

Outside In and the Idea of Community Involvement in Public History

by Bill Silag

Nearly one hundred years ago, historian Carter G. Woodson urged Americans from all walks of life to join him in a quest to know the past. "History belongs to all of us," declared Woodson, who founded *The Journal of Negro History* and created Negro History Week, a precursor to Black History Month. True to his beliefs, Woodson insisted that membership in the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (publisher of the *Journal*) be open to everyone, with or without "professional credentials" or institutional affiliation. Other historical organizations of the era—including the American Historical Association—shared Woodson's concern for inclusion, but their campaigns to attract non-academics proved unsuccessful. As a result, over time the historical profession has taken on the guild-like character familiar to us today. This trend no doubt saddened Woodson, who believed strongly that historical research and writing would enrich all citizens—whether formally trained in historical methods or not—because the study of history leads to a greater understanding of humanity. According to historian Spencer Crew, Woodson was convinced that in order to be meaningful, historical study must be inclusive lest perspectives be missed.

In late 2001, the State Historical Society of Iowa published *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000*, an in-depth look at the black experience in Iowa from territorial days to the dawn of the 21st cen-

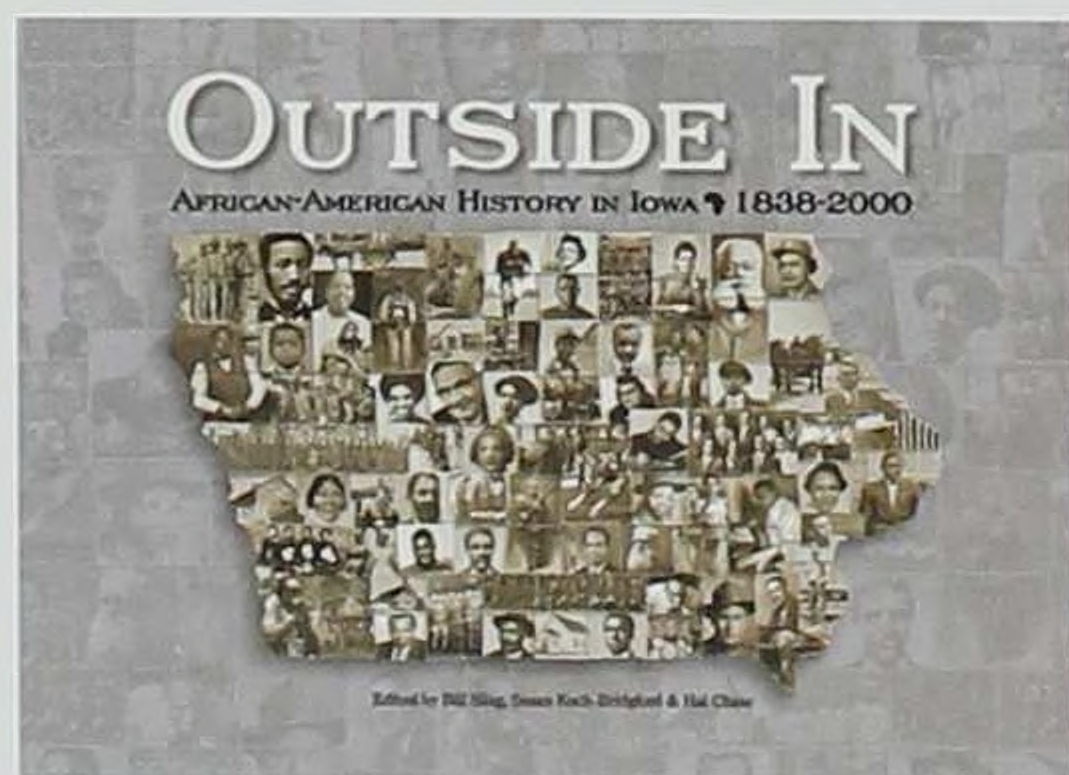
tury. I was the book's editor, and though I had edited many Iowa history books before, this project was special. For me at least, the research, writing, and publication of *Outside In* gave new meaning to the idea of community involvement in public history.

To a large extent, the project was organized along the lines Woodson advocated. *Outside In* brought together people from a wide range of professions and perspectives to shed light on the ways in which men and women of African American descent have taken part in Iowa history. The book's chapters show the diversity of attitudes and aspirations within Iowa's black communities, the ties that connect people in those communities with other Iowans, and the interdependency of all Iowans. In addressing these themes in Iowa history, *Outside In's* authors have provided a model of public history that can be adopted by other communities, be they small towns in rural counties, major metropolitan areas, or entire states. *Outside In* represents an approach to historical inquiry that engages as much of the community as possible and thereby draws on the variety of interests and talents to be found in all communities.

Hal Chase, instructor in history at Des Moines Area Community College, organized the team of writers and editors that produced *Outside In*. (The book's main title refers to Chase's boyhood years in the segregated South of the 1950s, when both Chase, who is white, and his best friend, John Sykes, who is black, felt themselves marginalized in the world of the other.) Chase called on three dozen authors to address various aspects of Iowa's black history: migration and other population trends, legal rights, employment patterns, community organizations, and individual achievements in sports and the arts.

Each of the authors has set a new standard for subsequent research in his or her subject area. Museum curator Jack Lufkin, who had prepared a major exhibit on Des Moines's African American community at the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1996, wrote *Outside In's* chapter about Iowa's black-owned businesses in the

Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000, edited by Bill Silag, Susan Koch-Bridgford, and Hal Chase. Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2001. xx, 580 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$50.00 cloth.





PHOTOS FROM *OUTSIDE IN: AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY IN IOWA*. (1898-2000: SHS) (DES MOINES).
RIGHT: COURTESY HENRY G. MATTHEWS.

Among the hundreds of photos in *Outside In* are these two. Left: Iowa's George Taylor was a presidential candidate for the National Liberty Party in 1904. Right: Henry G. Matthews poses with friends on his farm between Beebeetown and Logan, Iowa.

19th and 20th centuries. Attorney Alfredo Parrish prepared the chapter on Iowa's black attorneys. Kathryn M. Neal, then project archivist for the Iowa Women's Archives, examined key themes in the history of African American women in Iowa. Other authors recruited by Chase included college faculty members, local historians, doctors, politicians, community leaders, journalists, anthropologists, art critics, sociologists, and school administrators. Each author was urged to approach his or her topic in whatever way seemed most appropriate for the scope of the book and for the availability of historical resources. Leola Bergmann, author of the path-breaking study titled *The Negro in Iowa*, which was published by the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1948, provided a foreword. Spencer Crew, director of the National Museum of History in Washington, D.C., wrote the book's preface, and Tom Morain, then administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa, wrote the introduction.

Not enough praise can be bestowed on the authors for their dedication and determination. They participated in the project without financial compensation, and most of them worked with sources of information—letters, diaries, artifacts, and other items—that had never been examined by historians before. Because the authors drew heavily on interviews as well as on archival documents, interview subjects were given plenty of space to speak for themselves in the pages of *Outside In*. As a result, the tone of the writing typically reflects the subjects' own points of view. In so many cases—William S. Morris writing on the military, Raymond Kelso Weikal on music, and William S. Doan on the arts, to name a few—the authors established a deep connection with their subjects, and it shows in the vigor of their presentations. See for example the marvelous use David

Gradwohl and Nancy Osborn Johnsen have made of what they were told by Dorothy Mae Neal Collier, who lived in Buxton, Iowa's racially integrated coal-mining community, in the early 1900s. Another case in point is *Outside In*'s extraordinary chapter on black doctors in Iowa. The authors, Drs. Erin Herndon and Steven Berry, based their chapter on a series of in-depth interviews. The authors step in periodically to establish context or add interpretation, but for the most part the people interviewed are narrating the tale. It's a tour de force of fine writing, showing the effectiveness of letting subjects tell their own stories.

In his introduction to *Outside In*, Tom Morain writes about perspectives on race relations when he was growing up in small-town Iowa. "Had we been asked if there was racial discrimination in Iowa, we would have responded in good conscience that segregation was the practice in southern states but did not occur in the North. We believed it. For those raised in such innocence, *Outside In* will be startling and disturbing." As Morain suggests, though Iowa is proud of its record in supporting racial equality, especially since World War II, postwar efforts to end discrimination and segregation followed a century of less consistent commitment by white Iowans to ensure the basic rights guaranteed all citizens by the nation's constitution. True, the state's civil rights record was considered positive by white Iowans in the 19th century. Robert R. Dykstra's *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Harvard University Press, 1993) puts Iowa in the vanguard of states seeking to protect the legal rights of African Americans. But achieving legal rights was still a long way from securing the dignity and respect due black Iowans. The segregated quarters at Camp Dodge and Fort Des Moines during World Wars I and II and



Women's Army Corp trainees stand ready at Fort Des Moines during World War II.

the Ku Klux Klan in Iowa during the 1920s were reminders of the distance that remained. Not until President Truman's 1948 executive order banning segregation in the armed forces and the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision outlawing "separate but equal" schools would federal government agencies begin taking action on behalf of black civil rights in the United States.

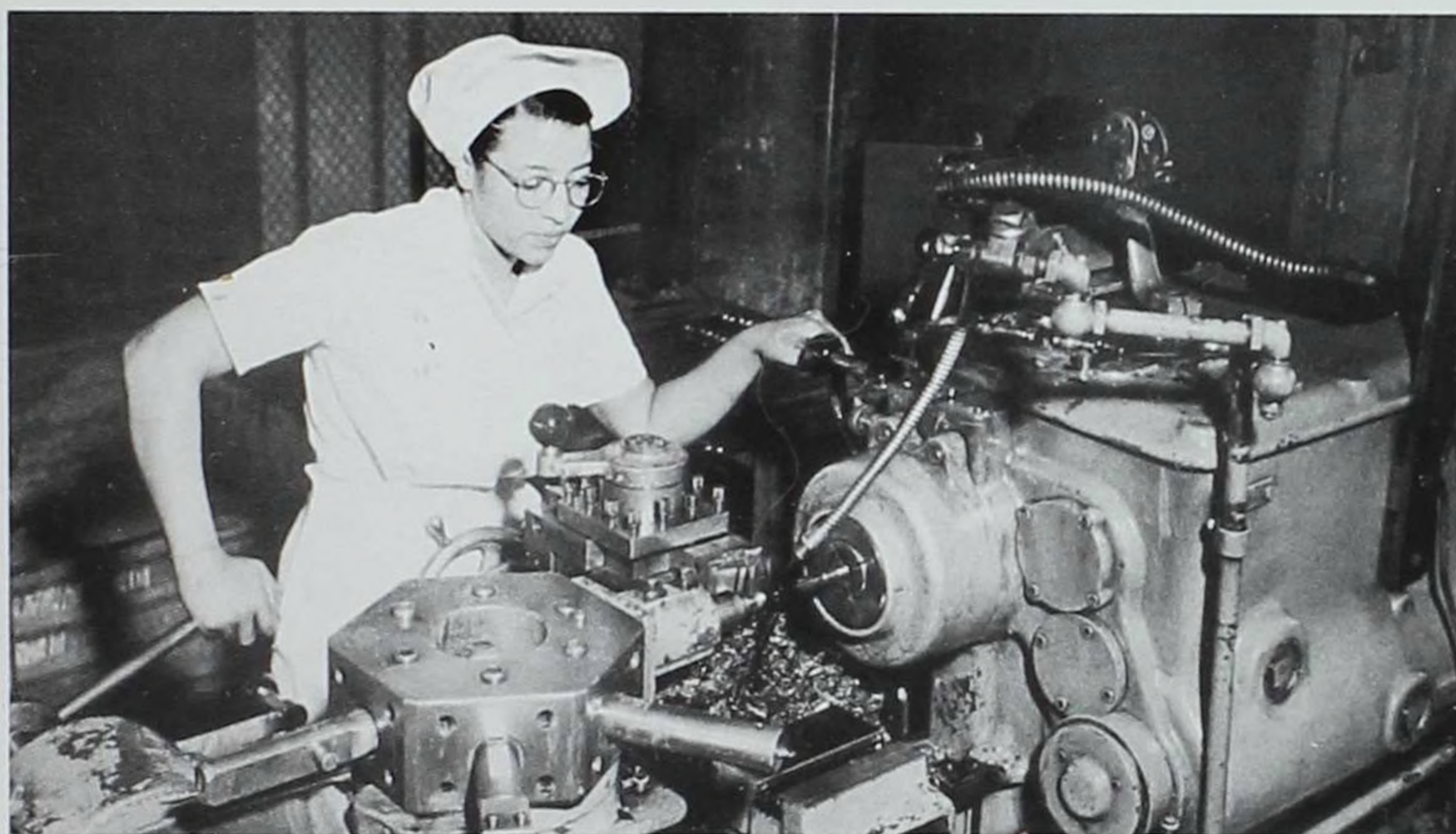
The impact of changes at the federal level took some time to be felt locally. In 1948, Edna Griffin led a successful boycott of Katz Drug Store in downtown Des Moines, charging the druggist with refusing to serve African Americans at the store's lunch counter. An Iowa Supreme Court decision was necessary to make the charges stick against Katz. Yes, said the state's highest court, it was wrong to discriminate among customers by race. But apparently the lessons of the Katz case were slow in reaching other Des Moines business establishments, for retired school principal Frances Hawthorne recalls segregation in Des Moines movie houses during the 1950s, when seats for whites were on the theaters' main floor and black seating was restricted to the balconies. In Cedar Rapids and elsewhere around the state, housing covenants kept black Iowans—regardless of income—residentially segregated well into the 1960s. And incredibly, from today's vantage point at least, not until the 1980s was the principle of desegregation institutionalized in such highly visible civil-service fields as police and fire departments.

Thus throughout the 20th century, black Iowans were forced to fight—in black news media such as the *Iowa Bystander*, in the city councils and the state legislature, and in the courts—to gain their constitutional rights. Beginning in 1915, Iowa branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

(NAACP) fought for the rights of full citizenship for African Americans in Iowa, applying steady pressure to Iowa's political institutions to correct injustices. *Outside In's* chapter on civil rights organizations, written by Professor Jeremy Brigham in collaboration with NAACP state conference president Robert A. Wright, chronicles the campaigns for equal rights led by brave NAACP leaders such as Marshalltown's Rose Bannon Johnson, Davenport's Charles Toney, and other black community leaders throughout Iowa. Considering its scant financial resources and the inertia of Iowa's major political parties on civil rights issues, the NAACP's efforts are praiseworthy not only for the tenacity of the organization's leadership but also for its successful appeal to white as well as black citizens for support.

Outside In's nearly 600 pages contain many stories that emerged unexpectedly during the course of the book's preparation from a network that the authors themselves pulled together—a community of public historians, if you will, that grew to include hundreds of people, each with an anecdote or a photograph to contribute. Material about the black firefighters of Des Moines, and about musicians Big Bill Broonzy and Eddie (Pickin) Bowles, found its way into *Outside In* courtesy of generous people who had no "official" connection with the book, individuals such as Leonard Feinberg, Linda Fobian, and Russell Lovell.

There were many others who lent a hand as well, and in my opinion their active interest in the project was especially significant. Lines traditionally drawn—between "experts" and "amateurs," for example, or between the "white community" and the "black community"—were ignored as authors researched and wrote about their topics. Drafts were passed back and forth



Dorothy Clayton runs a lathe at John Deere, Waterloo, 1940s. Robert M. Carney has practiced medicine in Grinnell since 1965.

among authors and editors for fact-checking; authors were alerted to items of interest that had turned up in someone else's research; and calls went out to people all over the country to have questions answered and details provided.

And what a difference the illustrations loaned to the project made to the book's final appearance. *Outside In* contains hundreds of photographs and other illustrations, thanks in large part to the archivists, librarians, and private citizens whose contributions provided *Outside In's* editors with the action shots, street scenes, and individual, family, and group portraits that convey a sense of the character of life for Iowa's African American citizens from the 19th century to today.

Even now, though *Outside In* has been out for more than a year, the work of collecting photographic images and other historical documents continues. Several chapter authors are working with Hal Chase to build up the State Historical Society's holdings in African American history in Iowa. Here again, the making of *Outside In* marked the beginning of an ongoing community of people committed to the preservation of Iowa's African American heritage.

That community was well represented at the annual "I'll Make Me a World" celebration held at the State Historical Building in Des Moines on January 24, 2002, which was *Outside In's* official publication date. Governor and Mrs. Vilsack were there, as were Juan Williams from the Washington studios of PBS News, Giancarlo Esposito from Fox Television, and many other prominent individuals. But the hallmark of the day was a shared sense of recognition—recognition of the people who had written the book and of those whose lives, or ancestors' lives, were described in its pages. January 24

was not simply a publishing event, but a day of triumph for all of Iowa in recognizing the aspirations and achievements of the state's African American community. That day I felt we had perhaps come a step closer to Carter Woodson's idea of public history.

"The African-American experience in Iowa has not only been a major one," historian Dorothy Schwieder writes in her afterword to *Outside In*, "but has exemplified the ideals and values that all Iowans have held to be important." *Outside In* shows clearly that the ideals and values held dear by black Iowans were the same: Healthy families and strong communities. Economic opportunity. And political rights and equal justice for all. White America has taken these things for granted, while black America's struggle continues. *Outside In* details the nature of the struggle in Iowa.

But for those of us who worked on the book, there was more, because the spirit of public history that infuses *Outside In*—involving authors from diverse personal and professional backgrounds, sharing information among authors, and welcoming contributions from the community as a whole—taught us a new way to learn about the past, about ourselves, and about the complex world around us. I for one hope that Carter Woodson is pleased. ❖

This column introduces selected books of pertinence and interest to readers keen on Iowa and the past. This issue's columnist, Bill Silag, earned his Ph.D. in history from the University of Iowa in 1979. A former editor of The Palimpsest, he has taught history, worked in program evaluation and organizational development, and served as managing editor and editor-in-chief of Iowa State University Press.