



SHSI (DES MOINES)



# Sowing Seeds of Kindness—and Change

## A history of the Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs

by Anne Beiser Allen

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When the women met again the following year to draw up a constitution (*see photo, left*), the delegates represented clubs comprising some 200 black women from Davenport, Ottumwa, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Muscatine, Keokuk, and Buxton. As an umbrella organization over individual clubs across the state, the Iowa State Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs would unite black women and provide support, inspiration, direction, resources, and strength in numbers. Looking back over the last century reveals the changing issues championed by Iowa's black clubwomen, and how those changes reflected changes in American society itself.

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**Here posed outside Davenport's African Methodist Episcopal church, the leaders of Iowa's black clubwomen meet to draft a constitution at their second annual meeting in May 1903.**





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SHIRLEY KOWLES



education than their mothers had. At first, they offered their talents to their churches, raising money and carrying out charitable work. Sometimes these groups found themselves dominated by male preachers with different goals from those of their female members; when this happened, the women often formed new groups unaffiliated with the churches. Many women, wishing to continue their education in an informal setting, organized clubs focused on literature, art, or music. Others formed clubs to discuss timely issues or civic concerns. Expanding their focus and interest beyond home and family, these clubs often tackled local social problems, founding settlement houses, homes for the indigent and elderly, and orphanages. They campaigned for better treatment for the mentally ill, for a more humane approach to problems of poverty, and—though sometimes in a quiet way—for political issues such as woman suffrage and prohibition. Women discovered that participation in clubs provided an arena in which they could develop leadership skills.

The urge for social betterment and self-improvement motivated both white and black women, of course, but black women were spurred on by the need to disprove negative images of black women that were widely accepted in American white society. While white women functioned under the popular belief that they were pure, moral, and uniquely designed by nature to provide a civilizing influence on society, black women were often portrayed as the opposite of their white counterparts: immoral, unintelligent, and unable to rise above the so-called “primitive” culture from which their ancestors had been exported as slaves. As more black women acquired education and moved into the American middle classes, they sought to demonstrate that they themselves did not conform to this racist stereotype, and to help their less affluent sisters rise above it as well. Like their white counterparts, these women formed clubs and organizations and looked around for ways in which they could help their communities.

Likewise, in the final decades of the 19th century, Jim Crow attitudes and practices led to the founding of black schools and colleges, where, as W. E. B. Du Bois termed it, a “Talented Tenth” would be educated and equipped to uplift the entire race. Urban black communities banded together to found institutions for social services; many of these were funded—and at times administered—by African American women’s clubs.

The groundwork for a national organization of these women’s clubs was laid in the 1890s, in response to two particular acts of exclusion and racism. Black women were refused representation at the Columbian Exposition, to be held in Chicago in 1893; its organizers gave

the excuse that there existed no national organization of black women to provide such representation (the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, founded in New York City in 1890, represented only white women).

The second impetus was a racist letter written by James W. Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association, to Florence Belgarnie, secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in England, in which he described most black women as “wholly devoid of morality . . . prostitutes, thieves and liars.” When the contents of this letter became known, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, president of the New Era Club of Boston, sent out a call for a “National Conference of Colored Women” to be held in Boston in the spring of 1895. The conference attracted 104 women from 54 clubs, representing 14 states and the District of Columbia. From this, the National Federation of Afro-American Women was formed. A few months later the national federation sent representatives to the Colored Women’s Congress held in Atlanta in conjunction with the Cotton States and International Exposition.

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the National League of Colored Women had also been formed. In 1896, the two groups agreed to merge, forming the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). For president they elected Mary Church Terrell—an Oberlin graduate who taught school in Washington, D.C., before becoming the first black woman on its school board. During her three years in office at the NACW, Terrell skillfully coordinated the differing agendas of clubs from all over the country, thereby harnessing the energy of the black women’s club movement into an effective national organization. With the goals to “elevate and dignify colored American womanhood” and to “foster moral, mental and material progress” among black women, the NACW chose for its motto “Lifting As We Climb.”

Iowa’s African American population was small—in 1900 there were only 12,693 black Iowans out of a total population of 2,232,000. The highest numbers lived in larger cities, like Des Moines, Keokuk, Davenport, and Ottumwa, and in the coal-mining town of Buxton, where African Americans composed more than half of the 5,000 residents. It was in these communities, among middle-class African Americans, that the black women’s club movement in Iowa began.

The earliest was the Harriet Beecher Stowe Reading Club, founded in Des Moines in 1890. In 1893, the Silver Autumn Leaf Club formed in Davenport to study domestic science, art, and issues of the day. In 1894, a group of women in Ottumwa formed the Ida B. Wells





**Children and the home were considered the central focus for women, but through club work, they could apply their energies to social problems and civic concerns in their communities.**

Reading Club (named for the outspoken black journalist who crusaded against lynching).

By May 1902, when the Iowa Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs was founded, five more clubs had been organized: the Violet Reading Club (for intellectual improvement and Bible study) in Davenport in 1898; the Paul Dunbar Club (art and study) in Muscatine in 1900; the Toussaint L'Ouverture Club (art and needlework) in Davenport in 1901; the Benevolent Club (art and domestic science) in Ottumwa in 1901; and the Good Intent Club (literature and woman suffrage) in Ottumwa in 1902. The Josephine Silone Yates Club of Cedar Rapids and the Equal Standard Club of Davenport soon followed.

The 15 clubs represented at the May 1903 federation convention in Davenport recognized, as their new constitution spelled out, that "knowledge may be more readily acquired by a combination of efforts rather than by single ones," and acknowledged "the need of an organized and united effort for the betterment of the home and social life of the Afro-American people."

By uniting into a state federation, the clubs anticipated these benefits: "1) To secure harmony in action and co-operation among women in raising their home, moral and civic life to the highest standard; 2) To encourage the organization of clubs where they do not exist and where the aid of women's clubs are needed; 3) To aid the clubs in becoming more thoroughly acquainted with the different kinds of work that come within the scope of women's occupations." As its motto, the federation adopted the phrase "Sowing Seeds of Kindness."

At the annual state conventions, which spanned two or three days, the program usually included music, handicraft demonstrations, speeches, and reports. The early functions and focus of the new federation are revealed in the committees it formed: Reciprocity (for sharing information among member clubs), Arts and Crafts, Mothers' Clubs, Social Purity, Household Economics, and Education.

In 1905 and 1906, for example, the Social Purity Committee suggested discussion questions like these for local club meetings: Do the parents of your city guard against late hours for their children? Is there an equal standard of morality for boys and girls? Do the mothers of the community see that their children read good literature? Are the Negro Minstrels helpful to the race? Does public opinion control one's best actions? Do you approve of total abstinence or moderate use of liquor? Will a social game of cards lead to gambling? Does mental motherhood and fatherhood overcome heredity?

The study of arts and crafts also had social betterment implications. "We ought to become more intelligent as buyers and more appreciative of artistic craftsmanship," the Arts and Crafts Committee reported in 1905. "Therefore the difficult and intricate problem called Arts and Crafts movement is in analysis an economic and social problem." Clubs were surveyed as to the number of local dressmakers and designers, basket makers, milliners, lace makers, and decorators of china. The final survey question was pragmatic: "Can they sell their work?"

From the start, education, especially for girls, was a particularly high priority for the federation and its member clubs. "Today as never before education is the watch word of the hour for the Negro race," proclaimed the education committee in 1905. Although only a few members were college graduates, clubwomen tended to be better educated than the majority of black women in Iowa. Most of Iowa's black college graduates left the state to seek better employment opportunities. (Iowa's school districts, for example, did not hire black teachers until after World War II.) "Opportunities are pre-



sented every day to the educated girl," the Education Committee affirmed; "if not here, there are other places and we must qualify them."

The Iowa Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs was also deeply concerned about the image of African Americans in society. Members felt a calling to reform and encourage the less fortunate members of their community, and they worked for safety and respect for their race. Reflecting these concerns, delegates passed these resolutions in 1905: "That inasmuch as the custom of permitting young girls to solicit men to buy tickets from them is damaging to modesty and a menace to morality, we do set the seal of our condemnation upon it and call upon the church people, especially, to help us abolish the custom; . . . That we voice our condemnation of lynching and mob violence, and redouble our efforts to arouse public sentiment to the demand that the majesty of the law prevail throughout this broad land of ours until every human being is guaranteed a fair trial by law for life and liberty; . . . That we do not use nicknames." These resolutions illustrate the federation's demand for respect in a racist society where young black women were regarded as sexual objects, summary justice was often executed on black males, and members of both sexes were commonly addressed by inappropriately familiar nicknames or as inferiors undeserving of polite conventions of speech.

**A**s individual clubs enthusiastically took up a rich array of activities, the federation's conventions and reports kept everyone informed of ideas, projects, and successes. For instance, one learned through early reports from Davenport's Elizabeth Lindsay Davis Club that besides studying needlework and forestry, the women now had "a club song which we prize highly because the literature and music were composed by two of the members of the club," and the president had organized a club of "little folks who study the literature of colored writers." In 1907 the Fannie B. Williams Club of Buxton reported their accomplishments: "Made better wives and mothers, more systematic housekeeping, improved the selection of literature, more economic housekeeping and improvement in a social way and unity in action. . . . Bettered the homes, improvement intellectually, ennobled the women to overcome embarrassment, benefit morally, made steps to secure a building [for] club meetings and City Federations and other beneficial purposes."

In Des Moines, the Callahan Industrial Club had "worked earnestly for the benefit of the church . . . done a great deal of charity work where needed . . . did art,

and studied literature and now we are studying the Bible and the American magazine on the Color Line in the South." Davenport's Violet Reading Club had helped a blind man in their community, and Ottumwa's Good Intent Club assisted a local widow with six children by providing clothing, a Thanksgiving basket ("we say a basket but it came near being a wagon load" the report added), and Christmas gifts, "and then we got the open door mission to help them through the winter." The Ida B. Wells Club of Ottumwa furnished a room at the local hospital, paying \$20 a year for its upkeep. To the question of "What has your club accomplished in your own community?" the Frances Ellen Harper Club of Keokuk replied succinctly: "Raised the standard both intellectually and socially."

By 1910 the Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Clubs had grown large enough to qualify for membership in the national organization. (It had altered its name in 1905, changing "Afro-American" to "Colored" to conform more closely with the name of the National Association of Colored Women.) New clubs continued to emerge throughout the state. By 1913, when it was formally incorporated, the Iowa federation proudly claimed 35 member clubs in 13 cities, with a total membership of nearly 600.

Much of the federation's success in those early years was due to the high standards set by leaders whose energy, determination, and stamina guided its work. Audra Alexander, for example, served on many committees from the earliest days of the federation and remained active into the 1970s. Sophie Nichols, a Missouri native who worked as a clothes presser in a Des Moines department store, held offices in the federation for many years and presided over the Des Moines City Federation in 1922. Margaret Patten, a teacher, devoted many years to club work, including a stint as president in the 1920s (her husband, Des Moines printer Robert E. Patten, printed the federation's convention reports for many years). Jessie Ellen Walker of Marshalltown served on scholarship committees for some 50 years and was twice president, in 1910 and 1942.

Educated in teaching, music, and law, Gertrude E. Durden Rush was the first practicing black woman attorney in Iowa. With four other black Iowans, she co-founded the National Bar Association in Des Moines in 1925, in response to earlier mistreatment by the American Bar Association. Rush drew up the original articles of incorporation for the Iowa women's federation and later founded the Women's Law and Political Study Club to familiarize women with parliamentary procedure and the legal system.

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Jessie Ellen Walker



Sue M. Brown



Audra Alexander



Margaret Patten



Gertrude E. Rush

provement Club in Des Moines in 1907 and quickly became active in the state, regional, and national federation of black women's clubs; in 1930, she represented the national federation at the International Congress of Women in Vienna. From 1909 to 1911, Brown edited *Iowa Colored Woman* magazine. In 1915, she instigated the commissioning of a portrait of Booker T. Washington for the Iowa Hall of History. Cofounder of the Des Moines League of Colored Women Voters, Brown was the first woman president of the Des Moines chapter of the NAACP. In 1910 she sued J. H. Bell Company under the Iowa Civil Rights Act, contending that because of her race she had been refused free coffee at Bell's booth at a Des Moines Retail Grocers' Association food show. (The court ruled that the booth and the free coffee were for advertising purposes and not covered by the act.)

Federation resolutions passed at the annual meetings attest to the range of obstacles and injustices faced daily by blacks in Iowa and the United States—and to the clubwomen's demands for improvements in education and working conditions and an end to racism. In the period before the First World War, for instance, federation resolutions included a vote of thanks to the Boyson Drug Company of Cedar Rapids for "giving employment to young colored women as waitresses in the Grill Room." A 1913 resolution praised attorneys S. Joe Brown and George Woodson's successful opposition to proposed state legislation banning interracial marriages. In 1915 and 1916, the clubwomen endorsed woman suffrage, prohibition, and establishment of social centers for young people. They denounced the use of "pictures which are objectionable to the Afro-Americans" and condemned "all vulgar and degrading post cards and posters" as well as racist movies like the highly popular *Birth of a Nation*. And they commended the white Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs for rejecting membership in the white

National Federation of Women's Clubs unless a black women's club in that city was allowed to affiliate with them. "We are grateful to them," said the Iowa federation, "and to all who have the courage to take such [a] stand and shall ever ask God's blessing on such true, broad-hearted persons."

Growing awareness of African American culture and heroes is also apparent in federation references to Crispus Attucks, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Dunbar. In 1917, a report noted proudly that at six Girls' Social Centers newly established in Des Moines, Ottumwa, Albia, Marshalltown, Buxton, and Clarinda, the girls were encouraged to study "Negro literature in order that they receive not only instruction, but also inspiration from the noted men and women of their own race." That same year, the federation unveiled its commissioned portrait of Booker T. Washington by Henry Ossawa Tanner. In 1921, the federation contributed to the national federation's drive to purchase and renovate the Washington, D.C., home of Frederick Douglass.

The Iowa federation also focused on the high rate of tuberculosis among the nation's black population. "The Negro is not subject to tuberculosis any more than any other race," it stated in 1915, "but it is due to the unsanitary conditions under which he is forced to live. Therefore be it resolved that we endorse the national tuberculosis movement as set forth by Dr. Booker T. Washington."

Sanitation problems and crowded housing in American cities were exacerbated as the "Great Migration" brought hundreds of thousands of blacks to northern industrial cities between 1915 and 1940. Although cities like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, and New York saw the greatest growth, Iowa's black population rose from 15,000 to 19,000 between 1910 and 1920. The most significant increase was in the Waterloo area in Black Hawk County, where the black population grew from 29 in 1910 to 856 in 1920. There, black labor was im-



ported to work in the railroad and agricultural implement industries, often as strikebreakers, or as replacements for white workers during World War I. The number of blacks more than tripled in Woodbury County; Sioux City, as well as Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, felt the impact of a large influx of African Americans.

"We are . . . pained to note," said federation president Sue M. Brown in 1917, "that the conditions confronting the black people of the southland at the present time are so perilous as to necessitate their migration . . . into this far off northern climate." A 1917 resolution read: "Whereas, the migration of the Negroes to the north has assumed unthought of proportions, between one hundred and fifty and three hundred thousand have migrated in the past year, be it resolved that we put forth every effort to help them in finding suitable homes and employment, and lending a helping hand in every way possible."

These newcomers, mostly from the deep South, caused considerable unease among the resident black population of Iowa, as in many northern states, especially among those who had achieved a sort of middle-class status. With meager resources and scant education, thick southern accents and unsophisticated manners, these in-migrants seemed destined to reinforce stereotypes that the local population had been working so long and hard to eliminate. Brown urged clubwomen to "bid these wanderers welcome and help to make them the kind of citizens we would have them be." The national federation's motto—"Lifting As We Climb"—took on a new relevance.

In many northern cities, the escalating need for social services strained the energies and resources of women's organizations already struggling to improve conditions for their people through self-help programs. Many of these groups now combined efforts with other organizations, such as the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (A branch of the NAACP was chartered in Des Moines in 1915, and additional branches followed quickly in other Iowa cities.) In addition to youth programs and educational efforts to counteract stereotyping, the NAACP used legal action to further its goals—something clubwomen could not so easily do.

It was during this period, too, that the federal government made its first tentative moves away from its traditional laissez-faire approach to social policy and shifted towards national health campaigns, housing and urban development initiatives, and industrial education. Although these first steps were made on behalf of white citizens, African Americans began to insist that their communities be included as well.

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



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Helena Downey paused in her annual address to look back before the start of World War I. "There was a time in the life of a club when we met, had a literary program, served an elaborate lunch. We felt we were doing our duty. It was pleasant. But lo, a change has come. As we groped on in the work, it began to dawn upon us that we could not live unto ourselves and that the aim and purpose of the club should not be self-improvement alone, but improving and benefitting the community in which they are located. The success of a club is measured only by the good that it can do."

Tapping into organizational and leadership skills learned through club work, Iowa's African American clubwomen did their part on the home front—selling war bonds, conserving food and fuel, volunteering for the Red Cross, and sending books "to our soldiers in France" as part of the "Negro Books for Negro Soldiers Movement." Solemn prayers and patriotic songs marked the 1918 federation convention in Des Moines, and photographs of African American soldiers appeared in the souvenir program.

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The 1919 federation program noted proudly that Camp Dodge and Fort Des Moines "are loud in their praise" of the federation's work. But the public hanging of three black Alabamian soldiers at Camp Dodge, found guilty in 1918 of assaulting a white female, was a chilling reminder of the precarious position African Americans occupied in American society—even in Iowa.

With the end of World War I, economic adjustments and job competition led to race riots in many northern cities. Although there was little racial violence in Iowa, labor unrest struck here as it did the rest of the country, and discrimination continued. In 1919 Iowa federation president Martha White called for "reconstruction for the colored American." She reminded the clubwomen that "our soldiers were Jim Crowed upon their return from battle, denied the rights of Pullman's, refused food at railroad restaurants and cafes, after sacrificing their all for democracy," and she urged members to support the NAACP in its efforts to end discrimination. While Iowa had passed a civil rights law in 1884, unwritten

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By 1921, the Iowa federation had established a Legislative Department to educate women on government and new responsibilities at the voting polls. Its Public Health Committee provided information on health issues in their communities. The recurrent issue of lynching in the South also received attention, with a 1923 resolution to "lend our energies to secure the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in the next session of Congress."

**O**n the second day of the federation's annual meeting in May 1919 in Marshalltown, a delegation of women students addressed the organization. One of the students, Mamie Diggs, described the difficult housing situation black women students like herself faced at the State University of Iowa in Iowa City. The university had completed its first dormitory in 1913, Currier Hall. By 1919, when university enrollment topped 4,000, Currier Hall housed fewer than 200 women—and none of them black. In the words of Philip G. Hubbard (a 1940 African American freshman at the university, and later a professor and dean there), black students at the University of Iowa in the first half of the 20th century were regarded as "visitors rather than full members of the general community." They rented rooms



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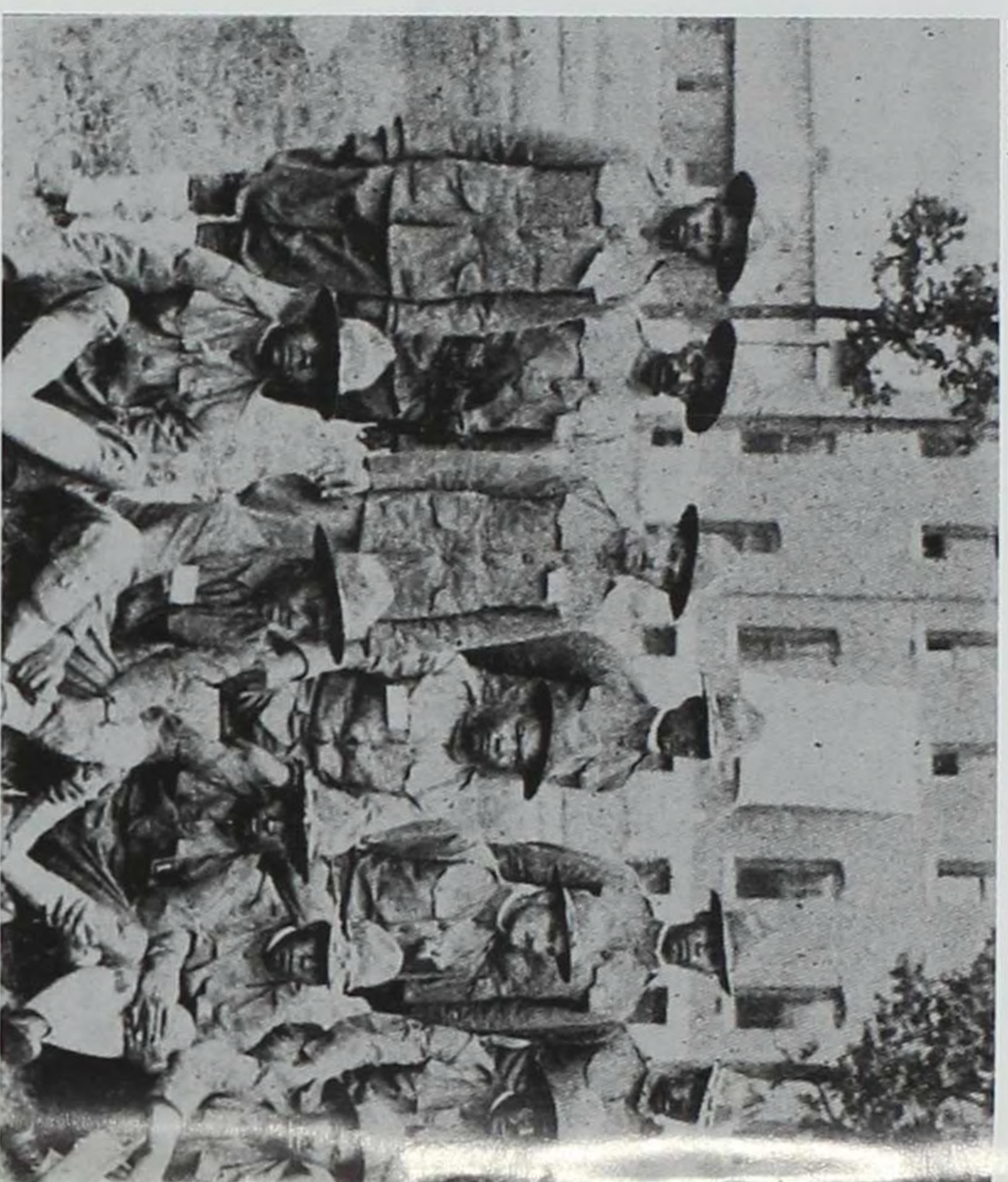
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The front page of *The Bystander*, August 22, 1919, captioned this photo "A Group of State University Girls Looking for a Home." The newspaper remarked, "There should be a home arranged for these girls who are trying to make their way thru the university that they may be better prepared to enter into life's battles and those things that go to make up a better and higher citizenship not only for this generation but for generations yet unborn." Back row, left to right: Naomi Harper, Elizabeth Imogene Wilson, Harriette Alexander, Ruth Southall, Helen Lucas. Front row: Iva McClain, Minerva Graves, Ola Calhoun, Mamie Diggs, Helen Beshears, and Emily Elizabeth Gross. Below: An all-Iowa fundraising project sold these tags for a dime in July 1919.

from members of Iowa City's tiny black community or from professors who offered lodging in exchange for menial labor. The supply of rooms available—especially for young women—barely met the demand.

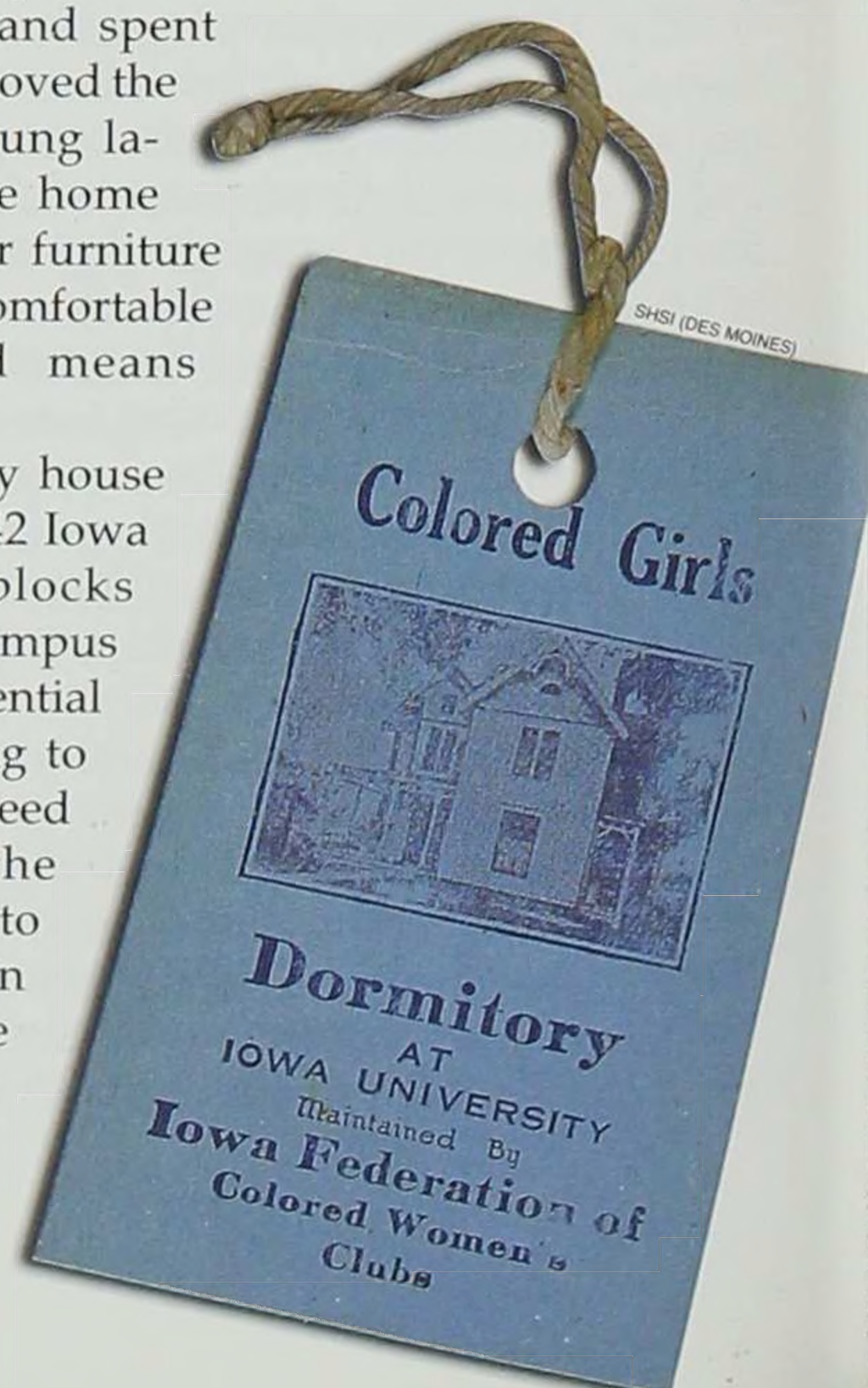
The women students asked the federation for help. Although they had formed a club and rented an Iowa City house in 1917, they needed a more permanent arrangement. They had approached women's clubs before, but this time the federation, deeply moved by the students' plea, realized that something had to be done. They discussed sending \$25 to the eight students (Iowa City's room and board averaged \$34 a month, and university tuition was \$40 a year). But delegate Susie Pugh of Cedar Rapids contended that this was not good enough. She insisted that the federation should do something of more lasting benefit to the students. A subcommittee led by Scholarship Chair Helena Downey would investigate possibilities.

By the next evening, the idea was in place: the federation would "make an effort to purchase a home at Iowa City for the colored girls of the State University." This was not the first time such an idea had appeared. As early as 1910, the organization had worked towards buying a home for young working women and elderly women in Des Moines, but financial problems and organizational details had stymied the project.

With the endorsement of university officials (but no real help), and through publicity from *The Bystander*, the

federation launched an ambitious statewide fundraising campaign. Within only three months, the women raised \$2,047, and by September the federation had purchased a house for \$5,300, paying \$1,000 down. "The place has nine large rooms, bath, hard wood floors, good attic, cellar, furnaces, etc.," the chair of the Scholarship Committee reported. "It had gas for illumination, but we installed electricity at a cost of \$25. Had the necessary plumbing done and spent two weeks and moved the furniture the young ladies had into the home and bought other furniture and made it as comfortable as our limited means would allow."

The two-story house was located at 942 Iowa Avenue, nine blocks from the main campus and on the residential boulevard leading to Old Capitol. "I need not tell you the struggle we had to secure a place in Iowa City," the committee chair





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**For three decades, the Federation Home at 942 Iowa Avenue in Iowa City housed African American women students enrolled at the University of Iowa.**

continued, "but I might say we grabbed this place as our last chance, an ideal place on the avenue." There had been some opposition from neighbors, who managed to force a reassessment of a small adjoining lot where a garage stood, but the committee arranged to pay the additional tax. A board of trustees was set up to oversee the Federation Home, as it was to be called. Sue M. Brown was deeply involved in the project and would chair its board until 1941. Her husband, prominent attorney S. Joe Brown, handled the legal work without charge. Archie Alexander, civil engineer and husband of Audra Alexander, directed renovations.

At the federation's 1924 convention in Iowa City, the board proudly announced that the home's mortgage had been paid off and invited members to tour the Federation Home. Many of its first residents were the founding members of the local chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority begun in 1913 at Howard University. Throughout the twenties, the federation focused most of its energies on the house in Iowa City. In 1929, the house provided rooms for 17 women students, and a social center for eight others who roomed elsewhere.

Although the Great Depression brought hard times, education and young people remained federation priorities. By 1935, the Iowa Association of Colored Women (as it was renamed that year) took pride in its girls' clubs and newest board position, the Superintendent of Girls. Affiliated with the National Association of Colored Girls' Clubs, the nine girls' clubs in Iowa, comprising 110 members, sent delegates to the annual convention,

where they, too, learned leadership skills. Even though more black students were now graduating from high school, the old complaint that Iowa schools were not employing black teachers, regardless of their qualifications, surfaced again in a 1937 resolution. In 1938, the federation also reestablished its scholarship loan program. It also recommended that a committee work with administrators of the Girls' Industrial Home at Mitchellville to guarantee black residents the same level of educational opportunity as white residents.

Roosevelt's second New Deal, after his 1936 re-election, opened some doors for blacks, partly as a result of the efforts of black educator Mary McLeod Bethune, whom Roosevelt appointed as director of the Division of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration. But organizations like the NAACP con-

tinued to fight for civil rights laws. Many of Iowa's black clubwomen were active in the NAACP; Sue M. Brown, for example, presided over the Des Moines branch from 1925 to 1930.

During the Depression, fewer black women enrolled at the University of Iowa, and this jeopardized the financial status of the federation's house in Iowa City. Rooms were rented to male students to keep the operation viable until more women enrolled—which happened as the thirties ended. The Federation Home was renamed the Sue M. Brown Hall following her death in 1941.

After the war, the GI Bill brought thousands of veterans to the University of Iowa. The university dropped its unwritten policy against housing black students in the dormitories; in 1946 five black women integrated Currier Hall. In 1950, the house in Iowa City was closed. The federation sold the property and invested the proceeds in defense bonds.

**A**s America's civil rights movement gained momentum, changes in the Iowa federation's name and structure reflected national trends. In 1956, it changed its name to the Iowa Association of Club Women, dropping the word "colored" to "set an example" in the field of race relations (though two years later it changed to the Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc., to again conform with the national federation). By 1958, federation departments focused





**Renamed the Iowa Association of Colored Women, the organization took on new challenges in the second half of the century.**

on human relations, women in industry, and international relations, as well as on education, young people, and family life, and phrases like "The Great Society" and "urban renewal" appeared in 1960s proceedings. In 1964, outgoing president Roberta Frazier urged members to help eliminate school dropouts, establish leadership training for women, and lobby Congress for the civil rights bill through a "letter a week" campaign.

With more scholarships now available from other sources, regardless of race or creed, the federation dissolved its scholarship program and shifted funds to a proposed state clubhouse in Des Moines. Nevertheless, it still supported involvement in the National Association of Colored Girls' Clubs through social events and philanthropic projects, although this initiative seems to have been most successful in the Des Moines area.

By 1967, the state federation counted only 15 clubs with 185 members. This was far below the federation's peak year, 1917, when President Sue M. Brown spoke of more than 40 Iowa clubs and nearly 800 members. This decline was happening across the nation. In 1950, membership in the National Association of Colored Women had dropped to 55,000—down from 100,000 in 1924. Much of the work previously done by African

American women's clubs—assisting the needy, promoting black culture, challenging the white community on civil rights and discrimination—had been taken over by more narrowly focused groups and by the government. Across the nation, black women were joining parent-teacher associations and the League of Women Voters in local communities, working alongside white women for social change.

These changes were part of a nationwide trend among women's clubs in general. As employment opportunities increased, and as the number of organizations devoted to specific political or social welfare projects mushroomed, American women had much wider choices about how and where to direct their energies. As organizations restricted to white males gradually dropped barriers based on race and sex, many women opted to join these groups. Society had changed to the extent that women no longer believed their voices would not be heard in a gathering of men.

In Iowa, too, black clubwomen had turned to more narrowly focused organizations. In the 1960s, for instance, many worked for civil rights through groups other than the Iowa Association of Club Women. Cecile Cooper, a businesswoman and founder of Davenport's



Semper Fidelis Club in 1958, devoted time to more than 30 secular and religious volunteer organizations, including the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, the Catholic Interracial Council, and both the Iowa and the Quad Cities Civil Rights Councils. She also helped organize Freedom Schools in the Mississippi Delta in 1964. Rose Johnson presided over the state NAACP, served on the Model Cities Board of Des Moines, and was vice-chair of the state Republican Party. Journalist Aldeen Davis founded the Muscatine Federated Women's Club in 1969 and organized "living room dialogues," where black and white citizens gathered to discuss civil rights issues. Beulah Webb, who organized the Sioux City Association of Colored Women, worked for improved housing and senior citizens' programs and directed the Downtown Senior Citizens' Center from 1971 to 1977. (Webb was admitted to the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame in 1997 at the age of 102.)

Women's energies were clearly not diminished, but the women's club movement was. By 1969 only eight clubs remained active in the Iowa Association of Colored Women. Some of the clubs that belonged to the state association had simply died out; others had disaffiliated but remained active locally. Although clubs continued to discuss topics such as international relations, civil rights, equal employment, and urban renewal, their main purpose had become more social.

Today, the Iowa Association of Colored Women comprises four clubs: the Criterion Club in Cedar Rapids, the Semper Fidelis Club in Davenport, and the Parliamentary Law and Culture Club and the Tawasi Club in Des Moines. In addition to social gatherings and trips, these member clubs support local charities. The state association raises money for scholarships and makes regular donations to the Center for Sickle Cell Anemia and child care organizations.

Like many Iowa women's clubs, the state association has reached its century milestone—"having started



Federation members present a \$5,000 donation to Simpson College for the George Washington Carver Hall in 1956.

out as they did in the year 1902 with a little handful of women who realized the power of organization and with a burning desire to share in the great movement of social betterment," as the president commented in 1917. Over the last century, Iowa's African American women's clubs and their state federation did far more than their motto, "Sowing Seeds of Kindness," first directed. They also sowed seeds of change—changes taken for granted today. They contributed significantly to the social emancipation of Iowa women. They provided a setting in which black women could be involved in arenas beyond their homes and churches. They taught their members skills in leadership, organization, and fundraising that could be applied in other areas. And they proclaimed to society at large that black women, like white women, were concerned about their communities and that they were willing and able to act upon those concerns. ♦

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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Annotations to the original manuscript are held in Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (SHSI-Iowa City).