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Article Summary: The Great Migration brought increased numbers of black residents to Lincoln, where a small group of blacks had already established themselves. To deal with post World War I discrimination, local black leaders in 1933 created the Lincoln Urban League, affiliated with the National Urban League until 1954. Like the national group, the Lincoln Urban League advocated for equality and integration. In addition it provided essential social services in what came to be called the Malone Community Center.

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Photographs / Images: Millard T Woods, first executive secretary of the Lincoln Urban League, with display in the LUL building at 2001 U Street, April 27, 1936; Woods in uniform; the Reverend Trago T McWilliams Sr, who helped organize the LUL and served on its board of directors; Dr Milton F Arnholt examining patients (Arnholt, superintendent of the Lincoln Health Department, was treasurer of the LUL and a member of its board of directors); band composed of LUL members; LUL Brownie Troop 31, led by Mrs. Lucy Nevels; sewing class in the LUL building, April 17, 1936; Millard T Woods, Mrs W W Putney, and Dr Milton F Arnholt at the ground breaking ceremony for the LUL building at 2030 T Street; Malone Community Center, named for Lincoln civic leader Clyde T Malone and located in the LUL building on T Street; volunteers in the kitchen and a sewing class in the T Street building; LUL girls' camp on the Big Blue River near Crete, 1945



Millard T. Woods (center), first executive secretary of the Lincoln Urban League, and two others with display in the League building at 2001 U Street, April 27, 1936. Courtesy of Lenora Letcher and Malone Community Center.

# THE FORMATION OF THE LINCOLN URBAN LEAGUE

*By Dennis N. Mihelich*

For a little over two decades (1933-54) the Lincoln Urban League (LUL) dispensed social services to the city's black community and served as an advocacy organization which promoted equal opportunity and integration in employment, education, and housing.<sup>1</sup> Recently historical community studies have revealed a rich diversity imbedded within grand generalizations pertaining to group activity and social change. The history of the formation of the LUL

illuminates the complexity of attitudes and social differentiation within a small, relatively stable black community. It documents the increased discrimination and segregation in the post-World War I era despite a minimal impact from black migration to Lincoln. It also highlights the spread of ideas from large eastern urban centers across the country and to smaller towns which did not simply duplicate the situation existing in those more cosmopolitan cities. Thus, the circumstances which led to the creation of the LUL disclose an important, distinctive element within the generalized concepts of the black experience and the struggle of blacks to gain their civil rights.

At the dawn of the twentieth century a sociological survey of the black



Millard T. Woods. Courtesy of Mrs. E.L. Woods.

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population of Lincoln revealed that 149 families (521 people which made up 1.1 percent of the total population) resided in several different areas of the town with slight segregation. The slow, steady migration rate during the last three decades of the nineteenth century increased significantly following the end of the depression-ridden 1890s. Between 1899 and 1904, 123 blacks (slightly over 30 percent of all black migrants to that date) arrived in the city. The contiguous states of Missouri (90) and Kansas (58) contributed the largest numbers to the total post-Civil War migration, although farther-away Kentucky (36) and Tennessee (25) also served as significant states of embarkation.<sup>2</sup>

The black community displayed low rates of illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, and serious adult crime, and had a high rate of miscegenation. Seventy-seven percent of the Lincoln blacks reported that they had "mixed blood," and the investigators claimed that "amalgamation" was increasing. Presenting much of their data in statistical categories based on the hue of the person's skin, they found education unaffected by color, but light-skinned blacks generally earned more than their dark-skinned compatriots. The wage differential was not very significant, however, since most blacks were chiefly employed in general working-class occupations, with less than four percent owning their own business. Overall, the researchers argued that blacks in Lincoln at the beginning of the twentieth century had had comparatively large family incomes and lived comfortably in non-ghetto, non-slum conditions.<sup>3</sup>

Thirty years later two new studies documented important changes which paved the way for the creation of an Urban League affiliate. During the interval the black population of Lincoln almost doubled to approximately 1,000. While the increase was locally significant, it paled before comparable figures for major northern urban centers, and blacks remained an



*The Reverend Trago T. McWilliams, Sr. helped organize the Lincoln Urban League and served on its board of directors. Courtesy of the late Reverend Trago O. McWilliams, Jr.*

infinitesimal 1.3 percent of the total population of Nebraska's capital. The lack of industrial jobs, the diminished opportunity in traditional areas of employment, and its proximity to Omaha slowed the growth of Lincoln's black population.<sup>4</sup> The greater economic diversity and the opportunity for employment spurred by World War I attracted ten times as many blacks to Omaha.

Despite the relatively small numbers, the migration wrought substantive changes in Lincoln. In one sense residential dispersion remained a basic characteristic. Blacks resided in eleven of the twelve political wards, and this diffusion "had a very definite effect on better relationships."<sup>5</sup> Yet, sixty percent of the black population was concentrated in just three wards. Almost thirty percent of the total was crammed into the "ill-kept congested" ward three, which also housed Mexicans, Indians, Jews, and Italians, all living in equally unattractive surroundings.<sup>6</sup> The emergence of a ghetto-like area resulted from factors which influenced the residential patterns of most groups of new, poor immigrants:

the availability of low-priced rents and inexpensive homes for purchase and the fact that others of their group already lived in the area. More ominously, however, one study complained that realtors concentrated blacks between the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad and the Rock Island Railroad, and that the twentieth-century influx produced a "Black Heaven" in the neighborhood north of "O" Street and east of the University of Nebraska campus.<sup>7</sup>

The increased residential segregation mirrored the development of black ghettos in the larger northern urban centers. The appearance of this phenomenon in Lincoln despite the low number of migrants suggests that it was not necessary for a community to be inundated by blacks in order to trigger increased discrimination. Although the black population of Lincoln doubled in the wake of the Great Migration, the absolute increase was only 500, and it still represented little more than one percent of the total population. Perhaps the rapidity of the small influx contributed to a sense of fear and rejection on the part of whites. Nonetheless, the appearance of a ghetto-like area highlighted the importance of a combination of factors: the economic status of the migrants, their desire to live among others of their group, and the growing acceptance of racial theories and stereotypes which intensified prejudice and discrimination in the early twentieth century in both the South and the North.

Use of the term "ghetto-like" should not conjure up images of eastern urban slums. The city was only sixty years old and did not develop the dense patterns of row houses and tenements common in other cities. Although residential concentration increased, it did not undo the pre-World War I pattern of dispersion, it did not create one homogenous black neighborhood, and it did not produce a slum. As one study revealed,

In no section of the city is there what may be



*Dr. Milton F. Arnholt, superintendent of the city's health department from 1927 to 1946, examines young patients. Arnholt was longtime treasurer of the Lincoln Urban League and served on its board of directors. Courtesy of Mrs. E.L. Woods.*

described as a colored belt. With the exception of two districts, covering about eight city blocks on the North side, most of the houses are in fair condition.<sup>8</sup>

The other study concurred, stating,

District I [north of "O" Street, east of 14th Street] is not so badly dilapidated as one may think from reading this description, but it is not by any means comparable to the other districts in wealth, order or dignity, and beauty.<sup>9</sup>

The Great Migration not only promoted separation between the races, but it also produced two distinct black communities. This occurrence was not uncommon among other groups of immigrants who migrated in stages over a lengthy period of time, and Kenneth Kusmer thoroughly documented the phenomenon among blacks in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>10</sup> In Lincoln, pre-World War I blacks had established themselves, a majority owned their own homes, and they were accustomed to a relatively integrated, non-discriminatory lifestyle. While they resided in many areas of the city, the concentration of the newer arrivers on the north side produced a conscious

south side community of longtime residents who had lost their racial identity.<sup>11</sup> The split was attitudinal as well as geographic. South siders criticized north siders as "very poor, low in the social scale and the riff-raffs."<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the black population was not numerous enough to support a large professional class. Prejudice obviously limited white clientele. Yet, in larger ethnic and black conclaves the prejudice inadvertently helped create a class of businessmen and other professionals who catered exclusively to the needs of their particular group. In Lincoln, however, more than the limited size of the black community retarded this development. One researcher complained that "the class of Negro citizens of the city, who can, to some extent, pay its bills, insists upon giving its services to the professional whites on the grounds that it has very little confidence in the ability of the professional Negro practitioner."<sup>13</sup> The above contrived

classification likely referred to the better-off, longtime residents, who did not think that racial identity should determine their consumer habits. Also the attitude probably indicated an unwillingness to accept the more stringent segregated patterns forced on the more recent migrants. Finally, it may have provided them with a sense of acceptance by the white community and served as a badge of their stature in the black community.

Race relations in other social and economic areas duplicated the complexity of the residential situation. The manifestations of equal access resulted from the lingering effects of the nineteenth century white liberal attitude and state statutes which copied the form of the national Civil Rights Laws of 1875. Also, the dispersion of black homeowners prevented a swift and easy introduction of some forms of *de facto* segregation, and the small size of the city and its limited growth would have placed an illogical,





*Band composed of Lincoln Urban League members. Courtesy of Mrs. E.L. Woods.*

if not impossible, demand upon resources to create separate facilities.

In 1933 J. Harvey Kerns, the executive director of the Omaha Urban League, declared that "at the present time the relations between the two groups are as amicable as to be found in most any Northern or Western city."<sup>14</sup> He based his conclusion on the fact that welfare agencies and clinics dispensed services equally; that "the two daily newspapers have been both liberal and fair in publishing news articles about Negroes" and the radio station broadcasted programs on race relations; and that integrated Boy Scout troops had existed. Furthermore, white ministers exhibited "a genuine spirit of cooperation." Negro choirs sang in white churches, black and white churches sponsored interracial programs, and it was "not uncommon to see whites attending services in colored churches."<sup>15</sup>

Also, the public school system was relatively well integrated. Two hundred black children (103 boys, 97 girls) attended classes at twenty-three

schools (eighteen schools reported no black students), and "in practically all activities" they enjoyed equal opportunity. Black enrollment in high school matched the race's proportion of the total population, and comments from school principals at all levels emphasized the absence of racial problems.

The seemingly ideal educational situation, however, was discomfited by the fact that Lincoln afforded "little incentive for Negro children to pursue high education," since the opportunities available to graduates were "similar to those who have little or no education." Thus, while he did not provide statistics, Kerns inferred that graduation rates did not keep pace with enrollment rates, and that the ambitious who did complete high school or college left the city in search of employment, denying the black community many of its potential leaders. Furthermore, few adults took advantage of the evening classes sponsored by the University of Nebraska or the public schools. Documenting the

milieu of the times, in 1932 no blacks enrolled in the continuing education classes at the university, and all eight who participated in the program at the public high school "took the Janitor Training Course for the purpose of self improvement."<sup>16</sup>

Thus despite his overall, relatively positive conclusion, Kerns also discovered a demeaning side to the complex pattern of race relations. Although the state civil rights laws had never been vigorously enforced, they had provided some protection to blacks willing and able to make use of the judicial system prior to World War I. Even then the courts on occasion rendered them useless through narrow or distorted interpretations. Now, however, in the postbellum era the statutes were openly and regularly circumvented. Theaters segregated blacks, restaurants refused them service, and the municipal swimming pool set aside one day a week for their use.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, although Kerns described the YWCA attitude as "one of

fine Christian fellowship," he noted that the institution organized a separate "colored Girl Reserve." Also, he claimed that "colored girls have had general use of the facilities of the YWCA," but later in the study remarked that "colored groups have on various occasions used the facilities of the building." Possibly the seemingly contradictory statements revealed a dual policy in reference to use by youth groups in comparison to adult groups. Without doubt, however, in light of subsequent complaints concerning both the YM and the YWCA, it was an era of changing policies which did not benefit the black community. Additionally, the creation of segregated groups or use times (the YMCA in conjunction with Scouting organizations "arranged a period at the Boy Scout Camp for colored boys") displayed the impact of the size of the city and the small population of the black community on the complex nature of the race relations. In this instance, it was not deemed feasible for Lincoln, in contrast to larger cities, including Omaha, to build an all-black YM and/or YWCA.<sup>18</sup>

Race relations at the state university, an institution which combined with the presence of the headquarters of state government to give the city its distinct ambience, displayed a similar contradictory pattern of "an open door policy" with "evidences of discrimination." Black applicants to the medical school, for example, were "advised to go to Howard or Meharry," because they could not "secure the practical work in the University Hospital to qualify them for graduation." Likewise, prospective black educators experienced difficulty finding schools to accept them as student practice-teachers, and would-be black athletes were barred from university teams on the grounds that several opponents in the athletic conference refused to play integrated teams.<sup>19</sup> Thus the equal opportunity in school activities disappeared at the collegiate level, and



*Urban League Brownie Troop 31, led by Mrs. Lucy Nevels (center). Courtesy of Lenora Letcher and Malone Community Center.*

while blacks could attend integrated schools and receive services at hospitals, their ability to become professional practitioners in either of them was severely constrained.

Finally, a survey of 100 wage earners, deemed representative of the race as a whole, revealed that blacks labored in twenty-nine different occupations, but that they "consisted largely of unskilled, semi-skilled, and personal service jobs." Men were "employed largely as laborers, porters, waiters, [and] janitors," while women found work "in the most part as maids, charwomen, and laundresses."

Few blacks worked in the handful of larger industries located in the city. Some had gained industrial employment during World War I, "but since 1919 they have been almost entirely replaced by other groups." Civil Service provided the "most lucrative jobs," but this area manifested the spread of discrimination. For example, at one time or another in the past, the Police Department had employed

eight blacks. In 1933, however, none served on the force. A similar reduction of opportunity occurred in federal and state positions in the city, with only two blacks employed as mail carriers, one as an internal mail distributor in the Capitol Building, and fifteen toiling as janitors and charwomen. While he certainly did not condone the situation, Kerns argued that the occupational patterns contributed to the existing peaceful race relations.

The type of employment, personal and domestic, largely followed by Negroes has brought them in close contact with the better thinking part of the whites and has obviated industrial competition to a marked degree, which cause generally precipitates racial antagonism.<sup>20</sup>

As an Urban Leaguer, Kerns dedicated his life to the elimination of employment restrictions; nonetheless, as a trained sociologist, he accurately described the absence of a crucial circumstance which promoted race riots in many cities. In concluding his economic discussion, Kerns deline-



*A sewing class in the Urban League building at 2001 U Street, April 17, 1936. Courtesy of Mrs. E.L. Woods.*

ated the miniscule black business community in Lincoln. All were classified as small businesses: four restaurants, two barber shops, two transfer companies, a billiard parlor, a dance house, and a recently established newspaper. They derived "their principal support from the Negro population," and their prosperity was "largely due to the fact that Negroes were barred from such establishments operated by other groups."

While Kerns did not mention a black class split in terms of patronage for the black-owned businesses, he did highlight the continuation of older patterns by revealing that one black physician practiced in Lincoln and that he administered to white patients. More indicative of the contemporary circumstances, however, "the majority of Negroes in need of medical attention received the care of a city physician or visited the clinics. The low economic status of the race seems to make this a logical course to follow."<sup>21</sup>

These social and economic problems received scattered but insufficient attention from the existing black churches and social and fraternal organizations, which drew most of their membership from the better-established, longtime residents. Seven black churches existed, but perhaps only two or three ministered to their communicants' non-spiritual needs. "Practically all of the churches" were in debt, none had "physical equipment available for young people," and most sponsored activities purely of a religious nature which garnered scant interest from the youth. It was evident to Kerns that there were "too many Negro churches in Lincoln" and that "well intended funds spent for the support of some institutions could be more wisely invested" (obviously in social work among the unorganized newer arrivals). Furthermore, he claimed "that the Negro church as a whole has failed to render its maximum service because some of their leaders have exploited the churches." In a like manner, twenty community organizations

with a total membership of 291 (27 percent of the total black population) had "functioned long enough to be a definite part of the community life of the race." Yet, while they had "the opportunity of initiating constructive programs of a more general nature, . . . the greater part of their time is spent for the benefit of the members."<sup>22</sup>

In summarizing the data, Kerns commended "the social minded white and colored citizens of Lincoln" for promoting the study before "the problems reached a state of race conflict." While the majority of whites remained passive "due largely to the infrequency of racial contact," blacks displayed a "growing feeling of unrest." He implied that an Urban League affiliate could address the issues precipitating the restiveness. While existing interracial programs stressed cultural appreciation, the basic socio-economic situation among blacks "received scant consideration." The "inferior economic status" was "the most pressing problem," but housing conditions also "warranted definite

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improvement." The churches needed aid to develop programs "in keeping with modern social trends," and the community organizations had to be federated to attack "in a more definite way some of the social problems in the community."

The third ward in particular, which contained "many families untouched by any social or religious program," demanded immediate attention. He argued that

some effort should be advanced to organize this group in neighborhood clubs where they can be instructed in better home management, health habits, and child welfare. Their method of living and lack of moral guidance unless touched by some constructive agency will breed conditions which will have an unwholesome effect on the amicable relations which now exist between the races.<sup>23</sup>

Kerns's report matched social problems to the program of the National Urban League and highlighted its integrationist, social-work philosophy. The NUL was created in New York City in 1910 through the merger of three black self-help organizations. In 1918 its integrated board of directors established a standard program for affiliates which included social research in the black community, promotion of equal opportunity in employment and housing, coordination of the activities of welfare agencies for the benefit of blacks, advancement of health and educational standards, and provision for recreation and aid for travelers. This program provided "a functional framework," but "because of the widely disparate conditions faced by the local Leagues, their autonomy and varying degrees of financial health, it was inevitable that local programs deviated from the 'ideal'." Thus, while the model made no mention of affiliates providing direct case work or extensive group work services, a number of affiliates found it necessary to operate community centers (black settlement houses), "although the official agency position was against it."<sup>24</sup>

The philosophy of the NUL was a product of the Progressive Era, and it attracted support from concerned



*Participants in the ground breaking ceremony for the Urban League building at 2030 T Street included Millard T. Woods (left), Mrs. W.W. Putney, and Dr. Milton F. Arnholt. Courtesy of Mrs. E.L. Woods.*

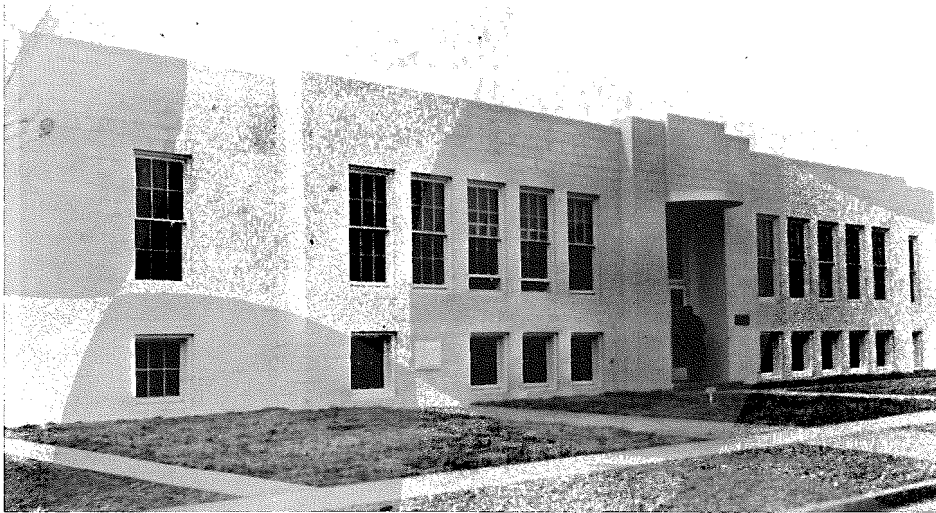
white businessmen, reform-minded middle-class whites, and educated middle-class blacks eager to protect and/or advance their status, or who were touched by the plight of the less fortunate of their race. The interweaving of altruism and self-interest from both races produced a diplomatic, gradualist approach which relied upon scientific social work to unearth the data concerning problems and solutions, to acculturate blacks to urban living, and to constrain racial conflict while it educated whites to accept blacks as equals.

While most whites involved in the Urban League movement probably did not accept the full implications of social equality, they did support the enforcement of constitutional rights and economic advancement which would ameliorate urban social ills that affected the entire community. Middle-class whites were shielded from direct residential and occupational competition from blacks, and white businessmen certainly stood to

benefit from punctual, clean, sober, well-behaved workers. Likewise, uncouth behavior by the uneducated black masses reflected badly on the entire race, and middle-class blacks viewed it as a cause of deteriorating race relations. While self-interest and middle-class values underlay the movement, altruistic concerns also attracted those who volunteered their time and energy. At the local level ministers, teachers, and social workers crowded onto the early boards of directors. Blacks and whites participated in the same urban, middle-class value system. It was the system of the successful; what else would social workers trying to socialize preach to their clientele? Thus, as Kerns's report argued, much of what was needed (and implicitly, what the Urban League provided) was a concerted effort to improve the manners, morals, hygiene, and basic economic skills of Lincoln's blacks.<sup>25</sup>

Lincolniters, with the help of NUL officials and executive directors of





*The Malone Community Center at 2030 T Street was named for Lincoln civic leader Clyde T. Malone. Courtesy of Mrs. E.L. Woods.*

affiliates from nearby larger cities, initiated the formation of the Lincoln Urban League in 1932. In many ways the process conformed to standard procedures, yet local conditions dictated important variations. The Great Migration reproduced across the country the conditions which prompted the creation of the NUL in New York City and led to the rapid expansion of the organization. In 1918 the NUL board decided the movement "should be extended as rapidly as possible to all cities of 25,000 and over in which there is a considerable Negro population."<sup>26</sup>

The aggressiveness notwithstanding, it grew erratically. At the end of World War I, twenty-seven affiliates existed, mostly in the Northeast, and all east of the Mississippi River. A decade and a half later sixteen of those locals had ceased operation, but the total number of affiliates climbed to over forty. By 1940 the geographic dispersion had changed little. The South remained woefully under represented, because even the mild League program was viewed as radical and because of the difficulty of securing integrated boards. The northeastern quadrant of the country housed the vast majority of locals with a slight shift westward to

the Missouri River, then the west coast contributed two affiliates, Los Angeles and Seattle.<sup>27</sup>

Omaha (1928) and Lincoln joined the federation midway between the two world wars and, although the records do not reveal it, Omaha quite likely served as a catalyst for the formation of an affiliate in the smaller city fifty miles to the southwest. In the first wave of expansion the NUL actively entered large urban areas and promoted its cause. Quickly, however, it eschewed that policy and established a responsive stance, waiting for expressions of interest from local groups.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, north of the Mason-Dixon Line the League idea spread rapidly from the east coast to the Missouri River — by example from affiliates in large cities, by dissemination of ideas through the national social work associations, and by the favorable publicity it obtained in the black press.

To form an affiliate the NUL required the creation of an integrated provisional committee, the submission of bylaws for NUL approval, and a fund-raising drive. The national office asked the local group "to secure operating funds for two consecutive years prior to submitting a formal

application for membership in a community chest." Also, since the NUL wanted trained social workers as executive directors, it reserved the right to supply a list of candidates.<sup>29</sup>

T. Arnold Hill, director of the NUL Department of Industrial Relations and western field organizer, arrived in Lincoln on November 5, 1932, and met with five unnamed blacks (three women, two men) who had discussed the idea of organizing a League chapter. Kerns of the Omaha branch, a Miss Maude Johnson of the University of Nebraska, pastor Arthur L. Weatherly of the All Souls Unitarian Church, and representatives from the community chest, the YWCA, and the YMCA also attended the session. According to Hill:

The members from the colored community felt that since they had no social organization save the little accomplished through the YWCA, that a community center together with the promotional plan of the Urban League would thrive and could be supported. The Community Chest official expressed himself as having an open mind and wishing to do something to meet the requests that had frequently come to him from colored people for assistance.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Hill had reservations. The NUL did not have an affiliate operating in such a small community, and he thought that the costs per capita of affiliation would be "rather heavy." He doubted that 1,000 people could support a community center and he prophetically warned that in such a circumstance the full range of League activities would be "subordinated to a recreational program." Therefore, he counseled:

In the event that a league is established, more than ordinary care should be taken to see that the white people connected with it are of large calibre and influence. There is great danger that in a fairly liberal community prejudice might be encouraged through the establishment of separate social facilities for Negroes.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the misgivings and the fact that a "mass meeting" held at the AME church generated only \$5.25 in contributions, organization proceeded systematically. The promoters promised to send the NUL another \$15 to help defray the cost of Hill's trip, and they had already secured the services

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*Meeting of Lincoln Urban League board of directors and members in the League building at 2030 T Street. Courtesy of Lenora Letcher and Malone Community Center.*

of Kerns to survey conditions in the black community. While they awaited the results of the study, the newly established black newspaper, *The Weekly Review*, edited by the Reverend Trago T. McWilliams, Sr., vigorously supported the efforts of the provisional committee. W. Robert Smalls, executive director of the Kansas City Urban League, braved a February snow storm to provide expert counsel and to make several promotional addresses.<sup>32</sup>

At the end of the month Kerns reported his findings to an interracial, twenty-seven person group consisting of representatives from the Community Chest, the Council of Social Agencies, and various social work organizations. He claimed that the study made a deep impression on those gathered and prompted the secretary of the YMCA to change his mind and become a supporter. Subsequently, on

March 25, 1933, the Council of Social Agencies granted membership to the LUL and Millard T. Woods, president of the provisional committee, was appointed executive secretary.<sup>33</sup>

Seemingly, once the interest surfaced, the formation of a Lincoln affiliate progressed smoothly and rapidly. Not all cities possessed such harmony, and "frequently, this meant a lapse of several years between the initial show of interest and the actual establishment of a League."<sup>34</sup> In Chicago, for example, "there existed a certain reticence among Negro leaders about helping to build up a new agency that might take over the program of their own institutions or compete with them for influence and philanthropic support." In the much larger city, churches, settlements, and social clubs engaged in welfare activities, including the operation of employment bureaus.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, some

scholars have argued that at times the NUL and the NAACP competed for support, splitting the black community.<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding the tension between longtime residents and newer arrivals, Lincoln escaped these more extreme forms of divisiveness. As Kerns reported, the existing black institutions did not provide significant welfare services, and the immediate inclusion of the LUL in the Community Chest (instead of the NUL prescribed formula of two years of independent fund raising) eliminated the competition for philanthropic support. Prior to its membership petition to the Council of Social Agencies, eight black pastors, twenty-four black civic, social and fraternal societies, and many black businessmen endorsed the idea of a League. Furthermore, after a lull in activity, William Woods, Millard's father, simultaneously



*Volunteers in the kitchen (above) and a sewing class (below) in the Urban League building at 2030 T Street. Courtesy of Lenora Letcher and Malone Community Center.*

busied himself reorganizing a local NAACP chapter and backing the formation of the LUL. Local circumstances and the exigencies of the Great Depression, it seems, combined to obviate intraracial differences.<sup>37</sup>

Symbolically, naming Millard T. Woods as executive secretary strengthened the communal unity, but it also established a precedent with disruptive potential. The younger Woods was born in Lincoln in 1904 and educated in the public school system. He attended the University of Nebraska and then finished his college

education at Howard University, where he took some courses "in Negro Sociology." He taught for several years at all-black schools in Texas and Arizona, and then he switched to the business world and returned to Lincoln.<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, he did not possess the trained social worker credentials preferred by the NUL, but his education, experience, and stature in the local community secured his approval. Had the NUL insisted on the appointment of a qualified outsider, thoroughly schooled in its philosophy and the

nature of its activities, the history of the LUL may have taken a different direction. Instead, the well-meaning acquiescence, which demonstrated the autonomous nature of affiliates, inadvertently abetted a parochialism which subsequently contributed to the demise of the LUL.

This observation, buttressed by hindsight, should not reflect negatively on Woods's administrative skills. He quickly initiated a sizeable operation which endeavored to fulfill the comprehensive Urban League program. Ironically, the Great Depression, which caused widespread dislocation, also spawned the New Deal with its myriad of alphabet agencies, many of which funneled funds to League affiliates, allowing them to expand their facilities and services. Woods continued with the Lincoln Urban League until 1942, when he became a club and field director with the American Red Cross, serving in North Africa and Italy.<sup>39</sup>

Initial Urban League activities were held in a house located near Twentieth and O Streets.<sup>40</sup> In 1933 a Grant from the Civil Works Administration allowed the LUL to rent a six-room house at 1946 S Street for its headquarters. Financial concerns, however, soon led the owner to terminate the lease. A Federal Housing Administration loan and an advance on the next year's budget from the Community Chest permitted it to purchase (sale price \$200, plus \$304 in back taxes) and remodel a dilapidated two-story home in the heart of the black community at 2001 U Street. Unfortunately fire consumed that building in 1940. This time the National Youth Administration absorbed seventy-five percent of the \$40,000 cost of constructing a modern 35,000-square-foot, sixteen-room community center at 2030 T Street.<sup>41</sup> After de-affiliation with the National Urban League in 1954, it was named the Malone Community Center after black civic leader Clyde T. Malone of Lincoln. Malone had served in various League offices and was named execu-

tive secretary in 1943.<sup>42</sup> The building was replaced by a new Malone Community Center building constructed at 2032 U Street and dedicated in 1982.

But that transformation was still in the future. Obviously, a rendition of the activities of the LUL lies beyond the scope of this article, but the study of the circumstances that led to its formation contained significant lessons concerning the complexity of history. The story illuminated important class and attitudinal differences within a small black community. It demonstrated the increased intensity and pervasiveness of prejudice and discrimination in northern cities following the Great Migration but also showed that local conditions molded the forms of segregation. It also provided a glimpse at the development of the profession of social work among blacks and the values of its practitioners. Furthermore, the 1904 and 1933 reports were stop-frame studies in the evolution of descriptive sociology and exemplified how researchers defined social problems. Finally, the story of the formation of the LUL illustrated the burgeoning nationalization of ideas and institutions that occurred during the past century. The northward migration of blacks made racism a national problem and in order to combat it and to gain support, expertise, and prestige, local leaders decided to affiliate with a nation-wide organization. Just as the National Urban League prescribed a standard program but allowed for local autonomy, the Lincoln story meshed with the larger generalized picture of the black experience in America while at the same time it presented a distinct image.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In 1954 its board of directors voted to drop the affiliation with the National Urban League and to operate independently as the Malone Community Center.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Emily Davies and Genevieve Marsh, "A Study of the Negro in Lincoln" (M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1904), 2, 44-6.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, 32-5, 101-42.

<sup>4</sup>J. Harvey Kerns, "Study of the Social and Economic Status of the Negro in Lincoln, Nebraska" (Typewritten Manuscript, The Race Relations Committee of Lincoln, 1933), 3-4.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, 7.

<sup>7</sup>Charles G. Blooah, "Lincoln Socio-Economic Survey" (Typewritten Manuscript, FERA, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1935), 11-13.

<sup>8</sup>Kerns, 8.

<sup>9</sup>Blooah, 13-4.

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Cleveland, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

<sup>11</sup>Blooah, 11, 13. Kerns, 4 also described the split, referring to pre-World War I blacks on the south side and post-World War I blacks on an ill-defined westside.

<sup>12</sup>Blooah, 14.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, Part II, 21.

<sup>14</sup>Kerns, 29.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 27-8.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 21-8.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 21, 28, 30.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 25-6.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, economic data, 10-2; block quote, 27.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 12, 14.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 17-20.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 32-3.

<sup>24</sup>Guichard, Parris and Lester Brooks, *Blacks in the City: A History of the National Urban League* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971), 130-3.

<sup>25</sup>For a discussion of the philosophy of the NUL see Jesse Thomas Moore, Jr., *A Search for Equality: The National Urban League, 1910-1961* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), xi-55, and Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 48-70. For a discussion of the black middle class concern for the acculturation of migrating blacks, see Weiss, 117-25.

<sup>26</sup>Parris and Brooks, 128.

<sup>27</sup>Weiss, 112, 163-5, 246.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>29</sup>Moore, 56-7.

<sup>30</sup>Memorandum, T. Arnold Hill to Eugene Kinckle Jones, December 31, 1932, National Urban League Manuscripts, Series 4, Box 30, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as NUL MSS, with appropriate abbreviations and series and box numbers.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*; *Weekly Review*, January 12, 1933, 1, January 26, 1933, 1, February 2, 1933, 3, February 9, 1933, 1.

<sup>33</sup>Letter, Kerns to T. Arnold Hill, February 23, 1933, NUL MSS, Series 4, Box 33; *Weekly Review*, February 23, 1933, 1 and March 30, 1933, 1.

<sup>34</sup>Weiss, 167.

<sup>35</sup>Arvarh E. Strickland, *History of the Chicago Urban League* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 27, 35.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 34; Weiss, 47-49; and Parris and Brooks, 387, only saw the competition at the national level during the 1940s; Moore refutes Strickland and Weiss (52-54) and supports Parris and Brooks (99), viewing the squabbles of the 1940s as a personal feud between the national executive directors.



The Lincoln Urban League sponsored outings and camping activities for black teenagers. In 1945 a League camp for girls was held at a site on the Big Blue River near Crete. Courtesy of Lenora Letcher and Malone Community Center.

<sup>37</sup>*Weekly Review*, January 12, 1933, 1 and March 30, 1933, 1.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, March 30, 1933, 1.

<sup>39</sup>Letter from Mrs. E.L. Woods, March 18, 1987, to Nebraska State Historical Society. "Indelible Memories of My Three Years with the American Red Cross," reminiscence of Millard T. Woods, donated to NSHS by Mrs. E.L. Woods.

Woods received a certificate of merit from President Harry S. Truman and was awarded the Medal of Freedom for outstanding services in the Mediterranean area during World War II. After the war he served with the Urban League in Muskegon, Michigan.

<sup>40</sup>Letter from Mrs. E.L. Woods, March 18, 1987, to Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>41</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>42</sup>*Lincoln Star*, February 15, 1951; January 26, 1956.