

“A Bond of Common Womanhood
Deeper than All Racial Separateness”:
Race Relations at the
Des Moines Young Women’s
Christian Association, 1919–1948

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THE CITY OF DES MOINES, like many Iowa communities, has witnessed myriad demographic shifts along the axis of race, ethnicity, and social class over the past century. In 1946 the *Iowa Bystander*, the city’s black newspaper, reported that for blacks visiting the state fair in the city, “the ‘welcome visitors’ signs that glittered and glowed . . . were no more sincere than they were gold.”¹ Although segregation in Des Moines was not as pervasive as in the Jim Crow South, nearly 70 years later *Wall Street 24/7* business writers critiqued the Hawkeye State’s capital along similar lines. In Des Moines, racial inequities and disparities related to home ownership, educational attainment, and unemployment rates were among the worst in the nation.² To address the issues faced by a growing African American community at an earlier period in the city’s history – during the

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1. Dorothy Schwieder, “Iowa: The Middle Land,” in *Iowa History Reader*, ed. Marvin Bergman (Ames, 1996), 1, 7; “Some Signs That Blinked ‘Welcome’ at State Fair Did Not Mean Negro Guests,” *Iowa Bystander*, 8/29/1946.

2. Thomas C. Frohlich and Samuel Stebbins, “The Worst Cities for Black Americans,” *Wall Street 24/7*, 10/6/2015, <http://247wallst.com/special-report/2015/10/06/the-worst-cities-for-black-americans/3/#ixzz4CGdvCEYW>.

Great Migration—black women skillfully worked through organizations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) of Des Moines.

At a time when some YWCAs were reluctant to support the establishment of African American centers, let alone fully integrate existing ones, white women’s willingness and black women’s interest and endeavor led to the establishment of a separatist branch in Des Moines’s Center Street neighborhood in 1919. Until 1946, via the Blue Triangle YWCA, black women maintained an inclusive space from which they could foster race pride, provide valuable services, and develop distinct leadership training and employment opportunities.³ Both the Central Association and the Blue Triangle Branch buildings offered Christian sorority, provided recreational opportunities, fostered political consciousness among their constituents, and helped women secure employment, safe housing, and health services. Although the booths of “the five and ten” were not always open to black diners, by the 1930s the Des Moines YWCA had begun to demonstrate a commitment to “a bond of common womanhood deeper than all racial separateness.”⁴

Following the example set by the historian Nancy Marie Robertson, I examine interracial work as a series of “common debates, rather than shared assumptions.”⁵ Thus, this article aims to peel back the veneer of sisterhood advanced by the National YWCA and examine the cultural work being conducted by the Des Moines YWCA’s “older sisters,” with particular em-

3. Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906–46* (Urbana, IL, 2007), 165–68; Patricia A. Schechter, “A World of Difference: Portland Women of the YWCA, 1901–2000—An Undergraduate Capstone Experience,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15 (2003), 170.

4. L. H. Hammond, *Southern White Women and Racial Adjustment*, John F. Slater Fund Paper #19 (Lynchburg, VA, 1917), 18, quoted in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 3; Mary Wood, interview by Kathryn Neal, 5/22/1997, transcript, p. 17, *Giving Voices to Their Memories: Oral Histories of African-American Women in Iowa*, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City (hereafter the archive will be referred to as IWA).

5. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 179. This point is also made by Kathryn Kish Sklar in “The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State,” in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York, 1993), 43–93.

phasis on the Blue Triangle Branch.⁶ Scrapbooks, publicity clippings, program and conference material, reports, and minutes from the Greater Des Moines YWCA, several oral histories from Des Moines natives and transplants, and the *Iowa Bystander* help us understand why African Americans in Des Moines wanted to ally themselves with a biracialist or segregationist YWCA, how the National YWCA both challenged and supported the advancement of separatist and integrated operations in Des Moines, and how the integration precipitated by the 1946 Interracial Charter affected black branch members and employees.⁷

Despite the patchiness or absence of certain administrative documents, likely lost or damaged during multiple facility relocations, closures, and expansions, an examination of documents from organizations such as the Des Moines YWCA contributes to the historiography of Iowa women's involvement in the long civil rights movement and draws attention to the extraordinary strategies that women, especially black women, used to advance their social agendas.⁸ An examination of the YWCA, particularly its black branches, allows us to place the experiences of black women and girls at the center of the story rather than casting them as supporting actors within traditional structures

6. YWCA of America, "The Sign of the Blue Triangle," ca. 1921, YWCA Blue Triangle Branch, Brochures, Photographs, 1941, 1947, 1988, box 27, YWCA of Greater Des Moines (hereafter YWCA), IWA.

7. I need to clarify the way I use several terms to distinguish types of race relations and cultural work occurring in the Des Moines context. The term *segregation* implies *de facto* segregation in neighborhoods and educational institutions, in addition to the segregation enforced, albeit somewhat inconsistently, by individual business owners. *Biracialism* is used when white and black people share a common facility or space but through the implementation of race-based user times or schedules. *Integrated* implies that a program or facility was open and/or welcoming to both races. *Separatist* is employed when referring to a group that is purposely dedicated to an underrepresented group and entirely or mostly self-governed.

8. Mary Frederickson argues that black women made an effort to publicly praise the efforts of white women and women's groups. For more on this, see Mary E. Frederickson, "Each One Is Dependent on the Other": Southern Churchwomen, Racial Reform, and the Process of Racial Transformation," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsack (Urbana, IL, 1993); Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 64.

of African American political life.⁹ For the lesser-known girls and women of Polk County, such documents illuminate a set of voices and experiences that are less often preserved in the historical record. An examination of the Des Moines YWCA allows us to see how black women aligned with white women's organizations and adapted the structures to best meet the needs of their own communities and create more opportunities for future generations.¹⁰ Des Moines native and social worker Marguerite E. Cothorn, one of a handful of black students at Drake University in the 1920s, stressed that her own generation had to "get [their] foot in the door" to ensure that "the next generation [could] get something more."¹¹

AFTER EMANCIPATION, newly freed people faced formidable pressures to survive, thrive, and advance themselves. Race activists devised an array of strategies built upon notions of a collective racial destiny. The idea that African Americans shared a collective racial fate allowed activists to develop different plans of action meant to ensure basic human rights related to economic prosperity, health, reproductive rights, and political gains for blacks in the United States. Civilizing missionaries, separatist black nationalists, and other crusaders of racial destiny adopted various strategies to advance the interests of the race whose collective future depended on "concerted efforts to police intra-racial activity."¹² Black reform activists focused much of their policing efforts on an attempt to mitigate derelict and overcrowded housing, food insecurity, and disease that threatened so many of the descendants of previously enslaved African Americans. Black reform work, whether aimed at boys and girls

9. Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 4.

10. Mind, body, and spirit are the three concepts that are represented by the triangle symbol used by the YWCA. Proposal, ca. 1932, Scrapbooks 1932-1934, box 34, YWCA, IWA.

11. For more on Marguerite Cothorn, see Marguerite Cothorn Papers, IWA; Marguerite E. Cothorn, interview by Carol Rick, 10/21/1986, tape recording, Iowa Oral History Project, Des Moines Public Library Virtual, <https://archive.org/details/072clacivilrightsandblackhistoryCothorn>.

12. Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 8, 9.

or women and men, elevated propriety, specifically the trifecta of morality, thrift, and hard work, as paramount for black communities and black progress. Such work took up the sexual, gender, and class politics of the era to advance notions of black purity and intragroup vitality, promote sexual reform, advance a specific relationship to material culture, and produce various texts about and for African Americans.¹³

An additional component of the early twentieth-century uplift movement was the creation of organizations and institutions that promoted a civil society. Such institutions benefited African American communities and could potentially mediate between black and white Americans. Black churches, newspapers, literary societies, fraternities, social clubs, insurance companies, and burial societies educated communities about the past and present social injustices faced by African Americans; at the same time, they produced ameliorating strategies that advanced uplift ideals of propriety in the face of a reluctant white society. These models largely advantaged the privileged actions and agendas of the black middle class, a status afforded through a combination of family wealth, income, educational attainment, and skin color. Black clubwomen saw their own status and uplift work in direct opposition to the way educators, historians, politicians, and scientists treated African American women and girls as incapable of respectability, femininity, and domesticity. African American club- and churchwomen placed home life and childrearing at the center of their uplift work as a means of improving black communities and dismantling the stereotypes harbored by white women, many of whom allowed racial differences to obfuscate class distinctions.¹⁴

White southerners' campaigns to criminalize, terrorize, and emasculate black men through legislative oppression and the practice or threat of lynching ushered in new notions of gender during Reconstruction and into the twentieth century. In response to white supremacist ideologies and power structures,

13. Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 9–15, 30–38.

14. Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York, 1996), 2; Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 14–26.

new configurations of gender, with a particular emphasis on black manhood, permeated many African American social institutions. Influential leaders of some black Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal denominations stressed black women's submission to their husbands and prohibited them from participating in the church as clergy. Politically active black women faced slander and were treated as suspect for not putting the needs of their brothers, sons, and husbands first.¹⁵

Despite the din of male opinion, black women found ways around men's suspicion of their suffrage and temperance agitation and their involvement in the lesser reform movements they helped populate through a social strategy Annette Baxter terms domestic feminism. In response to the status of moral superiority granted to them by their brothers, fathers, and husbands, women exercised their moral acumen to justify "occasional altruistic forays beyond the family circle."¹⁶ Rather than attending cultural events aimed at self-improvement or intellectual indulgence, privileged black clubwomen framed their endeavors outside the home as ones that benefited the community, with an emphasis on the welfare of mothers and children.

Despite structural schisms between black and white clubwomen, their common commitment to evangelical Christian work provided a powerful organizing bond at the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps both suffered "male complaints at the decrease of the number of pies consequent upon the growth of women's clubs," but that did not prevent them from adopting new reform approaches.¹⁷ Under the influence of the Social Gospel movement, reform women, both black and white, incorporated science, sociology, and biblical criticism into the religious worldview that informed their approach to the social and political issues of the day. Their concept of salvation came to focus

15. Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Women and the Church," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York, 1982), 141-53; Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 16-17; Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 108-40.

16. Annette K. Baxter, Preface, in Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York, 1980), xii.

17. *Ibid.*, xii.

less on one's individual relationship with God and became increasingly linked instead to one's participation in a more corporate vision of society, one in which individual members remained bound and interconnected to the spiritual deliverance of the community as a whole. Linking spiritual and social reform was by no means a race-specific imperative, but reformers' efforts were nonetheless separated by race, political agendas, and political capital.¹⁸

Both white and black women expressed their desire to affiliate through the Young Women's Christian Association. After its incorporation in 1906, YWCA President Grace Dodge led the women-run organization by the axiom of "not working for, but with" their constituencies.¹⁹ Those constituencies included workers and black women but also extended to immigrants, Native Americans, religiously unaffiliated women, and unwed mothers. Nancy Robertson argues that white women struggled with interracial partnership, often casting themselves as big sisters, a dynamic no doubt exacerbated by the homogenous composition of the YWCA's national board, inequitable financial support, and minimal self-governance afforded to constituents.²⁰

Reluctant to fully embrace the number and ardor of chapters developing within historically black colleges and universities and black communities, white segregationists exerted significant influence over the women's organization. The result was a segregationist legacy buttressed by a policy that allowed white women to capriciously hinder existing or developing black chapters or centers. White organizations in the North and South could simply deny black women's groups access to the resources of the national organization. In the event that black women's groups were brought into the fold, it was almost always under the direct supervision of white women's associations. Black women were not readily accepted as equals; in most cases they were denied voting rights and national representation and their

18. Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 32.

19. Grace H. Dodge, Introduction, in Annie Marion Maclean, *Wage-Earning Women* (New York, 1910), xi, quoted in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 11.

20. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 11-24.

facilities were kept separate from those of their white counterparts.²¹

In the face of such practices, the national YWCA hired its first two black staffers, Addie Waites Hunton in 1907 and Elizabeth Ross Haynes in 1908. They were tasked with defending the new policies to unsympathetic black activists and existing chapters, in addition to collecting information on existing associations in New York, Brooklyn, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. By 1910 the national leadership conceded that in areas where no white association existed or was exceptionally weak and a substantial number of black women existed to support it, a Colored Young Women's Christian Association could be established with staff supervision from the National YWCA.²²

Judith Weisenfeld argues that affiliation with the YWCA, despite its support of segregationist policies, reflected black women's "ongoing willingness to organize in any and all arenas" in their intrepid work toward "achieving justice and ameliorating the harshness of African Americans' daily living conditions."²³ Such work stood side by side with their labors in other institutions, offering an additional avenue from which to support black women and girls as many of them were migrating to urban centers. Affiliation with the YWCA allowed black women to create branches in their own communities while drawing on access to resources and support from white associations and the national and international voice of the YWCA. Finally, affiliation with the YWCA afforded middle-class black women access to white women and girls, a critical aspect of the fight against racial inequity.²⁴

The YWCA eventually became the nation's largest autonomous women's membership organization. Its gendered spaces presented an opportunity to address issues affecting women at a time when, according to Annette K. Baxter, most "men had

21. Adrienne Lash Jones, "Struggle among Saints: African American Women and the YWCA, 1870-1920," in *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and YWCA in the City*, ed. Nina Mjagkik and Margaret Spratt (New York, 1997), 160-87; Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 9-10.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 35.

24. *Ibid.*; Jones, "Struggle among Saints," 161.

barely sanctioned escape from the kitchen and nursery.”²⁵ Such concerns were not limited to white women. Even within the national YWCA, the City Committee expressed the concern that Hunton’s and Haynes’s husbands “might at anytime recall the loan,” leaving them without black staff to conduct outreach.²⁶

THE DES MOINES YWCA began in the home of Carrie Rawson in 1895. By the time the Des Moines YWCA was incorporated in 1896, the group had already moved twice, once to the News Building in April and then to the Christian Science rooms at 4th and Locust in August. Margaret Hamilton, president of the first board of directors, recalled, “We soon found that we had [built] too low, that the YWCA for which we were making a home and name, had really existed in our town for a long time in the form of a need, and it came in upon us like a flood.” By 1908, the Des Moines Association was able to move to its long-campaigned-for Central building at 9th and High Street.²⁷

Hamilton admitted that many of the first board members in Des Moines were “a very conservative set of women, so [they] moved forward very cautiously.”²⁸ In order to “stimulate interest in evangelical religion among young women of the city and vicinity,” athletics and dancing were used as a lure, open to nonresidents and nonmembers.²⁹ With the hope of recruiting girls and women as members, middle-class staff later introduced religious and moral programming at meetings and required vespers for residents. The class-based approach, embraced by both white and black directors in Des Moines, avoided the bib-

25. Baxter, Preface, xii. See also Nancy Robertson with Elizabeth Norris, “‘Without Documents No History’: Sources and Strategies for Researching the YWCA,” in *Men and Women Adrift*, 273.

26. City Committee Report, in YWCA National Board, Minutes, 2/7/1912, 15, quoted in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 34.

27. “A Chronological History of the Greater Des Moines YWCA,” n.d., Administrative Records, Histories, 1896, 1940–1995, box 1, YWCA, IWA; “Synopsis of Des Moines YWCA History”; “History 1896–1914,” Administrative Records, Histories, 1896, 1940–1995, box 1, YWCA, IWA.

28. “History 1896–1914.” The first board members were Helen Ankeny (Munger), Carrie Rawson, and Della Marquardt (Coggeshall).

29. “Synopsis of Des Moines YWCA History,” n.d., Administrative Records, Histories, 1896, 1940–1995, box 1, YWCA, IWA.

lical exegesis encouraged by most Protestant faith traditions, but also provided an avenue towards literacy.³⁰

Initially limited to one facility, the Des Moines YWCA, like those in Chicago and Boston, often resorted to segregated program offerings that fit within the YWCA's mission of inclusiveness. Gymnasia offerings at the Central facility were initially segregated by class, race, and age, with exercisers instructed to don a "white middy, black bloomers, cotton hose, [and] tennis shoes."³¹ Modern germ theory, aided by wartime jingoism and an influx of new non-English-speaking immigrants, "heightened white suspicion of others" and perpetuated racial ideologies of white purity and black contamination.³² In the initial decades, white "matrons," "business girls," and "deaconesses" convened during 13 sessions throughout the week, while "colored girls" only met in the gym on Wednesdays at 8 p.m., the last session of the evening. Non-white children received similar treatment for their aesthetic dance sessions, a practice replicated within the city Recreation Department's aquatic offerings.³³ Such bi-racialism, Martha Verbrugge argues, was "discrimination by another name," and "discrimination was particularly entrenched in recreation."³⁴

BLACK MEN AND WOMEN had resided in Polk County for over a half-century before the U.S. Army opened its training camp for black officers at Fort Des Moines in 1917. In nearby Monroe County, blacks and whites worked the coal mines in the racially integrated community of Buxton. Young people seeking a high school education, regardless of race, traveled from Buxton

30. Sarah Heath, "Negotiating White Womanhood: The Cincinnati YWCA and White Wage-Earning Women, 1918-1929," in *Men and Women Adrift*, 100; Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 28.

31. "Recreate Body and Mind," 1923, Publicity, Pamphlets, Y Winks, 1904-1924, box 13, YWCA, IWA.

32. Martha H. Verbrugge, "Recreation and Racial Politics in the Young Women's Christian Association of the United States," in *Women, Sport, Society: Further Reflections, Reaffirming Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Roberta J. Park and Patricia Vertinsky (London, 2011), 93.

33. Cothorn, interview; "Recreate Body and Mind."

34. Verbrugge, "Recreation and Racial Politics in the YWCA," 92.

to Des Moines between 1900 and 1920.³⁵ By 1910, census-takers estimated that 3,591 African Americans resided in Polk County, although black neighborhoods were not yet a prominent geographic feature of the growing city. Black women and men of means were able to purchase homes, but after 1910 landlords became more reluctant to rent to black tenants.³⁶

In 1917, with significant pressure from the NAACP, the U.S. Army established the first officer training program for African Americans at an abandoned cavalry outpost near Des Moines, “far from the east-coast media.” James B. Morris Sr., Des Moines lawyer and owner of the African American weekly the *Iowa Bystander*, speculated that if “you [were] going to put a thousand negroes in one town,” a town like Des Moines, where “people [got] along,” was preferable to a southern town.³⁷ Yet Des Moines pharmacy owner James Mitchell recalled several incidents that indicated that, “at this time, things were not all good in Des Moines.” During a visit to a café on Mulberry Street in 1917, the camp’s commanding officer, Colonel Charles Ballou, responded indignantly to the crispy pieces of meat served to his black recruits. Ballou drew attention to the disrespectful portions and threatened to “put the town under martial law.” Although the future black officers likely needed no reminder, the future general told the recruits that they would need to work extra hard “to be recognized” in the existing system.³⁸

35. Richard M. Breaux, “‘We Were All Mixed Together’: Race, Schooling, and the Legacy of Black Teachers in Buxton, 1900–1920,” *Annals of Iowa* 65 (2006), 301–28. For more on Buxton, see Rachele Chase, *Lost Buxton* (Charleston, SC, 2017).

36. Leola Nelson Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa*, 2nd ed. (Iowa City, 1969), 48; Wood interview, 17.

37. Robert V. Morris, “Black Officers at Fort Des Moines in World War I,” www.iptv.org/iowapathways/mypath/black-officers-fort-des-moines-ww-i; James Mitchell and James B. Morris, interview by Elaine Estes and James Hatch, 2/20/1975, tape recording, Iowa Oral History Project, Des Moines Public Library Virtual, <https://archive.org/details/FortDesMoinesColoredOfficersTraining1917>. For more on James B. Morris Sr., see Henry G. La Brie III, “James B. Morris Sr. and the *Iowa Bystander*,” *Annals of Iowa* 42 (1974), 314–22; Tom Longden, “J. B. Morris,” *Des Moines Register*, <http://data.desmoinesregister.com/famous-iowans/jb-morris>; and Robert V. Morris, *Tradition and Valor: A Family Journey* (Manhattan, KS, 1999).

38. Mitchell and Morris interview.

Because of the shortage of male and immigrant labor during World War I, industrialists had to work to recruit laborers, opening the door for black men and white women. With many women living away from home, the Des Moines YWCA, among other private groups, provided lodging for transients and permanent residents, a practice it continued for two decades. Such lodgings were often segregated by race and religion.³⁹

A newspaper advertisement for the YWCA portrayed a young white woman seeking the help of volunteers to reach the YWCA building. The "girl stranger" registered and received a room assignment before "the Friendship Club [got] in its work with an informal welcome," helping the transient to unpack and directing her toward "plenty of fun and exercise in a well-equipped gymnasium." With the help of the YWCA Employment Bureau, she could soon begin "the hunt for a job."⁴⁰ YWCA literature emphasized the deleterious effects of 10- to 14-hour shifts that exhausted women's frames, depressed their spirits, and wholly justified "an absolute need of cheerful social influences."⁴¹

White settlement houses and YWCAs, often managed by middle-class women adhering to strict codes of Victorian propriety and femininity, adjusted to meet the needs of a new type of single industrial woman who "demanded more than friendly feelings." More likely "to smoke, to drink alcohol, to dance, and to experiment with their sexuality," the white wage-earning

39. YWCA of America, "The Sign of the Blue Triangle"; Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Louisville, KY, 1990), 13. Other boarding homes constructed to meet wartime housing needs included the Catholic-run St. Catherine's Home on West Grand Avenue. After the armistice, a nondenominational Martha Washington Hotel for Girls was planned for employed and unemployed women. "Business Women's Home One of the City's Most Useful and Efficient Institutions," *Des Moines Capital*, 2/19/1919; "Des Moines Girls Hotel Assured, Plans Provide Up to Date Worker's Home," *Des Moines Register*, 2/23/1919, Publicity, Newspaper Clippings, YWCA Hostess House, 1919, box 13, YWCA, IWA.

40. "How the YWCA Greets 'The Girl Stranger,'" *Des Moines Capital Tribune*, ca. February 1925, Publicity and Newspaper Clippings and Photographs, 1913, 1923-1926, box 13, YWCA, IWA.

41. Second Annual Report of the Officers of Young Ladies' Christian Union (New York, 1873), 6, in Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 29.

woman, Sarah Heath argues, “was much more resilient, self-sufficient, and assertive than many middle-class reformers liked their protégées to be.” Reformers, believing that their charges needed protection from urban blight and vice, engaged in a variety of policing efforts that emphasized the extension of their organization as an extradomestic space. The Business Women’s Home on Pleasant Street in Des Moines, for example, claimed to do “everything possible . . . to enable the girls to live in as home-like a way as possible . . . in order that they may have less and less inclination to go downtown in the evenings.”⁴²

During World War I the national YWCA recognized that African American women and girls entering industry had limited recreational opportunities. In response, the organization aggressively facilitated a three-fold expansion of black free-standing associations and affiliated branches, enlisting black YWCA national staff and the War Work Council to obtain personnel and provide programming for black women and girls. Before World War I, nine black women were paid to work at 16 centers. By 1921, there were 10 black secretaries, 109 workers in local associations, 29 branches, and 29 unaffiliated chapters.⁴³ Marshalling the YWCA’s strong postwar financial position, the organization expanded programming efforts to include black girls and created leadership positions for black women, affirming white women’s claims of advancing American democracy and patriotism through Christianity. The efforts African Americans made in the war effort as full citizens, as opposed to wards of the state, fueled optimism as they approached war work with the YWCA and in the armed services. Although the YWCA and YMCA expanded offerings for black women and men, when the organization eventually created hostess houses for black men, black hostess house directors reported to white directors and few black women were sent abroad to work with black troops. In 1920, one year after the Red Summer, a summer that saw 25 race riots, the YWCA dissolved the existing War Work Campaign and earmarked only 4 percent of its budget for programs

42. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 78; Heath, “Negotiating White Womanhood,” 87; “Business Women’s Home.”

43. YWCA of America, “The Sign of the Blue Triangle.”

for black women and interracial work.⁴⁴ Although black women in Des Moines would benefit from this purse, the existing paths for interracial cooperation were often offset by the organization's commitment to segregation.

BY 1920, at least 5,837 African Americans lived in Polk County, a 50 percent increase over 1910.⁴⁵ Many of the college-educated men recruited for officer training at Fort Des Moines were graduates and faculty from Yale, Harvard, Tuskegee, and Howard. According to Des Moines native Mary Wood, the recruits "were impressed with Des Moines and saw opportunities . . . and when they got out of the service they brought their families . . . here." According to Wood, the middle-class wives and sisters were accustomed to segregated YWCA branches and college chapters, which "had meant a great deal to them, and so they were interested in having something of that kind."⁴⁶ Historically black colleges and universities had been quick to embrace the movement, as both the YWCA and YMCA united learning and spiritual development through mission work with poor black communities. Schools such as Wilberforce University provided "rest rooms"—respectable gathering spaces—for black college women at a time when they were rarely welcome at off-campus restaurants. In addition to support from faculty, these spaces provided a natural home for college YWCA chapters. After a black branch was established in Des Moines, numerous black sororities used the space to hold meetings.⁴⁷

Both men and women met at Des Moines's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church to organize groups dedicated to establishing a YMCA and YWCA on Des Moines's east side. The Blue Triangle YWCA organized in 1918, with white Vassar College alumna Della (Marquardt) Coggeshall serving as chair;

44. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 51–61.

45. Willis Goudy, "Selected Demographics: Iowa's African-American Residents, 1840–2000," in *Outside In: African American History in Iowa, 1838–2000*, ed. Bill Silag (Des Moines, 2001), 44.

46. Wood interview, 15.

47. Cothorn interview; Jones, "Struggle among Saints," 164; "1940 Annual Meeting, Blue Triangle YWCA," Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1935–39, box 20, YWCA, IWA.



A group of young women pose in front of the building on 10th Street in Des Moines used in the 1920s for the Blue Triangle Branch of the YWCA. Photo from State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

the National YWCA sent black staffer Beulah G. McNeill served as temporary branch secretary. In 1919 the branch began offering programming to women and girls from a small home on the 700 block of 10th Street, providing black girls an after-school respite.⁴⁸

For black school-age girls who only had white teachers, the Blue Triangle Branch was a formative space where girls could interact with college degree-holding staffers like McNeill, Virginia Robinson, Regina Crawford, Frances M. Banks, Ruth Marie Brown, and Adah (Hyde) Johnson, one of the first black women to graduate from the University of Iowa.⁴⁹ Branches provided practical work experiences and leadership training that helped

48. "East Side Branch of YWCA Sought by Negro Women," *Des Moines Register*, n.d., YMCA, Iowa vertical file, Special Collections, Des Moines Public Library, Des Moines; "History of Young Women's Christian Association Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines, Iowa," ca. 1942, History, 1942, 1975, box 20, YWCA, IWA; "A Bit More about the Blue Triangle Branch and Racial Integration, as told by Adah Johnson to Virginia Van Liew," n.d., *ibid.*

49. "Adah F. Johnson," 2/7/1988, YWCA Blue Triangle Branch, Brochures, Obituaries, Photographs, 1941, 1947, 1988, box 20, YWCA, IWA; "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines"; "Blue Triangle (Colored) Branch," *Inklings of the YWCA*, 4/27/1927, 2, Publicity, *Inklings*, 1913-1928, box 13, YWCA, IWA.

many of the girls ascend into other black agencies and institutions by the close of the 1930s. In 1927 35 volunteers and a branch secretary served more than 500 women and girls by overseeing the Girl Reserve program, leading vesper services, supervising campers and teen advisers, and organizing financial campaigns and membership drives. Mary Wood remembers gaining a wide variety of experiences: "I practically lived there! [I did] their typing, their vesper services, the scrubbing of the floors—I did everything." Her impressionable experiences with the Blue Triangle Branch sparked an entire career with the organization. In 1956 Wood became the first African American to hold the title of executive director of a major metropolitan YWCA, first in Buffalo and later in Pittsburgh.⁵⁰

New branches customarily received visits from members of the national staff. National Secretary for Colored Work Cordella Winn visited the Blue Triangle Branch several times within its first decade. Winn urged the Des Moines YWCA board to create more leadership opportunities for black women. After the Blue Triangle Branch moved to another house at 1227 School Street in 1924, it continued to be managed by a four-person Committee of Management. Although branch members elected the committee members, branch members were not allowed to serve on the Des Moines YWCA board or vote for its members.

Some opportunities for interracial work did occur at the club level. The More the Merrier Club, for example, invited women who worked from home or who were employed as domestics or child-care workers to participate in racially integrated parties and field trips. Between World War I and World War II, 90 percent of black working women, including Mary Wood's mother, Rose, worked from their homes doing what Des Moines native and social worker Marguerite (Esters) Cothorn recalled was "a lot of rubbing and scrubbing, and starch and bluing, and ironing."⁵¹

50. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 193; Wood interview, 11; Kathryn Neal, Introduction, "Interview with Mary Wood, 5/22/1997," *Giving Voices to Their Memories: Oral Histories of African-American Women in Iowa*, IWA.

51. Industrial Department of the Des Moines YWCA, "Girls' Doings at the YWCA," *Publicity, Pamphlets and Y Winks, 1904-1924*, box 13, YWCA, IWA; Goudy, "Select Demographics," 35; Cothorn interview; Wood interview, 17.

While black women in Des Moines were settling into their separate and unequal places within the association, the national YWCA began battering its institutional hatches against the YMCA's postwar efforts to expand its work to include girls and women. Stiff competition for underrepresented regions, populations, and benefactors added to the fervor. One secretary from Cincinnati took a long view, writing that "while I believe in the outlawry of war, I am afraid that local combats will be necessary for a few years."⁵² Using sociological arguments, the YWCA attacked the unnaturalness of same-sex spaces and institutions.⁵³ The aftermath of woman suffrage, the rise of a consumer-driven economy, and new Freudian theories about latent sexuality promoted a new heterosocial culture everywhere from college campuses to reform organizations. Still, many women attempted to brave the cultural storm from their respective settlement houses, missions, and political parties. Within professions they found themselves placed in a gendered hierarchy "without real power." Robertson argues that "what for men then were debates about wholesomeness, efficiency, and giving communities what they wanted were, for women, questions about their power in the organization and agency within the broader society."⁵⁴ National YWCA staff objected "to only being consulted about the church carpet," insisting that they wanted to act on their own expertise and training. "We want to do our own thinking," wrote YWCA national board president Emma Bailey Speer, "and that process leads to amusement when some worthy brother thinks he is 'saving the family' by getting Mr. Jones and Mrs. Robinson in the same swimming pool."⁵⁵

52. Regina Bannan, "Management by Women: The First Twenty-Five Years of the YWCA National Board, 1906-1931" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 62-63, in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 102.

53. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 102-3.

54. *Ibid.*, 105, 108. See also Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Nancy Tomes, "Women in the Professions: A Research Agenda for American Historians," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982), 284; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York, 1984), 180.

55. Emma Bailey Speer, "What Does the Woman Want: Men Wonder, But Women Know," *Women's Press* 22 (July 1928), 456-57 (reprinted from *Association Men*), in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 113.

Most women of the YWCA, such as National Secretary to the Negro Board Eva Bowles, warned against following the path of their male counterparts by falling “for the bait of” glossy, segregated buildings. They urged the YWCA not “to see their own work in terms of equipment” and to avoid decisions that would result in the loss of work for YWCA-trained leadership staff.⁵⁶ Such gendered turf wars were familiar to national YWCA staff, many of whom were affiliated with separatist organizations such as the Women’s Division of the Amateur Athletic Foundation, which in 1921 initiated a separatist campaign to assert its own expertise within existing structures of sport, athletics, and physical education for women and girls.⁵⁷

In contrast to the muscular Christian-based set of services the YMCA peddled to its increasingly middle-class constituency, the YWCA shamelessly touted its promotion of interracial sisterhood. Black women’s presence as delegates to national meetings had increased from 40 in 1920 to 100 in 1930. Still, most interracial efforts within associations were rooted in individual orientation or action rather than policy and did little to disrupt the hegemony of white supremacy or segregation.⁵⁸

In Des Moines, the specter of segregation trumped Christian sisterhood when it came to Girl Reserve troops, regional Girl Reserve summer conferences, and sessions at Camp Dodge, where it was feared that shared cabins, canoes, and swimming pools might result in “intimate and unscripted interactions.” Maintaining unspoken covenants of racial segregation, swimming pools were constructed in the heart of distinctly white and black neighborhoods. Cothorn recalled that during the 1920s and ’30s, Des Moines schools “did not want the black children in the swimming pool.” Black students were discouraged by any

56. “Annual Report of Eva D. Bowles to the City Department,” 3/4/1929, 3, Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1929–1932, box 34, YWCA, IWA.

57. Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (New York, 1994), 57–62; Estelle Freedman, “Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930,” *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979), 513; Ellen Gerber, “The Controlled Development of Collegiate Sport for Women, 1923–1936,” *Journal of Sport History* 2 (1975), 5–6; Betty Spears, *Leading the Way: Amy Morris Homans and the Beginnings of Professional Education for Women* (New York, 1986), 130.

58. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 102–4, 117, 135.

means necessary from swimming; often they were routed to study hall or orchestra during aquatic units. Cothorn maintained that "that spirit carried over to the playground" and to swimming classes at high school pools, where "black children always had the last class of the day," further reinforcing white assumptions about black ability and hygiene.⁵⁹

In the spirit of the bitter battle for membership, the Des Moines YWCA pulled no punches when presented with the opportunity to compare its biracial practices to the segregated policies at the YMCA. White YWCA staff and black community members harangued the Des Moines YMCA after its board decided that black girls could not swim in its camp pool in Boone. During the planning period for 1934, a schedule revision meant that white boys' and black girls' sessions would overlap. Since the Boone camp's inaugural season in 1923, both groups had been able to negotiate time for their sessions. A black physician expressed disappointment that school-aged girls would have to turn to waters "heavily infested with disease germs and poisonous matter" of the recently flooded banks of the Des Moines River. Editors of the *Bystander* remarked that "with all the frills stripped off . . . it is the policy of the Young Men's CHRISTIAN Association to resort not only to the unchristian policy of segregation which is not even involved here, but by that of exclusion." Eskil C. Carlson, president of the Des Moines YMCA's board of directors, labeled the women uncooperative and appealed to anxieties of interracial sexual relations, cautioning that "something might happen." He also expressed concerns about a potential loss of members and financial support. Claiming the utmost regard for the "excellent Negro ladies" of the branch, he reasoned that the only interracial work that was worthwhile was the type that could be approached without uncertainty. Carlson, like many segregationists in the YWCA, urged disappointed black community members to be open to "patient tolerant progress."⁶⁰

59. Verbrugge, "Recreation and Racial Politics in the YWCA," 104; Wood interview, 9; Cothorn interview. For more on gender and racial segregation in swimming pools, see Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007).

60. "Board Chairman in Defense of YWCA Stand on Swimming Pool," 7/13/1934 and "Secretary Dillon Sanctions Policy of Exclusion," 6/22/1934, Scrap-

Bystander editors refuted the YMCA's backstroking.

There are possibilities always that something unusual might happen and yet if the YMCA and YWCA can't supervise their activities so as to keep this 'something' at a minimum, then who in the world may we look to for it? In fact, if they can't they might as well close their building and use the money to feed the poor. Recognizing that the YMCA is having difficulties financially, the *Bystander* would like to know what institutional or individual is not. . . . Further the *Bystander* does not believe that any appreciable number of the Y's prospective contributors refused to give because they wanted to be fair to Negroes. . . . Of course some people object to being fair with Negroes; some people object to pool tables, bowling alleys, and many other features in the Y. They don't throw them out and why? Because most of the people think them good, wholesome recreation. The *Bystander* believes that most people want to be fair to the Negro; the only thing needed is a leadership with fair, courageous convictions to point that way.⁶¹

Despite the segregation practiced at Camp Boone sessions, this conflict created several opportunities. The YMCA's insistence on its rigid race policies prompted a dogged defense by white women of black girls' access to all of the experiences enjoyed by white campers. Additionally, by focusing on the interests of black girls, both white and black leaders were able to foreground the existence and worth of black girlhood. Such interracial work, while it did not end segregated camp sessions, prompted additional consideration of branch members' interests and voices in the organization and supported the national YWCA's efforts to differentiate itself from its male counterpart's segregationist policies.

THE 1930s ushered in several structural changes in the national YWCA organization and also bore witness to more inclusive policies and new strategies for interracial work. With more than 100 black delegates at the national conference in Detroit in 1930, some staff more boldly proclaimed their dedication to interracial

book, 1932-1934, box 34, YWCA, IWA; "Negro Girls Are Barred from YMCA Pool," *Iowa Bystander* 6/22/1934, *ibid.*; Verbrugge, "Recreation and Racial Politics in the YWCA," 94.

61. "Negro Girls Are Barred from YMCA Pool."

work. Large increases in lynchings, particularly in non-southern states, prompted one white secretary to report that white women needed to be convinced not to confuse compassion for justice and to consider the needs of black communities rather than simply offering individual kindness.⁶²

Students, often the first to demand change, led the charge against segregation after the death of Juliette Derricotte, the dean of women at Fisk University and former secretary of the YWCA's National Student Council. In 1931 Derricotte and a Fisk student suffered injuries in an automobile accident. After white emergency room doctors treated their injuries, both women were sent to a boarding house to await an ambulance to transport them to a black hospital in Chattanooga, rather than admitting them to the segregated hospital for observation. Both were pronounced dead within the day. Derricotte's visits and writings in the YWCA organ *Women's Press* had given many white women their first exposure to a black middle-class woman. Anger over her ill treatment galvanized white members of the Headquarters Committee of the National Student Council, which issued a statement decrying Derricotte's death and pledging itself "to an unremitting effort for a new and different civilization where segregation would be abolished." This marked the first time in the history of the organization when an arm of the national body openly criticized segregation. Soon a new generation of staff members would employ more overt pressure in an attempt to bring white women along.⁶³

Black women like Eva Bowles and Cordella Winn had confidence in their ability to engage and transform the structures of the YWCA. At the institutional and local level, both approached their work with the uplift axiom that encouraged reformers to "bend the tree while it is young."⁶⁴ In 1928 Winn returned to Des Moines to discuss race relations with the women at the Blue Triangle Branch and to help establish an interracial Committee on Colored Work (CCW). First proposed at the YWCA Confer-

62. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 132.

63. *Ibid.*, 134-38.

64. Mrs. Bush, "Bend the Tree While it is Young," *Colored American* 12 (Jan. 1907), 53, in Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, 13.

ence in Louisville in 1915, CCWs were initially designed to facilitate "the better understanding of both races."⁶⁵ Too often, CCWs also functioned as Committees of Management for branches, a problem that the national staff faced regularly throughout the 1920s.

In Des Moines, a Committee of Management already existed, although it was not included in association affairs as much as Winn would have liked. Winn worked with Des Moines women to develop a CCW that could function as a "clearing house on technical and administrative questions between the black branch and the white association."⁶⁶ Composed of an equal number of black and white women, the CCW was charged with studying the history, development, and needs of African Americans. The CCW reported to both the board of directors and the branch's Committee of Management on racial issues. In Winn's opinion, the most difficult task involved the time and trust needed to create an environment in which white and black women could discuss race relations and black community needs frankly "and with unbiased minds."⁶⁷

Winn was well aware that whites had long ignored African Americans residing in communities where they had always been small minorities. As black neighborhoods grew in Des Moines during the 1920s and '30s, "the very presence of a Negro in a community [created] a problem in the white mind."⁶⁸ One such neighborhood was along Center Street, an enclave that became one of the most prominent and bustling black neighborhoods in the city.⁶⁹ Due to varying "experience levels,"

65. The Des Moines YWCA preferred the term Race Relations Committee over Committee for Colored Work. YWCA of the USA, *Proceedings of the Eighth National Convention*, 1924, 39, in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 92.

66. "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines"; "Notes on Interview with Ms. Winn," n.d., Blue Triangle Branch Race Relations Committee, 1927, box 20, YWCA, IWA.

67. "Committee on Colored Work," May 1929, Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1929-1932, box 34, YWCA, IWA; Cordella Winn to Mrs. M. W. McCoy, 6/6/1930, Blue Triangle Branch Scrapbook, 1919-1932, box 24, YWCA, IWA.

68. Cothorn interview.

69. Jack Lufkin, "'Higher Expectations for Ourselves': African-Americans in Iowa's Business World," in *Outside In*, 204-10.

members of the CCW in Des Moines, as in many other cities, had to work through unfamiliarity and other traditions as they approached their work as students of "racial understanding."⁷⁰ "It is almost impossible to work interracial," Winn wrote after a third visit to Des Moines, "until you are pretty well acquainted with the thinking and attitudes of each other. . . . Often we do not agree in our thinking, which is not at all serious if we have the right attitude about it, but it helps us to open our minds by discussing frankly and freely whatever faces us."⁷¹

Departments committed to race work were among the organizational casualties of the Great Depression. Prompted by budget cuts of 38 percent from 1929 to 1932, the Des Moines YWCA eliminated its CCW in 1932 and folded its workers into other departments with higher numbers of non-white constituents.⁷²

Despite the dissolution of the CCW, the Des Moines YWCA slowly embraced interracial programming. The proximity to Drake University and the pool of black, middle-class professionals residing in the Center Street neighborhood provided access to well-known artists such as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Etta James.⁷³ Unfortunately, the hospitality of the Des Moines YWCA did not always extend beyond its own walls. In March 1932 Langston Hughes arrived at the Central building to present "an evening of poetry and its relation to the background of the life of the Negro." Hughes's stay in Des Moines was marred by the denial of service in a local hotel and a restaurant.⁷⁴ Ten years later, Marian Anderson returned to Des Moines to perform at the Shrine Auditorium. Unlike during her first trip, she was able to stay in town at the Hotel Fort Des

70. "Annual Report of Eva D. Bowles to the City Department 1929."

71. Winn to McCoy, 6/6/1930.

72. "Committee on Colored Work."

73. Mitchell and Morris, interview. For more on African American entertainers in Iowa, see Raymond Kelso Weikal, "The Song of the River: African-American Music and Entertainment in Iowa," in *Outside In*, 522-53.

74. "Noted Poet to Be Present at YWCA," Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1932-1934, box 34, YWCA, IWA; Clipping, ca. 1932, Scrapbook, 1929-1932, box 20, YWCA, IWA; Darlene Lewis and Lisa Nakashima, "History, YWCA of Greater Des Moines," 1995, Administrative Records, Histories, 1896, 1940-1995, box 1, YWCA, IWA.

Moines, with the tacit understanding that she would use the service elevator to enter and exit.⁷⁵

In the 1920s and '30s, few restaurants owned by whites would serve lunch or supper to black diners. Rock Island Station would seat black customers, but Cothorn recalls that occasionally the food was over-salted as "a way of letting you know" you were not welcomed. By 1939, the Marguerite, a roadside hotel owned and managed by Arthur J. and Nellie Mae Esters, was one of the safe havens advertised by *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. In addition to black middle-class vacationers, servants and domestics traveling with white families to Lake Okoboji also found respite at the Marguerite. Similarly, various iterations of the Blue Triangle were able to provide temporary and longer-term lodging for single black women and occasionally larger groups.⁷⁶

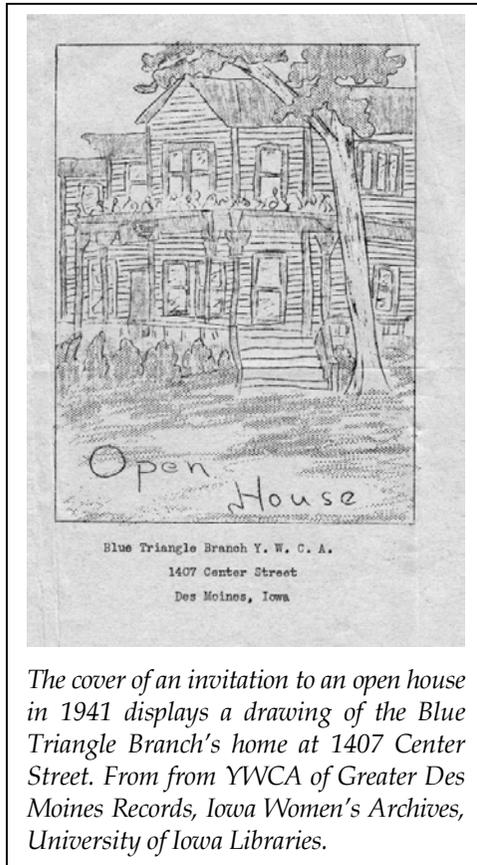
Local talent from the black community, like the Blue Triangle Octet, was welcome to performed at the Central during folk festivals in the early 1930s. The Central also hosted educational lecture series related to African American culture and social experiences. With financial assistance from the Central, in April 1933 the Blue Triangle Branch hosted a conference as part of National Negro Health Week in which mothers, wives, workers, and teens from the community could learn about child psychology and combating preventable diseases.⁷⁷

Although the CCW was dissolved, another long-lasting interracial cornerstone was laid in the early 1930s. Each week, both the Blue Triangle and the Central facilities hosted "Sunday Con-

75. Cothorn interview; Mitchell and Morris interview.

76. Lewis and Nakashima, "History, YWCA of Greater Des Moines"; Mitchell and Morris interview; Cothorn interview; Mark S. Foster, "In the Face of 'Jim Crow': Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945," *Journal of Negro History* 84 (1999), 130-49; *The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1939* (New York City, 1939), 11, accessible at The New York Public Libraries Digital Collections, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/911d3420-83da-0132-687a-58d385a7b928>; Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa Bystander*, 6/18/1946.

77. "Folk Festival," ca. 1932; "Folk Festival Here Tonight, 11/18/1932; Invitation, ca. 1932; "National Negro Health Week," 4/4/1933, all in Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1932-1934, box 34, YWCA, IWA.



The cover of an invitation to an open house in 1941 displays a drawing of the Blue Triangle Branch's home at 1407 Center Street. From from YWCA of Greater Des Moines Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

versations." For at least two decades, these integrated coffee clutches met after church services to discuss topics ranging from employment issues and teen diversions to housing discrimination and the quality of public schooling in Des Moines.⁷⁸

In 1933 the Blue Triangle Branch was able to relocate after receiving a generous gift from the family of John S. Coskery. In the heart of the vibrant Center Street neighborhood, the new home at 1407 Center Street was "well kept and attractive" and "always available for use of groups in the Negro community."

78. "Committee on Colored Work"; *Blue Triangle YWCA News*, 1/13/1933; "Invitation," Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1932-1934, box 34, YWCA, IWA; Katherine Lucchini to Myra Smith, 9/29/1947, YWCA-Des Moines Administrative Records, General Correspondence, 1908, box 2, YWCA, IWA.



Members of the Book Lovers Club pose in their neighborhood. Photo from YWCA of Greater Des Moines Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

The branch accommodated three residents and a gathering space for large traveling groups, such as out-of-town church choirs from black churches, and provided programming space for weekly meetings of the Book Lovers Club, a separatist literary circle dedicated to black authors and black culture during a time when circulation specialists at most public libraries had yet to embrace multicultural talents and tastes. In addition, vesper services regularly dotted the branch calendar, as did teen dances, forums on physical health, family life, dating, employment, and classes in interior decorating, handicraft, basketball, and badminton. Later, during World War II it served as a hostess house for black soldiers.⁷⁹

79. "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines"; "Annual Report," 1938, YWCA Records, box 6, YWCA, IWA, in Christine Pawley, "Race Reading, and the Book Lovers Club, Des Moines, Iowa, 1925-1941," *Annals of Iowa* 65 (2006), 39-42; Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa By-stander*, 6/18/1946.

With the dissolution of the CCW, much of the burden of race work in Des Moines shifted to the newly founded Public Affairs Committee (PAC), an education and action group established at the national convention in 1932. Like the NAACP organ *Colorlines*, branch publications provided regular legislative updates and encouraged members to write to senators and congressmen about important votes.⁸⁰ Des Moines's interracial PAC distributed its own newsletter to members. Common causes included "work for the continuance, extension and enforcement of social legislation" related to disarmament agreements, raising the minimum wage, limiting hours of work, maintaining free public schools, and ensuring workers' right to organize.⁸¹

The Des Moines PAC also encouraged members to attend an interracial vesper service in 1933. Those in attendance prayed together:

Leader: Lord of all nations,
Grant that, in this nation,
There may be none, high or low, whatever his race or caste,
Who is bound by the shackles of ancient contempt,
And barred by his right of free manhood.
People: Grant that all people and tongues may be combined
In a new striving for social emancipation;
In a new enthusiasm of humanity,
Brother working with brother
To give all men their full rights of common sonship to Thee.
Amen.⁸²

Such interracial events served as a weak proxy for racial justice. Despite invocations of the Social Gospel movement, such events were used to placate black women, particularly students, who more actively agitated for increased inclusion and demanded representation.⁸³ Still, by the 1930s, the Des Moines YWCA,

80. *Public Affairs*, April 1933, May 1933, September 1933, Scrapbook, 1932-1934, box 34, YWCA, IWA.

81. "Program Emphasis for 1938," 10/6/1938, Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1938-1940, box 21, YWCA, IWA; "Clubs Opened to Two Races," *Des Moines Register* 2/16/1947, Scrapbook, 1946-1947, box 27, YWCA, IWA.

82. "Race Relations Vesper Service," 2/19/1933, Scrapbook, 1932-1934, box 34, YWCA, IWA.

83. Jones, "Struggle among Saints," 166; Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 135.

particularly the Blue Triangle Branch, had reinforced many of the prominent strategies characterizing uplift reform work: highlighting the needs of African American communities, increasing awareness of those needs among both whites and blacks, and creating interracial dialogs between community members and folks with the power to influence the broader association.

IN 1935 two black women were able to penetrate the lily-white ranks of the Des Moines YWCA board of directors. An all-white voting body elected social worker Clara Webb to serve a three-year term. Additionally, the chair of the branch's Committee of Management, first represented by Anna Simmons, was given a seat on the board. For black members, an even greater sea-change occurred when women of the Blue Triangle Branch received their first ballots for association elections in January 1936. In 1937, after Winifred Brooks, the branch's Laugh, Love, and Life Girl Reserve president, attended a National Girl Reserve Conference in New Genoa, Wisconsin, she reported that she was the only black student elected to the camp council. In 1938 branch members began to expand their reach within the association with seats on committees for Girl Reserves, Camp, Employment, Personnel, Membership, Program Planning, and even the Executive Committee. Both Amos Hyatt Junior High School Girl Reserve clubs merged into a single entity with two co-advisers, one black, one white. The women who escaped the sticky floor of the branch were mostly middle class, college educated, or married to prominent men in the black community.⁸⁴

As black members gained seats and chair positions on committees, black leaders applied pressure and influence from within the organization. Blue Triangle leaders advised their members that in order to "to be well bred," it was paramount to be "considerate of the rights and feelings of the others under all circumstances."⁸⁵ Such advice played into the "backleading" that many

84. "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines"; Winifred Brooks, "My Trip to Powers Lake," *Headliners* (1937), Scrapbook, 1935-1937, box 35, YWCA, IWA.

85. Emily Post, "Etiquette Authority," *Headliners* (1937), Scrapbook, 1935-1937, box 35, YWCA, IWA; "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines."

African American women had been taught to do as the national YWCA pushed for deeper inclusion outside of the Northeast.

The visibility gained by board member Clara (Webb) Bayles gave her access to white women's organizations throughout the state of Iowa. She was able to educate white reformers about problems unique to black Iowans, particularly ones who had recently migrated. Bayles also used her visibility to familiarize white women with the reform work conducted by the NAACP and to encourage them to use their own voices to follow suit.⁸⁶

In general, the Blue Triangle continued to provide a conduit between black Des Moines, the Central, and, by extension, other social reformers. The national YWCA was so pleased with the interracial work in Des Moines that National Secretary Frances Harriet Williams visited to witness for herself the "good will" being advanced by the local. She encouraged black Iowans by noting that their "great work" and interracial fellowship would surely benefit "other sections of the country."⁸⁷

Despite acclaim from national leaders, mild unrest seethed at the Blue Triangle. After branch delegates returned from the national convention in Colorado Springs in 1938, members voiced concerns about inclusion and involvement in the broader association, particularly on the influential Committee of Management and the board of directors. The following year, black women gained additional influence through the election of Hazel Dixon to the board of directors and Korrine Jackson to the nominating committee.⁸⁸ The slow uptick in representation within the association, the commingling of branch Thoroughbreds and association Industrial Girls and Business Girls clubs, and branch efforts to include "women and girls of all ages, classes, churches, sections of the city, and various types of employment" in the Committee of Management, events, and classes allowed for a glacial destabilization of the white middle-class dominance of the organization. A similar change was

86. Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa Bystander*, 1/31/1946.

87. "NY Leader Tells of Goodwill Here," 1/28/37, Scrapbook, 1935-1937, box 35, YWCA, IWA.

88. "Program Emphasis for 1938"; Verbrugge, "Recreation and Racial Politics in the YWCA," 90; "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines."

occurring in the broader community, as the 1930s saw a rise in Urban League and NAACP memberships and an increase in the number of black businesses, churches, women's clubs, and student groups.⁸⁹

The national YWCA extended another nod of approval toward Des Moines by inviting members from the Central and the Blue Triangle Branch to participate in a Standards Study. According to the national YWCA, a "'Standard Association' is one which deliberately, persistently, and honestly endeavors in all that it does to build the kind of fellowship described in the Association purpose . . . a very simple thing to understand, difficult as it is to achieve." Chaired by a black branch member, the Standards Committee evaluated the place of the branch within the association and made recommendations about how to best implement corrections to inequities discovered through the self-study. The committee concluded that the Blue Triangle was a miniature reproduction of the Central Association.⁹⁰

The Des Moines YWCA was happy to report the voting franchise exercised by black members in its association leadership even though only 40 percent of the branches nationally were allowed to vote for association leadership. Framed in a positive light by the report's authors, such characterization likely ignored inequities in pay and camp counselor training and other inconsistencies often found between the associations and branches.⁹¹

Des Moines's self-study of gaps and redundancies prompted a restructuring of the interracial Amicita Club, a club for women who labored from home or worked as domestics. The club, which met at the Central, continued to support such women and address issues related to standardizing home care and work

89. The Thoroughbreds consisted of black high school graduates, whereas Industrial Girls Clubs typically included women involved in factory work, and Business Girls were more often employed as typists in offices. "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines"; "1940 Annual Meeting, Blue Triangle YWCA."

90. YWCA of America, "The Standards Study," in untitled report, ca. 1939, Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1938-1940, box 21, YWCA, IWA; "History of YWCA Work with Colored Women and Girls of Des Moines."

91. Jones, "Struggle among Saints," 184; "National YWCA Plans to End Racial Segregation," *Iowa Bystander*, 3/14/1946; Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 149.



Members of a dance team at the Des Moines YWCA's Blue Triangle Branch strike a joyful pose in 1941. Photo from YWCA of Greater Des Moines Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

from home. The Central offered many clubs and programs for white business, professional, and unemployed women. At the branch, black high school graduates under 35 were invited to join the older high school degree-holding Thoroughbreds; junior high and high school girls could find fellowship in the Girl Reserves; readers of all ages were welcome to join the Book Lover's Club; and many found their place in interest groups such as typing practice, handicraft, and mixed choir. Black girls and young women were encouraged to follow the "good road to health and happiness" through basketball, volleyball, tap dance, and table tennis. Daring members could have a try at roller skating. Women between 18 and 25 were invited to join the Blue Triangle Dance Club, and older employed women

could “find joy” through “educational programs and recreation” with the Cheramis Club.⁹²

Facing cutbacks and gasoline rationing during World War II, the YWCA welcomed cost-saving measures, such as Stay at Home Conferences, and provided additional revenue-producing co-ed activities for youth, teens, and adults. Both white and black women participated in a mixed-sex choral group. Perhaps even more significant was the way the YWCA embraced mixed-race dances for teens and young adults. Although there is no evidence that black teens were partner dancing with whites, the mere commingling was not a widespread practice. The Des Moines School system did not sanction racially integrated socials and the Drake Relays social was not integrated until 1947. Integrated co-ed Saturday night dances became so popular that the YWCA relocated them from the Central building, which could hold only 500 dancers, to the Tromar Ballroom, a space that held up to 3,200. The branch also provided separate entertainment for black youth through its regular Saturday Fun Nites. “A high regular attendance” drew locals and “students from Ames,” who were able to take a bus and return before midnight. In February 1941 more than 100 high school boys and girls visited the branch to dance and to play checkers, carom, and table tennis. In the summer, smaller integrated socials such as The Barnyard Frolic were held on the branch lawn until it closed in 1946.⁹³

Similar to wartime trends in women’s physical education, programming at the YWCA placed a heteronormative emphasis on attracting members of the opposite sex. Weight control and reducing classes had existed since the 1920s, and courses related to attracting and maintaining a mate became increasingly popular for “bashful, shy, out-of-date” young women. Charm school and

92. Untitled report, ca. 1939; “Clubs Opened to Two Races”; “Let’s Join a Club,” ca. 1938–1940, Blue Triangle Scrapbook, 1938–1940, box 21, YWCA, IWA; “1940 Annual Meeting, Blue Triangle YWCA”; “It’s Your ‘Y,’ Enjoy It!” ca. 1941, Scrapbook, 1941, box 36, YWCA, IWA; “Let’s Turn the Spotlight On,” ca. 1941, *ibid.*; “The Blue Triangle YWCA,” ca. 1941, *ibid.*

93. Cothorn interview; “Drake Relay Officials Congratulated,” *Iowa Bystander*, 5/1/1947; Minutes, Stay at Home Committee, 4/17/1945, Program Stories, 1946–1947, box 5, YWCA, IWA; untitled report, ca. 1939; “Cost of Teenage Centers,” *Des Moines Tribune*, 8/31/1946, Scrapbook, 1946–1947, box 27, YWCA, IWA; “Fun Nite,” Feb. 1941, Scrapbook, 1941, box 36, YWCA, IWA.



The Blue Triangle Branch of the Des Moines YWCA offered a safe gathering place for young black women. Photo from YWCA of Greater Des Moines Records, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

the veneration of domestic talents such as table decorating peppered the programs of the association and the branch.⁹⁴

Cultivating charisma may have been the aim of some programs, but the Blue Triangle Branch women also valued collaborations with Planned Parenthood, the Family Society, and local health care providers. Local white female physician Dr. Nelle Noble and local black physician Dr. Emmett Thomas Scales advised girls and women on more serious matters related to dating, healthy marital relationships, options for preventing pregnancy, and venereal disease. Black leaders at the branch believed that such health education delivered in small groups would have a positive effect on the girls and women in their community and would continue to uplift the race.⁹⁵

94. "Social Dancing," Feb. 1941, Scrapbook, 1941, box 36, YWCA, IWA; "Nobody Plays Hookey at Charm School," *Des Moines Register*, 10/24/1946, Scrapbook, 1946-1947, box 27, YWCA, IWA.

95. "Education Committee Invites to a Forum 'Venereal Disease,'" ca. 1939, Scrapbook, 1937-1939, box 20, YWCA, IWA; Lucchini to Smith, 9/29/1947; Dr. Scales became the first African American chief of staff at Mercy Hospital in 1952.

Lecture series, pamphlets, stand-alone lectures, conference panels, and Girl Reserve events such as the Mother's Tea were among the ways girls and adults were encouraged to discuss matters ranging from curfews to social ills, with a particular emphasis on "religious, racial, [and] family" prejudice. Black women and girls could learn about sexual dysfunction and sterilization and discuss topics such as sexual compatibility and expectations and be exposed to strategies for communicating levels of sexual experience with a mate. Many reformers attempted to "erect a barrier against casual prostitution"; the Blue Triangle YWCA, in contrast, responded to a diverse array of member needs, providing a space where conversations could diverge from social mores dictated by more conservative faith communities.⁹⁶

Facing another devastating war, the national organization took up the familiar task of maintaining wartime "civilian morale" for soldiers and families simply by offering "normal community life." The YWCA in Des Moines provided hostess services for both white and black soldiers in their respective segregated camps and recreation halls. The branch's Girls Service Organization (GSO), chaired by Winifred Brooks and assisted by secretary Barbara Crawford, set out to entertain not only the black soldiers and officer candidates but also the 40 black women selected for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Military personnel from Fort Des Moines could join in on Saturday basketball games and dancing.⁹⁷

After the consolidation of the black branch into the association, the Hostess Club remained one of the most popular and well-organized clubs, with members providing conversation and care for patients at local hospitals. Although the club was interracial, there is no indication that white hostesses interacted with black patients or black hostesses with white patients.

96. Invitation, ca. 1937, Scrapbook, 1935-1937, box 35, YWCA, IWA; "Questionnaire for Mothers," ca. 1937, *ibid.*; Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, Introduction, in *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and YWCA in the City*, 9.

97. "Program Focus," ca. 1941, Scrapbook, 1941, box 36, YWCA, IWA; "Girls' Service Organization Entertains Sixty Soldiers," n.d., Scrapbook, 1941, box 36, YWCA, IWA; "Negro WAACs and Soldiers Entertained," *Des Moines Register*, 8/9/1942.

Save for the custodial staff, it is likely that black hostesses were among the only African Americans circulating in Des Moines hospitals.⁹⁸

AFTER THE CONCLUSION of World War II, Mary Shotwell Ingraham, president of the national YWCA board, addressed the 17th national convention, proclaiming, "Man broke the atom, woman must break the pattern—there must be no more war; there must be harmony among men."⁹⁹ The 1946 national convention laid the groundwork for the Interracial Charter, an integrationist motion that, when enacted, significantly altered the experiences of many African American YWCA members. Although black women favored integration of social institutions, concerns over implementation of the Interracial Charter abounded.¹⁰⁰

In Des Moines the Executive Committee confidently affirmed its ability to move forward, declaring that a sort of practical integration had slowly been put in motion a decade earlier. Interracial "committees, councils, inter-club councils[,] all-association meetings," and repeated use of the Central building for large black and integrated program offerings made it easier to convince board members that such changes were practical, possible, and positive. In the summer of 1946, the Central YWCA hired two black Drake graduates, Joyce Carmon Smith, an assistant in the office of the business manager, and bookkeeper Billie Jean Davis. Smith moved into the Central facility alongside other white boarders. The board of directors approved a constitutional revision mandating that "the professional leadership of the association shall be entrusted to an Executive Director and such other officers as may be required, always including at least one Negro woman in a professional capacity."¹⁰¹

98. Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa Bystander* 4/24/1947. For more on the first African American public health nurse in Des Moines, see Barbara M. Calderon Papers, IWA.

99. YWCA of the USA, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth National Convention, 1946*, 11, in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 162.

100. *Ibid.*, 165–68.

101. Madeline Lambert to the Board, 5/14/1946, YWCA General Board Members, 1936–1945, box 2, YWCA, IWA; "Billie Jean Davis," *Iowa Bystander*, 8/28/1947; "Engagement Announced," *Iowa Bystander* 11/14/1946; "Rededication for

Employees from the Blue Triangle Branch were appointed to the board and various committees, and some black women brought valuable experience from elsewhere in the country. One member of the professional leadership, Bennett College honor graduate Helen Boulware, had been executive director of the Boulware Branch of the YWCA in High Point, North Carolina. Adah (Hyde) Johnson, who had served as executive director of the Blue Triangle Branch in 1945–1946, was reassigned to the position of director of Interracial Activities. It is difficult to assess whether that was an advancement, a lateral move, or a demotion for Johnson, although she only remained in the post for a year. Initially, Johnson received assistance from Dorothy I. Height, secretary of Interracial Education for the national YWCA, who was sent to Des Moines to meet “with a number of groups to discuss the interracial integration.”¹⁰²

Since Webb’s election in 1935, black membership on the board had been inconsistent. In 1948 the board welcomed three prominent black women to the board: Mrs. W. J. Ritchey, Mrs. Marshall Smith, and Lillian (Moore) Scales, who held one of the two vice presidencies. As an indicator of the social standing enjoyed by Ritchey, the wife of a black dentist, she invited the 17-member board to her home for a welcome reception for a new member of the professional staff, Mamie Davis.¹⁰³

A resounding victory for many, the enactment of the Interracial Charter resulted in the bittersweet closure of the branches. In rare cases, branches disaffiliated from the YWCA. Some associations refused to comply, though none were officially excommunicated until 1967.¹⁰⁴ Pittsburgh Executive Director

the Remodel,” *Des Moines Register*, 11/26/2017, Scrapbook, 1946–1947, box 27, YWCA, IWA.

102. Lewis and Nakashima, “History, YWCA of Greater Des Moines,”; “On YWCA Staff,” *Iowa Bystander*, 10/2/1947; Scrapbook, 1946–1947, box 27, YWCA, IWA; “YWCA,” *Iowa Bystander*, 6/15/1947, *ibid.* Dorothy Height also served as the president of the National Council of Negro Women.

103. Charlene J. Barnes and Floyd Bumpers, *Iowa’s Black Legacy* (Charleston, SC, 2000), 66; “Des Moines YWCA and Staff Members,” *Iowa Bystander*, 10/29/1948, Scrapbook, Publicity, 1948–1949, box 3, YWCA, IWA; Executive Committee Minutes, 2/11/1947, Administrative Records Series, Executive Committee Minutes, 1947–1952, box 3, YWCA, IWA.

104. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 177.

Mary Wood recalled that, growing up in Des Moines, she and other African Americans had experienced “blockades: you can’t do this, you can’t do that, you can’t teach, you can’t be a social worker, you can’t be something else because you’re black.” Wood, the only black member of her graduating class at both East High and Drake University, could find safe harbor, racial solidarity, and encouragement at the branch. According to Wood, “people loved their YWCAs” and viewed their closing as a tragedy. “As I saw it, [the segregated branch] was a stepping stone for women to come from their community into this branch and then gradually work up to being president of the whole YWCA, but when you eliminated this, you lost a lot of leadership in the YWCA. It had its value.”¹⁰⁵

For some, integration invoked suspicion. Robert and Louis Coskery, the holders of the quitclaim deed tied to the last branch location, approached the merger with concern. Their family told the board’s president that the board “should look upon the proceeds from this property as a special fund with which the board . . . may further whatever special projects it may” but that it ought not to be used to supplement the “ordinary running expenses of [the] organization.” The Coskery family was one of many voices expressing concerns that race work would be ignored after the branch was merged into the Central association.¹⁰⁶

In 1947 the YWCA diverted funds from the sale of the Coskery estate toward programming that would most acutely affect black girls, who were still prohibited from skating at public rinks, sharing a Coke in a booth with friends, or frequenting all the stalls at the Iowa State Fair.¹⁰⁷ Teen canteens, date nights,

105. Wood interview, 9, 15–16.

106. Robert and Louise Coskery to Mrs. Guy Lambert, 8/29/1946, Financial Records, Official Papers, Correspondence, Wills, Receipts, Permits, 1913–1947, box 10, YWCA, IWA; Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 166.

107. “Branch YWCA Ends in Des Moines; Program Integrates with Central; Building Sold,” *Iowa Bystander*, 7/11/1946; Coskery Fund Committee Minutes, 11/30/1946, YWCA Branches and Clubs, Blue Triangle Branch, Coskery Fund Committee, box 20, YWCA, IWA; Lucchini to Smith, 9/29/1947, YWCA-Des Moines Administrative Records, General Correspondence, 1908, box 2, YWCA, IWA; Marie Ross, “Personal Touch,” *Iowa Bystander*, 9/14/1949, Publicity

and school-sponsored diversity conferences emerged. For adults, women's dining clubs and co-ed coffee clutches carried on the tradition of caffeine-fueled discussions about social ills in Polk County.¹⁰⁸

Nationally, black members still failed to see themselves represented at the highest levels of their own associations. In a 1949 policy study, the YWCA acknowledged that it had yet to employ a single black executive director. Citing retention issues, qualifications, and recruiting woes, black national board member Constance Ridley Heslip of Toledo, Ohio, argued that the issue had nothing to do with "ability and stick-to-it-iveness on their part"; rather, black women often held "doubts of the attitude of the majority group." Such attitudes were also reflected in a decline in educational and recreational programming for black girls and women between 1945 and 1947.¹⁰⁹

Although some white women did approach integration with a zero-sum game mentality, black women did not swarm into every event, association, or club. Unclear invitations, exclusive luncheons, and off-site events did not make for effective inclusion. Before the merger in Des Moines, one third of the 359 new and renewal memberships were from the branch. After the merger, black membership slid to 20 percent. Perhaps a matter of branch location, it is also possible that black girls' families were not immediately open to allowing their daughters to "play together, and share experiences at the YWCA with girls of other

Scrapbook, 1948–1949, box 28, YWCA, IWA; "Some Signs That Blinkered 'Welcome' at State Fair Did Not Mean Negro Guests," *Iowa Bystander*, 8/29/1946. The building was sold to Pauline Humphrey for \$7,000. She planned to use it to operate her Crescent School of Beauty Culture. Humphrey was the first African American woman in Iowa certified to teach, own, and operate a cosmetology school. For more on Pauline Humphrey, see Barbara James, interview and related materials in *Giving Voice to their Memories: Oral Histories*, IWA.

108. "Find Prejudice Personal Issue," *Des Moines Register*, 10/27/1949; "High School Students at Human Relations Institute," *Des Moines Register*, 10/24/1949, Publicity Scrapbook, 1948–1949, box 28, YWCA, IWA; Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa Bystander*, 7/25/1946; "Romantic Atmosphere at the New Calico Club," *Des Moines Register*, 2/15/1947, Scrapbook, 1946–1947, box 27, YWCA, IWA.

109. YWCA of the USA, *Proceedings of the Seventeenth National Convention, 1946*, 86, 92, in Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 167–68.

racess, creeds and colors." *Bystander* writer Marie Ross encouraged black readers to shuck their anxieties and send their daughters to the integrated camp in Boone, while Winn remarked that efforts to integrate served as "a test of white people's sincerity."¹¹⁰

AFTER THE MERGER, black women's voices become more difficult to discern in the preserved record. Yet it is clear that both black and white staff and volunteers shared a vision of Christian sisterhood and mission that required taking the needs and potential of girls and young women seriously. They had not always approached their work with such unity.

Leaders and members soon felt the postwar sting of housing and employment shortages. Des Moines staffers wrung their hands over their declining ability to protect their protégées. Much to the chagrin of the employees operating the rooms registry, "the crop of June graduates had [staff] tearing [their] hair out," taking pains to locate alternatives to "rooms in sections of the city that [were] notorious or very badly run down." Property managers' refusal to rent to single girls created an increased demand for services while staff turnover, volunteer slumps, and a shortage of younger women willing to "assume leadership" left the Des Moines YWCA barely able to function as more than a "drop-in center." The Book Lovers Club and the Public Affairs Committee still gathered in the Club Room, but political and educational programming took a back seat to large socials and one-time events.¹¹¹

110. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA*, 167; "Clubs Opened to Two Races"; Report of the Executive Director to the Board of Directors, 2/19/1946, Annual Reports, 1938-1964, box 3, YWCA, IWA; Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa Bystander*, 5/14/1948, Publicity Scrapbook, 1948-1949, box 28, YWCA, IWA; Report of Cordella A. Winn, July 1938, 10, Reports, Secretaries', Winn, YWCA of the USA National Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, in Verbrugge, "Recreation and Racial Politics in the YWCA," 104.

111. "Finding a Home, A Story," April 1946, Program Stories 1946-1947, box 5, YWCA, IWA; "Job Problems of Women Told," *Des Moines Tribune*, 2/11/1949, box 28, Publicity Scrapbook, 1948-49, YWCA, IWA; Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa Bystander*, 9/14/1949; Marie Ross, "Personal Touch," *Iowa Bystander*, 6/18/1946; Katherine Lucchini to Norma Simms, 4/16/1947, Administrative Records, Histories, 1896, 1940-1995, box 1, YWCA, IWA; Lucchini to Myra Smith, 9/29/1947.

The institutional support offered by the YWCA provided an arena from which black middle-class reformers and community leaders could meet the needs of their own community while dismantling stereotypes held by their white counterparts. Both the separatist branch and the integrated association provided a way for black women and girls to acquire visibility and influence in their organizations and communities while honing the skills that allowed them to begin to transform “their world into their ideal of it.”¹¹²

112. Executive Committee Minutes, 2/11/1947.