaha.” Meetings resumed, but they were held sporadically, and most activities consisted of only social functions. Although new civil rights groups were formed and established ones were strengthened, a void was left that was never filled in the fight for civil rights in Omaha.¹⁷

In May 1954, several hundred people gathered at the downtown Rome Hotel in support for the newly formed Omaha Metropolitan Community Council (OMCC). Organized through the Urban League under the direction of Ted Cobb, the League’s community service secretary, its purpose was to help develop neighborhood improvement programs, expand community leadership, and target other resources that would be useful in meeting the problems in the Near North Side.¹⁸

Guest speaker Whitney Young, now Dean of the Atlanta School of Social Work and past executive secretary of the Omaha Urban League, expressed confidence that the Council would be successful due to its “high spirit of teamwork and cooperation.”¹⁹ Mayor Rosenblatt and State Budget Director Arthur McCaw, a Near North Side resident, also supported the organization’s endeavor to improve the community. Numerous smaller organizations joined the OMCC, including the De Porres Club, the NAACP, the

Ideal Improvement Club and the Army Mother's Club. One year later, the organization had a membership of seventy civic, religious and social groups.²⁰

From 1954 through 1956, the local NAACP took a more active role in supporting the fight against Jim Crow. The *Star* endorsed its president, Rev. Emmett T. Streeter, as "another Moses [who] will continue to give consecrated and unselfish Council and leadership which the people are crying for."²¹ Streeter's commitment to eradicating racial discrimination in Omaha was evident when he addressed four areas of racial discrimination in a letter to the new members of the NAACP executive committee. These consisted of integrating the Omaha Fire Department, the hiring of black teachers at the high school level, the employment of skilled blacks at the Metropolitan Utilities District, and the passage of Fair Employment Practices legislation. The black newspaper also assured its readers: "If the [NAACP], with Streeter leading the way, proceeds vigorously towards the accomplishment of these goals, important gains can be made here in Omaha towards securing first class citizenship for all, regardless of race or color."²²

One reason for Streeter's popularity was that he was one of the few religious leaders who took a public stand against racial discrimination. Curtis Brown, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church, noticed the lack of support in the civil rights movement by other ministers when he moved to Omaha from Oklahoma in 1955. Feeling "greatly disappointed" with the city, he blamed inconsistent leadership for the problems blacks faced in buying homes outside of the Near North Side, and the discrimination in employment and public facilities, including many "scummy" restaurants. Speaking to a

NAACP meeting in September 1956, he stated: "With the law on your side, I thought you would have something. But you haven't got a thing. You are far behind."²³

While some Catholic priests joined in the fight against Jim Crow policies, blacks continued to face discrimination within the Church. For example, three prominent North Omaha residents were "black-balled" by the seven members of Father Flanagan's Boys Town Knights of Columbus, a fraternal order for Catholic men. The applicants were Claude Organ, a physician at St. Joseph Hospital, and Herbert Rhodes, a deputy of the U.S. District Court, both members of Saint Benedict the Moor Church, and Raymond Metoyer, a councilor at Boys Town, belonged to Sacred Heart Church.²⁴ While twenty-five candidates were considered, the only ones that were rejected were the blacks. John Krejcie, the council's Grand Knight, explained that the vote represented only a "small minority" of the council. Archbishop Gerald Bergan initially declined to comment on the incident, but later stated that he was distraught "to find seven members of our local council who are so backward and unChristlike as to bar the admission of Negro candidates."²⁵ He added, however, that he was certain that the strong leadership in the organization would "quickly eliminate the cause of this sorry spectacle."²⁶

Others were not so willing to look the other way. In a letter to the *True Voice*, a northeast Nebraska Catholic newspaper, Monsignor Patrick Flanagan asserted that his younger brother's name should no longer be used in connection with the Knights of Columbus. Several years later, however, the newspaper published an advertisement for the organization, which read: "We're white-skinned, black-skinned, brown-skinned and yellow-skinned. . . . Our diversity spells creativity; our unity spells strength."²⁷

The “backward” mentality extended further than the church. With the exception of one black firefighter who was employed as a lieutenant at the airport station and another at the department’s inspection bureau, Omaha’s ten remaining black firemen were restricted to a Near North Side station. Regardless of the firefighter positions that became available throughout the city, eligible blacks who wanted to work for the city’s fire department still had to wait until an opening occurred at the Twenty-first and Lake Street station.²⁸

Fire Commissioner Simon A. Simon and Mayor Rosenblatt were apparently content with the situation. In March 1955, Rosenblatt avoided addressing the issue, stating that “it was up to each commissioner to solve his own problems in his department.” Urban League executive secretary George Robinson later contacted Simon requesting a meeting with him, League members, and the firemen from the segregated station. Simon declined, stating: “The matter is closed as far as I am concerned.”²⁹

Simon later met in a closed session with Rosenblatt and Commissioners Walter Spellman, Warren Swigart, Arthur Hanson and the fire battalion chiefs. One official reported that before the meeting, each attending member was “sworn to secrecy.” Rosenblatt denied that the segregation matter was discussed, adding that the issue only concerned his aides and Simon. The *Star* reported, however, that the commissioners were questioned as to their opinion on the issue.³⁰

Simon then announced that he would hire a black to work for the fire department’s new alarm and communications system, located at Fortieth and Nicholas Street. This, in addition to the two black firemen who were employed outside of the Near

North Side, he believed, was proof that “progress is being made.”³¹ Robinson disagreed.

He stated:

[A]lthough Commissioner Simon feels he is making progress, he evidently is unwilling to take responsibility for integrating the entire department without the backing of the City Council, so we are asking the Council to act on it. Surely, segregation is not the official policy of the city of Omaha.³²

Mayor Rosenblatt would not take responsibility either. He stated that he had “no immediate plans” to address the problem with the council members, although he agreed to schedule a meeting between the council and League members in the fall. Meanwhile, according to the *Omaha World-Herald*, six councilmen were planning to remove Simon from his position as fire commissioner if problems continued. In a front page editorial, the *Star* commended the mayor for “his ability to move with dispatch and wisdom in working out the many and varied situations that arise in any city government.”³³

Nevertheless, it criticized his decision to postpone any action on the segregated fire station: “[T]here doesn’t have to be any more meetings in private with the Urban League or any other group. For these private sessions only bespeak the want of appeasement. And there is nothing to be negotiated, conciliated or appeased.”³⁴

The International Association of Fire Chiefs Convention was held in Omaha in September 1955. There, Sergeant Milton Coleman Jr. from New York discussed integration within the military fire departments. He maintained: “It will work in any civilian department if somebody on the top level has enough guts to enforce it.”³⁵

Another visiting fire chief agreed:

It can work here in Omaha [but] there probably are some in your department here who think that the department belongs to them and might resent working side by

side with a Negro. But if given the choice of integration or leaving the department, they'll keep their bread and butter.³⁶

It soon became more obvious that city officials were stalling in addressing the issue. Not only had Rosenblatt not held the meeting between the council and League members that he promised, but Simon still had not hired a black to work for the fire department's communication system. Although the mayor tried to mollify the black firemen by telling them that they had "a legal right" to work in other areas of the city, Simon's lack of action added to the tension.³⁷ First, he claimed: "Two Negro firemen took the test for placement there and didn't pass." Yet according to Fire Chief Eugene Fields, all of the approximately fourteen firemen who took the exam passed. Furthermore, Elijah McClinton was employed temporarily at the alarm station as a relief operator and was described by his supervisor as "a splendid relief man." Simon, then claiming he had been misquoted, infuriated the *Star* by denying that he said they had failed the test, but rather that they did not "qualify."³⁸

A *Star* reporter asked him why he did not correct the "misquote" immediately rather than waiting until it was learned that no blacks actually failed the test. Simon replied: "I have no statement to make. I'll answer none of your questions." The reporter angrily declared: "I'm not going to be a scapegoat for you because you didn't know what was going on in your department. It wasn't a case of your being misquoted. It was a case of your being misinformed and you know it."³⁹ The dispute was carried over to a front-page editorial in the *Star*. It stated:

We feel that when Simon said at first the two Negro firemen hadn't passed, he was saying what he thought was correct. He knew he had promised to place a Negro in the new division, and he felt he was saving face by saying none of them

had passed. We only hope that Simon will keep his promise and permanently place a Negro at the alarm station.⁴⁰

Most black policemen also continued to be restricted to a Near North Side station.

Although the segregated station added a fourth officer to “cruiser duty” in September 1954, complaints of mistreatment by the police in the black community continued.⁴¹

In September, three policemen, Oliver Poulson, Richard Alsager, and Morris Lawry, allegedly beat twenty-four year old James Lee at the City jail. The officers insisted that “only necessary force” was used to subdue Lee after he became aggressive and needed to be isolated. According to the *Star*, however, his injuries consisted of “several broken ribs, a punctured kidney, eye injuries, severe head cuts and multiple head and body bruises.” Lee stated that he was beaten “all the way down the elevator and into the ambulance.”⁴²

When questioned by an Assistant Public Attorney, Lawry stated that upon hearing of the disturbance, he knew to go to cell block number four “because there is where they keep the colored prisoners.” He then admitted to using Alsager’s leather strap to beat Lee about his head and body for “my own safety.” He also said that he could not remember why he continued to hit the prisoner after he was on the floor, although he later claimed that he meant to say that he “struck Lee as he was going down.”⁴³ The *World-Herald* reported that the jailer received a cut to his forehead when Lee slammed his head against the bars of his cell, for which Lee was charged with assault and battery.⁴⁴

The *Star* made no excuses for Lee’s behavior. It described him as a “drunk” with a “morally offensive” record. It took issue, however, with the way the police handled him. Moreover, it quoted a *World-Herald* edition that stated: “[T]he whole affair sounds

suspiciously like the ancient police practice of ‘working over’ a prisoner who has the temerity to strike an officer.”⁴⁵ The De Porres Club sent a letter to Chief of Police

Raymond Strong relating its disapproval of the incident:

It is the opinion of this club that nothing recently has been done so much in this community to completely destroy confidence in the police force. It is apparent this man was brutally beaten and we feel it is the duty of your office to establish who is responsible. . . . The fact that the prisoner was a Negro could have certainly influenced the degree to which he was beaten. It is possible provocation was given but under no circumstances are three police officers justified in taking the law into their own hands to nearly kill a defenseless prisoner. . . . This incident again indicates the urgent need for a thorough police-training course.⁴⁶

The three policemen involved in the incident received between five to ten-day suspensions. Poulson and Alsager were accused of “not using proper procedure and minimum force in overpowering,” and Lee for not notifying the police captain of the incident. Lawry also was suspended for not reporting his attack to the commanding officer. Poulson admitted to being the main aggressor. The punishment the officers received was far too lenient to satisfy the NAACP. After a board meeting one month later, members agreed that the attack upon Lee was “unwarranted, brutal, cruel and inhumane” and called for “strong disciplinary action against the officers, including possible dismissal.” It also called for a change of the Police Department’s administrative procedures to avoid a similar incident. Furthermore, it stated:

The fact that James Lee is a Negro is not the sole basis of this protest: that the punishment of any prisoner by beating on the part of police officers is morally, sociologically, and legally wrong and that it is feared that the light suspensions given in this case permit this beating to stand as an unfortunate precedent for police treatment of either prisoners of whatever race or color, and are not sufficient deterrents against the probable recurrence of such assault and battery.⁴⁷

The Omaha Metropolitan Community Council also protested the treatment Lee received at the city jail. In a letter addressed to Mayor Rosenblatt and the city council, it too expressed the need to prevent future incidents of this nature.⁴⁸

As a result of what Police Sergeant Howard McArdle referred to as “some recent unfortunate experiences,” the Police Civil Service Commission agreed that psychiatric examinations would be administered to all police force applicants, including five lieutenants who were being considered for a promotion.⁴⁹ Moreover, several officers were chosen to attend a public relations class at Michigan State College in early 1955. One of the instructors was Dr. Joseph Lohman, who had developed a civil rights and human relations course for the Chicago Police Department. Police Commissioner Henry Boesen stated: “Whenever any of our men get a chance to improve their work, I’m for it. This type of thing is much needed by our department.”⁵⁰ Another change occurred when John Pierce, one of the four black police officers on the Near North Side, was placed on the Police Youth Activities Bureau.⁵¹

Racial problems within the Police Department continued, however. In the early morning of March 18, 1956, George Barton, a Creighton University maintenance foreman, was standing on North Twenty-fourth Street waiting for a cab. Officer John Steiner noticed Barton and, according to court records, demanded to know “what right he had to be on the sidewalk.” Barton explained that he was waiting for a cab, but the policeman continued to verbally abuse him, using racial slurs. Barton protested, and was arrested. While in the cruiser, Steiner reportedly told him he was “one of those smart niggers,” and that “You ought to be in Russia, you nigger son-of-a-bitch.”⁵²

Upon arrival at the police station, he was booked for “investigation,” and placed in a cell until the following afternoon. During this time, Barton repeatedly asked to make a telephone call to his employers, the Creighton University priests, and explain his absence. His request was denied, as he had, according to Steiner, “a lot of charges” against him. Using the burnt end of a match stick to write on a piece of cardboard, Barton fashioned a note, gave it to a prisoner who was being released, and instructed him to deliver it to one of the university priests. After approximately thirteen hours, Barton was set free on bail. Municipal Judge Joseph Houston determined that Barton had no previous criminal history and ordered that the bond be refunded.⁵³

Barton filed suit against Steiner and Sergeant Walter F. Wilson, head of the police unit’s Morals Squad, for ten thousand dollars. In a trial before a jury, his attorney pointed out that he was a “respectable and honest citizen” who was “active in various [civic] clubs and groups” and that his incarceration amounted to “false arrest and false imprisonment.” The defendants denied the accusations and stated that Barton “caused and provoked his own arrest.” The case was tried before a jury, which returned a verdict in favor of the police officers.⁵⁴

Police brutality was not the only complaint the black community had against the police department. The Near North Side suffered from a lack of law enforcement. In a front-page editorial, the *Star* stated: “It goes without saying that legal authorities are inclined to view assaults and crimes committed against a Negro by another Negro with less seriousness and severity than those committed by a Negro against a white or between whites.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, the *Star* attributed the black community’s high crime rate to the

oppressed conditions under which its members were forced to live. The editorial also declared:

We realize that there is no scientific relationship between criminality and race. The real and important variables are found in the conditions of living: employment, housing, restrictions upon movement and activities, moral and spiritual leadership and activity.⁵⁶

Studies and committees were organized in an attempt to either alleviate the problems that existed in the Near North Side or to appease its angry residents. Regardless of the reasons for the problems, racial discrimination was rarely recognized as the common denominator. In 1954, a yearlong study conducted by the United Community Services' Social Planning Unit Committee published several findings. Unfortunately, it offered few constructive suggestions for solving the conflicts. Furthermore, it implied that some of the problems were unique to the black race. For example, it found that in one month, approximately one third of the children questioned by the Police Department's Youth Bureau and the Juvenile Court resided in the Near North Side. The report referred to the youths as "adventuresome, destructive, restless, aggressive and rebellious." It also stated that they resented "supervision and authority." Some of these adjectives not only applied to inner city youths, but to many other teenagers as well. Moreover, it recommended that even "minor pranks" be recognized as "a possible index of future delinquency."⁵⁷

Nor did the study suggest a solution to the area's high number of unwed mothers, another problem it addressed. It merely referred to the situation as one that yielded "attitudes and social values which lead to the acceptance of them." Some vague and ineffective proposals for improving the neighborhood included inviting "civic-minded

residents in the area to take part in city-wide planning projects to develop Omaha spirit.” It also stated that “more educational forums and discussion groups” might produce more “volunteer leaders.” The committee did, however, recommend three new community centers and that a public library be built in the area to replace the bookmobile that occasionally visited the Near North Side.⁵⁸

In the spring of 1956, Mayor John Rosenblatt created a Near North Side Planning Committee to address many of the area’s concerns. It resulted from a study conducted by Johnny Owens, head of the Mayor’s Action Committee, that established the extent to which blacks were discriminated against in public accommodations, employment and housing. According to its findings, Omaha hospitals were considered “good . . . with the exception of semi-private rooms,” but only three of the city’s forty-one nursing homes accepted black patients.⁵⁹

The Mayor’s Action Committee also found that blacks could eat at most downtown establishments without incident. In the “fringe areas” and throughout the city, however, “reservation dodges” were used to discourage black patrons while other eateries seated them in separate rooms. Only one-tenth of the business firms employed blacks, while the “greatest Negro representation” in employment was found in the unskilled and service occupations. The report also found that although there was no longer a shortage of housing in the white community, the Near North side still suffered from a lack of homes and rental units. In addition, three times as many people resided on one acre of land in North Omaha than in other sections of the city.⁶⁰

In an attempt to acquire “specific recommendations” and obtain a “closer picture of information,” Rosenblatt selected six area residents for his Near North Side Planning Committee. They included three religious leaders, Rev. Charles Tyler, Rev. Emmett Streeter, and Father John Killoren. Urban League member Ted Cobb, Kellom Elementary principal Edythe Hall, and Alyce Wilson, executive secretary of the Woodson Center Social Settlement House, also were chosen.⁶¹

People who lived in North Omaha did not need committees to repeatedly point out their problems. They knew only too well how racial discrimination affected their finances, education, employment, and home life. The fact that many of the area’s businesses were operated by people who lived outside of their neighborhood, yet, as the *Star* complained, “were callous and unconcerned” about their difficulties, continued to plague them. Furthermore, these businesses provided little support to the civil rights organizations that made it possible for the black community to obtain decent employment and, in return, spend more money. The black newspaper attributed some of the problems, however, to lack of communication. It stated: “A portion of the blame for this state of affairs undoubtedly rests with those who have not sat down and told the merchants the facts of life. We hope the time has arrived for some serious talk.”⁶² In a letter to the editor of the *Star*, a reader complained:

90 percent of the money spent out here is spent with people who show no interest in our problems. Will they help us get a [Fair Employment Practices Committee] in Omaha? They may use our money for just the opposite reason. Some of us open and close these businesses and try to kill our own brothers in business. Maybe we’ve got too much white blood in us. Why else would we support those who do nothing for us?⁶³

Communication was difficult, though, in a city where blacks remained invisible to most of the white community. As Omaha expanded in the 1950s to form suburbs to accommodate its growing population, the black community remained hemmed in by Jim Crow practices that prevented little expansion to its already overcrowded neighborhood. Some blacks were able to build modest homes on what little vacant land the area had. In 1954, two Near North Side businessmen, Cliff Dudley and George Randol, formed a construction company. With the intention of serving the black community, they built their first model home at 2715 John Creighton Boulevard. Several other new homes were soon built on the same street. Not only did they promise “the best materials and workmanship,” but they also claimed to provide access to what most blacks were unable to obtain, a mortgage.⁶⁴

Complaints that banks either refused to loan blacks money or charged them a higher interest rate were common. Additional deterrents to building new homes were finding a location and obtaining a contractor who was willing to work with them. In August 1955, Robert C. Hastings, Regional Director of the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), arranged a meeting to investigate these problems. In attendance were Nebraska Congressman Jackson Chase, and FHA Zone Commissioner Klein D. Reed and Underwriting Supervisor Vladimir Weichbrodt, both of Washington, D.C. Chicago’s Regional Racial Advisor, N.P. Dotson, and Omaha Urban League Executive Director George Robinson also attended. Hastings assured the group that FHA mortgage insurance valuation was no different for minorities.⁶⁵ He also stressed that the agency was very anxious to include more blacks in its program:

FHA is in constant contact with lenders and builders trying to encourage them to get into this very good market among minorities. . . . We try to show them that they should build houses for that part of the market as they do for the entire market.⁶⁶

Using Omaha builder George Randol as an example of the progress that was being made, the FHA director insisted that the housing market was not closed to blacks, but that they were “forgoing the purchasing of new homes for some of the easier conveniences they can buy.”⁶⁷ Dotson praised the new homes built along Creighton Boulevard, referring to the area as “a very attractive and quite desirable section.”⁶⁸

Robinson agreed that home mortgages were more available than they had been previously. The problem, he said, was that the few available lots were scattered. With no existing sites left in the Near North Side to develop as a subdivision, residents had little choice but to buy existing homes. This “exploitation” continued, despite the fact that the black neighborhood’s boundaries had slightly expanded northward, into “fringe areas.”

He further stated:

Restrictive practices in regard to rental sales and financing and gentlemen’s agreements operate to prevent freedom of movement by qualified Negro citizens. The result is to continue the increasing Negro population to a limited area where the population density in 1952 was 34.9 per acre—nearly three times the average 13 per acre for the city as a whole.⁶⁹

Furthermore, Robinson pointed out that blacks had greater difficulty selling their older homes because banks were reluctant to invest in the area. This prevented them from “upgrading” their living conditions by selling their existing home for a profit and purchasing a better one. Therefore, potential buyers were unable to buy homes, and homeowners were “stuck” with the ones they had.⁷⁰ An editorial in the Westport, Connecticut *Town Crier* obviously conveyed the *Star*’s feelings of residential

segregation. It stated: “Every restrictive covenant in a real estate agreement—written or unwritten—has a close kinship to lynching.”⁷¹

Racial discrimination was also evident in the city’s zoning regulations and the “gentleman’s agreements” of which Robinson spoke. In the summer of 1955, the Plumb Supply Company successfully petitioned the city to rezone an area east of Twenty-fifth Street from residential to industrial to accommodate its business. In so doing, the city ignored the property owners’ complaints of “spot zoning,” and their fear that it “would diminish the value of our several parcels of real estate which are residences.”⁷² On another occasion, several black housewives accidentally received invitations from a local construction company to purchase lots in a new subdivision. The bottom of the letter read: “white race only.”⁷³

White residents who sold their homes to blacks often experienced an angry backlash from their neighbors. On March 11, 1956, an advertisement appeared in the *World-Herald* newspaper:

FOR COLORED
EXCELLENT 3-BEDROOM HOME
\$48,500.00

The home was located at 1817 Pinkney Street in Kountze Place, a strictly white neighborhood that had successfully kept blacks out with a restrictive covenant. Roy Harrop, an Omaha attorney, and his wife, May, who lived at 1822 Emmet Street, filed suit against the owners of the property, four other neighbors, four real estate agents and one real estate corporation for violation and breach of the covenant.⁷⁴

They sought fifteen thousand dollars, claiming that the sale of property to blacks decreased the value of their home. In the petition, Harrop stated that in 1946, neighbors signed an agreement that their property “shall not be sold . . . to any person or persons of any race other than . . . Caucasians.” The defendants’ attorneys argued that the United States Supreme Court previously ruled that protective and restrictive covenants were not enforceable and that “damages will not lie for the breach of covenants.”⁷⁵

Harrop’s attorney argued that it was common knowledge that the sale or rental of homes in the Kountze Place addition to “any non-Caucasian descent” would result in a “50 to 75 percent” loss in property value and would therefore be acceptable only to other non-white residents. He also accused the homeowners of lacking “respect and regard for the rights of the white people residing in [the area] and [that they] were persons void of principles [for] conniving plans and schemes or purpose, to promote such offers.”⁷⁶

Hoping to capitalize on any fears or suspicions the jurors may have held for blacks, he further added:

[T]here is a nationwide conspiracy aided by its propoganda machine of subversive activities to force the will of a minority group on the majority of white property owners. That by the sale, renting and occupancy of said property . . . addition by members of the non-Caucasian race and their conspiracy unlawful acts have endangered the safety and peaceful habitation of members of the Caucasian race . . . caused it to acquire the unsavory reputation as a place of robbery, rape and murder and other unlawful actions by persons of the non-Causation race. . . .⁷⁷

Apparently, the lawsuit was dismissed.

For some, moving into a white neighborhood was a relatively easy transition. For example, in 1952, after obtaining a loan for fifty thousand dollars from a downtown bank, A. B. Pittman bought a home at 9701 West Dodge Road. Once a prospective homeowner

acquires financing, which he admitted was much easier to do “outside of the ghetto,” he should move in immediately. He also advised against asking the neighbors “if they would welcome you. White people don’t, why should we?”⁷⁸

As some blacks moved out of the Near North Side in the mid-1950s, the city began to take a more serious approach to the deteriorated areas. Joseph F. Mangiamele, director of the Neighborhood Conservation Department, a city agency, conducted a housing survey in an area bounded by Clark and Grace Streets, and Twentieth and Twenty-fourth Streets. He explained that its purpose was not to “develop slum areas,” but, rather, to prevent areas from becoming slums. The study focused on “the number of toilets, lighting and wiring, presence of rats, number of occupants and kitchen facilities.” While overcrowding existed throughout the area, the problems that resulted from the lack of repair and maintenance, and inadequate toilet and bathing facilities were more serious. The last finding of the report stated that the survey “strongly indicates the need for expanded studies throughout the city and a need for correction of the existing housing conditions.”⁷⁹

Although the study did not show the problem of over-crowding to the degree it was expected, Mangiamele stated that it still was a major problem and one of the most difficult to correct. He explained, “If people own their own homes and they have additions to the family, you can only cure the problem of over crowdedness by adding on to the structure. They can’t get rid of their children.” He also pointed out that landlords did not care how many people lived in their rented structures, but only that they collected the rent.⁸⁰ The survey further stated that the four-block area that was studied was not

representative of the entire neighborhood. He stated that it needed to be expanded to include the entire Lake and Kellom School areas since “small segment projects can not achieve the goals of neighborhood improvement.”⁸¹ Mangiamele later met with a gathering of black homeowners to discuss plans to improve the vicinity. Urban League member Ted Cobb also spoke to the group. Both men stressed “organization, planning and cooperation” in order to rehabilitate their neighborhood.⁸²

Two months later, a panel of six real estate and housing experts addressed the housing situation at the First Unitarian Church. It included Urban League members Alfred C. Kennedy and Nathan Phillips Dodge, III, both of whom were realtors, Charles Davis, chairman of the Omaha Housing Authority, Robert Hastings, director of the Federal Housing Authority, Edwin Lyman, city-county health director, and Joseph Mangiamele. Speaking to a crowd of approximately one hundred people, the panelists emphasized the importance of establishing a minimum health standard ordinance. They acknowledged the fact that blacks faced a housing crisis, but some listeners felt that they discounted racial discrimination as the cause.⁸³

Nathan Phillips Dodge, III, president of the Omaha Real Estate Board, said that the overcrowded conditions resulted from the increased population on the Near North Side. Many of these people, he said, were “housed in locations that were deserted in the thirties.” Segregation, he added, contributed to the problem and he recommended an “open employment policy” to alleviate the problem.⁸⁴ Robert Hastings wondered if expensive “governmental services” should be continued in the area. Edwin Lyman, a physician and city-county Health Director, was concerned about the ill effects of poor

housing on the mental and physical well being of the residents. He recommended taking “the profit out of the slums” with the passage of a minimum housing standard law.

Charles Davis, an attorney and a North Omaha resident, was also vague in his recommendations for improving the housing problem. He stated: “The OHA is interested in helping to meet the housing crisis, but we don’t feel we should do anything about a redevelopment program until the program requests it.”⁸⁵

One angry member of the audience told the panel that they were “merely talking on the periphery of the real problem.” Father John Markoe, mathematics professor at Creighton University and founder of the De Porres Club, questioned whether turning North Omaha into a “gilded and ritzy segregated area” would be worthwhile. Instead, he recommended that a Fair Employment Practices ordinance be passed. He also stated:

In your efforts to clear up this housing situation, which means over crowdedness, substandard homes, health hazards, etc., it seems to me that you are talking around the real cause of this crisis. The real heart of this problem is compulsory segregation and racial discrimination. If some program was initiated to do away with racial segregation and discrimination, the problem would largely solve itself.⁸⁶

In 1956, the city council passed a minimum housing standards ordinance. In a five to two vote, it specified that proper repair and maintenance of homes by the owners and occupants be enforced. It also mandated authorized inspections of homes, and established rules and regulations for appeals and penalties for violations. Later an amendment was added that channeled appeals to the city council rather than an appointive board.⁸⁷

Supporters of the new ordinance called it the “answer to poor housing conditions and high rentals.” NAACP president Rev. Emmett Streeter declared: “The Near North

Side suffered more than any other section from unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions.” Commenting on the condemned but still inhabited dwellings, he also said that it was an “impossible situation for youth coming from housing lacking sanitation to integrate successfully into activity of society.”⁸⁸ Arthur B. McCaw, a member of the committee that wrote the ordinance, added that it would provide some relief from the “high rentals and poor properties and health conditions” that plagued the black community.⁸⁹

Peter Marchetti, an attorney for the Small Property Owners Association disagreed. He believed that the ordinance was a “surrender of liberty . . . an attempt to use the power of eminent domain.” Simon A. Simon and Arthur Hanson, both of whom offered the two dissenting votes, referred to it as “a monstrosity and communistic.” Rev. C. C. Adams, minister of the Paradise Baptist Church, also was against the plan. He believed that the only way to improve the housing situation in the black community was to overcome Jim Crow practices. He complained: “[A]s long as we have segregation, we will have blighted areas.”⁹⁰

As the Near North Side became more congested, so too did its schools. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education*: “[S]egregation based on race or discrimination of any kind with respect to admission, accommodations, or treatment is forbidden in any school, college or university supported by public funds.”⁹¹ This ruling did not affect Omaha blacks, because, as the *Star* pointed out, “most of the students attend schools in their districts except some of the ‘whites’ who

are allowed to transfer to other schools rather than attend the predominately Negro schools.”⁹²

Still, the schools in the black community, which included Howard Kennedy, Lake, Long, Lothrop, Franklin and Druid Hill, suffered. At a 1954 city council meeting, Fred Hill explained that the public housing projects at Thirtieth and Lake Streets greatly contributed to the already overcrowded Howard Kennedy Elementary School, necessitating the addition of five more classrooms. One year later, Harry Burke, Omaha Public Schools Superintendent, reported that the most congested elementary schools in the city were in North Omaha. He added that the fall enrollment would “bear the brunt” of an additional two thousand pupils, necessitating portable classrooms and extended daytime classes. He thought that it would be several more years, however, before some schools would benefit from any additional construction.⁹³

Burke’s prediction was correct. In the fall of 1955, Long Elementary was forced to send some of its seventh graders to Technical High School, located at 3219 Cuming Street, while Lake turned its library and auditorium into classrooms. The total number of students in the kindergarten, first and second grades at Kennedy numbered more than the entire school’s enrollment three years earlier. To accommodate its 960 pupils, Lothrop transferred its kindergarten classes to Immanuel Baptist Church. Saint Benedict the Moor School had also reached full capacity, with 237 students. By 1956, the Near North Side’s ten elementary schools and the seventh graders at Technical High totaled 7, 078 students, an increase of 516 in one year.⁹⁴

While black children were restricted to schools in the Near North Side because of neighborhood segregation, black teachers continued to face difficulty in finding employment in Omaha. Consequently, the *Star* wondered how long it would be until Omaha had “complete integration of teachers and students in [its] public school system.” In a July 1954 editorial, it gingerly pointed out that the NAACP was not supporting the cause:

We respectfully recommend to [the NAACP’s] attention the fact that in the past few years at least twenty-six qualified Negro teachers have gone elsewhere for employment or taken jobs in Omaha not in keeping with their training. . . . The Omaha Public School system now employs approximately 1,000 teachers with 40 principals, 11 supervisors, and 24 clerks. Negroes now employed are: 25 teachers, 1 principal, and no clerks or supervisors. . . . Here is the rest of the picture—a couple of Negroes are employed as janitors for the high schools. . . . We again humbly recommend it to the attention of the local NAACP branch.⁹⁵

In addition, the *Star* bitterly complained that black teachers were hired only when another one retired or quit. They should be hired, it stated, not “merely to replace the Negro who no longer teaches, but [to fill vacancies,] regardless of the school.”⁹⁶

Still, some Omaha black educators were successful in their profession. For example, in 1954, the Parent Teachers Association of Kellom Grade School presented its principal, Edythe Hall, with the Second Annual “Friend of Children” award. The previous recipient was Omaha School Superintendent Harry Burke. At the ceremony, Hall was praised for being “a wonderful person [who] cooperated with school authorities.”⁹⁷

Two years later, the local chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews chose Kathryn Favors to attend a twelve-day race relations conference at Fisk University. Favors began teaching at the racially mixed Lake Elementary in 1950, where

she was the first and only full-time black teacher. She held a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology from Fisk and a Master's Degree in education from the University of Nebraska.⁹⁸

Furthermore, Robert Myers, a Near North Side resident and funeral director, ran, although unsuccessfully, in the primary for the Board of Education in 1956. He stated his reasons for wanting to be elected were due to a "natural interest in the conduct of our school system because I have two daughters attending public schools. . . . [Also] I feel a sense of duty to do what I can to make our school system operate in the interest of all."⁹⁹ Prior to the election, *The Star* wrote:

In all our efforts to secure the appointment of Negro teachers on the high school level and the assignment of Negro teachers on basis of merit we have been handicapped by the lack of support from within the policy making level of the school system. We feel that by the election of Myers to the Board this can be overcome. As a group we are dedicated to the public school system as such and should have a voice in its administration.¹⁰⁰

Myers held a Bachelor of Science degree from Howard University in addition to graduating from the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science. An active member of his community, he served on the executive board of the Mid-City Businessman's Association, the Urban League, the NAACP, and the North Side YMCA.¹⁰¹ Despite the support he won from the Omaha Metropolitan Community Council, the De Porres Club, NAACP, and many small, community groups, Myers lost the bid by fourteen votes to Howard Milder.¹⁰²

Black youths experienced racial discrimination in sports as well as in education. In 1955, two athletes of the Kellom Swim Squad, Bob Biddle and Leonard Hawkins, were not allowed to participate in the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) Swim Meet. Both of the swimmers were AAU members and had participated earlier in the Midwest AAU

Championships at Hastings, Nebraska.¹⁰³ Joseph Malec, owner of Peony Park, where the event took place, told the boys that they could not participate because they were “colored and our policy at Peony Park is not to admit colored people to our pool.” The two other team members, both of whom were white, refused to compete in the event without them. Consequently, emotions in the Near North Side ran high. An angry front-page editorial in the *Star* read:

For the past few years, many of the [black] social organizations have used the dancing provisions of Peony Park for their segregated formals. They knew full well that the Peony Park management would not allow Negroes to come to their public dances. . . . We don't see how any self-respecting group from our community could use Peony again in view of the happenings there Saturday. . . . The time has come when Negroes should stop forcing segregation upon themselves. And that is what using Peony Park for social events is. . . . We feel that any Negro organization that uses Peony Park as long as they keep their same policy should be read out of the community.¹⁰⁴

Another editorial pointed out the “irony” in the fact that Biddle and Hawkins participated in the following swim meet at Miller Park, where they competed against the Peony Park team. The paper also stated that the Lettermen's Club, an organization for men who lettered in high school or college sports, “scraped” together a ten-dollar contribution to the NAACP, which represented David Biddle, the father of one of the boys, in a law suit against the park.¹⁰⁵

A letter in the *World-Herald* “Public Pulse” column protested an earlier statement made by Sports Editor Floyd Olds, who referred to the athletic event as an “invitational” rather than an “open” event. The writer believed that Olds was trying to protect the individuals who did not respect the “standards of non-discrimination” as set by the AAU.

He also referred to the incident as a mockery against the idea that sports can be a “positive factor in cutting juvenile delinquency.”¹⁰⁶

The park’s attorney, William J. Hotz, claimed that the incident was simply the result of a “misunderstanding between the operators of the pool and the operators of the ball room.”¹⁰⁷ Before fining Peony Park fifty dollars, Judge Robert R. Troyer stated:

For a long time I have said you cannot legislate morals and you cannot legislate individuals. I think we have made a lot of social progress. But if we push too hard it will react. It is only one or two individuals who spoil it for all. Whatever penalty is given here will not correct the problem. Someday it won’t exist.¹⁰⁸

Lawyers for Peony Park agreed to meet with NAACP officials several weeks later to discuss the segregation policy.¹⁰⁹ Suspecting Malec did not intend to change his rules, the *Star* suggested that blacks try to be admitted to every public affair held at Peony Park. If they were denied admission, they were instructed to file charges with the county attorney. This, it hoped, would eventually bring about a “change of some sort.”¹¹⁰

Although Malec did not want blacks in the swimming pool, he depended upon their business for other events. Therefore, he contacted several Near North Side organizations that used the park’s facilities for dances, claiming that the pool and ballroom management operated individually. One club to which he spoke, however, said that Malec would not admit that the two policies were different.¹¹¹

Due to the swim meet incident, Ted Cobb asked the board of managers of the Midwestern Association of the American Athletic Union (AAU) to establish a policy regarding racial discrimination. The organization then decided that it would “issue sanctions for championship events or for athletic events designated as ‘open meets’” only if the competition is open to all current card holding members of AAU.¹¹²

Some black groups continued to use Peony Park's facilities. The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott was a sharp contrast to the disunited response of Omaha blacks to Peony Park's policy. As the *Star* angrily noted, black residents of Montgomery:

have banded together and declared with Daniel-like conviction that they were tired of the company's [bus] discriminatory policy. They have pooled their cars, hitched rides and walked. But above all, they have maintained their pride and self-respect.

A sad and disheartening counterpart to this fine effort can be found here in Omaha—a Midwestern city where the Negro is supposed to be a little more intelligent and move with a great deal more freedom.¹¹³

Meanwhile, the NAACP received much praise for its involvement in the case. Recognizing the fact that the organization had previously “failed to act with interest and zeal in problems confronting the community,” the *Star* congratulated its president, Rev. Emmett T. Streeter, and attorneys Ralph W. Adams and Charles F. Davis for their efforts.¹¹⁴

One year after the Peony Park swim meet incident, the NAACP met at the North Side YMCA to discuss a complaint regarding Ralph H. Fox, the owner of the Crosstown Roller Rink, located at Twenty-fourth and Leavenworth Street, and his reluctance to admit blacks. In 1953, the Dr Porres Club successfully challenged Fox's Jim Crow policy, and he was fined twenty-five dollars. He then designated Wednesday nights for blacks to skate. Unaware of this policy, in August 1956, Mrs. Joseph St. Clair drove her daughter, two sons and the girl's two white friends to the rink, where they had attended a skating class together earlier in the week. The white girls were sold tickets, but the black children were refused admittance. St. Clair stated that when she tried to purchase a ticket for her daughter, the cashier “pushed it back, saying she couldn't sell me any tickets.”

Fox then told her: “We don’t allow colored people in here today. Negroes are allowed to skate only on Wednesday evenings. I like you colored people. But . . . you drive away business. I wish you called first to find out and then I could have saved you this embarrassment.” St. Clair responded: “When did it become necessary in America for people to call any place to see if they will be accepted? I’m not in the habit of doing that.”¹¹⁵

Fox claimed that he lost thirty to thirty-five percent of his business when he allowed blacks on a regular basis, although he admitted that he never received any complaints from his white clientele. Insisting that his concern about “mixed skating” was “purely financial,” he added, “When you don’t see your regulars night after night, you have to attribute it to something.”¹¹⁶ Apparently, legal action was taken.

The NAACP did intervene when the City Prosecutor’s office refused to file a civil rights violation complaint for Alexander H. Gordon against the American Legion Club, located at 2027 Dodge Street. In June 1956, the Club refused to give accommodations to Gordon, a black veteran, who was attending the General Council of Congregational Churches meeting in Omaha.¹¹⁷ Gordon stated he was told that the policy of the Post “was to not rent rooms to Negroes, and to not accept or accommodate Negroes in the housing facilities” of the establishment.¹¹⁸

Gordon contacted City Attorney Herbert M. Fitle, and asked that he file a complaint against the establishment for violation of his civil rights. Fitle, in turn, referred him to Charles A. Fryzek, a city prosecutor. Neither individual filed a report. Several days later, Gordon again requested that the attorneys take action and, again, they refused,

claiming that the establishment was a club, not a hotel, and therefore “it did not fall under the provisions of the state’s civil rights laws.” Gordon sued the American Legion Club, stating that they violated his constitutional right to “equal protection of the law.”¹¹⁹

In court, the defendants’ lawyers argued that the men gave “adequate time, attention and consideration” to all of Gordon’s complaints and that there was “no violation” of the Civil Rights Statute. Ralph Adams, chairman of the NAACP Legal Redress Committee, countered that the club functioned as a hotel and was licensed as such. He also stated that Fryzek failed “to be active and vigilant in the enforcement of this misdemeanor violation.”¹²⁰ The delegates to the General Council of Churches, which established a fund for Gordon’s legal expenses, stated:

[We] deplore the refusal of accommodations on the basis of race to one of our members by the Omaha American Legion Post No. 1, which advertises rooms for rent in the public press. We came to this city with the understanding that there was to be no discrimination . . .¹²¹

Rita Parr, a Denver, Colorado, resident who was participating in a religious pageant that was presented during the convention, reported that she was appalled at the treatment the four black members of her group received when they tried to go swimming:

I was allowed to at swim at stupidly segregated beaches where my friends were not. On the hottest day, our group drove to four different pools, and because of our friends, we were refused entrance. Because we were white, we could have the relaxation of a swim while they sweltered in the car. At restaurants, citizens stared disapprovingly at our mixed group. At one, the manager actually cut one of our friend’s portions in half because he was a Negro.¹²²

While some businesses excluded blacks, others were intended to serve them exclusively. Some blacks were actually more comfortable with the idea of self-imposed segregation. In a six to one vote, with Commissioner Warren Swigart dissenting, the city

council approved a request from Almira Owens for a liquor license in a restaurant located at Thirty-first and Lake Street. Those in favor of the new license stated that it would “help curb discrimination if the Negroes had a cocktail lounge of their own.”¹²³

Johnny Owens, husband of the applicant, stated that he was in favor of integration, but felt “it must be gradual. . . . We Negro taxpayers of Omaha don’t want to force ourselves anywhere. We want to have our own place.” He also said that the “better class of Negroes feel insulted by the type of Negro that [frequents establishments that discriminate] and did not want to associate with [them.]” The new restaurant was patterned after one that was in an area close to the black neighborhood. Owens told the city council: “If this type of steak house is good enough for the people of that neighborhood, it is certainly good enough for the people of the Near North Side.”¹²⁴

The area of discrimination that affected blacks the most was employment. Although some small gains were made, most jobs remained closed to blacks, despite their capabilities. In 1955, two black stenographers were employed at the Cudahy Packing House. In addition, the Urban League awarded Richard Nelson, general manager of Yonkers Department Store, a certificate of merit for its hiring policy. Kathryn Favors, chairman of the awards committee, pointed out that the store’s policy was to hire “on the basis of qualification alone. The job is given to the immigrant, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, White, Oriental or Negro person who can do the job best.”¹²⁵

Other companies, unfortunately, were not so open-minded. In 1947, the Omaha Urban League fought to secure clerical and office positions for eligible blacks with the Mutual Benefit Health and Accident Insurance Company. Its “lily-white” hiring policy,

however, remained in effect eight years later. Realizing there could be no reasoning with the company officials, Milton Lewis, industrial relations director for the Urban League, took a different approach to the problem. Emphasizing that he was not staging a boycott, he asked policyholders, other Urban Leagues and newspapers throughout the country to write letters to the company, voicing their disapproval of its unfair hiring practices.¹²⁶

According to the *Star*, letters “flooded” Mutual’s home office. Whitney Young, former executive secretary of the League and Dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work, wrote the presidents of the company, V. J. Skutt and G. J. Cleary, stating that he was “greatly distressed” to learn of its policy and that he would cancel the four insurance policies he held with the firm. Roy Wilkins, executive director of the national NAACP, pointed out that the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company employed “hundreds” of blacks and “no harm has been done.”¹²⁷ A caustic editorial by George S. Schuyer, published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, read:

Milton Lewis . . . had been trying for a long time to get a definite answer out of the company which has a multitude of colored policyholders. A month ago he got his answer, which was “Mutual doan ‘low no culled folses heah.” Most of the company’s thousand office workers are no more than high school graduates and there are plenty of Negro high school (and college) alumni in Omaha. . . .

Like many other American businesses, insurance and otherwise, this one insists on advertising for the patronage and taking the money of Negroes while rigidly excluding them from white-collar jobs. Some are shrewd enough to keep colored protest groups off their necks by hiring one or two brown folk. Then they can boast about their liberalism.¹²⁸

In response to these letters, O. F. Tucker, a salesman for Mutual, called the effort “a great disservice” in the fight against racial discrimination. He further stated, “it is unfortunate that this matter was not explored more thoroughly with the principal officers

of the company before the ill-tempered [*Star*] articles were published.” Due to these articles, he claimed, “progress” was halted.¹²⁹ The *Star* found Tucker’s argument “laughable.” Any progress that was made, it stated, began with the campaign against the company. It added:

The disservice that has been committed has been done by Mutual in their failure to hire Negroes in all levels and by anyone who seeks to justify their failure to do so. The responsibility for their failure cannot be placed on any article or any campaign. It rests on Mutual entirely.¹³⁰

The company continued to stall. One month later, Mutual officials announced that a “study” of the company’s hiring policy by the personnel department would begin. Any decisions made by the board of directors would take place after the results of the “study” were evaluated. Four months later, George Boddiger, assistant treasurer, stated: “We are busily engaged in trying to come up with a program that will be satisfactory to all concern [*sic*].”¹³¹

Realizing that the only way they would achieve equal rights in employment, blacks continued to fight for a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). In 1954, Senator John Adams, speaking at a Nebraska Credit Union League banquet, stated that he would again introduce a legislative bill: “This is our fighting year for FEPC. The time is ripe. We can win.”¹³²

One reason he was especially optimistic was because Senator George Syas, a union member and North Omaha resident, had replaced Omaha businessman Karl Vogel as chairman of the Unicameral’s Labor Committee that presided over the bill. Vogel strongly opposed the anti-discrimination legislation that Adams introduced four years

earlier. He also had the strong support of the NAACP, Omaha Metropolitan Community Council, the Urban League, and the Omaha Council for Equal Job Opportunities.¹³³

Several religious leaders backed the anti-discrimination bill as well. Catholic Archbishop Gerald T. Bergan asked, “Are we first class citizens and all others must stand at a safe distance in the rear?” Rabbi Benjamin Groner, Secretary of the Synagogue Council of Omaha, announced, “We call for the enactment of an Equal Job Opportunities Ordinance which will guarantee freedom of economic opportunity to all citizens . . .”¹³⁴ James A. Hart, president of the Metropolitan Council of Holy Name Societies, a Catholic men’s organization, which earlier urged the city council to pass a fair employment ordinance, stated that the enactment of the bill would be “a matter of moral principle.”¹³⁵

On January 5, 1955, Adams introduced LB 7 in the Unicameral Legislature. It provided that it would be “unfair employment practice for an employer to refuse to hire or otherwise discriminate against a person due to their race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry.” Among a standing room only crowd, he also introduced four additional bills that proposed revision of the state’s civil rights laws.¹³⁶

LB 280 would award three hundred dollars to any person denied certain rights as specified in the civil rights statute and LB 312 provided for “the establishment of a division of civil rights in the State Department of Education with the necessary employees and compensation for expenses.”¹³⁷ LB 313 would repeal the state’s miscegenation statute that read: “Marriages are void when one party is a white and the other is possessed of one-eighth or more Negro, Japanese, or Chinese blood.” The last proposed bill, LB 46, served to remove the requirement that a person must list his race on

voter registration forms, driver's license applications, and other state and county forms. Arthur McCaw told the Unicameral that Nebraska and thirteen southern states were the only states that required information pertaining to a voter's racial background.¹³⁸

Supporters of Adams' proposed legislation had reason to be optimistic. The Labor Committee postponed acting on the fair employment bill for several weeks until it had time to study the Ives-Quinn Act of New York, a similar FEP law. Meanwhile, one senator on the Labor Committee admitted that discrimination existed in the state. In addition, United States Attorney General Herbert Brownell and Assistant Attorney General J. Lee Rankin both agreed that the New York statute was "workable."¹³⁹ It also seemed that LB 46 would be approved, as it was advanced by a 37 to 1 vote, with only Senator Karl Vogel in dissent of advancing the measure. In fact, he had originally moved to kill the bill, but later withdrew this motion.¹⁴⁰

Unfortunately, the same rhetoric that was used in the fight against a fair employment bill was heard again. Earl Luff, a Lincoln steel executive and spokesperson for the Associated Industries of Nebraska, stated that while no one disagreed with the idea of fair employment, "evil in the hearts of men cannot be legislated out."¹⁴¹ An editorial in the *Star* presented a two-fold argument to Luff's rationale. First, if the Associated Industries of Nebraska supported fair employment policies, why were qualified blacks not found in upper level positions? Second, the purpose of FEP legislation was not to rid the "evil in the hearts of men," but rather to "control . . . that evil."¹⁴²

Others who spoke out against the bill included John Cleary, who was also affiliated with the Associated Industries, Robert Guenzel, of the Lincoln Committee of Fair Employment, Merle Jones, a Beatrice manufacturer, and H. L. Van Amburgh, vice-president of the Omaha Stockyards. Those in support of the measure included Gordon Peeble, president of the Nebraska Federation of Labor, Arthur McCaw, who represented the Governor's Committee on Human Relations, and J. H. Stocker, of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Eva Nichols represented the Inter-Tribal Association of Omaha, the only off-reservation association in Nebraska for Native Americans. Many women's groups also actively campaigned for the bill such as the National Council of Jewish Women and the B'nai B'rith Auxiliary.¹⁴³

In his argument for LB 313, the miscegenation bill, Adams pointed out before the legislature's Public Health Committee that past scientific studies proved that different races do not have different types of blood. Its main opponent was Omaha attorney Roy M. Harrop. He stated that the proposal was "communist inspired," and that no one had the right to marry an interracial couple. According to the Public Health Committee's statement, he "continued on at great lengths about things that were irrelevant to the bill."¹⁴⁴ The *Star* referred to Harrop as a "chronic objector," citing his opposition to the equal job opportunity clause in the new Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company franchise.¹⁴⁵ Alice Skiff, an Omaha resident, did not understand why blacks would want to marry whites when "[they] have free schools, nice hospitals, etc."¹⁴⁶

The Nebraska Council of Churches and Isaiah J. Domas, a Unitarian minister and head of the Lincoln Human Relations Council, backed the miscegenation bill. Domas

referred to the law was “antiquated,” and, therefore, needed to be removed. He also added: “[P]rohibiting intermarriage has been surpassed only by Nazi Germany and the present South African government.”¹⁴⁷ The Committee decided, however, that racial intermarriage was against “the best interest of all people concerned,” and voted 4 to 2 in favor of indefinitely postponing the bill.

For the fifth time in five sessions the FEP legislation was killed. Even a proposal to amend the measure to allow for a ban on racial discrimination in employment without penalties was vetoed. According to Senator George Syas, Nebraska industries believed that “private business and industries are improving without government intervention.”¹⁴⁸

The *Star* was not surprised that LB 7, the fair employment practices measure, was rejected again, but the legislation against the ban on interracial marriage seemed “so basic, fundamental and Christian we are not able to see how the Public Health Committee could in good conscience turn it down.” It further stated:

Nebraska has long prided itself as being opposed to governmental interference in the activities of men’s daily lives. It seems that as of last week, when governmental restrictions should have been abandoned as in the case of the intermarriage bill, it was imposed; and that when it should have been imposed, as in the case of the FEP measure, it was abandoned. You would look for such action in a southern legislative body. Could be that the only difference in Nebraska and Mississippi is the weather.¹⁴⁹

Whatever the reason for the defeat of Adams’ legislative bills, one thing was certain: Omaha blacks remained invisible to most of the white community. An example of the isolated conditions that segregation created was evident when, in 1955, Dr. Harold Eastman, professor of Sociology at Midlands College in Fremont, Nebraska, arranged for nineteen students to have a “look-see” at how the black community lived. First, they

visited the Swift Packinghouse, where, according to the *Star*, they saw “large numbers of colored and white employees working harmoniously at various jobs.” Next, they went to two elementary schools, Kellom and Long, where they observed students of both races eating lunch and visited with the principals.¹⁵⁰

Another place of interest was the recently integrated public housing projects. The students were also shown several well-maintained homes, along with others that were very dilapidated. A trip to Saint Benedict the Moor Church and the Near North Side YMCA completed the tour. George Robinson, executive secretary of the Urban League, helped to arrange the tour. Obviously hoping to show that blacks and whites could function together, he stated: “We are anxious to provide ‘laboratory experience’ for college students who are desirous of learning more about the conditions under which our citizens work, live and play.”¹⁵¹

A forum in 1956 was held in response to the annual “Brotherhood Week,” at St. John AME Church. A panel of five students, including a college freshman and four high school seniors, met to discuss racial relations. One member, Ernest Chambers, a Creighton University student, related that people should focus on what they have in common, not on their differences. He added: “Prejudices start because of a lack of understanding. When we learn to understand other people rather than to tolerate them, then the brotherhood of man becomes a reality.”¹⁵² Some fourteen years later, in 1970, Chambers would be elected to the Nebraska legislature as the only black member of that body. He became a consistent voice speaking out and working for minority rights and a number of social causes.

On May 15, 1956, the citizens of Omaha voted for fifteen Charter Convention members who would be responsible for studying the government of the city and to propose any changes they considered necessary. Ray L. Williams and Charles F. Davis, two Near North Side attorneys, filed for a place on the ballot. With a total of thirty candidates and the voting response predicted to be light, these two candidates had a chance to be a voice in the formation of the new government, if the black community had a high voter turnout. According to the *Star*, however, they lost by “default:”

Plenty of times we as Negroes make a lot of noise about the lack of opportunities available to Negroes—and rightly so. Oft time we complain because consideration is not given us in regards to appointment to official positions and on various governmental boards and commissions-and we should complain. But last Tuesday . . . we had an opportunity to place some of our own in a position where they could have participated in the affairs of our government and not leave the job for someone else to do. But we failed by default.¹⁵³

The election results were a disappointment, but not enough to discourage the paper. It informed its readers that some of the chosen candidates supported the black community. Furthermore, it urged the local NAACP, the Omaha Metropolitan Community Council and the Urban League to push for a civil rights clause in the charter.¹⁵⁴

Neither the NAACP nor the League needed encouragement. Lawrence McVoy, spokesperson for the NAACP, told members of the Charter Convention that a civil rights policy with provisions for equal employment and the use of public facilities should be included in the preamble of the plan. He also stated that the newly proposed mayor-council form of city government would eliminate the wall that blacks often faced when they presented their problem to city officials. Using the segregated fire department as an

example, he explained: “We have sought for a declaration of policy in this matter from the chief, the commissioner, the mayor and the council. No one wanted to assume the responsibility for deciding what the policy would be.”¹⁵⁵

Wayne Anderson, a hired consultant for the Charter Convention, agreed to the addition of a civil rights clause since it would not “violate” the evolving charter draft. Rather than placing it in the preamble, he recommended that it be inserted in a specific section of the charter.¹⁵⁶ George Robinson was also supportive of the new form of city government. In addition to a civil rights clause, he and Urban League vice-president Arthur McCaw pushed for the addition of a permanent human relations board. Its purpose would be to advise the mayor and his council on all matters involving racial discrimination, provide educational programs to promote equal rights, and investigate any complaints of discrimination. It also called for a general civil rights statement, and nine elected members who were “known to be in sympathy with the purposes and objectives of the board.” Both the Urban League and the NAACP, which strongly supported the charter, advocated a provision that would forbid discrimination in the “hiring, appointment, tenure or assignment” of city employees.¹⁵⁷

On August 31, 1956, a headline on the front page of the *Star* read: “Charter Group to Make Final Decisions Saturday: FEP Clause is Included.” The Charter Convention voted eight to five to include a fair employment practice clause in all city contracts. Although it was only the first draft, the black community was hopeful that they would finally achieve equal rights, at least in employment. Furthermore, charter delegate Nathan Phillips Dodge, III moved to approve the provision for a permanent

human relations board. Chairman A.V. Sorensen, however, felt that the members needed more time to study it. He stated: "This isn't like adding a few words or a phrase or two. This is a major addition and I think important enough to warrant study by us before we are called to vote on it."¹⁵⁸

One issue was the section that called for investigative powers. In arguing for the clause, Samuel Cooper presented the Philadelphia Charter, which had a similar plan in its human relations board. One week later, the provision was approved, but the clause that called for investigative powers was omitted.¹⁵⁹

Still, Anderson deemed the proposed charter "advanced." He stated: "The civil rights provisions in the proposed charter were more comprehensive than those contained in any other city charter." One of the most important features, he added, was the "increased [status] of the relations board," which, through public educational programs, had the potential to "encourage equal rights for all Omaha citizens."¹⁶⁰

Others, however, were skeptical. Milo Bail, president of Omaha University, and the Rev. Carl Reinert, president of Creighton University, served as co-chairmen of the Citizens Information Committee for the charter. They strongly urged Near North Side clubs and organizations to proceed cautiously in deciding whether or not to endorse the plan. Bail commented, "Some clubs are already favoring or denouncing the new charter. We feel it is too early to make these kinds of commitments." Both men advised civil rights groups to question members of the Charter Convention Speakers' Bureau before making their decisions.¹⁶¹

Television commentator Phil Allen was adamantly opposed to the plan. Speaking at the Beau Brummel Club annual banquet, he strongly discouraged blacks from voting in favor of it:

There is a technique being used to neutralize the Negro opposition to various things, such as streetcar franchises and city charters. This technique often takes the form of a paragraph in favor of good human relations or a committee to study and advise about good human relations. They [are then] used in hope that members of minority groups will go along with, or at least not oppose, a form of government by a power structure, usually consisting of real estate, utilities and financial interests.¹⁶²

Voters approved the Home Rule Charter of the City of Omaha on November 6, 1956 by a count of 57,701 to 45,855. It became effective May 27, 1957, and included a civil rights clause, a provision for fair employment in city positions, and provided for a Human Relations Board. Its purpose was to investigate complaints of discrimination and guide the mayor and Council as to the handling of these matters.¹⁶³

Section 4.04 states that a nine-member Human Relations Board would be appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the council. It would “advise the mayor and council on all matters concerning the administration and enforcement of laws and ordinances” concerning racial discrimination. It would also “institute and conduct educational programs to encourage granting equal rights and opportunities to all persons”¹⁶⁴ Section 5.17, which deals with contracts, designates that “all contract of the city shall contain a provision that contractors shall not, in the performance of the contract, discriminate or permit discrimination against any person because of his race or political or religious opinions or afflictions.” Section 6.11 provides that no city employee position “shall be taken or withheld by reason of race”¹⁶⁵ Finally, section 8.02 reads: “All

persons regardless of race, creed, or color shall have equal enjoyment of, and equal protection under, all the provisions of this charter and all ordinances, resolutions, rules, regulations, orders and directives adopted pursuant hereto.”¹⁶⁶

These additions came after a decade of difficult battles that were fought with a new and confrontational attitude that emerged after World War II. In 1955, Thurgood Marshall, chief of the legal staff of the NAACP, stated: “As in the past, there are some who say that we are moving too fast and others that say we are moving too slow. The obvious answer is that we are moving and that is the important factor to keep in mind.”¹⁶⁷ Omaha blacks were clearly moving. By the 1950s, some blacks had not only bought homes in white neighborhoods, but also found acceptance from their new neighbors. The NAACP began taking a more active part in the legal fight for civil rights. Several organizations such as the De Porres Club and the Urban League took an aggressive, head-on approach to discrimination and successfully opened many doors that were previously closed to blacks. Furthermore, some of the abuses blacks experienced by members of the police force were recognized and addressed.

It was the problems that did not change, however, that deserved the most attention. Most blacks remained segregated on the Near North Side, an overpopulated area with substandard housing. Many restaurants and other public facilities still refused to serve them. They experienced discrimination in employment and no black teachers had been hired in any of the city’s high schools. Committees continued to be formed, resulting in studies that merely told the blacks what they already knew, while blacks continued to tell the whites what they did not care to acknowledge. In fact, many of the

problems that were cited were the same ones that Kerns and Sullinger noted in their 1931 study, *The Negro in Omaha*. It was these unresolved problems, and the new, confrontational attitude that developed after the war, that laid the foundation for the civil rights advances that occurred in the turbulent decade that lay ahead.

¹ *Omaha Star* (hereinafter referred to as *OS*), 6 January 1954; Rene R. Beauchesne, "The Political Impact of the Omaha Home Rule Charter (1956)," Omaha, 1961 (copy in Alumni Memorial Library, Creighton University), 2.

² *OS*, 29 January 1954; 5 February 1954; 7 May 1954.

³ Jeffery Harrison Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club" (master's thesis, Creighton University, 1967), 62-69.

⁴ *OS*, 13 August 1954.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20 August 1954. As mentioned in chapter 4, the OCEJO was formed in 1952 in an attempt to obtain an FEP city ordinance.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1954.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1954; 13 August 1954. Charles Washington worked as a reporter, columnist and editor for the *Omaha Star* for forty-eight years. In addition to being a long-time board member of the Urban League, he hosted its community affairs television program, "Omaha, Can We Do?" in the 1980s. He was referred to as the "godfather" of the black community, and after his death in 1986, the Omaha Public Library's north branch, located at 2868 Ames Avenue, was renamed in his honor. *Omaha World-Herald* (hereinafter referred to as *OWH*), 11 August 1983; 15 September 1986; 27 March 1985.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 August 1954.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 July 1954; 23 July 1954.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23 July 1954.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13 August 1954.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20 August 1954.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6 August 1954.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Omaha Chamber of Commerce, committee minutes, 27 September 1954, 2; *OS*, 22 October 1954; 12 November 1954; Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," 69.

¹⁶Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," 75; *OS*, 29 October 1954; 8 July 1955; Although the Club faced a serious decline in both its activity and membership during the mid-1950s, it continued to function until the early 1960s.

¹⁷Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," 75-76; *OS*, 27 May 1955.

¹⁸*OS*, 31 March 1954; 4 June 1954.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 4 June 1954.

²⁰*Ibid.*; 4 June 1954; 3 June 1955.

²¹*Ibid.*, 17 December 1954.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, 28 September 1956.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 30 September 1954; *True Voice*, 17 October 1954.

²⁵*OS*, 30 September 1954; 22 October 1954. Claude Organ was the first black chairman of the Creighton University Department of Surgery, serving from 1971 through 1982. *OWH*, 20 February 2001.

²⁶*True Voice*, 17 October 1954.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 24 October 1954; Steven Szmrecanyi, *History of the Catholic Church in Northeast Nebraska: Phenomenal Growth From Scannell to Bergan (1891-1969)* (Omaha: Catholic Voice Publishing Company, 1983), 573.

²⁸*OS*, 25 March 1955.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 25 March 1955; 1 July 1955.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 1 July 1955.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*, 8 July 1955; *OWH*, 6 August 1954; 14 August 1954; 16 August 1954; 17 August 1954.

³⁴ *OS*, 8 July 1955.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 September 1955.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23 September 1955.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 October 1955.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 November 1955; 11 November 1955.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 November 1955.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27 August 1954.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 30 September 1954.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30 September 1954.

⁴⁴ *OWH*, 28 September 1954.

⁴⁵ *OS*, 30 September 1954.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 October 1954.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 28 January 1955.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1 July 1955.

⁵² *Barton v. Wilson*, Doc. 478, No. 201, District Court Douglas County, Nebraska.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *OS*, 27 January 1956.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 31 March 1954.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13 April 1956; 24 February 1956.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 24 February 1956.

⁶¹ Ibid., 13 April 1956.

⁶² Ibid., 16 July 1954, p.1.

⁶³ Ibid., 31 March 1954.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 3 September 1954; 20 February 1954; 9 September 1955. Additional homes were built at 2715 and 2701 John A. Creighton Boulevard.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12 August 1955.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 19 August 1955.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 12 August 1955.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 26 August 1955.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 14 October 1955.

⁷² Ibid., 24 June 1955.

⁷³ Ibid., 26 August 1955.

⁷⁴ Harrop v. Forbes, Doc. 477, No. 223, District Court Douglas County, Nebraska. In 1955, Harrop appeared before a committee of the Nebraska Unicameral in opposition to a bill that sought the repeal of a state statute prohibiting inter-racial marriages. OS, 23 March 1956.

⁷⁵ *OS*, 23 March 1956.

⁷⁶ Harrop v. Forbes.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *OWH*, n.d., file clipping, DCHS. Pittman was elected to the Omaha Urban League board of Directors in 1956. *OS*, 10 February 1956.

⁷⁹ Harl A. Dalstrom, *A. V. Sorensen and the New Omaha* (Omaha, Nebraska: Lamplighter Press, 1987), 223; *OS*, 26 August 1955.

⁸⁰ *OS*, 29 July 1955.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 26 August 1955.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 2 September 1955.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16 December 1955.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 June 1956.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 8 June 1956. Arthur McCaw, former president of the Omaha chapter of the NAACP, was born in 1906. He attended the University of Omaha and the Omaha Law School. Later, he worked for fifteen years in the Douglas County Assessor's Office. In 1956, he began serving as economic advisor for the state department's Agency for International Development in South Korea, Sudan, Zambia, Tunisia, and the Dominican Republic. Ten years later, he served as chief administrator and budget officer of the White House Conference on Civil Rights. In 1969, Clifford Harding, Secretary of Agriculture, and former chancellor of the University of Nebraska, named McCaw deputy administrator of the Agriculture Department's food and nutrition service. *OWH*, 6 July 1985.

⁹⁰ *OS*, 8 June 1956.

⁹¹ Robert T. Kimbrough, *Summary of American Law* (San Francisco: The Lawyers Co-operative Publishing Company, 1974), 52.

⁹² *OS*, 11 June 1954.

⁹³ Chamber of Commerce Minutes, Educational Committee, 6 January 1954; *OS*, 7 January 1955, 1.

⁹⁴ *OS*, 9 September 1955; 17 August 1956.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9 July 1954.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11 June 1954.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 December 1954.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29 June 1956. Kathryn Favors later became the director of the school district in Berkeley, California, where she also earned a doctorate of education.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6 April 1956.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1956.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6 April 1956; The Mid-City Business and Professional Men's Association was a short-lived group that served the Near North Side during the 1950s.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 27 April 1956; 8 June 1956. Robert Myers was elected to the Board of Education in 1964, upon which he served for almost six years.

¹⁰³ *OWH*, 7 September 1955.

¹⁰⁴ *OS*, 2 September 1955.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 2 September 1955; *OWH*, 7 September 1955.

¹⁰⁶ *OWH*, 2 September 1955.

¹⁰⁷ *OS*, 16 September 1955.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 September 1955; *OWH*, 16 September 1955.

¹⁰⁹ *OS*, 7 October 1955.

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- ¹¹⁰ Ibid., 16 September 1955.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid., 7 October 1955.
- ¹¹² Ibid., 21 October 1955.
- ¹¹³ Ibid., 20 January 1956.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid., 16 September 1955.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid., 31 August 1956.
- ¹¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., 21 September 1956.
- ¹¹⁸ Gordon v. Frzek, Doc. 482, No. 320, District Court Douglas County, Nebraska.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid; *OWH*, 22 September 1956; 25 September 1956.
- ¹²⁰ *OS*, 28 September 1956.
- ¹²¹ Ibid., 29 June 1956.
- ¹²² Ibid., 13 July 1956.
- ¹²³ Ibid., 18 May 1956.
- ¹²⁴ Ibid., 18 May 1956.
- ¹²⁵ Ibid., 10 February 1956.
- ¹²⁶ Ibid., 8 July 1955.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid., 15 July 1955.
- ¹²⁸ Ibid.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid., 5 August 1955.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid.
- ¹³¹ Ibid., 23 September 1955; 20 January 1956.

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- ¹³² Ibid., 22 October 1954.
- ¹³³ Ibid., 7 January 1955; 10 December 1954; *Lincoln Journal*, 9 January 1955.
- ¹³⁴ OS, 4 February 1955.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid., 18 March 1955.
- ¹³⁶ Ibid., 7 January 1955.
- ¹³⁷ Office of the Clerk of Nebraska Legislature, Education committee, LB 312, 1955.
- ¹³⁸ OS, 28 January 1955; 14 January 1955; *Lincoln Journal*, 27 January 1955.
- ¹³⁹ OS, 18 February 1955.
- ¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 11 February 1955.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁴² Ibid; *Lincoln Journal*, 8 February 1955.
- ¹⁴³ OS, 11 February 1955.
- ¹⁴⁴ Office of the Clerk of Nebraska Legislature, Public Health and Miscellaneous Subjects Committee, LB 313, 1955.
- ¹⁴⁵ OS, 11 March 1955.
- ¹⁴⁶ Office of the Clerk of Nebraska Legislature, Public Health and Miscellaneous Subjects Committee, LB 313, 1955.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid; OS, 11 March 1955.
- ¹⁴⁸ OS, 18 March 1955.
- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 25 March 1955.
- ¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 3 June 1955.
- ¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 17 February 1956.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 23 March 1956.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 8 June 1956; 6 July 1956.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 22 June 1956.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 6 July 1956; 31 August 1956; *OWH*, 28 September 1956.

¹⁵⁸ *OS*, 31 August 1956.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 7 September 1956.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 14 September 1956.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 28 September 1956; Szmrecsanyi, *History of the Catholic Church in Northeast Nebraska*, 293. Reinert's objectivity is questionable, as he asked the De Porres Club to conduct its business away from Creighton University in 1947.

¹⁶² *OS*, 21 September 1956.

¹⁶³ Dalstrom, *A. V. Sorensen and the New Omaha*, 35, 39; The Charter Convention, "The Proposed Home Rule Charter of the City of Omaha, 1956" [final draft], n.d., Omaha, Nebraska, 1, 81.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁶⁷ *OS*, 29 July 1955.

Conclusion

Blacks in Omaha developed new approaches to fight Jim Crow practices in the post-World War II era. As a result, substantial gains were made in the areas of public accommodations, employment, residential segregation and education. The *Omaha Star*, a black newspaper, was instrumental in reporting civil rights abuses to its readers, while constantly urging them to unite and fight for their rights.

Civil rights organizations played a crucial role in bringing about these efforts. The NAACP chapter was established as early as 1918, but after an initial burst it was relatively ineffective until the 1950s. On the other hand, the local Urban League, which dated to 1928, adapted more readily to the changing post-World War II environment. Realizing the need to shift from its earlier emphasis on self-help and recreation orientation, it began to address problems such as employment, housing, and race relations.¹

In 1950, Whitney Young replaced Leo Bohanon as the executive secretary of the League. Described by his peers as having “an outgoing personality” and “an ability to carry out programs.” Young exhibited not only charisma, but also diplomatic skills that enabled him to relate to both races. He conducted frequent visits to prospective employers, persuading them to hire blacks, especially the skilled and educated. Although he resigned after serving only three years with the League, he was instrumental in placing blacks in many local businesses that had previously adhered to Jim Crow practices, and helped obtain scholarships for black students. He also worked with smaller local

organizations to improve the living conditions of North Omaha residents. Yet in his final League report in 1953, he expressed disappointment that Omaha banks, large insurance companies, and the Union Pacific headquarters still refused to hire blacks.²

New organizations, with new approaches, also emerged. The Omaha Council of the National Negro Congress began in 1946. While its focus was on the crucial problems confronting blacks, such as housing, education and employment, rumors of its affiliation with the Communist Party prevented it from gaining a strong foothold. Furthermore, its president, Anita Hayes, an outspoken advocate of civil rights, was subjected to FBI surveillance throughout the 1940s and 1950s.³

It was the Omaha De Porres Club, however, that made the civil rights movement in Omaha different from that in other cities. This group originated on the Creighton University campus in 1947, under the direction of Father John Markoe, a Catholic priest, and Denny Holland, a student. The Club was an interracial organization that attracted a following of students from other schools, social workers, and civic-minded people who were interested in its cause. Working closely with the Urban League, it focused on the areas of employment, housing, education, and public accommodations. It utilized direct action techniques, including sit-ins, boycotts and picketing, and followed the passive resistance teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi years before its counterparts in most other cities.⁴

The Club staged major campaigns against local businesses that adhered to unfair hiring practices—the Coca-Cola bottling plant, the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company, and the Reed Ice Cream Company. Its last difficult battle was waged

against the Omaha School Board with mixed results. According to Creighton University English Professor Edward Corbitt, “[The De Porres Club] was fighting for civil rights long before it became fashionable to do so.”⁵

Its activity tapered off drastically in the mid-1950s, when, in the words of Jeffery Smith, “other voices were being raised and other forces launched in a growing nationwide civil rights movement.” The Club did not disband, however, until it accomplished what it set out to do, which was to rectify “the lack of social justice for the Negro in the post World War II Omaha.”⁶ Mac Gothard, the manager of the North Omaha Coca-Cola plant that finally succumbed to the Club’s pressure tactics against unfair hiring in 1951, said fourteen years later: “If there is anything I can say about the De Porres Club, it is that they were ahead of their time. The methods and pressures they used were not thought of in those days. I was shocked by their tactics. I was ignorant of the whole thing.”⁷

Political scientist Ronald Walters argues that although the origins of the recent civil rights movement are usually placed in the South, the “first modern sit-in” actually began in 1958 under the direction of the NAACP Youth Councils in Wichita, Kansas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Furthermore, he relates that the techniques used in these two events were based on methods developed by Gandhi. The sit-ins organized by the De Porres Club, while not as organized as those that Walters discusses, preceded those demonstrations by several years.⁸

In 1958, approximately eight years after the De Porres Club waged its first sit-in, the national office of the NAACP issued a statement expressing “sympathy” for cities

“where the national office had not extended sponsorship or support.”⁹ Furthermore, the Omaha chapter of the NAACP stepped in when the De Porres Club activity began to decline. Its 1956 president, Rev. Emmett T. Streeter, took an active stand against many of the Jim Crow hiring policies within the city. In addition, he was recognized as one of the few religious leaders who challenged discrimination. The organization also became more involved in the black community’s complaints of harsh treatment from the police department.¹⁰

Many studies and committees were formed in the 1940s and 1950s in response to complaints from the residents of the Near North Side. Racial discrimination was rarely recognized, though, as the cause, or even a contributing factor. In 1954, the United Community Services’ Social Planning Unit Committee found a disproportionately higher crime rate among black youths, as compared to whites. It offered broad suggestions for improving the neighborhood, such as bringing in “educational forums and discussion groups” to produce “volunteer leaders.”¹¹

Two years later, Mayor John Rosenblatt created the Near North Side Planning Committee in response to a study that was done by Johnny Owens, the head of the Mayor’s Action Committee and a North Omaha resident. It found that only three of the city’s forty-one nursing homes accepted black patients, and many restaurants either used “reservation dodges” to discourage black patrons, or they were seated in separate rooms. Furthermore, only one-tenth of the local business firms employed blacks, and most held jobs in the unskilled and service occupations. The report also found that three times as

many people lived on one acre of land in North Omaha than in any other section of the city.¹² These findings produced more interest than the previous ones.

Meanwhile, Senator John Adams, a black attorney who represented the North Omaha district, introduced five bills in the Unicameral in 1955. These called for fair employment practices legislation, the “division of civil rights in the State Department of Education,” the repeal of the state’s miscegenation statute, and the removal of the requirement that a person list his race on state and county forms. Backed by organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League, civil rights activists were optimistic. Arthur McCaw, a North Omaha resident and a representative of the Governor’s Committee on Human Relations, spoke in favor of the bill, along with other individuals interested in abolishing Jim Crow practices. Unfortunately, all of the bills were defeated.¹³

Still, in November, 1956, Omaha voters approved the Home Rule Charter of the City of Omaha. It became effective on May 27, 1957, and provided for a Human Relations Board that would “advise the mayor and council on all matters” that related to racial discrimination. It also included a clause that forbade discrimination in employment” and that “all persons, regardless of race, creed or color shall have equal enjoyment of, and equal protection under, all the provisions of this charter.”¹⁴

Racial discrimination persisted in Omaha, as it continued to do so across the United States. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the city experienced a tumultuous period in race relations with increased tensions between blacks and whites, and riots breaking out on several occasions. Yet those developments should not obscure the very real

accomplishments that black activists and their white allies achieved in the 1945-1956 era, when the *Omaha Star*, the Urban League, the De Porres Club, the NAACP, and others built a solid foundation for later civil rights efforts.

¹ David McMahon, "The Origins of the NAACP in Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska, 1913-1926" (master's thesis, Creighton University, 1993), 8; Dennis N. Mihelich, "World War II and the Transformation of the Omaha Urban League," *Nebraska History* 60 (fall 1979): 418-19.

² Nancy J. Weiss, *Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1989), 46, 48; Whitney M. Young, 1953 Omaha Urban League report, DCHS.

³ Lawrence S. Wittner, "The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment," *American Quarterly* 4 (winter 1970): 887; Anita Hayes, FBI file 100-3741-6 through 100-3741-48, 26 July 1944 through 11 January 1958

⁴ Jeffery H. Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," *Negro History Bulletin* 33 (December 1970): 194. No specific date is given for the first De Porres Club sit-in, but in context to other dated events, it can be assumed to have occurred in 1950.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Jeffery H. Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," *Negro History Bulletin* 33 (December 1970): 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁸ Ronald Walters, "The Great Plains Sit-in Movement, 1958-60," *Great Plains Quarterly* 16 (spring 1996): 85. For further information on the Wichita Civil Rights movement, see Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights movement in the Midwest, 1954-72* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ *Omaha Star*, 17 December 1954; 15 October 1954.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31 March 1954.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26 February 1956.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18 February 1955; 11 February 1955; *Lincoln Journal*, 8 February 1955; Office of the Clerk of Nebraska Legislature, Public Health and Miscellaneous Subjects Committee, LB 313, 1955.

¹⁴ The Charter Convention, "The Proposed Home Rule Charter of the City of Omaha, 1956" [final draft], n.d., Omaha, Nebraska, 1, 81.

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Appendix A

De Porres Club leaflet

**A Moral Appraisal
of
An Individual Act
Of Racial Discrimination**

By

Rev. John P. Markoe, S.J.

Imprimi Potest

Daniel H. Conway, S.J.
Provincial
Missouri Province
June 19, 1951

Imprimatur

✠ Francis J. Haas
Bishop of Grand Rapids
Grand Rapids, Michigan
July 9, 1951

Appendix A (Continued)

De Porres Club leaflet

5¢ each
 \$4 per 100
 \$15 per 500
 \$25 per 1000

PREFACE

Reprints av.
DENNY H.
 2517 N. 13th
 OMAHA

Perhaps the greatest social problem confronting America today is the problem of making Democracy work at home. Until this problem is solved America's bid for moral leadership throughout the world is tremendously handicapped, if not rendered hopeless.

The most glaring breakdown in the working of Democracy at home is found in the unjust and uncharitable discrimination practiced against the Negro American. Until this defect in the operation of our democratic machinery is remedied it is idle to speak of selling Democracy abroad. We must first practice ourselves what we preach to others.

Motives are necessary in any human endeavor. The most powerful of all motives, the one that should underlie all other motives, whether they be political, economic or otherwise, should be the moral motive. It is also the most necessary and important. Other motives, unless they rest on the solid foundation of morality, are reduced to mere opportunism and expediency.

It is to supply the necessary moral motive for the solution of America's race problem that the following moral appraisal of an individual act of racial discrimination has been prepared. It deals with racial discrimination in a restaurant. It is to be noted that what is proved to be immoral, and sinful because it is immoral, is the act of racial discrimination. This act is immoral wherever practiced. The place is merely incidental. Hence the case before us applies with equal force to racial discrimination practiced in a church, hotel, school, employment policy, etc. The moral principles used in solving the particular case presented are universal in their application. Hence, like a spot-light, they may be used to pick out the immorality in other types and cases of discrimination than the one cited below.

Appendix A (Continued)

De Porres Club leaflet

TYPICAL CASE OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

John White operates a public restaurant to support his family. He recognizes all human beings as essentially equal but one day refuses service to Jim Black, a Negro, on the grounds that to serve Black would harm his business, which caters to white trade only. Is John White's act of discrimination moral or immoral?

SOLUTION: An act is immoral if one (or more) of the constituent elements of the act is immoral, namely: 1) The END OF AGENT (purpose); 2) The END OF OBJECT (means); 3) The CIRCUMSTANCES. But, in the case stated, elements 2 and 3 are immoral. Hence the act is immoral on these two points, or doubly immoral.

PROOF: 1) The END OF AGENT is good; John White intends to support his family.

2) The END OF OBJECT is immoral because:

a) John White is striking a blow on the wedge that tends to split the natural unity of the human race. Hence his act *violates* the NATURAL LAW.

b) His act *violates* JUSTICE because:

i) He denies Jim Black the treatment due him as a HUMAN BEING.

ii) He does not treat Jim Black on an equal footing with other members of the public.

iii) He *denies* Jim Black the dignity, respect and courtesy *due* him as a HUMAN PERSON.

c) His act *violates* CHARITY because it humiliates, hurts and frustrates Jim Black; it objectively degrades him.

3) The CIRCUMSTANCES greatly aggravate the objective immorality of the act because individual acts of discrimination of the kind under question, even when done without malice or bitterness, but for business reasons only, support and perpetuate the GROSSLY IMMORAL SOCIAL PATTERN known as "Jim Crow" or the "Color Line" in America with all its horribly evil consequences. (cf. A Moral Appraisal of the Color Line; *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, August, 1948.)

Appendix A (Continued)

De Porres Club leaflet

SOME OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

1. John White has the obligation, and consequently the right, to support his family and operating the restaurant is the means chosen by him for this purpose. Hence there is here a conflict of two rights.

Reply: There is no conflict of rights here. John White can support his family and also serve Negroes.

2. If John White serves Negroes his business will fall off and his family suffer. Under these conditions it is asking too much of him.

Reply: How does John White know his business will fall off since presumably he has never tried serving Negroes? Could it be that his fears are exaggerated? In any case, which good comes first; the dubious private good of his family or the certain common good of society? The difficulty of the circumstances under which John White might serve Negroes certainly would mitigate his guilt in refusing to serve them but certainly could not excuse it completely except under very extreme circumstances.

3. John White is not responsible for the social pattern in which he lives and has a right to accommodate himself to it.

Reply: Granted that he is not responsible for the immoral social pattern in which he lives; still he has no more right to accommodate himself to it than he would have a right to accommodate himself to the immoral social pattern wherein cheating, stealing and lying are the fashion.

(Please make use of this in every way possible)

Appendix B

De Porres Club Credo and Pledge

Credo and Pledge of The Omaha De Porres Club



As MEMBERS of the OMAHA DE PORRES CLUB we firmly believe that:

ALL MEMBERS of the ONE HUMAN RACE, without any exception, whatsoever, have been equally endowed by the CREATOR, through HIS promulgation of the NATURAL LAW, with the following fundamental HUMAN RIGHTS:

- A. THE RIGHT TO LIVE A FULL AND COMPLETE LIFE, to the *utmost* of their capacity, both in PRIVATE and in PUBLIC. Consequently, we recognize the following inalienable rights in *each and every member* of the HUMAN RACE:
1. The right to be recognized as a MEMBER of the HUMAN RACE.
 2. The right to be treated with the *respect and dignity* DUE *every* member of the HUMAN RACE.
 3. The right to be *integrated* into the SOLIDARITY of the HUMAN RACE.
 4. The right to choose the BEST means to living the FULLEST and MOST COMPLETE LIFE POSSIBLE.
- B. Consequently, since every individual human *Right* implies a corresponding OBLIGATION on the part of others to respect that right, always keeping in view the COMMON GOOD, we as MEMBERS of THE OMAHA DE PORRES CLUB, utterly condemn as UNJUST every violation of the above mentioned inalienable human rights. Specifically do we condemn as UNJUST:
1. The estimating of the some members of the HUMAN RACE as essentially inferior human beings.
 2. Anything and everything that tends to FRUSTRATE in any way the living of the FULLEST AND MOST COMPLETE life POSSIBLE in another.
 3. Every form of COMPULSORY SEGREGATION.
 4. Any and all forms of DISCRIMINATION against individuals because of COLOR only.
- C. We recognize the above not only as violations of JUSTICE, which requires that we render unto every HUMAN BEING his DUE, but also as violations of CHARITY, which further requires that we LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR AS OURSELVES.
- D. CONSEQUENTLY, as MEMBERS OF THE OMAHA DE PORRES CLUB, we pledge ourselves to regulate our own dealings with others in accordance with the above TRUTHS and PRINCIPLES, and, further, we pledge ourselves to strive in every way possible to get others to do the same.

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