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Article Summary: Within the decade of the 1940s the forces unleashed by World War II produced a major transformation in the Omaha Urban League. 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 many in the black community; in the latter capacity it helped to initiate the struggle to include blacks in the mainstream.

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Photographs / Images: Map of Near North Side, Omaha, Nebraska, 1940-1979; FERA project recreation center, 1935; FERA project beauty school, 1934-1935; Nebraska Telephone Company's Webster Exchange Building; Whitney M Young Jr

WORLD WAR II AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE OMAHA URBAN LEAGUE

By Dennis N. Mihelich

The exigencies of World War II placed unusual demands on the American people and put a tremendous strain on the existing social structure. The fielding and supplying of an army changed the nature of the economy; the enlisting of millions of men in the armed services reordered sex roles; the quickened pace of the migration of blacks to industrial cities exerted pressure against segregative policies; and black participation in the war effort—especially one which was fought against the racist doctrines of Germany and Japan—gave impetus to a militant, direct-action program to alter race relations.

The Omaha Urban League (OUL) felt the impact of all of these forces. First, it had to reorient its standard group-service and recreational program to meet the peculiar circumstances prompted by war. Second, the conflagration reawakened the desire and the possibility for vigorous activity in promoting equality of opportunity in jobs, housing and social relations. Finally, the stimulus provided by World War II led to the adoption of a new direction in the immediate postwar years. The OUL abandoned the community center it had operated since 1934, jettisoned its recreational and group work functions, and embarked upon a community services program which stressed the promotion of equality of opportunity in all areas of American life. Thus, the decade of the 1940s produced a major transformation in the nature and the function of the Omaha Urban League.

Census figures reveal that 12,015 Afro-Americans (slightly less than 7 percent of the total population) lived in Omaha in 1940. In the two decades following the end of World War I, the number of black residents had expanded by only 1,700. During the 1940s this stability ceased and in-migration produced a net increase of 4,296, a jump of 36 percent. Black residence was confined to two strictly delineated areas—one in

South Omaha in the vicinity of the meat-packing plants, and the second on the Near Northside in proximity to the downtown area. The South Omaha settlement—specifically concentrated between Q and Y Streets, from 27th to 33rd Streets—was distinctly smaller, containing less than 10 percent of the black population. On the Near Northside blacks replaced earlier immigrant groups, predominantly Jews and Italians, and carved out a neighborhood which stretched from Spencer on the north to Cuming on the south, and from 22nd Street west to 31st Street. A small, adjacent area north and west of Adams Park also existed as a satellite of the minority community. Despite the rapid growth in population during the World War II period, no significant neighborhood expansion ensued. Instead, the era witnessed a process of filling in which produced the city's most densely inhabited area, and actual overcrowding.¹

A description of the social and economic conditions pertaining to blacks in the inter-World War era merely reiterates the all-too-well documented saga of second-class citizenship. At various times the unemployment rate was double or triple that of whites, and among those who had jobs, the vast majority labored in unskilled positions or in some form of domestic service. The older neighborhoods they occupied contained a disproportionately high share of dilapidated homes, and the overcrowding and low economic status prevented significant improvement. The areas lacked adequate recreational facilities, which contributed to further problems of poor health standards and high adult crime and juvenile delinquency rates. Furthermore, all forms of social segregation—in theaters, restaurants, hotels, and dance halls—crowned a system which separated blacks and consigned them to a position of inferiority.²

To meliorate such conditions, black leaders and white social workers cooperated to establish an Urban League affiliate in Omaha in 1928. Five years later it merged with the Mid-City Community Center and during the depths of the Great Depression it dispensed social and recreational services from the former Webster Exchange building at 2213 Lake. The telephone company donated the facility which was transformed to house offices, meeting rooms, a library and a gymnasium. Because of the economic plight the OUL's activities in the areas of housing, race relations and employment atrophied, and in their stead it organized a host of clubs, athletic teams and social

activities which provided an important recreational release for the minority community. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the National Youth Administration (NYA) provided funds and workers for a significant expansion of the program during the late 1930s. The advent of World War II, however, necessitated program changes and, again, within a matter of a decade the OUL charted a significantly new course.

On the war's eve both the National Urban League and the Omaha Urban League retained new executive directors who would be instrumental in implementing necessary changes. The national office suffered from a lack of funds and internal bickering, and had poor relations with its affiliates. According to Guichard Parris and Lester Brooks, historians for the National Urban League:

Blacks viewed it as practically impotent: after all, what victories did it have to tout while the NAACP won battle after battle in the Supreme Court. . . . White leaders measured the League against their usual criteria and found it far short: they saw little evidence of solid black support and no evidence of support by the black masses. The League had few members; its black constituents gave it little in contributions. Its vital statistics were definitely not reassuring—its budget was infinitesimal, its reserves were nonexistent, its size was inconsequential, its black leaders were practically unknown and few of them wore the 'old school tie,' whites on its board were mostly do-gooders and even its address—1133 Broadway—was *declassé*.³

In 1940 Lester B. Granger, a militant liberal, assumed leadership and reversed the National Urban League's downward spiral. In Omaha—because of the lack of national support, because of the apathy of both the white and the black communities and because of the Great Depression—the affiliate mirrored the conditions of the parent organization. The lone exception was its vigorous recreational and educational programs, but even these were largely financed and staffed through New Deal funding.

In April, 1939, Bernard Squires resigned as executive director of the OUL in order to assume the same position with the Seattle affiliate, and his departure precipitated a brief crisis. A group of black leaders felt that the position should be filled by a native Nebraskan and they promoted the candidacy of Millard T. Woods of Lincoln. The *ad hoc* committee argued that

a Nebraska man will have the welfare of the people of Omaha at heart more so than some out of state man. The out of state secretaries have often led the colored people to believe that they have (been) found to be doing something altogether different.⁴

The controversy revealed a provincial outlook on the part of some black leaders, but it also manifested a political division within the black community, a mild antagonism towards the OUL, and a distrust of its integrated board of trustees. Subsequently, that board, considering "applicants in terms of efficiency," hired Raymond R. Brown of Akron, Ohio. Brown had 14 years of social work experience and was credited with expanding the League program in the "tire capital." He received a warm welcome to Omaha in mid-September (the rupture was healed temporarily) and began to apply his talents toward repeating his earlier success.⁵

A monumental war-bred task demanded Brown's attention very early in his six-year tenure. For nine years Northwestern Bell donated its former Webster Exchange substation to the OUL for use as its community center. The phone company even continued to pay the taxes and insurance and made some necessary repairs to the building. By mid-May, 1941, however, the increase in defense activities demanded added storage space which the facility could supply at no extra cost to the company. Therefore, as a matter of good business, NW Bell asked the OUL either to purchase the structure or to vacate it by June 1. The selling price was \$5,500 and the League needed \$1,000 cash for a down payment; the remainder could be secured through a bank loan. The Community Chest, to which the OUL belonged, knew of no other suitable building in the neighborhood and thus gave it special permission to conduct a fund-raising campaign.⁶

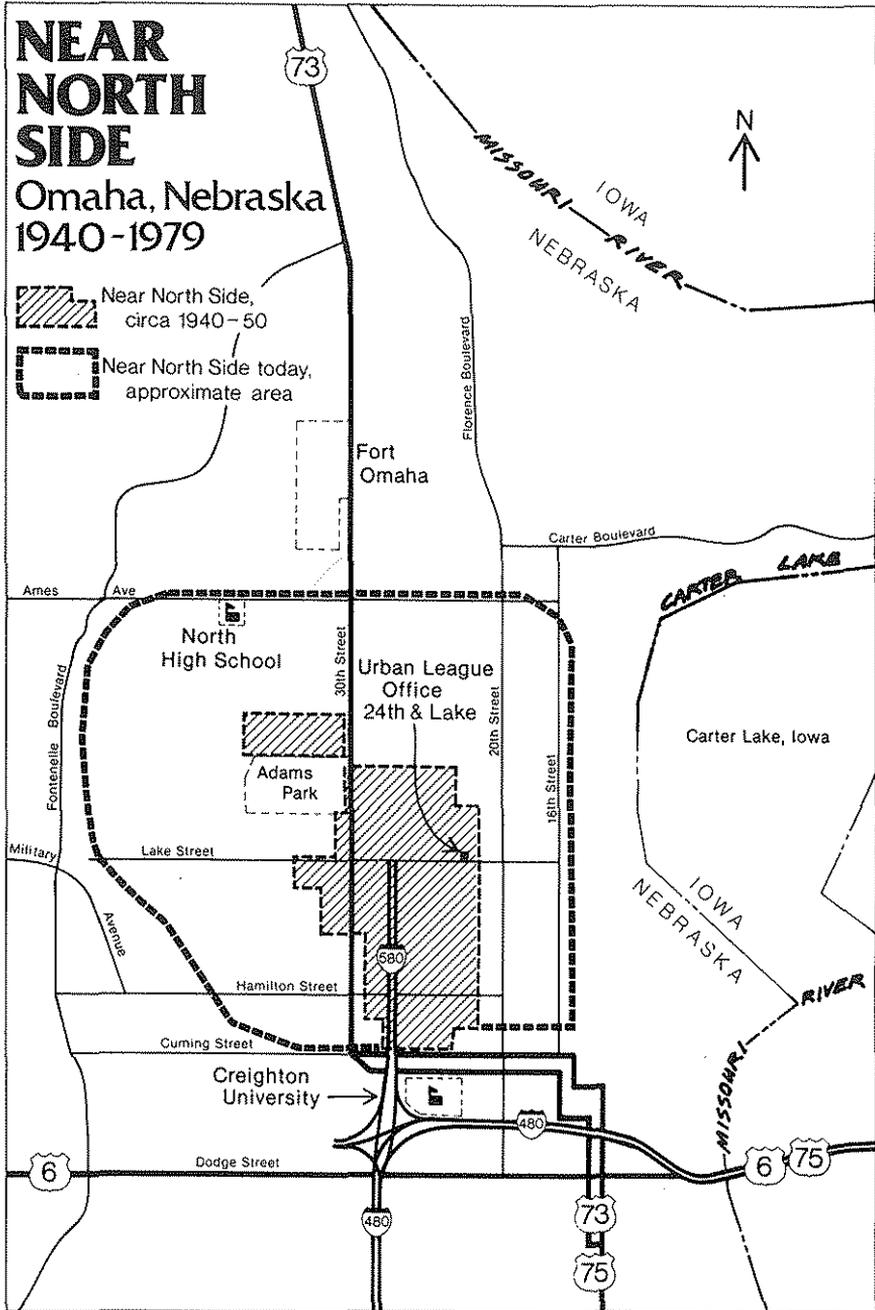
Most of the traditional money-raising devices were used—a benefit dance at Dreamland Hall, card parties, a baby contest, and a midnight show at the Ritz—yet, going into the final week of the drive less than one-fourth of the goal was realized. A special attempt was made to enlist support of black churches and solicitors canvassed the Near Northside seeking 1,000 employed individuals who would donate \$1 each. Drive leaders placed great emphasis on race pride, arguing that failure would make the group the "laughing stock" of the city and the state, while success meant enhanced respect.⁷ The efforts were well-rewarded; the last week of the campaign witnessed a topping of the goal and on June 21 the final tally of \$1,423.94 was announced. Plans were made to use surplus donations to pay for redecoration and repair of the building.⁸

The war induced major changes in the staff and services of

NEAR NORTH SIDE

Omaha, Nebraska
1940-1979

-  Near North Side, circa 1940-50
-  Near North Side today, approximate area



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

the league. The neighborhood department, for example, engaged in a program of informal education, recreation, clubs, special interest groups, athletic teams and community committees. It also promoted knowledge of health care, conducted adult education classes, made home visitations, and acted as a liaison between parents and the school system, and individuals and other institutions. The number and the scope of activities increased markedly during the late 1930s because of WPA and NYA support. In 1939, 14 WPA workers, 12 NYA youths, and a Smith-Hughes sewing teacher supplemented the OUL's meager staff of two. Ten were NYA female trainees who served as "Girl Scout Troop leaders, clerical assistants, library assistants, pre-school assistant teachers, and class instructors in tap dancing, cooking, handcraft and dramatics." An outstanding WPA accomplishment of the period was the publication of *The Negroes of Nebraska* (1940). Co-sponsored by the OUL and researched and written by the Nebraska Writers Project, the monograph—short as it was and now quite dated—remains the only comprehensive treatment of the history of blacks of the state.⁹

Increased defense expenditures, however, quickly produced cuts in appropriations for the New Deal relief agencies. As late as July, 1941, the WPA Recreation Department aided the OUL in sending children to summer camp for the first time in five years; but the support came from an emaciated institution about to expire. In that same year not a single WPA or NYA employee remained on the OUL staff, and the loss produced dire consequences. The adult education classes taught by WPA instructors, for instance, provided persons with basic skills necessary to meet literacy standards for defense jobs. With the cutback and the tight budget of the OUL, the crucial service was discontinued, although it was briefly maintained through local voluntary efforts. Overall, however, a myriad of programs was lost due to the shift in spending priorities.¹⁰

Shifts in manpower allocation caused their own unique changes. The demands of the armed services and the sharp increase in employment caused the number of local league volunteers, especially men, to drop precipitously. The OUL did muster enough support to sponsor a unit of the American Women's Voluntary Services (AWVS), but its thrust was towards war-related needs. Thus, the traditional program suf-

ferred from a double jeopardy—the slack in federal spending for social services and the loss of local voluntary aid. In 1942 the League tried to start a Cub Scout troop, but the attempt failed for lack of a parent to lead the group. Eventually, a committee from the board of trustees accepted responsibility for a troop, but this stop-gap measure had limitations. Similarly, the shortage of supervision forced the combining of the boys' junior, grade school, and cub programs into a single unit. Furthermore, the programs that remained endured disruptive changes in professional personnel—in 1943 there were three different boys' work secretaries.¹¹

The draft, enlistments, and defense jobs (or training for those still in school) completely eliminated the senior boys' group. The senior softball league became a "war casualty" in 1943 because one-half of the previous year's players were in the armed services or were working overtime. High-school students, many of whom now also worked, began to look for more late afternoon and evening leisure activity. The league put additional emphasis upon developing co-educational groups of teenagers. The OUL unit of the AWVS, for example, initiated a canteen which subsequently merged with another dance sponsor to create an area-wide social event. Interracial youth cooperation also experienced several encouraging stimuli. In 1944, the league sent 23 boys to Camp Strader for a week of outdoor activity in an integrated environment (the YMCA facility near Lincoln housed 40 black and 45 white youths). At about the same time the Central Club opened its swimming pool and gymnasium to black boys, thus giving them an opportunity long denied.¹² The war promoted a renewed dedication to American democracy that slowly began to manifest itself in increased integration.

Young women were also affected by the peculiar conditions fostered by war. The league's Girl Scouts undertook special training to make them good "little homemakers"; necessary skills now that dad and older brothers were in the service and mom was employed outside the home. The need for a day-care facility, felt for years, now reached crisis proportions with the advent of "Rosie the riveter." The OUL chapter of the AWVS, in conjunction with the WPA and the Board of Education, opened a day-care center on the Near Northside at Howard Kennedy School in 1942. It was established as a "type B"

nursery for children of working mothers. It remained open eight hours a day, six days a week, and each family paid a small fee based on total income. The Board of Education furnished the building, the WPA supplied the staff, and the AWVS provided equipment and transportation. In order to meliorate the added burden during the summer, the league also formed a day camp with the cooperation of the Northside YWCA. The small number of volunteers limited the service, but on the average 75 boys and girls between 5 and 15 attended five-week sessions.¹³

Public health and other civic and patriotic concerns added to the responsibilities of the league during WW II. It sponsored a health forum in 1942 to discuss effects of population movements (including transiency of servicemen), entrance of workers into defense industries, and the mental stress caused by the hostilities. The AWVS also taught classes in physical fitness, first aid, and nutrition. Moreover, because every segment of society had to be organized behind the war effort, the OUL was called upon to serve on numerous civic and government committees. The armed services used it to seek recruits, its building served as headquarters for the War Savings Stamp and Minute Men Bond drives, and its auditorium became a temporary registration station for the Office of Price Administration Rent Control. With Ak-Sar-Ben providing funds, league volunteers staffed the USO facility opened for black soldiers on North 24th Street. And, finally, as black defense workers streamed into Omaha to work for the Martin Bomber Plant, the league established special leisure activities which revolved around that factory's work shifts.¹⁴

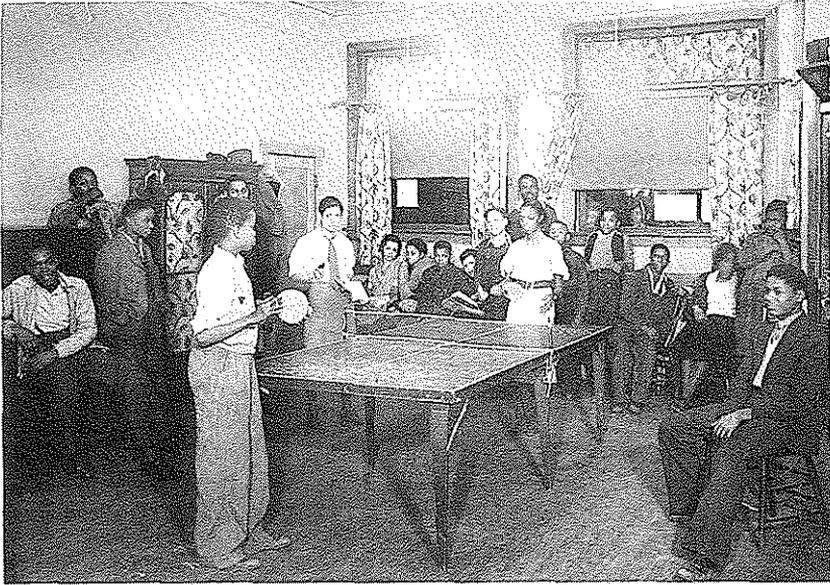
In addition to the reorientation of services, Executive Secretary Brown and the board of trustees understood that the war imposed new problems as it relentlessly reorganized the social and economic structure. It contributed to disruption of family life, to an increase in juvenile delinquency, and to other personal and group maladjustments. It transformed the chronic problem of insufficient and substandard housing into a crisis situation as thousands of blacks migrated to the city to find employment, only to be jammed into the narrow confines of the Near Northside. The booming economy presented opportunities if and when racial barriers were broken, but also presented a significant challenge to promote amicable human relations between black and white workers. The same considerations ap-

plied to the acceptance of minority leaders into the unions, and the challenge was accepted unhesitatingly because league officials were determined to use war-induced patriotism to prick the conscience of white America and make it live up to its democratic creed. They also realized that resultant tensions embodied "potential floods of reaction," which had to be calmed through a positive program of promoting interracial harmony.¹⁵

The OUL had always maintained a job placement office, but the Great Depression severely constrained its operation, and the recreational activities of the community center overshadowed all other agency functions. This situation changed rapidly and dramatically, however, as Europe stood posed on the verge of war. The situation, as previously noted, prompted large shifts in the spending priorities of the national government from relief to defense. The cutback in WPA funds meant that hundreds of thousands of blacks lost their jobs; white workers made the transition to defense employment with relative ease, but minority applicants received prejudicial rejection. This treatment produced a double negative effect:

(1) Higher unemployment resulted for blacks during the time lag which existed between the loss of a relief job and the opportunity for employment in the war-stimulated private sector of the economy (that is, a nuance of the familiar predicament—first fired, last hired), and (2) a socio-economic lag also existed since blacks usually had to enter the market at lower levels of employment, many times in jobs vacated by whites moving up to the better-paying defense plants. Brown and the OUL tried to combat these circumstances by pushing for job training, upgrading of black employees, and integration of offices and factories heretofore closed to blacks. According to the executive secretary: "To those of us engaged in social work, the word defense has a broader and deeper meaning than military preparedness. It must include a defense of our economic and social democracy."¹⁶

The NUL lobbied to ensure equal opportunity in defense job-training programs, and locally the OUL promoted them as a key to open racially locked doors. Omaha blacks, however, skeptical by conditioning, did not gravitate to the programs quickly or in large numbers. Therefore, the league, by itself and working through other agencies and churches, undertook a campaign to enroll minorities in job-skills courses offered at the Nebraska



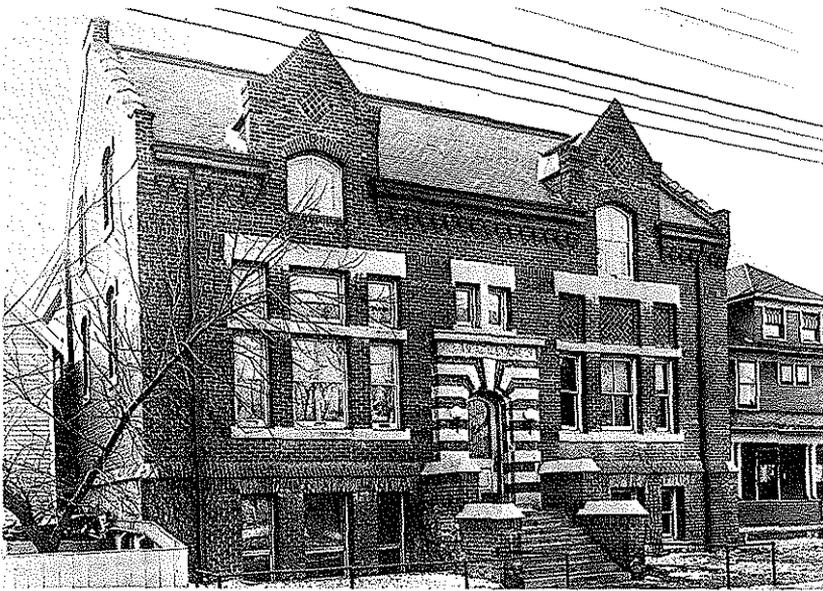
*FERA project recreation center for Negroes, Omaha, 1935. . .
(Below) FERA project beauty school for Negro girls, Omaha,
1934-1935.*



State Employment Service office. It encouraged those unemployed to register with the league so that it could keep training officials and industrial leaders informed about the available Negro labor supply. It increased its referral services to the Labor Temple for jobs in the construction industry, and it held mass meetings as part of an educational effort to keep blacks informed about the defense program. Furthermore, in conjunction with Workers' Service Bureau of the WPA, the OUL organized the Northside Building Trades Council, which was instrumental in placing more than 350 black laborers on the Martin Bomber Plant construction project. After the issue of Executive Order 8802 in June, 1941, which resulted in the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), the league gave personal attention to individuals and groups filing discrimination complaints.¹⁷

Eventually blacks did benefit from the economic boom, both in numbers of jobs and in skilled jobs. In 1939, for the sake of comparison, the OUL placed 311 individuals in jobs, the bulk of which fell in the following categories: 123 maids, 35 waiters or waitresses, 34 housemen, and 33 shoeshiners. During the early 1940s the vast majority of employer calls continued to seek domestic workers, but the placement office could no longer fill them because even the unskilled jobs made available by the war boom paid higher wages. Many prospective employers from homes, hotels, and stores became "unreasonable and insulting," threatening that they could not wait until the war industries shut down and blacks came "groveling to them for help." By 1943 the employment outlook for Negroes was good, and the placement service was "reduced to a minimum." A newly created industrial relations committee, chaired by Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld, concentrated its efforts on combatting discrimination and on gaining positions for blacks in firms which never before had hired them.¹⁸

In the realm of "firsts" and upgrading, in 1939 the OUL placed two social workers at the Bureau of State Assistance, and the following year prepared 22 persons to take the civil service tests for government employment above the custodial level. Other significant breakthroughs came with the hiring of seven women as elevator operators at Northwestern Bell, integrating the staff at the 24th Street Safeway grocery store, employing power machine operators in two sewing firms, and placing two



The Nebraska Telephone Company's Webster Exchange building, 2213 Lake, was once Urban League headquarters. Designed by Thomas R. Kimball, it is now the Great Plains Black Museum, a National Register of Historic Places site. Courtesy of Great Plains Black Museum.

women in upgraded positions at the Armour and Company packing plant.¹⁹ Since Armour had a defense contract, added pressure could be supplied but token advancements did not guarantee general or wholesale improvement. In 1944 the league opposed a plan by several food processing plants "to use war prisoners to meet a labor shortage without fully tapping all the resources for labor in the Negro community."²⁰ The OUL secured War Manpower Commission support and petitioned churches and other agencies to recruit applicants.

The league balanced its job-getting efforts with job-maintaining advice. "First" applicants were chosen carefully and conferences held with worker committees and labor organizations. The *Omaha Guide* echoed the concerns of the OUL and the black middle class in a front-page editorial which exhorted the new Safeway cashiers: "If you get the job, please take care of it, so that the way for those who follow you, may be made easier. Make good. Stay and stick on the job!"²¹ The added psychological burden of being the "right" Negro for a job

and the constant feeling of being on display as a representative of the race must have weighed heavily on these pioneers of economic integration.

At the professional level symbolic success occurred in 1945 when, for the first time in decades, the Omaha Public Schools employed four colored persons as full-time teachers. The absence of black instructors had been a particularly sore point during the 1930s and the early 1940s. Then, as the war ended in Europe, the Young Citizens Forum was organized and it worked closely with the OUL to furnish the administration with lists of Negroes, many with advanced degrees and teaching experience. The barrier was breached with the assignment of four educators to predominantly black schools, but negotiations continued in an effort to gain positions "in borderline areas where there is to be found a proportionate number of both white and colored pupils."²² The *Omaha Guide* invoked war-bred logic in its editorial about the accomplishment:

Let us pray, God above, that those who so gallantly met the challenge, those now lying in military cemeteries stretching across the wide expanse of Africa, Europe and Asia, died not in vain, but that we at home, free men, might have a democracy which is a reality and not a farce.²³

Democratization of labor unions was another goal which witnessed rapid, albeit uneven, fulfillment. While progress lagged in the skilled craft unions, gains occurred among mass production workers and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, especially, promoted anti-discrimination measures. In 1930 only 110,000 blacks belonged to labor organizations, but 1,250,000 claimed membership by 1945.²⁴ Omaha mirrored the general national conditions; historically poor relations improved as black workers entered recently organized factories. By 1942 Brown reported that "a wholesome relationship" was preserved with both the AFL and CIO and that their cooperation led to "the employment of several painters [previously barred] at the Mead Ordnance plant and the eventual placement of 40 Negro women at Armour Packing Company."²⁵

In May, 1942, the league cooperated with the Nebraska Federation of Labor, the Omaha Central Labor Union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other groups to sponsor a labor institute attended by 500 persons. Nationally prominent speakers included A. Philip Randolph, head of the Redcap

union and noted civil rights leader, and Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, Washington, DC. Conferees also received a sloganized matchbook packet which read, "Defense and Democracy Depend on You—1/10 of America's citizens are Negroes—Train Them—Hire Them." Brown claimed that the circulation of the matches (also disseminated through unions, civic groups, churches, and businesses) aided in placing blacks in skilled jobs. Campaigners distributed to plant executives and personnel managers 100 pamphlets entitled, "Speed Defense Production, Open the Gates," published by the NUL to familiarize businessmen with the successful use of Negro labor.²⁶

Some accomplishments were the product of moral persuasion; the industrial relations committee claimed "fairly good results" in combatting discrimination, but it had to seek aid of FEPC, WMC, and USES (War Manpower Commission, US Employment Service) to obtain its goals. Therefore, the OUL petitioned for a local agency and in March, 1943, the Omaha-Council Bluffs Industrial Area FEPC was established. It had 80 members, 18 of whom were black, including OUL Executive Secretary Raymond Brown and Saybert C. Hanger, president of the board of trustees. Moreover, Rabbi Lelyveld assumed the chairmanship of its five-person executive committee. The influence of the league was enhanced in 1944 when Brown was appointed advisor to the Chicago FEPC office. He reported to the regional director and had a direct pipeline for support for investigation and adjudication. The OUL also extended its sway through training programs for employees of USES and WMC in which it advised them on matters relating to the improvement of their services to black workers.²⁷ The stature of the league was elevated, contributing to its success in the economic realm, and thrusting it into the limelight as the recognized focal group in the black community.

The league, however, could not rest on its laurels; it was well aware of the necessity to plan for postwar reconversion. At the 16th annual meeting in 1944, keynote speaker Julius A. Thomas, industrial relations secretary of the NUL, addressed the topic, "Home Front Dangers in our Peacetime Economy." He asserted that the three greatest dangers of the postwar era would be: (1) competition for jobs in an economy of 55 million available workers, 10 million more than necessary; (2) a

negative reaction to the changed status of blacks, and an attempt to keep them "in their place"; and (3) an effort to revive animosity between the North and the South.²⁸ To combat these dangers the OUL participated in the NUL campaign to retain jobs for Negroes in the postwar era. It emphasized continued job-training and placement, increased union membership, improved work efficiency, lowered absenteeism, and more race relations programs. It undertook plant tours to gain information on the hiring policies that would be followed after government contracts ended. It hoped to forestall discrimination and to keep an active file on available jobs. As veterans returned home, it recruited them for government-sponsored training programs in area businesses.²⁹ When the war ended, the league understood it had a double duty—(1) to defend wartime economic advances; and (2) to strive for first-class citizenship. It was a perilous task, demanding the persuasive skills of OUL's black and white leaders.

From its inception the OUL stressed racial harmony. But the war and its aftermath intensified tensions and required a special effort to insure not only peaceful racial interaction but acceptance of racial social progress. The summer of 1943 witnessed race riots in Harlem, Mobile, Detroit and Los Angeles. As a result, the NUL urged local leagues to confer with labor, political, and civic leaders "to prepare [a] counter offensive of public opinion against outbreaks in League centers."³⁰ To its credit, the OUL trustees established a Race Relations Council a full year before the arrival of the national plea. In one of its first actions it cooperated with the YWCA to sponsor a conference addressed by Bayard Rustin, black labor leader and civil rights activist. In 1943 the committee joined the newly created area-wide Community Welfare Council to deal with the problems of blacks and whites. "Thus it was once again," Brown praised his organization, "as in the case of the local FEPC, the Omaha Urban League was able to demonstrate an activity needed and desired by the community at large."³¹ The merger was important because it removed the limitations of finance and support when it operated solely under the auspice of the league.

The league, however, continued to work independently in the area of race relations. It made a unique contribution among the young. In 1942, in conjunction with the Northside YWCA and the Woodson Center, it formed the Omaha Negro Youth Coun-

cil for high school students "as a means of developing greater opportunity for leadership, cultural expression, and more wholesome social affairs."³² Each school had a club which sent representatives to the city-wide council as it strove "to bring greater unity among all high school boys and girls and to help create better understanding between races."³³

Subsequently, the council met with white youths at Temple Israel to create a chapter of the national interracial club, the Forerunners, a high-school aged study-action group. The league secretary served on the board of directors of the Swing Inn, an interracial canteen for teenagers, and he helped defuse a school racial crisis. The league arranged conferences between school administrators, juvenile court officers, parents, ministers and students in calming tempers.³⁴

The promotion of better race relations should not be mistaken as an "Uncle Tom" approach to keep peace and gain acceptance. The war bred a new militancy which demanded a restructuring of society and pushed for peaceful consent for the new order:

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 which went unchallenged before were now met head-on by citizens of this community.³⁵

Because of the large number of civil rights cases referred to the OUL, it worked with NAACP legal counsel, J. D. Crawford, a member of the league's board of trustees, to construct a standard form for use in these matters. "As a result," Brown claimed, "several adjustments including theaters, restaurants, and drugstores have been satisfactorily handled for complaints."³⁶ The age of direct action and non-violent confrontation to promote social change was dawning.

Another area in which militancy displayed itself was in housing. Originally the league was active in this field, but its activities dwindled to insignificance during the late 1930s. Understandably, in 1944, housing reemerged as a regularly reviewed category in the annual reports. A nation-wide problem resulting from lack of construction during the Depression and World War II, it was compounded by the large influx of blacks in the cities. Everywhere blacks met with discriminatory practices and Omaha suffered from a local form of the disease. In 1944 the NUL published *Racial Problems in Housing*, which

went through three printings within a year, and it scheduled housing as a major agenda item for the 1946 national conference.³⁷

Locally, Brown attended a post-war planning seminar at Creighton University "to obtain information on plans for Omaha's urban re-development" and conferred with realtors about breaking down housing restrictions.³⁸ In 1945 the mayor's Housing and Slum Elimination Committee surveyed 2,490 homes on the Near Northside. The study revealed that only 50 percent of the dwellings were without the need of repair and that 15.2 percent were "unfit for human habitation." The committee recommended an urgent "program for condemnation, demolition, home improvement, and construction in this area," and it "also pointed up the laxity of the city in rendering the usual municipal services in this district."³⁹

The league applied a three-fold approach to the housing issue: (1) it disseminated information on the conditions of Negro housing; (2) it cooperated with all interested organizations in promoting better housing; and (3) it tried to stimulate public officials to act. Obviously, its achievements were limited; the problem precluded a quick remedy, and the financing and construction needs were beyond the means of the black community. Still, the first new homes on the Near Northside in almost 40 years were constructed in 1945 by Hiram D. Dee of the Realty Improvement Company and a second project was undertaken by the C. C. Wilson Real Estate Company. While significant, these few units at 30th and Wirt and Parker hardly made a dent in the total demand.

Returning veterans exacerbated the existing crisis and the league did what it could to ease the situation. The mayor urged owners of vacant lots to loan them to the city in order that temporary dwellings could be erected. The OUL coordinated the efforts on the Near Northside; it registered property owners, it compiled a list of black veterans in need, and it wrung from the administration a promise that blacks would receive a fair share of the temporary houses.⁴⁰ The project brought relief to a few, but the crisis lingered far into the postwar era. In fact, despite some cosmetic solutions, the problem of inner-city housing continues to plague the city.

The end of World War II did not prove a line of demarkation for the OUL. Instead, the new militancy it unleashed swelled

like an ocean wave. The league rode the crest aggressively into civil rights activism. The concern for broadened equal opportunity overshadowed the league's recreational function and demanded another internal reorganization. The process of completing the transformation engendered stress and the new leadership had to endure several seasons of tribulation before it could proclaim success. By 1950, however, the restructuring was accomplished and the community could readily see that the league was no longer the recreational agency it had been during the 1930s.

In April, 1945, Brown returned to his native Akron as secretary of that city's Urban League. Durward R. Crooms was hired as executive secretary and Arthur B. McCaw was retained as chief assistant. Their tenure proved short-lived, however, as both resigned a year later to accept positions with the *Omaha Guide*. The board then retained the services of M. Leo Bohanon, former manager of the Phyllis Wheatley House in Minneapolis and representative to the United Nations Relief Administration, as the chief administrator and Marion M. Taylor, a Wilberforce (Ohio) College graduate who did social work in Cleveland, as industrial relations secretary. They remained to oversee the completion of the program reorientation.

In 1946 Julius Thomas of the NUL recommended that the Omaha branch make a commitment to "new directions."⁴¹ Discussions followed and in October the board published a six-point goals statement. Its objectives in industrial relations included vocational guidance and counseling; opening of new areas of employment, especially the placing of semi-skilled, skilled, clerical and professional workers; making job-training facilities available for black laborers; and promoting industrial peace. In the area of housing the league promised "to cooperate with all groups interested in better housing" to encourage slum clearance, neighborhood rehabilitation and open occupancy policies. Two other aims called for advancing racial amity and for "sponsoring health education programs, stimulating the use of available services and aiding in the obtaining of more and better health facilities." Finally, the league pledged to research conditions of black Omaha to document the need for added social services. It also developed self-help groups to attack the problems of sanitation, police protection, street lighting and paving, and outdoor recreation.⁴²



Whitney M. Young Jr., executive director, OUL, 1950-1953; NUL, 1960-1970. Courtesy of Lincoln Journal-Star.

The board explained that the change entailed a shift from group to community work. As a group-work agency, it had tried to improve the lot of people, who in turn influenced others by sponsoring clubs, classes, and recreational and social activities. Now, as a community-work organization, its activities differed in two ways: (1) the program was directed towards the improvement of the community, not necessarily groups or individuals; and (2) the formula for attaining the ends was through committees representative of the affected community, which then carried out the program. Ultimately this affected the well-being of its individual members. "Essentially," the board explained, "a community organization program is one of organizing community leaders to work toward overall neighborhood and community betterment."⁴³

The board justified its abandonment of the group-work and recreational functions on the basis of the opening of other facilities on the Near Northside. A dozen years earlier, only it and the YWCA provided these services to blacks. By 1946, however, the Charles Street Center had opened to supply the needs of residents of the Logan-Fontenelle public housing project, a USO had been organized and the YMCA had established a branch on North 24th Street. Thus, to avoid duplication the OUL decided to leave the community-center business.⁴⁴

By the end of 1947, the league had divested itself of its previous functions and its building. It leased the facility to the YMCA, and the OUL moved its headquarters downtown, "nearer those agencies, organizations and firms with which it must work closely in the promotion of the League's program."⁴⁵ The move gave the agency the distinction of

becoming the first and the only black firm or organization located in Omaha's central business district.⁴⁶

In the short run the transfer produced a series of negative effects. A full rendition of the travail of transition is beyond the scope of this paper, but several brief generalizations will lay the groundwork for understanding. Neither the white nor the black sector of Omaha really comprehended the nature or significance of the reorientation. Therefore, the league's efforts were diluted by the constant necessity to interpret its program; in fact, at times it seemed as if a seventh point—interpretation—consumed more time than its six other goals. It secured the aid of NUL officers, who visited the city in order to explain the objectives and methods to politicians, civic groups, church leaders, and its own members and staff.⁴⁷ The league's effectiveness was also hampered by structural weaknesses; the abrupt departure left the small staff bewildered, the actual number of employees was inadequate, and the committee framework was unsuited to the new tasks. Furthermore, no data base existed; no comprehensive research had been done about the black neighborhood since the 1930s.⁴⁸

The Community Chest, which controlled the OUL's finances, failed to grasp the import of the renovated program. Despite memos of interpretation and regular progress reports about activities, the director of the chest confused the OUL with the NAACP. He thought they were the same agency and admitted that at first he did not realize that the league was a Community Chest member (it had been a member since 1928). Bohanon felt that the director wanted to expel his organization or, at least, to slash its budget drastically⁴⁹—a dire threat, since the chest supplied over 90 percent of the league's funds. Internal politics in the chest prevented the cuts, but the 1944 and 1950 budgets were almost identical.⁵⁰ In a period of high inflation, this severely limited the agency's output.

The new direction did not enamor the black community either—membership in the OUL dropped dramatically.⁵¹ On the one hand, black apathy blocked any real empathy with the objectives. Bohanon complained that the Omaha Negro had "developed a psychology of acceptance of things as they are, knowing it could be and was worse in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and other points south, from which he had recently migrated."⁵² Thus, while the recent war-bred militancy fired the enthusiasm

of the middle class, the black masses accepted the status quo. On the second hand, the loss of the community center irritated a large number. The fact that it "belonged" to the neighborhood—its contributions allowed the purchase of the building just seven years earlier—probably heightened the animosity. Many may not have accepted the league's justification of a duplication of group-work effort. In 1945, for example, the *Omaha Star* editorially demanded a new Northside facility for mass recreation to combat black juvenile delinquency and referred to the OUL's community center as "inadequate."⁵³ Eventually, however, the misunderstanding evaporated, the financial picture brightened, the structural weaknesses were eliminated, and the community embraced the new direction. In 1950, Whitney Young, Jr., who replaced Bohanon, inherited an organization which he felt had "definite support" from black Omaha.⁵⁴

Thus, within the decade of the 1940s the forces unleashed by World War II produced a major OUL 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. Operating in a milieu of centuries-old prejudice and discrimination, changes did not come easily. The OUL's accomplishments were significant, but limited. Greater job opportunities were secured, although the goal of equal employment remained far from being realized. Similar circumscribed gains came in education and the integration of public facilities while virtually no progress was made towards the goal of open occupancy in housing. The league, however, looked to the future with guarded optimism. It had become a recognized leader of the black community and during the 1950s it became a prime mover in the local civil rights crusade. A new day had dawned for the United States, for Omaha and for the Urban League.

NOTES

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