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Article Summary: The Lincoln Urban League performed two valuable missions during the Depression and World War II: "group work" which dispensed social services directly to the people, and "community work" which promoted equal opportunity to the entire community. During the Depression, the LUL became established in the minds of the public as the operator of a community center. When World War II pushed community work to the foreground, the LUL was able to help break down only a few barriers to black employment. Though its success was marked on its fifteenth anniversary in 1946, within seven years it had disintegrated, due to its controversial mission of equality of opportunity for all.

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Photographs / Images: Well Baby Clinic; Millard T Woods and colleague, 1935; LUL Community Center, Twentieth and U streets, 1935; Women's Sewing Project, 1935; Nathan J Gold; Clyde W Malone; Malone Community Center, 2030 T Street, 1942

# THE LINCOLN URBAN LEAGUE: THE TRAVAIL OF DEPRESSION AND WAR

By Dennis N. Mihelich

In 1946 the Urban League of Lincoln, Nebraska, celebrated its fifteenth anniversary. On that occasion Executive Director Clyde W. Malone reiterated the goals of the organization and extolled its accomplishments:

The Lincoln Urban League was organized primarily to offer Negroes of Lincoln an outlet for self-expression; a means for recreation and to promote for them more abundant social, economic, and educational opportunities. The facilities for realizing these aims were for some time limited. They have grown from a small beginning to a larger well equipped building which permits full expression for many of these universal human needs.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, the pride and optimism soon dissipated as the Lincoln Urban League (LUL) entered a period of rapid disintegration and expired a mere seven years later. The seeds of its destruction were contained within Malone's statement, which listed goals that were not mutually exclusive but which nonetheless germinated controversy.

In the philosophy of the National Urban League (NUL) and in the minds of the professional social workers who directed the activities of its affiliates, "group work," which dispensed social services directly to people, and "community work," which promoted equal opportunity for the entire community, were organically related. The LUL car-

ried out its group-work function through the operation of a community center, which organized clubs and provided education and recreation to blacks of all ages. On the other hand, its community-work function necessitated a professional staff of social workers and integrated volunteer committees of prestigious citizens to act as advocates in negotiations with the white power structure to promote equal opportunity for blacks in education, employment, and housing. Ultimately, successful community work would eliminate group work. That is, if the LUL could gain equal access for blacks to recreational facilities in the city, then it would no longer need to dispense recreational services itself.

While no blacks challenged the value of either the group-work or community-work function, factionalism produced by debates concerning priorities and methods eventually blighted the LUL. For the Urban League movement in Nebraska, 1946 was a watershed year. World War II unleashed pent-up emotions that demanded that the United States live up to its democratic ideals. To foster that goal, the NUL decided to pressure its affiliates, including the ones in Omaha and Lincoln, to shift their emphasis from group to community work. The change required curtailing or abandoning many of the people-oriented services provided through community centers.

The reorientation exacerbated the debate concerning priorities and methods within the black community

and within the white community associated with or affected by Urban League activities. After a few tumultuous years the Omaha Urban League successfully transformed its program, but the LUL failed to weather the storm. Paradoxically in 1954, when the United States Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Topeka* decision, which symbolically established integration as national policy, the integrated board of directors of the LUL voted to end its affiliation with the NUL and to reorganize as a local, independent, segregated community center.

The complex story of the post-World-War-II demise of the LUL lies beyond the scope of this article, but a root cause was the peculiar historical development of the organization during its first fifteen years of existence. The LUL began operation in the midst of the Great Depression. The economic hard times and the inauguration of federal direct relief spending in the guise of a myriad of New Deal agencies combined to establish a LUL program that emphasized group work. Suddenly World War II altered the situation dramatically, shifting emphasis to community work. Despite Malone's optimistic evaluation cited at the beginning of this article, the new direction was neither well understood nor universally accepted by the black community of Lincoln or by white supporters of LUL activity. Thus, the history of the first fifteen years of the LUL provides an insightful glimpse into white-

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black race relations in Lincoln during the second quarter of the twentieth century. It also reveals the nature of social work among blacks, with its virtually inherent element of civil rights advocacy. Furthermore, it highlights the tension between the group-work and the community-work approaches to social work among blacks, a tension that ultimately contributed to the dissolution of the Urban League affiliate in Lincoln.

On March 25, 1933, the Lincoln Council of Social Agencies granted membership to the newly organized Lincoln Urban League. Millard T. Woods, a Lincoln-born black, secured the position of executive secretary.<sup>2</sup> He assumed his new role three weeks after Franklin Delano Roosevelt inaugurated the New Deal, which entailed unprecedented expenditures for direct relief to alleviate suffering brought on by the Great Depression and to prime the pump of economic recovery. Several New Deal relief agencies channeled funds to Urban League affiliates, allowing them to expand their facilities and services. Such grants enabled the LUL to start fast and to grow rapidly.

A grant from the Civil Works Administration in 1933 supplied funds to the LUL to rent a six-room house at 1946 S Street for its headquarters. However, the owner soon terminated the lease. Subsequently, a Federal Housing Administration loan permitted the LUL to purchase (sale price \$200, plus \$304 in back taxes) and to remodel a dilapidated, two-story dwelling in the center of the black community at 2001 U Street. Unfortunately, fire destroyed the building in 1940. At that time the National Youth Administration rescued the LUL, underwriting seventy-five percent of the \$40,000 cost of constructing a 35,000-square-foot, sixteen-room facility at 2030 T Street, named the Malone Community Center after deaffiliation.<sup>3</sup>

New Deal funding had an equally significant impact on the LUL's program. In normal economic times most

affiliates obtained their funds from the local community chest. The LUL's annual disbursement from the chest increased steadily during the Depression decade, even in years when the granting agency's revenue fell. In part, the reward stemmed from the fact that the LUL unit in the city-wide fundraising drive consistently surpassed its goal. Still, the \$1,000 in 1933 and the \$3,000 in 1939 secured from this source

(supplemented by a few hundred dollars acquired through the rental of its facility to outside organizations) only paid the salaries of a skeletal staff consisting of the executive secretary and an office secretary.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the small staff at least received a meager wage. The national office relied on private philanthropy, which the Depression severely curtailed. The contributions of a few dedicated sup-



## Lincoln Urban League

porters "barely managed to save the League from financial collapse." Thus, it limped along by resorting to deficit spending, slashing programs and staff, and instituting payless paydays, which sometimes extended for months.<sup>5</sup>

In stark contrast, most affiliates expanded their operations through the largess of New Deal agencies, which put the national government in the business of financing social welfare

programs. This source of funding and the LUL originated simultaneously. Therefore, it began auspiciously with a large auxiliary staff (at times numbering over thirty), which provided a wide array of services. In one sense the financial reservoir was a godsend, which helped to ameliorate the dislocation of the economic downturn. On the other hand, it accustomed the black community to a League which

emphasized group-work activities. When the funds and the expanded staff disappeared and when the NUL tried to reorient the affiliate's emphasis in the post-World-War-II era, critics complained about the "abandonment" of the "traditional" program. Thus, New Deal funding inadvertently helped to create local circumstances which led to the deactivation of the Lincoln affiliate.

Not possessing clairvoyance, Millard T. Woods used the funds of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and its longer-lasting successors, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the National Youth Administration (NYA), to institute the full scope of the NUL standard program. The bounty reached utopian proportions in 1936, when the WPA singled out the LUL "to be the haven of all social welfare work done for and among Negroes." With pride Woods extolled the grant as "the only work project of its type in the country."<sup>6</sup>

The nature of the funding, however, channeled the major efforts in the direction of group work. It financed a ten-man WPA orchestra, touted as "positively the best musical organization of its type that Lincoln's colored population has ever possessed." A home advisor was employed "to contact and visit homes where advice about health, family budgets and general welfare" was needed. A Federal Sewing Project provided jobs to over twenty women who stitched over 4,000 garments annually for the poor from materials supplied by the United States government. In cooperation with the board of education, the League housed adult education classes, and (more within the purview of its community-work responsibilities) it succeeded in placing two black music instructors in the system.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, with the aid of the Lincoln



*Well baby clinic, 1942. (NSHS-MacDonald Studio Collection-5/11/42)*



Millard T. Woods and colleague, 1935. (NSHS-MacDonald Studio Collection-12/10/35-1 of 3)

Recreation Board and other organizations with facilities, the LUL sponsored a host of recreational activities, which provided jobs for a few and enjoyment for many. Picnics, parties, family dinners, art and craft sessions, clubs of all types for all ages, and a drama guild were standard bill of fare. Auxiliary NYA staff directed activities at two public playgrounds close to the League headquarters; League-sponsored boys' and girls' teams competed in city-run athletic conferences; and

opportunities were secured for boys and girls to attend camps operated by the YMCA and YWCA.<sup>8</sup>

Another element of the standard program was the annual promotion of National Negro Health Week. Booker T. Washington originated the concept, which the NUL endorsed in 1915, and it quickly developed a model program for the dissemination of information. In 1937 the LUL received a bronze plaque from the United States Health Service honoring its program, which included a

parade replete with floats and city officials. Medically more important, in the same year its entreaties prompted the building of the George Washington Carver Nursing Home; and the Junior League established at League headquarters a well-baby clinic, which held monthly meetings for several years.<sup>9</sup>

The LUL performed its informational role in several other ways. For many years, at times weekly, it scheduled "Forums," which featured prominent speakers who discussed vital issues of the day. It reached a wider audience through broadcasts over radio station KFOR and with its newsletter, the *Urban League Informer*, an appropriate name since the local black newspaper established in 1933 folded quickly. The *Informer* included news about black churches, social events, and related items of interest. Visits from NUL staff members were another device in the LUL repertoire. In 1937, for example, T. Arnold Hill, the first industrial relations director of the NUL, came to town for a round of speech-making, which included an address to the state legislature.<sup>10</sup> However, research atrophied. The LUL itself did no research during the 1930s, but it did benefit from the work of others. The Omaha Urban League received a FERA grant in 1935 to make a socioeconomic survey of ten Nebraska cities, including Lincoln. Also, University of Nebraska students supplied the LUL with data they gathered for classroom projects. Quite significantly, in 1939 a white undergraduate sociology student claimed to have uncovered a residential-restriction agreement among Lincoln realtors.<sup>11</sup>

The League had no official housing program, but it naturally supported decent accommodations and equal access to them. In this area, as in so many others, the expansion of the national government's role posed new problems. The need to influence legislation and to deal with the myriad of federal agencies prompted the League to supplement its traditional method of quiet, behind-the-scene

## Lincoln Urban League

negotiations with overt public and political pressure. Thus, when the LUL learned that white tenants forced the eviction of a black from a south Lincoln apartment building, it went public with its complaint. Likewise, when it believed that the Home Owners Loan Corporation acquiesced in the alleged *de facto* residential-restriction agreement, it enlisted the support of its congressman, who complained to the head of the agency in Washington, D.C. The petitions elicited a justification instead of a change in policy, but the attempt hailed the advent of the Urban League movement as a civil rights advocate.<sup>12</sup>

In other areas of race relations the LUL continued to try to promote understanding of and sympathy for the plight of blacks. Among its regular round of meetings, for example, it

cooperated annually with University of Nebraska students to sponsor an all-university meeting to encourage interracial friendships. These types of educational endeavors, however, had no impact on the white masses or on the maturing forms of discrimination. Thus, when the Earl Hines orchestra played an engagement in town, the LUL had to find its musicians places to stay. Limited access to the facilities of the YMCA and YWCA provoked the LUL publicly to chastise the institutions for always considering the "color question a factor." Furthermore, it organized mass protest meetings in response to the barring of blacks from the municipal swimming pool. The LUL urged the desegregation of the pool or the construction of one in the black neighborhood. Instead, after two

years of prodding, the city recreation department provided a water spray at 20th and U streets.<sup>13</sup>

Prejudice and economic hard times also severely constrained the LUL's accomplishments in the realm of employment. Federal funds enabled it to hire an industrial relations secretary, but he also had to coordinate recreational activities. Nonetheless, he did follow NUL guidelines and established an Emergency Advisory Council (EAC) and a Workers' Council. The NUL promoted both as grassroots, self-help organizations. The EACs arose in response to the National Industrial Recovery Act and were to push for equal employment opportunities under new codes that were to be devised to govern business operations. Created the following year,

*LUL Community Center, Twentieth and U streets. (NSHS-MacDonald Studio Collection-12/10/35-2 of 3)*



the Workers' Councils aimed at organizing black laborers and securing their inclusion in the segregated union movement.<sup>14</sup>

In 1935 the LUL claimed (without documentation) that its EAC opened many new avenues to employment. Yet, two years later it reported (more realistically) that the group studied the employment problem, made many contacts, but accomplished "very little." Similarly, while the Workers' Council had a contact committee to try to create new job opportunities, its efforts suffered because it was "very difficult to find employment of any kind" at that time. Moreover, in the sparsely industrialized city, it reported no activity in the area of union organizing. Therefore, the Workers' Council concentrated on men already employed, with the "principal aim" of making them "realize that they should become more efficient and indispensable on their jobs." As a testimony to the actual conditions of the era, the council invited employers to address its Thursday night meetings, because it felt that if they knew black workers better, they would provide work when business improved. By the end of the decade the LUL described both the EAC and the Workers' Council as groups designed to keep up the morale of the unemployed, revealing the mutation of their original intent.<sup>15</sup>

With a comparable lack of success, the LUL tried to operate a free employment service. It could place very few men and refused many calls for women domestics at unreasonably low wages. In 1939 the employment director either fashioned an unacceptable liaison with the Nebraska State Employment Service (NSES) or explained the relationship incorrectly. "After considerable negotiation," he claimed to have "secured acceptance of a plan whereby all opportunities for employment of Negroes are referred to our office for placement," because the LUL was "better able to see that the best Negro workman" was placed. "In the long run," that was "best for Negro

employment in the future." The NUL industrial relations director criticized the arrangement, warning his local counterpart against doing the work for the state agency. NUL policy encouraged the NSES to treat blacks equally. Again, the misunderstanding entailed the difference between group work (the agency providing the social service itself) and community work (the LUL expending its energies to ensure that existing social agencies dispense their services to blacks on an equal basis). Woods quickly defended his associate, describing the arrangement as "typical" for other leagues and claiming that his agency made direct placements "only occasionally when there was a call from the NSES for a specialized colored worker and they do not have such a person on their list."<sup>16</sup>

However the placements were made, they were few and far between. In 1934 they totaled only twenty-four, the next year thirty-five, and fifty-one in 1936. They also continued to be almost exclusively in the area of menial labor. Of the forty placements in 1937, twenty-two were maids, and one was for a stock girl. The men fared no better: Fourteen obtained jobs as porters or janitors, three as garage workers, and one as a chauffeur. Completing the year's dismal record, thirty-five women and 133 men secured temporary jobs at the LUL's behest. By the end of 1939, with the economy on the upswing due to the outbreak of war in Europe, the employment picture brightened, with 165 referrals for full-time jobs. The "most noticeable gain in employment came in the type of permanent jobs offered women." The LUL placed an unspecified but obviously small number of them in department stores.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of these dreary statistics, the Vocational Opportunity Campaign (VOC) established by the NUL in 1930 might seem to have been a cruel hoax or a flight of fantasy. The VOC sought to break the vicious cycle of attitudes which perpetuated the position of blacks at the bottom of the

economic system: White employers felt that blacks were capable only of menial labor, high school counselors advised black youths "realistically" to train only for available jobs, and in despair the vast majority of young blacks accepted the situation and either emphasized vocational education classes or dropped out of high school. Given its self-help philosophy and diplomatic methods and its basic acceptance of the free enterprise system, the NUL devised an educational program aimed at white employers, school administrators, and black youths. In what became an annual week-long campaign, it used all the standard means of publicity to try to change the misconceptions of whites and to encourage blacks to remain in school and to train for skilled and professional positions.<sup>18</sup>

The LUL dutifully established a VOC and in 1939 boasted that it had extended the program to a year-round basis. In that year, reminiscent of all the NUL and affiliate reports, it analyzed the "success" of the campaign in terms of the number of meetings held, the size of the audiences, and the prestige of the speakers. Thus, during the week before the scheduled national campaign, the LUL organized three meetings attended by 241 people, who listened to addresses which extolled outstanding achievements by blacks in white-collar vocations. Then during the officially designated Vocational Opportunity Week, it held another four meetings attended by 219 persons.<sup>19</sup> The absence of placement statistics, however, revealed the irony of training for nonexistent jobs during the Depression decade. Yet, the VOC was more than a quixotic venture. To break out of the confinement, blacks had to acquire skills, and to the degree that the VOC encouraged their acquisition, it helped to establish a pool of trained workers who could take advantage of more prosperous, less discriminatory times.

While opportunities in the private sector languished, New Deal work



*Women's sewing project, 1935. (NSHS-MacDonald Studio Collection-12/10/35-3 of 3)*

relief programs cushioned the desperate plight of the unemployed black. By 1935 about fifty percent of Lincoln's blacks were on relief. Paradoxically, the appeal of WPA jobs contributed to the high rate. As Woods explained, the security wage they offered meant

a decided increase over the salary . . . paid Negroes in domestic service. Every day we find Negro women going on relief in order to leave jobs that have been paying only three to five dollars a week, in order that they might be given work in a sewing center where the minimum wage is forty-two dollars per month.<sup>20</sup>

The situation in Lincoln also benefited from the fact that the state-based administrators had a "sympathetic understanding" of the blacks' predicament and did "everything possible" to help them. The aid included placing "every woman" and "most men" certified for WPA jobs. Furthermore, Woods knew

of no youth between the ages of 18 and 25 who has made application at the N.Y.A. employment office and has been refused an opportunity. The N.Y.A. even attempts to make placement according to the choice of field of interest of the worker.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, while prejudice and economic hard times rendered the LUL virtually powerless to change basic black employment patterns, it was able to take advantage of New Deal programs to secure an economic lifeline for its clients. In industrial relations (as in its other activities), federal funding provided the LUL with money to conduct programs which softened the impact of current conditions, but the goal of racial equality remained unattainable. The exigencies of the Great Depression and the availability of New Deal funding molded the LUL into primarily a group-work agency. The historical forces established the parameters of an

agency which dispensed a variety of social and recreational services and only tangentially fulfilled the advocacy role envisioned by the NUL standard program. Considering the national record in race relations during the 1930s, full-scale community work probably would have accomplished little more in terms of eliminating discrimination in the tenaciously resistant areas of housing and employment. The ultimate importance of the group-work emphasis lay in the fact that it established expectations in the community which resisted later program changes.

The advent of World War II, however, unleashed forces which promoted change and which presented the LUL with new opportunities and challenges. Hardly a program area escaped the wrenching influences of

the conflagration. Actually, however, one of the first and most significant alterations came by accident. On the bitterly cold night of January 4, 1940, a fire of unknown origin destroyed the LUL Community Center and much of its equipment. Woefully inadequate insurance coverage (\$1,000 on the structure and \$300 on its contents) left the organization in desperate straits. Nathan Gold, a board member and local department store magnate, underwrote the rental of temporary headquarters and chaired a special building fund committee authorized by the community chest. Within a year it raised \$11,000. The figure surpassed the NYA requirement (twenty-five percent of the total construction cost) needed to secure that agency's underwriting of the project. On April 20, 1942, a new sixteen-room facility (combination gymnasium and 750-seat auditorium with a balcony and stage, kitchen, library, craft shop, photographic studio, game rooms, meeting rooms, and offices) was opened.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the year, however, the war caused the first of many significant modifications in the structure and program of the LUL. In December 1942, Millard T. Woods resigned as executive director and joined the overseas personnel of the American Red Cross. He became the first black to serve as a field director outside the United States, contributing thirty-four months of service, mostly in North Africa and Italy. After the war he chose not to return to Lincoln, accepting the position of executive secretary of the Citizens' Recreation Association of Muskegon, Michigan.<sup>23</sup>

The LUL entered a new era. For the second time the board passed over outside candidates submitted by the NUL for the vacant directorship and named a local, Lincoln-born applicant, Clyde W. Malone. His parents had migrated to Lincoln from Tennessee in 1878. After graduation from high school he married Izetta Colley and worked as a bank messenger, hotel waiter, and file clerk. With the entry of the United



*Nathan J. Gold. Courtesy of Lincoln Journal-Star.*

States into World War I, he enlisted in the army and attended Officer Training School, but the armistice was signed before he saw any overseas service. He returned to earn a B.A. in business administration from the University of Nebraska. For the next decade he worked in the insurance field in Detroit, Kansas City, and Atlantic City. Then in 1931 he moved to Minneapolis and began a new career as boys' worker at the Phillis Wheatley Settlement House. Three years later he returned to Lincoln because of a family illness and (thanks to the WPA) secured employment as the recreation and employment director of the LUL.<sup>24</sup> Considering his ties to the established black community and his eight years of service, his elevation to the top spot came naturally, and the leadership

transition proceeded smoothly.

Although acceptance of his direction was guaranteed locally, Malone had to contend with new NUL leadership and with dislocations precipitated by the war. At the end of 1941, Lester B. Granger replaced Eugene Kinckle Jones as executive director of the NUL. Granger decided to abandon his predecessor's "quiet style" and more directly to address civil rights issues.<sup>25</sup> He also hoped to work more closely with welfare agencies and affiliates to develop a "better understanding of the criteria for local League programs."<sup>26</sup>

Malone, who also belonged to the NAACP, had no qualms about the civil rights orientation, but the rigors of operating a community center with a dwindling staff and response to the immediate concerns of wartime limited action in that area. Nonetheless, the LUL tried to fulfill both its group-work functions and to increase its public advocacy role. A revised constitution may have alluded to the new policy emphasis. The amendments involved the "extension of the term of incorporation and clarification of the language of the original articles."<sup>27</sup> Most of the changes were cosmetic, but the addition of two significant adjectives to the definition of the corporation may have been prompted by its new civil rights emphasis. The board defined the LUL as "strictly an educational, charitable, non-partisan and non-sectarian organization."<sup>28</sup> The board may have felt that a public advocate which received funds from the community chest needed to deny any partisan or sectarian associations.

During the war years support from the chest rose steadily (\$2,548.21 in 1940; \$7,561.02 in 1945), but the increases failed to offset the loss of federal funds. Wartime priorities and war-bred prosperity combined to eliminate the WPA, which had financed most of the group-work program and staff of the LUL from its inception. With the abolition of the WPA at the end of 1942, the staff virtually ceased to exist, leaving only the executive sec-

## Lincoln Urban League

retary, the office secretary, and the custodian. In 1944 a girls' worker was added, but the city recreation department rejected an appeal for funds to pay for a boys' worker. Operating the new community center saddled the LUL with higher fixed costs; unexpected repairs to the gym floor and the roof caused an annoying drain of money and volunteer time.<sup>29</sup>

In order to alleviate the cash shortage, the LUL established a Special Financial Committee in 1944 to negotiate with the community chest. The increase for the next year, however, merely matched the approximately \$1,000 increment of previous annual adjustments. The League also resorted to other devices to raise revenue. As a member of the chest, of course, it was not allowed to conduct separate, competing fund drives, but it garnered several hundred dollars a year through renting its facility, hosting various types of entertainments, and selling concessions. However, a fundraising dinner in February 1944 featuring Julius O. Thomas, NUL director of industrial relations, netted a minuscule profit of \$17.<sup>30</sup>

A much more lucrative source of funds materialized with the initiation of a mass membership campaign in 1944. The original bylaws had established memberships with a minimum contribution of twenty-five cents, but with the national government pumping in sufficient funds no recruitment took place. In 1936 the LUL had only about fifty members. The revised constitution deleted the reference to the minimum donation, and an annual membership drive became an important supplementary revenue source. By the end of 1945 membership totaled 803 and (combined with a few small gifts) raised \$1,060.50. Well over half the members were white, and the total number continued to climb for several years thereafter. Starting in 1946 the LUL began to brag that it had the largest per capita membership of all NUL affiliates.<sup>31</sup> The support probably attested to widespread acceptance of

the LUL's group-work program administered through the modern community center facility.

Yet, the demands of the war also led to substantial alterations of the group-work agenda. Of course, the two-year hiatus in temporary headquarters following the fiery destruction of the U Street building severely curtailed the recreation program. The lack of space also resulted in the discontinuation of the well-baby clinic, and only four adult education classes were sponsored in 1940. An arrangement with the Lincoln Board of Education, which allowed the use of several schools for League activities, partially obviated the space deficiency. Also a special LUL committee negotiated the use of the YMCA pool for swimming classes for black men and boys. The League claimed that the aquatic opportunity marked the "first instance" of the YM opening its doors to the race. As such it not only provided a new form of recreation but also signified an important gain in the area of civil rights. Similarly, after no girls attended the YWCA summer camp in 1942, "tough negotiations" overcame objections and thirty-one girls went to Camp Kiwanis the following year. The rustic experience saddled the League with \$242 of indebtedness that had to be overcome by special donations, but with financial assistance from the Cooper Foundation, the boys continued their uninterrupted annual sojourns to the YMCA Camp Strader.<sup>32</sup>

After the new community center opened, the League faced the anomaly of an enlarged facility but a curtailed program due to inadequate staff. As the WPA and NYA workers disappeared, volunteers had to fill the void, but they were hard to attract because of the long work days associated with the war effort. Girls' activities suffered less, largely because those in their upper teens participated in United Service Organization (USO) programs. The Men's Club did grow in number to about fifty by the end of 1943, but members served chiefly as monitors for

events and counselors for juvenile delinquents. Free play in the gym became a poor substitute for organized recreation.<sup>33</sup>

The wartime disruption of family and institutional supervision may have contributed to an increase in youthful waywardness. In November of 1944 Malone claimed to express the anxiety of the community when he censured modern youth for a "lack of respect for their elders or law or order, exhibitionism in dress and manner and the emphasis given to good times in place of educational advancement." While he criticized other personal habits, vandalism to the building, fixtures, and cars especially concerned him. "In this bracket," he complained, "the worst miscreants [were] those who tinker [ed] with automobiles or auto tires for in these days of rubber and car shortages this [was] a misdemeanor comparable to sabotage."<sup>34</sup>

During the next six months Malone publicly voiced his concern several more times, usually coupling it with a plea for adult volunteers and a correct understanding of the League program. Some parents criticized the LUL for not doing enough. The complaints led Malone to suggest to the board of directors that it "officially confirm the group work functions . . . as opposed to a case work agency." The "need for clarification," he explained, was

evident in the expressed opinion that the Urban League [was] responsible for overcoming individual problems, particularly of boys. While the recreation program [sic] [was] of value in the reduction of individual delinquencies it [was] only as the individual cooperate[d] with the program and contribute[d] to the group idea.<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, tension existed for some between their recreational and social welfare desires and the NUL standard program. In the situation cited above, at least some members of the black community wanted the LUL to deal with the distinct social problems of particular individuals (case work). The League did not proclaim a case work responsibility, but for the general public it was not easy to understand the differences between case and group



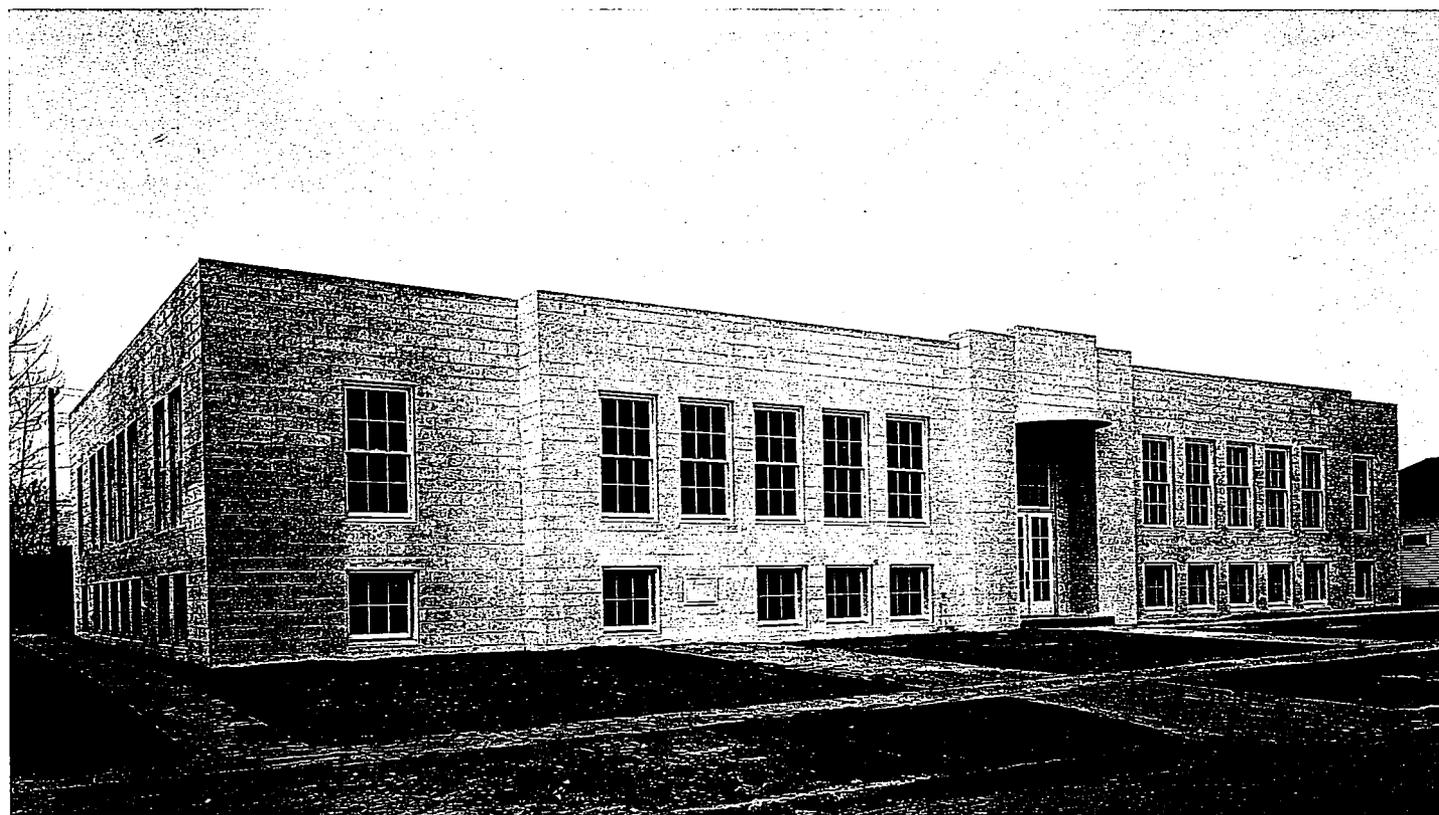
Clyde W. Malone. Courtesy of Mrs. Jeanne Malone Freels.

work and between group and community work. This confusion plagued the LUL during its entire existence and manifested itself in another manner in a 1944 program evaluation. Anne M. Smith, instructor in group work at the University of Nebraska Graduate School of Social Work, author of several books on the topic, and director of the Lincoln Community Centers, concluded that the LUL provided a "real center for all the Negroes of Lincoln in social, cultural, education, employment and other welfare matters." She commended the executive secretary for his "fine work," found the staff interested, and thought that a spirit of cooperation bound the staff and the people who used the facility.<sup>36</sup> For the professional group worker, the LUL succeeded at its task, but the praise emanated from those used to the settlement house model. At the same

time the NUL, using different criteria, found the LUL program wanting because of its limited community work (the advocacy role).

Nonetheless, the scant staff and volunteers from the board of directors did try to respond to the challenges of war. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the armed services established a sub-recruiting station at the LUL office. The League also promoted war bond sales and coordinated salvage drives. It complained, however, about discrimination in the national defense program. While black women knitted for Britain and the Colored Boy Scout Troop participated in a national emergency training program, Malone charged that Civilian Defense officials ignored the efforts of blacks to volunteer and excluded them from many agencies.<sup>37</sup>

To right this and other wrongs, the



Malone Community Center, 2030 T Street (NSHS-MacDonald Studio Collection-4/15/42-3 of 4)

## Lincoln Urban League

LUL sponsored the Nebraska Conference on Interracial Social Action and Negro Participation in War and Post War Programs. Representatives from Grand Island, Hastings, Fairbury, Beatrice, Omaha, and Lincoln gathered in the Senate Chamber of the State Capitol Building on March 28, 1942. They discussed the civilian defense program; analyzed the role of the black press, youth, and women in the war effort; agonized over the "Employment Problems Peculiar to the Negro Worker"; and brainstormed about postwar problems. Before adjourning, the conferees established themselves as an ongoing organization for the promotion of better race relations and planned to send speakers throughout the state to advance that goal.<sup>38</sup> No records substantiated continued activity, but the sponsorship of the initial conference revealed the commitment of the LUL to the advocacy of equal opportunity.

In comparison to the long-range comprehensive goals of the conference, the arrival of black soldiers in the Lincoln area posed immediate local problems. The LUL responded with both a group-work and community-work effort. It organized a recreational program for the Seventy-fourth Aviation Squadron, and as the number of black soldiers increased, it petitioned the USO for a local facility. At first it could not find a building, but it received permission from the regional USO headquarters to house it in the LUL community center. In July 1943, however, it found a suitable location, and the servicemen's entertainment agency began to function independently.<sup>39</sup> The LUL fulfilled NUL policy by securing the services of an existing agency instead of duplicating them, but since the branch catered only to black soldiers, it was a limited accomplishment. Actually, the LUL may have suffered from its "victory" in that the independent black USO probably siphoned away from the community center desperately needed adult volunteers.

Executive Secretary Malone also claimed that League attempts to improve conditions for black servicemen at the Lincoln Air Base resulted in certain improvements.<sup>40</sup> Whatever the unspecified progress on the base entailed, it paled in comparison to the failure to overcome white resistance to open housing. In 1940 the League claimed that an "unwritten law" excluded blacks from renting or buying in "any square block" in which a member of the race did not already live. Mistakenly, it felt

rather definitely that the perpetrator of this idea [would] eventually absorb enough of the spirit of community unity that . . . developed since the beginning of the National Defense Program, to at least expand the area in which they were forcing Negroes to live.<sup>41</sup>

Because Lincoln was not a major defense center, the League saw little chance of acquiring a federal housing project. Although seventy-three percent of the pre-war black residents owned their own homes, the majority of dwellings even in the areas of black concentration remained in the hands of whites. Increased purchases by blacks in those areas were retarded by the fact that most of the houses were small and in need of repair or remodeling. The League responded with the obvious advocacy of an open-housing policy that would enable blacks to buy larger homes and rent anywhere in the city. However, entreaties for support to the city council, the air base, the Chamber of Commerce, the Real Estate Board, the Council on Civilian Defense, and the FHA brought negligible results. The only positive response to these early efforts came in 1941, when the Home Owners' Loan Corporation released for rent "a large number of homes which had previously been held for sale only."<sup>42</sup>

With the influx of black soldiers, the housing problem reached critical proportions. In 1943 black instructors and their families arrived for duty at the Air Mechanic School. Public facilities such as base housing, rooming houses, or hotels did not exist to accommodate the newcomers. The residential restric-

tions forced the League to cooperate in an effort that placed between 150-200 people in 234 existing black homes.<sup>43</sup>

The following year, however, a partial remedy seemed in the offing. In July 1944, after many interviews, the FHA responded to the results of a LUL housing survey, and it authorized twenty-five conversions into multiple units and the erection of nineteen new houses. The next few months were filled with the frustrations of overcoming the barely surmountable obstacles of locating a site, arranging for financing, and securing a builder. The League pushed the project by obtaining promises-to-purchase from twenty-six financially secure black families. On October 26 at a meeting at the community center, the contractor explained the plans for the four-to-six-room homes, but prejudice and historical contingency soon dashed the euphoria of the moment.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the fact that the FHA "expressed the determination to remove all barriers,"<sup>45</sup> at the end of the war the housing situation still posed a "very discouraging state of affairs."<sup>46</sup> Construction of the new homes on North Twenty-sixth Street began in July 1945, but as the project neared completion opposition to black occupation mounted. With the fighting at an end in August 1945, the demand for rapid reconversion of the economy led to the dismantling of most price controls, and the contractor raised prices \$500-\$700 on each house, escalating the total cost of each to over \$6,000. The League thought that the inflated price would eliminate most of the black purchasers. The rest, it charged, were barred from the housing development because the contractor refused to sell to them out of sympathy for the opponents.<sup>47</sup>

The League experienced similar frustration in trying to help black car owners comply with a 1945 compulsory liability insurance law. The LUL reported that only eighteen of ninety-three casualty companies sold policies to blacks and that some of them dis-

criminated on rates. It presented the statistics to the State Insurance Department, which demanded affidavits before it would give the matter consideration. At the time, Malone did not know how to interpret the response, and subsequent records did not reveal that a remedy ensued.<sup>48</sup>

In comparison, war-produced full employment and national policy supported League efforts to break down the barriers of job discrimination. Within a few years the LUL shifted gears from a desperate search for any kind of work for the unemployed to a concern for improvement in the quality of jobs available to blacks. Still, the transition was slow, agonizing, and limited. In 1940 as production increased, industrial employers rebuffed attempts to place black men with the stock answer: "We have a long list of men who were laid-off who will be given the first consideration when we increase our staff workers." Yet, an important "first" occurred when the Kresge store hired five blacks, and the Post Office brightened the picture by adding five more blacks to its staff. As usual, opportunities for domestic work remained "endless," but now the League found it impossible to fill the demand. Indicative of the changed circumstances, it negotiated with the NSES to standardize wages for various types of household work and to get salaries tied to training and experience.<sup>49</sup>

The following year, despite the issuance of Executive Order 8802 which created a Fair Employment Practices Committee, the LUL continued to lament its inability to place black laborers in industries that received defense contracts. It acknowledged that on several occasions the NSES made a special effort to secure blacks a position where they had not worked before, but "from any angle" it evaluated its own success in defense-industry placements as "not only meager but deplorable." Only one of eight Lincoln companies with defense contracts hired blacks. In 1941

the Western Tent and Awning Company retained the services of two black youths formerly employed by the NYA.<sup>50</sup>

The situation remained gloomy for two more years. The fact that Lincoln was not a major industrial city contributed to the problem, since previously blacks, especially women, had little chance to acquire factory skills. While the League decried prejudice as the primary culprit, it understood that the relatively small number of industrial jobs constricted opportunity. The frustration level increased dramatically when an opening occurred and it did not have a qualified applicant to recommend.<sup>51</sup>

Prejudice and resignation also hampered attempts to gain the requisite skills. The League experienced considerable difficulty in arranging for the admission of black youths to the Lincoln Aeronautical Training Institute. The school balked, because it feared it could not fulfill its pledge of guaranteed employment upon graduation. The first black student matriculated in 1941, only after releasing the school from its pledge. Fortunately, two weeks after he began classes the Curtis Wright Company of Buffalo agreed to hire him upon completion of the course load and promised to take another trained black. This achievement notwithstanding, the League asserted that one of "the greatest problems" it faced during the year was that "of trying to get Negroes themselves to reach the point of willingness to accept training opportunities which were created for them."<sup>52</sup> Thus, prejudice, the nature of Lincoln's economy, and a lack of individual initiative instilled by the tradition of job discrimination combined to slow the pace of socio-economic advance.

Nonetheless, the times were propitious for some advancement, and by 1944 the LUL reported more good news than bad. Signaling a basic level of economic security, it revealed that it received "very few" applications for work. It placed fifty-one men and 101

women, and most of its direct placements entailed a shift from "nonessential" (domestic) to "essential" (industrial) jobs. It commended the NSES for making referrals but berated it for doing too little to promote integration. The League hoped that a recent change in personnel would result in a change of attitude but admitted this to be "wishful thinking on our part."<sup>53</sup>

A similar good news-bad news pattern manifested itself in relation to war industries. Placements remained few because of the limited number of jobs, the lack of experienced black laborers, and continued discrimination by two or three firms. Moreover, several of the war contractors that did hire blacks, did so only at the lowest levels. On the other hand, one or two companies that had previously refused to employ blacks now sought more than could be supplied locally. The Elastic Stop Nut Corporation increased its number of black female machine operators; the most significant "first" occurred when Western Electric began to employ blacks at all levels of skill. This accomplishment highlighted the importance of membership in a national organization. Julius O. Thomas, NUL director of industrial relations, visited Lincoln to collect facts relating to the local case and then presented them to the Western Electric corporate heads in New York City, who in turn rectified the situation to the satisfaction of the LUL.<sup>54</sup>

By the end of 1944, the relatively rosy employment picture and the scent of Allied victory led Malone to ponder the postwar economic situation. Again he editorialized on the responsibility of blacks: "One thing we must be mindful of is that a part of the decision rests with the individual worker." He cautioned against chronic absenteeism, inefficient work, and a poor personality.<sup>55</sup> Then as peace returned he stressed wariness over a possible economic lull created by reconversion and set his sights on helping soldiers find jobs commensurate with the new

skills they had learned in the armed services. In 1945 he claimed two such placements in spite "of the general chaotic state of industry."<sup>56</sup>

World War II had posed many problems, but it also presented many opportunities. Black leaders were determined that the spirit and principles for which the struggle was waged now further the cause of racial equality at home. As the last year of the war opened, Malone voiced the general sense of frustration in conjunction with the promise of a better future. In a "Message of Happy New Year to Soldiers" he wrote:

It is probable that many of you are unhappy about the undemocratic practices of segregation and discrimination of the country for which you are making these sacrifices but it is also probable that many of you realize that the most that is near and dear to you are within the boundaries of America . . . Your struggle will not be profitless nor in vain for despite the many barriers progress has been made and progress will continue.<sup>57</sup>

Nine months later, in celebration of V-J Day, Malone reiterated the same basic desire:

The clear-cut victory of the allies over Germany and the final subjugation of Japan testifies to the progressive leadership of the allied countries. However, this victory over the foes of freedom and democracy presents the challenge to continue the fight to uproot every undemocratic practice wherever found.<sup>58</sup>

These sentiments obviously meshed well with the NUL emphasis on community work. World War II created a climate which intensified the demand of blacks for equality and raised their level of expectation. The NUL wanted its affiliates to promote civil rights by acting as an advocacy agent, especially in the areas of education, housing, and employment. Thus, the NUL envisioned its local professional social workers encouraging school administrators to change the counseling given to black high school students, convincing black students to stay in school and to educate themselves for white-collar careers, and prodding employers to hire blacks in positions formerly denied to them.

This type of community work, however, was not well understood, especially when it curtailed the popular

group-work services provided through the community center. Eventually, in a complex series of events during the early 1950s, the LUL board of directors voted to cut its ties with the NUL and to reorganize itself as an independent organization dedicated to the operation of a community center which dispensed social services to blacks. While the decision shocked and dismayed many, the history of the first fifteen years of the LUL showed that it was a climax bred by local conditions and historical contingency.

The unusual circumstances of the Great Depression and World War II muted the tension between the group work and community work approaches to social work among blacks. The economic hard times bred conditions which prevented meaningful changes in the increasing patterns of *de facto* segregation. How, for example, could the LUL promote the upgrading of black workers in the face of massive unemployment? Thus the advocacy role of community work suffered while the New Deal relief agencies provided funds for many types of group-work services. Thus by the accident of historical timing, the LUL began, grew rapidly, and became established in the community mind as the operator of a community center.

The radically different circumstances of World War II pushed the community work function to the foreground. Almost immediately complaints surfaced about the drop in services. During the war years, however, the public accustomed itself to making sacrifices in many areas, and the level of complaint remained more annoying than disruptive. Meanwhile, the LUL helped to break down a few barriers to black employment, although it failed to alter substantially the segregatory pattern of race relations. In terms of its long-standing standard program and in conjunction with the new mood promoted by World War II, the NUL wanted its affiliates to intensify the community work approach. The "traditions" established in its first

years of existence combined with specific local events of the early 1950s to prevent the LUL from making that transition.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Annual Report of Lincoln Urban League, 1946, National Urban League Manuscripts, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Series XIII, Box 14. Hereafter cited as NUL MSS, with appropriate abbreviations and series and box numbers. For a discussion of the origins of the Lincoln Urban League, see Dennis N. Mihelich, "The Formation of the Lincoln Urban League," *Nebraska History* 68(Summer 1987):63-73.

<sup>2</sup>*Weekly Review* (Lincoln), March 30, 1933. 1.

<sup>3</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1935 and 1943, and Community Center Dedication Pamphlet, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; *The Voice* (Lincoln), April 27, 1950, 1, 3; *Omaha Star*, April 24, 1942, 1.

<sup>4</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1935, 1936, 1937, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14 and LUL Annual Report, 1939, NUL MSS, Series 5, Box 10.

<sup>5</sup>Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 242-47.

<sup>6</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1936, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>7</sup>LUL Annual Reports, 1935-39, all quotes from 1935, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Guichard Parris and Lester Brooks, *Blacks in the City: A History of the National Urban League* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971), 66; Weiss, 85; LUL Annual Report, 1937, Series 13, Box 14; *Urban League Informer* (newsletter), April 9, 1937, Series 4, Box 30.

<sup>10</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1937, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; *Urban League Informer*, March 6, 1936, Series 5, Box 10.

<sup>11</sup>Charles G. Blooah, "Lincoln Socio-Economic Survey" (Typewritten Manuscript, FERA, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1935), 4; LUL Annual Report, 1939, NUL MSS, Series 5, Box 10.

<sup>12</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1937, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14 and 1939, Series 5, Box 10. For a general discussion of the NUL's shift in methodology, see Weiss, 265-80, and Parris and Brooks, 227-47, 260-64.

<sup>13</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1935, 1936, 1937, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14 and 1939, Series 5, Box 10.

<sup>14</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1935, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; Parris and Brooks, 240-60.

<sup>15</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1935, 1937, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; *Urban League Informer*, March 6, 1936, and "The Urban League of Lincoln, Purpose," February 5, 1940, NUL MSS, Series 5, Box 10.

<sup>16</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1935, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; Letter Clyde W. Malone to T. Arnold Hill, March 24, 1939; T. Arnold Hill to Millard T. Woods, April 1, 1939; and Millard T. Woods to T. Arnold Hill, April 3, 1939, NUL MSS, Series 4, Box 30.

<sup>17</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1936, 1937, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14 and 1939, Series 5, Box 10.

<sup>18</sup>Weiss, 255-64; Parris and Brooks, 209-13.

<sup>19</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1939, NUL MSS, Series 5, Box 10.

<sup>20</sup>Letter, M. T. Woods to T. Arnold Hill, December 9, 1935, NUL MSS, Series 4, Box 33.

<sup>21</sup>*Urban League Informer*, March 6, 1939, NUL MSS, Series 5, Box 10; LUL "Annual Report," 1940, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>22</sup>LUL Annual Report 1940, 1941, and the LUL Community Center Dedication Pamphlet, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; *Omaha Star*, April 24, 1942.

<sup>23</sup>*The Voice*, November 1, 1946, 1.

<sup>24</sup>"The Secretariat" (a LUL publication), Vol. X, First Quarter, 1947, 14, Lincoln Urban League Manuscripts, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska. (Hereafter cited as LUL MSS, NSHS).

<sup>25</sup>Jesse Thomas Moore, Jr., *A Search for Equality: The National Urban League, 1910-1961* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 95.

<sup>26</sup>Parris and Brooks, 285.

<sup>27</sup>"LUL Bulletin," May 1, 1945, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>28</sup>Minutes of the Board Meeting, November 29, 1944, Robert T. Malone MSS, Series 2, Folder 1, NSHS.

<sup>29</sup>LUL Annual Reports, 1940-45, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; Minutes of the Board Meeting, November 29, 1944, Robert T. Malone MSS, NSHS; "LUL Bulletin," October 21, 1944, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>30</sup>Minutes of the Board Meeting, February 24,

1944, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>31</sup>LUL Annual Reports, 1944-46, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; "LUL Bulletin," October 1, 1946, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>32</sup>LUL Annual Reports, 1940-3, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; Minutes of the Board Meeting, November 29, 1944, Robert T. Malone MSS, Series 2, Folder 1, NSHS.

<sup>33</sup>LUL Annual Reports, 1943-4, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>34</sup>"LUL Bulletin," November 1, 1944, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>35</sup>"LUL Bulletin," April 1, 1945, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>36</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1944, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 1941.

<sup>38</sup>"Nebraska Conference on Interracial Social Action and Negro Participation in War and Post War Programs," NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; *Omaha Star*, March 27, April 3, April 17, 1942.

<sup>39</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1943, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14; Letter, Millard T. Woods to Lester B. Granger, December 22, 1942, NUL MSS, Series 5, Box 19.

<sup>40</sup>Minutes of the Board Meeting, April 26, 1944, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>41</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1940, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>42</sup>Quote from LUL Annual Report, 1941. See also LUL Annual Report, 1943, NUL MSS,

Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>43</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1943, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 1944; "LUL Bulletin," November 1, 1944, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>45</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1944, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 1945.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*; Minutes of the Board Meeting, October 31, 1945, Robert T. Malone MSS, NSHS.

<sup>48</sup>"LUL Bulletin," September 1, 1945, LUL MSS, NSHS; Minutes of the Board Meeting, October 31, 1945, Robert T. Malone MSS, NSHS.

<sup>49</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1940, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 1941; *Omaha Star*, October 24, 1941.

<sup>51</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1943, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 1941.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 1944.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*; "LUL Bulletin," November 1, 1944, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>55</sup>"LUL Bulletin," November 1, 1944, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>56</sup>LUL Annual Report, 1945, NUL MSS, Series 13, Box 14.

<sup>57</sup>"LUL Bulletin," January 1, 1945, LUL MSS, NSHS.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, September 1, 1945.