

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**

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*Frederick McGhee and his family on the porch of their home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1918. He was among the African-American business and professional men and women who helped nurture, within a gracious community, several generations of achievers. See article beginning on page 4.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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**On the Cover:** The first black criminal lawyer west of the Mississippi, Frederick McGhee, shown with his home and family, was a prominent Democrat and Catholic in St. Paul in the early 1900s.

**Acknowledgements:** Photographs on pages 5, 7 (James K. Hilyard), 8 (J. Frank Wheaton), 10 (Owen Howell), 11 (W. T. Francis' house), 13 (the Vass house), and 14 (the Adams house) are reprinted from the September 12, 1910, Quarto-Centennial celebration edition of *The Appeal*. The photograph on page 17 is from A. A. Heckman's private files. The photograph on page 30 of the Bishop house as it appeared in 1980 is from the Ramsey County Historical Society collections. All other photographs are from the audio-visual collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**D**an Hoisington, the Society's executive director, is fond of saying: "We're all historians." Nowhere is this more evident than when we go through family letters, diaries or old photos seeking to reconstruct some family history. The theme of the Society's current "Have Lunch With an Historian" weekly lecture series is "Memories, Diaries and Letters."

In conjunction with this, the Editorial Board of *Ramsey County History* invites readers who would like to share an especially meaningful letter, diary, photo or artifact dealing with the history of Ramsey County to contact our office at 222-0701. We'll help you determine what bit of history your letter or photo contains.

We're also interested in your comments on articles we've published in *Ramsey County History*. We're inviting you to bring a bag lunch and participate in a new discussion series based on these articles. The first is set for 12-1 p.m. April 20 in Courtroom 408, Landmark Center. We'll invite some of our writers to attend.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

## Small and Cohesive

# St. Paul's Resourceful African-American Community

Arthur C. McWatt

This article is an attempt to chronicle the lives of some of St. Paul's African-American\* business and professional achievers during the period between 1900 and 1943. Throughout this period, these men and women were the leaders of the city's small but cohesive African-American community. The community they nurtured lay, roughly, between Marshall and University, Dale and Rice Streets. The now vanished Rondo Street ran through its heart. There is little physical resemblance today to the neighborhood St. Paul's black community knew fifty years ago. Much of it was destroyed by urban renewal and Highway 94. This article is an attempt, then, to retrace decade by decade for a new generation the lives of these men and women and their achievements and also to recapture through photographs a vanished part of St. Paul's history.

Tribute should be paid to the important role the black press played in communicating, irritating and motivating the community into new levels of awareness and change, and to the black scholars and businessmen who provided both role models and jobs for newly arriving black migrants and for their own young people. Finally, there is the resourcefulness of the black entrepreneurs who managed to sustain their businesses and make them grow, despite difficult economic times, until a wartime economy presented them with new opportunities.

The history of blacks in Minnesota and St. Paul dates back to at least 1802 and the birth of George Bonga, the son of a black frontiersman and a Chippewa woman, near what is now Duluth. In the 1830s the

\*Although the writer prefers "African-American," other terms, including "Negro," "Afro-American," "colored" and "black" will be used as appropriate to various time periods.

presence of Dred Scott, a slave living in free territory as a servant of Fort Snelling's surgeon, precipitated the Supreme Court's famed "Dred Scott Decision." James Thompson, another slave at Fort Snelling, served as interpreter for a missionary at Kaposia and later settled in St. Paul.

By 1848, thirty-five black men and women were living in Minnesota Territory, most of them in St. Paul, Thompson among them. During the last third of the 19th century, migration of blacks to Minnesota was steady and St. Paul, as the capital, attracted many of them.

### 1900-1910

By the first decade of the 20th century, the black population of St. Paul was fairly well established. A quarter of them were native-born Minnesotans, and some families had been St. Paul residents for two generations. Cultural institutions were in place. Pilgrim Baptist and St. James African Methodist Episcopal churches were well established. The Pioneer Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons had been organized by Moses Dixon, Joseph Farr, Israel Crosley and Jacob Pritchmen. (Black masonry had arrived in St. Paul in 1866.) Negroes had won the right to serve as jurors. Church and social leader, T. H. Lyles, had formed a Robert Bank's Literary Society at Pilgrim Baptist Church. In 1885 Samuel E. Hardy and John T. Burgett had founded the *Western Appeal*, the



The Rondo Sub-Station, shown here in 1927, at the corner of Rondo and Western.

# Community

black community's first major newspaper. F. D. Parker was its first editor. In 1886 the paper was sold to J. K. Hilyard and Thomas Lyles, who brought in John Quincy (J.Q.) Adams from Louisville, Kentucky, as associate editor. Parker helped bring the community together. One of the ways he chose to do this was to mount a campaign to hire black firefighters. Parker worked in the office of M. J. Bell, St. Paul's register of deeds, and this put him in a good position to lobby for his cause. His efforts finally bore fruit. William R. Godette was hired as the city's first black firefighter. Charles H. Brown was appointed in 1887, and he was followed by John Benjamin in 1888 and Frederick Tobie in 1897.

All of them were assigned to Chemical Company No. 4, which was located on the corner of Front and Auerbach (later Matilda) Streets. The station was a real source of pride for the black community, despite the fact that the company (later renamed Supply Hose Company No. 5) usually received all the bog and dump fire calls throughout the city. These were fires that often lasted sixteen to eighteen hours before they were put out, as James S. Griffin pointed out in his book, *Blacks in the St. Paul Police and Fire Departments, 1885-1976*.

James Burrell, appointed in 1892, was St. Paul's first black policeman. A former Pullman car porter, he was assigned permanently to the Rondo Street Sub-station. He served with distinction for many years and won the confidence and respect of both his colleagues and his superiors.

James H. Loomis, another prominent St. Paul citizen and later a businessman, became a police patrolman in 1900. He had been fired from his job as court bailiff when Mayor Robert A. Smith, a Democrat, found out that Loomis was a Republican. J. C. Reid, editor of the *Afro Ameri-*



C. P. Tyler and friends in his seven-seat Oldsmobile. Behind them, at 411-415 W. University Avenue, is W. B. Elliot's store and residence.



F. D. Parker

*can Advance*, was appointed to take his place.

In 1897 John Quincy Adams bought the *Western Appeal* from Parker and dropped the word, "Western." The new editor was a militant and outspoken Republican who was ever vigilant against what he saw as

the racist barbs of the Democratic-leaning *St. Paul Pioneer*—later the *Pioneer Press*. He not only raised the social consciousness of his black readers but also alerted them to any transgressions against black citizens in St. Paul. At its peak in the 1880s, *The Appeal* was published in Dallas, Washington, D.C., St. Louis, Louisville, Chicago and Minneapolis, as well as St. Paul, and it had corresponding offices in Denver, Milwaukee and Des Moines.

Another event which undoubtedly helped to strengthen the will of the community was the passage in 1898 of a civil rights bill by the state legislature. It was introduced by Minnesota's first black representative, J. Frank Wheaton. Section 373.09 guaranteed protection to all Minnesota citizens from discrimination based on race, color, national origin or religion. It also provided that violators, or those who aided or incited others to violate its provisions, would be guilty of a gross misdemeanor and liable in a civil action for damages not to exceed \$500.

Wheaton had been born in Maryland in 1866. He was educated at Storer College in West Virginia and Howard University where he studied pre-law. He graduated in 1892 and came to Minnesota the following year where he was admitted to the University of Minnesota's Law School. After his



The old Pilgrim Baptist Church, Twelfth and Cedar Streets, in 1936. A. F. Raymond photo.

## The history of blacks in Minnesota dates back to at least 1802 . . .

By 1900 the population of the St. Paul black community had stabilized with a slow-down in immigration due, at least in part, to the decline in river traffic. While the majority of the city's black men and women were engaged in service jobs, there also was a substantial and increasing number of leaders in business and the professions.

The leading businessman of that period was T. H. Lyles, who not only ran one of St. Paul's finest barber shops but, in addition, worked as a mortician and a realtor. His wife, a prominent businesswoman in her own right, operated the Hair Bazaar at 47 E. Third Street, which offered ladies baths, shampoos and hair styling. She also sold or rented masquerade costumes, mourning clothes and wedding attire.

Harry Sheppard was a photographer with an integrated clientele. James K. Hilyard operated a clothes cleaning and renovating business at 468 Robert Street. H. H. Kent had a delivery and forwarding company at 200 W. Seventh Street. He hauled, packed and shipped furniture; he took up carpets, cleaned and re-laid them, and he had wagons and excursion buses for hire.

Arthur Lowe was a businessman who had one of the nicest establishments in downtown St. Paul. He owned a flourishing picture framing business. He also had a large number of real estate properties listed with the Williams Real Estate Company. Lowe's firm was located first at 475 Wabasha Street and later at 489-491 Wabasha. In 1906 he added a photographic gallery to his downtown store. Six years earlier, in 1900, he had built his family a new home at 726 Sherburne Avenue.

The first Afro-American to own a downtown theater was Thomas Jefferson, who opened the Park Theater at 374 Minnesota in 1886. It was a few doors down the street from Mrs. Mary Mink's Hotel de Mink.

In the field of skilled trades and labor, the St. Paul Paving and Construction Company was one of the largest black-owned businesses in St. Paul. The company was started in 1908 by a Negro civil engineer,

T. C. Cuthbert. He employed nineteen black stone masons and laborers to install concrete paving, build brick dwellings and handle other general contracting projects from his plant at 1145 Charles Street.

A few blacks managed to find employment in clerical and white collar jobs in St. Paul during the first decade of the new century. This was such an auspicious achievement that *The Colored Magazine of Boston* featured one of them, Mrs. Birdie High, on its cover. She was a graduate of the J. D. Hess Business College.

St. Paul's black professionals included doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers, nurses. Dr. Valdo Turner, who had graduated from the Meharry Medical School, was the first black physician licensed to practice in St. Paul. Dr. Thomas S. Cook was the first black physician licensed to practice medicine in Minnesota. He began his practice in St. Paul.

Minnie and Bessie Farr were appointed in 1895 to teach in the public schools. In 1880 Minnie Farr became the first Afro-American girl to graduate from the St. Paul High School, a massive structure located downtown near Tenth and Robert Streets. She was assigned to the eighth grade at Lincoln School and she taught there for the next eight years. She died in 1905 at the age of forty-two. Bessie Farr taught second grade at Cleveland School.

Scottie Primus, who graduated from the St. Paul High School in 1897, went on to become the city's first Afro-American woman to receive a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Minnesota. James P. Anderson, a letter carrier, graduated from the St. Paul College of Law in 1902 and became the first black to practice before the Minnesota Supreme Court. In 1907 John Henry Hickman, the son of pioneer Robert T. Hickman, became the first Minnesota-born Afro-American to graduate from the St. Paul College of Law.

Despite this record of significant business and professional advances by members of St. Paul's black community, it was all too apparent, as the decade ended in 1910, that the vast majority still faced countless barriers. The popular verse which had applied to the Irish in the previous century now seemed more appropriate for blacks:

graduation in 1894, he became active in Republican politics. In 1898 he nominated himself for state representative from Minneapolis' Forty-second District, then known as the city's "silk stocking" district. Surprisingly, he was elected.

After serving one term, Wheaton founded the United Brotherhood Insurance Company, which won the backing of Booker T. Washington's Business Men's League. The company was incorporated in Chicago. Its goals were the establishment of a publishing company, a bank and a newspaper. It was one of the most ambitious business projects ever started by a black businessman from Minnesota. Unfortunately, it failed, but Wheaton remained active in Minnesota politics. In 1890 he nominated himself as delegate to the Republican National Convention and thus became the first Negro convention delegate ever elected from Minnesota.

Another effective black leader from St. Paul was attorney Frederick L. McGhee, the first black criminal lawyer west of the Mississippi and a prominent Democrat and a Catholic. McGhee used his considerable influence with Mayor O'Brien and Councilman R. D. Brian to open up employment opportunities for blacks, a move that helped both their economic growth and their business advancement.



John Quincy Adams



James K. Hilyard

"Shame on the lips that utter it,  
Shame on the hands that write,  
Shame on the pages that publish,  
Such slander to the light.

"I feel my blood with lightening speed,  
Through all my veins fast fly,  
At that old taunt, forever new,  
No Negroes need apply!"

During the first decade of the 20th century, the black population in Minnesota had increased by almost 3,000. In 1910 al-

most 90 percent of the state's black population lived in St. Paul, Minneapolis and Duluth. There were 3,144 blacks in St. Paul, and about twenty black families, mostly Civil War pensioners of the Baptist faith, had settled around Fergus Falls, Akeley and Nevis. Another twenty families were reported to be living around Wealthford in the Mille Lacs region.

### 1911-1920

During the years between 1911 and 1920, more than half a million blacks migrated north from the southern states each year, but only about 500 of them came to Minnesota in each of those years. There were ample reasons for the southern Negro to flee the South during the second decade of the 20th century. In many respects, these were the darkest and most dangerous years that blacks had ever faced in America. Black historian Rayford Logan called the period, "the Nadir of Afro-American life in America."

Thousands came north to escape the violent racist attitudes of the South. Most blacks came to work as laborers, but others had been forced out of skilled trades and other good jobs in the South which increasingly were being reserved for whites. Many blacks were removed from their jobs through contractual arrangements with white unions which threatened work shut-downs and boycotts if blacks were hired.

By 1900 blacks had been almost completely segregated in the South; ten years later they had been almost completely stripped of their right to vote. Negro workers were being used to break strikes, while Samuel Gompers of the A.F. of L. was busy stereotyping them as "happy-go-lucky, lazy and immoral." For most poor blacks in the South, however, it was mainly,

"Boll-weevil in de cotton,  
Cut-worm in de fields,  
Debil in de white man,  
I'se goin'on."

Chicago was the center for the recruitment of black labor and, when the Armour Company was established in South St. Paul during this decade, a great number of blacks were recruited for work in the plant. Many settled in St. Paul. The *Appeal*

declared in a March 25, 1911, editorial that it had learned that "immigrants who are the possessors of twenty-five dollars in cash, and who have transportation, were being welcomed to make their homes in Manitoba." However, a year later the same paper reported that Afro-Americans from Oklahoma had been turned back at the Canadian border and had settled in St. Paul.

After 1910, when St. Paul was of increasing importance as a railroad center, Afro-Americans became an integral part of the railroads' work force. In 1911, the *Appeal* noted, St. Paul porters were passing around a petition to raise their \$25-a-month salary to \$50 and insisting on \$60 a month after ten years of service. The following summer T. R. Taylor of St. Paul, a porter on the Great Northern, was given the unusual opportunity to serve as a sleeping car conductor.

During the next few years more business opportunities were pursued by black entrepreneurs in St. Paul. In 1913 Claude Jackson, the choir director for the St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, decided to open a dining room at 650 Wabasha Street. The following year, Negro asphalt workers in St. Paul were threatened with the loss of their jobs when the Public Works Department discharged all city workers and brought in cheaper black workers from Indianapolis.

O. C. Hall, a former barber, learned of the scheme while working in the city auditor's office, and he protested the action in a letter to the editor of the *Pioneer Press*. The result was the formation of the Afro-American Industrial League with G. T. Williams as its president, O. C. Hall as its secretary, and R. M. Johnson as its treasurer. Within a short time, the league had enrolled twenty-six members and was successful in saving the public works jobs.

In the meantime, Afro-American women were experiencing their own difficulties, including problems in enrolling in St. Paul's business colleges. Mrs. W. T. Francis, the wife of the city's leading black lawyer, took it upon herself to give regular evening instructions in shorthand to young black women in her home at 606 St. Anthony.

Another project which evolved out of the Industrial League and helped to pro-

vide jobs through the efforts of black businessmen was started by Thomas Morgan who printed *The Helper*. It was an informal and ingeniously organized job placement service. Morgan asked readers to report any jobs they knew of to the Hall Brothers Barber Shop. *The Helper* then printed the job openings, along with instructions on how to get to most of them. S. E. (Ed) Hall, O. C. Hall's brother, did much of the searching for jobs, as well as placing applicants in them. He used the information that came from the black community and tips he received from his clientele.

There were other achievements in St. Paul's black community as its young people began to emerge from their academic worlds. In 1915 Gale P. Hilyard, a student with a straight A average in three-fourths of his classes at the University of Minnesota's Law School, graduated with his law degree and immediately went to work for A. H. Hall's St. Paul law firm. Olive Howard, who graduated that year from the university's School of Pharmacy, was the first Afro-American woman to graduate from one of the university's professional schools. Another 1915 graduate became a physician and humanitarian. Dr. Cathryn Lealtad, daughter of the pastor of St. Philips Episcopal Church, received the Noyes Scholarship for academic excellence at Macalester College where she graduated with honors. She then left St. Paul for Washington, D. C., to begin teaching at the National Training School for Women.

Clarence Wigington, a bright young black architectural draftsman from St. Paul, took the Civil Service examination for a position in the St. Paul Parks, Playgrounds and Public Buildings Department. His test score of 84.78 placed him first on the list and he was appointed to the position. He drafted the plans for the Homecroft and Hazel Park schools, for the Highland Park Water Tower near Snelling Avenue and Ford Parkway and for numerous other public buildings. Later, as a private architect, he drew the plans for St. James A. M. E. Church, which opened its doors on January 17, 1926.

In May of that year, attorney J. Louis Ervin gained some measure of fame in a different arena. He won acquittal for Wes-

ley Gresham, a black former police officer charged with murder in the death of a white bartender. Apparently this was the first time a black attorney had accomplished such a feat unaided by the presence of a white attorney in the courtroom.

In January of 1918 the Sterling Club for Professional Afro-American Men was founded. Its purpose was to "foster civic pride, encourage literary research and cultivate sociability among black citizens, as well as to entertain Negro visitors of note who were visiting St. Paul." Its membership was limited to sixteen and its charter officers included J. E. Johnson, president; F. D. McCracken, vice president; B. C. Archer, secretary; C. W. Wigington, secretary, and O. D. Howard, treasurer.

That year, also, St. Paul's only black Catholic priest, the Reverend Stephen L. Theobald, organized St. Peter Claver's Auxiliary of the American Red Cross. It was the first organized black Catholic group in St. Paul. Theobald was a young man from British Guiana who had been recruited for the priesthood by Archbishop John Ireland. He was a graduate of Queen's College, Georgetown, and had earned a law degree at Cambridge University in England before emigrating to Canada where he worked as a reporter for the *Montreal Star*. He had a brilliant academic record at the St. Paul Seminary. Ordained on June 8, 1910, he was assigned at first to the position of canon lawyer for the archdiocese.

As the second decade of the new century drew to a close, attorney W. T. Francis, a Republican lawyer who filled the legal void left by the unexpected death of Frederick L. McGhee, spoke before a meeting of the St. Paul YMCA's board of directors. In his speech, he summarized some of the economic gains which had been made by members of the city's black business and professional community.

He mentioned the presence in the city of two black physicians, Dr. Cook and Dr. Turner, and of Dr. Earl Weber, a recent graduate of the University of Minnesota's School of Dentistry. But he also mentioned Dwight Reed, Sr., an electrical engineer who had been forced to settle for a job as street gang foreman for St. Paul's black paving crews. Finally, he listed the city's black business firms, including twenty-seven barber shops, five pool halls, seven



J. Frank Wheaton



Frederick McGhee

restaurants, one picture framing business, three shoe shine parlors, one piano polisher shop, seven tailor shops and one bath and millinery salon.

Francis, with his wife and other community leaders, had played a major role in successfully lobbying the Minnesota legislature into passing an anti-lynching law, the first in the United States. Their efforts came on the heels of the lynching in Duluth in 1920 of three black male circus employees who were accused of raping a white woman. Some years later, Francis was appointed United States consul to Liberia.

Other job gains included the addition of three new detectives to the St. Paul police force, along with the eighteen carriers and clerks at the main post office. All in all, he said, it reflected considerable advancement over the previous decade and it attested to a supportive community effort which was working for the common good.

### 1921-1930

More economic progress was made during the decade following World War I. The black population of Minnesota had somewhat stabilized again, with a new growth of fewer than 700 persons annually, a slowing of migration that was due in part to the state's lack of major industrial plants.

Social organizations continued to thrive and grow within the black community. By 1920 there were nineteen fraternal and benevolent associations, the *Appeal* reported on April 17, 1920, and fifty-six business establishments in the city.

The community also began to sustain some losses among its earliest members. In January, 1921, Russell Durant died suddenly. He had come to St. Paul in 1866 and his life reflected the city's early years. As a youngster, he had attended Adams School, located on the site today of St. Paul's downtown post office. His home stood on what later became the location of the Golden Rule department store. Durant was a well-educated man. After graduating from Berea College in Kentucky, he had taken graduate work at the University of North Dakota, then opened a barber shop on the corner of Payne Avenue and Whittall.

In 1922 the St. Paul Negro Business League was formed to showcase and promote black businesses in the city. They did this by sponsoring exhibitions of their products, usually at centrally located sites in the black community. Their first exhibition, held that fall at the Union Hall on Kent and Aurora, included thirty booths which were set up in the hall's auditorium. They displayed products of more than fifty different black businesses.

Owen Howell, a black entrepreneur and the long-time president of the League, was the main organizer of the event. Howell had opened a Valet Tailoring Service in 1920 at Fifth and Wabasha. (Its



*Delivering the mail on Holly Avenue around 1890. At one point early in this century, eighteen African-American carriers and clerks worked in St. Paul's main post office.*

name was changed later to the Uptown Sanitary Shop.) For the next two decades he was perhaps the leading black businessman in St. Paul, taking over the role that T. H. Lyles once had played. Other major supporters of the business league were pharmacist George Wilson, the Hall brothers and William Liggins.

An organization that was the forerunner of the Pullman Porter Brotherhood, the Pullman Porters Industrial Association, first met on August 8, 1922, at Welcome Hall, 443 Mackubin. This was a community center founded by Mrs. Anna Camp and her husband, the Reverend George Washington Camp, pastor of Zion African Presbyterian Church. George Shannon was the association's first chairman and Frank Boyd their secretary-treasurer. Two years after the organization's inception, the Pullman Company took over all Pullman cars throughout the nation. Boyd later became one of A. Phillip Randolph's

most trusted organizers of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

The St. Paul Urban League, another organization that would help solidify the black community, was formed in 1923. That year the national Urban League office sent \$500 to Edward Hall to help him organize a local branch. The national office also loaned the branch the services of a fund-raiser, T. Arnold. He worked with branch secretary, Roy Wilkins, to bring Garrison Villard, the famous white liberal leader, to St. Paul for a rally.

A chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the oldest civil rights organization in the nation, had been established in St. Paul in 1913, three years after the founding of the national organization. Wilkins would rise to nation-wide prominence as the head of the NAACP from 1955 to 1977. A graduate of the University of Minnesota, he had grown up in St. Paul and played a major



**“Rondo Street is ‘a riot of warm colors, feeling and sounds with sights that would make one from . . . the South feel at home . . . ’**

role in bringing about the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960 and 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1984 the St. Paul Civic Center’s auditorium was named the Roy Wilkins Auditorium in his honor.

The St. Paul Urban League’s fund-raising rally was a success and on September 17, 1923, an organizational meeting was held. The group selected George S. McLeod as president, W. R. Francis as vice president and Wilkins as secretary. Elmer A. Carter was brought in from the New York office to serve as the League’s first executive director. His first office was located in a two-story building behind the Walgreen Drug Store on Seventh and Wabasha, above Friedman’s Butcher Shop.

There were other changes and there were high points. Later in 1923 the men at Engine House No. 22 were transferred to Engine House No. 9 at Edmund and Marion Streets where they remained until the black company was dissolved in 1943 and integration took place. The engine company had gained a measure of fame in 1921 when it had responded to a call for assistance from North St. Paul and helped prevent the entire village from being destroyed.

In 1924 St. Paul’s black citizens welcomed the arrival of Dr. J. Walton Crum, a general practitioner and graduate of the University of Iowa, who had been practicing medicine in Colorado and Texas. He became a strong civic leader. He was the first black physician to be admitted to the Ramsey County Medical Association and one of the first in the Midwest to become a member of the American Medical Association.

But tragedy also struck in 1924. John Q. Adams was hit and killed by a car while climbing into a streetcar at Vandalia and University Avenues. Owen Howell purchased his paper and a year later, with a young Roy Wilkins, he began publishing the *St. Paul Echo*. In the first issue he chided St. Paul residents for their lack of fiscal solidarity by noting that though “the 1,200 colored families of St. Paul spend approxi-



W. T. Francis



Owen Howell

mately \$40,000 annually on milk, our black papers still have no ads from white milk companies, nor do they hire any colored drivers. We spend \$50,000 on laundry, yet there are no ads or colored drivers. It would seem only a boycott would change the picture.”

Roy Wilkins warmed to a similar theme

in 1926 when he reminded *Echo* readers that, “if all our colored families would spend just one dollar a week with the two colored grocery stores, they would make \$24,000 a year. If Negroes buy from Negroes, then Negroes have the money and the goods, too. This is the right road to race economic security.”

Earlier, Howell had suggested that Negroes place a correspondent in Washington to keep Minnesota’s black farmers informed on farm benefits, including farm credits and loans under the Farm Loan Act. The *Echo* also brought to the attention of its readers the fact that the stop signal invented by R. L. Milton of 314 Rondo had been tested by Twin Cities police departments. Models, the newspaper said, would soon be installed at the corner of Fifth and Wabasha in St. Paul and at Seven Corners in Minneapolis.

The St. Paul branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters held its first meeting on June 13, 1926, at Welcome Hall. Paul L. Caldwell chaired the meeting attended by more than fifty Pullman porters. It was the beginning of a branch which, a quarter of a century later, would have a local membership of 700 members in a national organization of 16,000 members.

That same year black businessman Harold Goins opened the Como Theater on University Avenue between Kent and Mackubin. He had remodeled it with the purpose of giving black artists an opportunity to perform and develop their talent and also to show motion pictures featuring black players.

In 1927 attorney W. T. Francis became a paid lobbyist for black hairdressers of the Twin Cities when he fought for a beauty culturist bill in the Minnesota legislature. The bill was designed to protect trainees from being discriminated against at white beauty culture schools in Minneapolis and St. Paul. It stated specifically that, “No school should refuse to teach any student, otherwise qualified, on account of their race, creed or color.” In February of that year, Leona O. Smith, the only black woman attorney in St. Paul, was appointed deputy regional director of the National Bar Association.

Later on that year, Editor Wilkins proudly observed that, “the colored people of St. Paul live in one of the city’s best loca-



W. T. Francis' home at 606 St. Anthony Avenue.

tions. It is near the downtown shopping area, it is convenient to both cities, it is neither on top of a hill nor in a valley, it has its streets well lined with beautiful trees, it is not near a railroad yard nor any unpleasant manufacturing plants, it has excellent transportation, which makes it ideal for business . . . ."

Then he described the now-vanished Rondo Street. It is, he wrote, "a riot of warm colors, feeling and sounds with sights that would make one from the rural portions of the South feel at home and a person from Harlem or State Street at ease. Music is in abundance from victrolas, saxophones, player pianos and hurry-up orchestras which pour out their complaints to the passing scene. It seethes with the pulsating beauty of the lives of its people who feel intensely every emotion which stirs their being."

In August of 1928, a group of black businessmen bought land for a resort on the St. Croix River in Washington County,

two miles north of Point Douglas, twenty-one miles from St. Paul and five miles from Hastings. Lots of 40 by 100 feet were to be sold for \$150 to \$350 each and the resort was to be managed by Cyrus Lewis. Shareholders included Lewis, John Williams and Eugene Jackson. The property consisted of eighty rods of shoreline and 180 acres of land which could be reached either by water or through the village of Newport. It is more than likely that the venture succumbed to the after shocks of the stock market crash in 1929.

As the decade came to an end, St. Paul's African-American community could look back on it with mixed emotions. Some gains had been made in both the business and professional fields, but a study of 475 black families made near the end of the decade by the Minneapolis Urban League, revealed many negatives. The study found that more than 80 percent of the African-American men in the Twin Cities were employed as porters, janitors, or night watch-

men, or doing other kinds of menial labor.

The median income for African-American families in the two cities was \$1,720, compared with the \$2,262 which the United States Bureau of Standards cited as a minimum income for maintaining a family of five "at a decent level." The study also showed the unwillingness of almost all unions to accept blacks as members, which kept most of them from obtaining the skills and training necessary to compete for better jobs. Worst of all, the study concluded that many black job-seekers were becoming apathetic about their futures.

### 1931-1943

A black movement in the mid-1920s, the period of the Harlem Renaissance, helped to give the race the pride and the group solidarity they would need in order to deal with the adversities of the 1930s. African-Americans in the northern cities began to identify with the ideas of black writers who were receiving the plaudits of white audiences. Many of these artists, such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, helped to ease the blacks' struggles.

The famous poem, "The Negro Mother," enhanced the strength of the women who carried many black families through the Depression. Cullen's "The Ballad of the Brown Girl" gave inspiration and understanding to the new generation, while Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" helped create a new pattern of more aggressive reactions to violence from whites.

With the advent of the New Deal, blacks continued to lose jobs as the higher wages set by the National Industrial Recovery Administration forced many into lower paying jobs. White employers just were not willing to hire blacks at those higher wages. In the fall of 1930, Cecil Newman's newspaper, the *Northwestern Bulletin*, carried an editorial pointing out that Germany had had unemployment insurance since 1884, Britain since 1929 and France recently had passed it. He added that no group in America had suffered more from unemployment than had black workers and in St. Paul they were far too often "the last hired and the first fired."

"Negroes," he wrote, "should get to the polls and vote for those candidates who

support child labor laws, maternity insurance and old-age pensions and who promise to work for those reforms if they are elected." It was a forecast of things to come. In 1930, Afro-Americans scored their first national victory when their opposition prevented the confirmation of Judge John Parker to the United States Supreme Court.

Parker, a southerner, was suspected of having anti-Negro sentiments and many blacks, for the first time, realized the possibilities of organized protests. In St. Paul, black citizens enjoyed a small legal victory when Mrs. Doris Roper of 982 Fuller Avenue became the first black person to serve on a grand jury in Ramsey County. She was chosen its secretary.

Black lawyers in St. Paul during the 1930s included Louis Irvin, Hector Vassar, Charles Anderson, Maceo Littlejohn and Hammon ("Ham") Turner. Douglas Crane, who had graduated from Macalester College and the University of Minnesota Law School, found the going so difficult that he was forced to confine his law work to writing briefs for white lawyers while working full-time as a dining car waiter.

In 1934 Dr. Charles Williams, a graduate of the University of Iowa's Dental

### **It was, perhaps, the most significant political reversal ever made by an ethnic group in America.**

School, arrived in St. Paul. He was followed a few years later by Dr. Claiborne C. Hill, who graduated from the University of Nebraska and then opened his dental practice in St. Paul. Another dentist, Dr. Albert Butler, was forced to practice only part-time, due to a lack of paying patients. He was appointed supervisor of maintenance personnel at the state capitol and later worked in the same capacity at the state highway department.

From 1930 to 1943, St. Paul had only one Afro-American teacher. She divided her time between Central and Mechanic Arts high schools until 1946 when she won tenure as a history teacher at Mechanic Arts. In 1931 Frances McHie became the first black woman to graduate from the University of Minnesota's School of Nursing.

The next year, one-fourth of the nation's black voters switched their allegiance to the Democratic party in the hope that Franklin Delano Roosevelt would move to improve their economic status. It was perhaps the most significant political reversal ever made by an ethnic group in America.

The following year, a memorial service was held to honor Thomas H. Lyles, probably the wealthiest of St. Paul's black businessmen and the role model for many of them during the first quarter of the century. The memorial committee was chaired by Nathaniel Evans. The main address was given by Jose E. Sherwood, who spoke of the growth of the black community during the early 1930s.

He mentioned the contributions of Squire Neal, who had a mortuary at 525 Rondo, and his hope for George Brooks, newly certified and working for McGavock's Funeral Home at 697 Rondo. He singled out Elmer Morris, a pharmacist who had hired Lafayette Fields as a student intern. Both Brooks and Fields would open their own places of business before the decade was over. In fact, the drug store Fields opened on the corner of Dale and Rondo in 1935 became the social center as well as the heart of the black community. Brooks became the community's leading mortician for the next half century.

In 1934 the *Twin City Herald* appealed to its readers to write their congressmen in support of a petition by Oscar De Priest, the only black congressman, asking that blacks be allowed to eat in the House of Representatives' dining room. All nine of Minnesota's representatives voted affirmatively and the petition passed 237-113, with seventy-nine abstentions.

That year, also, Cecil Newman, editor of the *Herald*, was able to start the *St. Paul Recorder* with funds he raised while working for the *Kansas City Call*. Newman managed to live on \$25 of his weekly salary while sending \$75 back to William Smith to keep the paper running. Nationally-acclaimed photographer Gordon Parks worked for the *Recorder*, along with his duties as a photographer for the YWCA and the St. Paul International Institute.

In May of 1934 Maceo Moody filed for a seat in St. Paul's Thirty-eighth legislative district. Moody later became a well-known businessman and realtor. He was thirty years old when he filed for the seat and a graduate of Atlanta University where he had been picked for the *Chicago*



Dr. Valdo Turner, pioneer physician, in his office at 27 E. Seventh Street, St. Paul.

*Defender's* Negro All-American Football Team in 1927-1928. He was a law student and a member of the local Democratic party's Speakers Bureau. Hector Vassar, a black Republican lawyer, was his opponent. Both lost. Moody had 222 votes and Vassar 175.

Insurance needs for many in the black community were mostly taken care of by Theodore (Ted) Allen and Lee Turpin. Both of them were employed by the North American Life and Casualty Insurance Company.

In 1935 the *Recorder* began a policy of listing business firms who hired blacks and urged blacks to boycott those who did not. The Reverend Victor Holly, who had only recently become pastor of St. Philips Episcopal Church, cancelled his order for six kegs of beer from one St. Paul brewery and ordered them instead from the Yankee Brewery, which employed black drivers. When Newman heard that Freeman Aircraft was refusing to take blacks up on sight-seeing trips from Holman Field, he called a department store owner who held considerable stock in the company. The stockholder told the pilot he was to show



*The residence of J. A. Vass at 450 Rondo Street, a street that was "a riot of warm colors, feeling and sounds . . . ."*

black passengers the same courtesies he showed whites.

One event of 1935 which gave an extraordinary boost to black morale throughout the nation was the victory of Joe Louis over Primo Carnera for the heavyweight championship of the world. It was particularly symbolic because the Italo-Ethiopian War was being waged at the time.

By the mid-1930s St. Paul had a substantial black business community made up of small stores, shops, restaurants, bars and barber shops. There was Elliot's Grocery Store on University between Mackubin and Arundel, and Black's Grocery on St. Anthony and Kent. Walter Baines ran a coal yard at Kent and Rondo, and Addie Few had a gas station and auto repair place on Rondo and Arundel. Both Bill O'Shields and Charles Anderson had shoe repair shops on Rondo, O'Shields' on Dale and Anderson's between Kent and Mackubin.

Goff's Tailor Shop was on the corner of Dale and St. Anthony and Dick Mann had a drying cleaning establishment on the same corner. McCoy's Tailor Shop was down a block on Dale and Rondo, but perhaps the best known tailor was Maurice Love, who had a shop on Farrington and Rondo. Bunk's Rondo Cab Company was

also located on that corner and Nathaniel Walker's Moving and Storage Company was near the eastern end of the black community on Rice and Rondo.

Jim's Place, the most popular bar in the black community, was east on St. Anthony. It had started out as a pool hall but expanded to become a bar and restaurant. Other bars and taverns in the black community included Toni Goodman's Tavern on Arundel and Rondo, and Booker T's on the corner of Rondo and Western. Walker's Keystone Bar and Hotel was located on Western and Carroll.

Pool halls were run by T. Vernon on Kent and Rondo and Bill Herron on St. Anthony and Kent. Utley's pool hall was downtown at Tenth and St. Peter.

One of the nicest restaurants in town was owned by Chester Oden at Western and Central. Others included Ernie Potts' Restaurant on Farrington and Rondo; Goodman's, on the same corner, and Spurlings Bar-B-Que on Arundel and Rondo. Artie Boyd had a cafe on Kent and Mackubin called Artie's Chicken Shack.

Two of the more colorful entrepreneurs on Rondo were "Tiger Jack" Rosenbloom, who had a small store with items ranging from American flags to candy, and Stone's Coal and Ice Company. Stone delivered



*Roy Wilkins. Fabian Backrach photo.*



*John Quincy Adams' house at 527 St. Anthony Avenue, as it appeared in September, 1910.*



*The Adams house as the Gopher Elks Club 105 in 1960. The house seems to typify the decline of the neighborhood.*

his products in the trunk and back seat of his Cadillac.

The most important disseminators of news within the black community were the barber shops. Perhaps the dean of the barbers within the community at that time was Levi Martin, who over the years trained many of them. Martin's Barber Shop was on Rondo, between Grotto and St. Albans. The Lewis Barber Shop on Grotto and Rondo probably was the next most popular. Others included Dick Smith's on St. Anthony and Kent, Garret's on the corner of Rice and Carroll and Cassius's at Victoria and Selby.



*Booker T's, cafe and tavern, at 381-383 Rondo in 1960.*

Black women ran Boyd's Beauty Salon on Dale and Rondo and Lola Finney's Salon on Mackubin and Rondo. The most popular place for black youngsters was Clemons Sweet Shop on Rondo between Grotto and St. Albans.

In 1937 Cecil Newman suggested that his readers join his Friendly Merchant-Consumer Club to work against economic discrimination in the Twin Cities. He noted that the black community in the two cities spent almost \$3.5 million annually in the area and he felt that more time should be spent trying to upgrade and improve employment possibilities. During the Depression, blacks suffered from countless forms of prejudice and racial discrimination as the job situation worsened in St. Paul. Even the CCC (the Civilian Conservation Corps) created additional difficulties for St. Paul youth by sending them to southern camps, rather than to integrated camps in northern Minnesota. Employment break-throughs were few and gains were difficult to achieve.

In 1938 Ruth Pittman was hired at the Maurice L. Rothchild department store through the efforts of the Reverend C. F. Stewart, while Lou Ervin was successful at finding a job for Burnett Godman in the Grand Central Market's fruit department. The *Recorder* commended St. Paul Postmaster Arthur A. Van Dyke for his fair employment policies in promoting blacks at the main post office. The black community was further strengthened by the appointment of Myrtle Carden as the director of the Hallie Q. Brown Community House, and the purchase of Union Hall, which gave it a permanent home. It became a widely used community facility as

the center of the black community shifted westward from the Welcome Hall Community House on Mackubin and St. Anthony. Hallie Q. Brown became a gathering place for people of all ages and a second home for many impoverished youth.

Another agency which helped black families during the 1930s was the Christian Center at 603 Central Avenue. Built in 1931, it was a non-sectarian Christian education center directed by the Reverend Joseph Harris of Memorial Baptist Church. Other agencies included the Associated Negro Credit Union of St. Paul, which helped black families save for special needs and emergencies, and the Joint Negro Labor Council, which helped coordinate the activities of black labor, civic and church groups.

In 1938, according to the United States Chamber of Commerce, black proprietors across the nation operated 32 percent of all shoe repair shops, 20 percent of all clothes cleaning establishments, 17 percent of all barber shops and 16 percent of all mortuaries.

That year the St. Paul community was saddened by the death of Captain William Davenport who had been St. Paul's only black fire captain when the department was segregated. He had been promoted in 1928, after serving ten years at Engine House No. 9 on the corner of Edmund and Marion Streets.

In September of 1938 Cecil Newman protested the display of signs at the Minnesota State Fair which stated, "Colored Trade Not Solicited." The signs were quickly removed. For all of 1938 Newman had printed the Minnesota Civil Rights Law on the front page of his paper under



*The intersection of University and Rice Streets, looking east toward the capitol in 1916, before the widening of University. This was a familiar scene for the residents of St. Paul's black community. University was the neighborhood's northern border.*

the caption, "The law is plain to see," to continually remind his readers of their rights to legal redress.

In 1939 James Griffin scored highest in the civil service examination for the St. Paul Police Department and began a career which eventually earned him the position of deputy chief of the department. In 1940 Clarence Wigington was chosen to design the Winter Carnival Ice Palace. One of its features was a post office which issued official carnival stamps. Two years later, in 1942, Wigington was appointed architectural designer for the city of St. Paul.

Employment opportunities for all St. Paulites began to improve as a result of the nation's defense effort before America's entry into World War II. Some blacks began to benefit from job offers that were formerly closed to them. Ralph Jones, who had a special aptitude for shop work, was surprised to be accepted as an apprentice machinist as a result of the labor shortage.

After registration for the draft began, some black residents of St. Paul protested that no African-Americans had been selected to serve on either the local draft boards or as medical examiners for draftees. In response to their demands, Governor Harold Stassen picked one black from each of the Twin Cities to serve on each board. Another protest, led by Lee Turpin, was the result of the governor's refusal to accept blacks into the Minnesota

National Guard. The case was never heard, since Turpin was called up, unexpectedly, for service in the army. Stassen struck a positive note, however, by refusing to extradite a black convict who had escaped from an Arkansas penal farm in 1921. After the declaration of war in 1941, St. Paul's African-American community received a truly significant boost in both skilled and professional job opportunities with the opening of the Twin Cities Ordnance Plant. The plant was managed by Charles L. Horn, who had been Cecil Newman's first yearly subscriber to the *St. Paul Recorder*. Horn brought in Newman as an advisor to the supervisor of industrial relations and he subsequently became the director of Negro personnel.

Over the next few years, Newman placed blacks in more than forty different job categories. Before the war they had been restricted to fewer than a dozen categories. These opportunities, along with many new job openings which had been created by the draft and war labor shortages, gave African-American job seekers a chance to learn new skills which later translated into new business and marketing initiatives. The G. I. bill gave significant numbers of blacks in St. Paul professional training for the first time. It was truly a take-off period in St. Paul's economic history which few would soon forget.

The years since then have been marked

with gains and losses for the community. More gains came in the wake of the civil rights upheaval of the 1960s. A major loss has been much of the physical framework of the old community, the spacious tree-shaded homes where business and professional men and women, the backbone of the community, the role-models for the next generation, once lived on Central and Aurora and University avenues. They were replaced in the late 1960s by urban renewal suburban-like single dwellings, apartments and town houses. St. Paul's African-American community still exists, although its leaders are now spread throughout the St. Paul area. While a community is not just a geographical location, it is well to remember a period when it was, and to remember the men and women who contributed so much to its development.

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*Horse and buggy at the Minnesota State fairgrounds in 1903. Karal Ann Marling evokes once again the glories of the fair in her book, Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair, reviewed on page 26.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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