

MAY HARMONY P THE EARLY HISTORY





REVAIL

OF BLACK WATERLOO

by Robert Neymeyer

Workers pause for a photographer in front of the Illinois Central Railroad's Waterloo repair shop in about 1915. The railroad provided employment for generations of newcomers to Blackhawk County, including European immigrants and recent arrivals from the American South. (courtesy Grout Museum of History and Science, Waterloo)

Reverend I. W. Bess glared at the *Waterloo Courier* spread across his desk. The advertisement in front of him touted the celebrated Hollywood film, *The Birth of a Nation*, due to arrive within the week at the Waterloo Theatre. The fanfare preceding the film's cross-country tour had been met in some American cities by angry protests from black leaders who objected to producer D. W. Griffith's derogatory treatment of Afro-Americans in the movie and by his distortions of their history. For a moment, Reverend Bess faced a dilemma: his political instincts told him to avoid arousing the animosity of Waterloo's white moviegoers, who would probably regard the film as a harmless diversion, but his heart instructed him to join the chorus of protestors. The preacher's pulse quickened at the thought of creating further controversy for the men and women of his small congregation on the city's East Side.

Bess was no stranger to controversy. In the two years since taking charge of the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Church on Halstead Street in 1913, the thirty-five-year-old Bess had assumed the leadership of a loosely organized movement among Waterloo's black citizens to win the respect of local white residents. The work had not been easy, but progress was apparent. Afro-Americans had organized a variety of social institutions to advance their interests, and black churches, benevolent associations, and service clubs had done much to improve the quality of life in the East Side neighborhoods where black citizens had settled in recent years. In turn the growth of community pride helped temper the East Side's reputation as a den of sinners and outlaws. Reverend Bess had not produced this change single-handedly, of course, but his energetic leadership did much to heighten public understanding of the city's newest immigrant group.

The Bess house was often crowded with visitors coming to see the young minister about one of the many local issues that received his attention. In addition to church-related activities, Reverend Bess led neighborhood clean-up campaigns, founded a Big Brother Mission, and became involved in a variety of public issues. White civic leaders began to view him as one who could communicate with both white and black groups in the city. Requests for his assistance grew frequent. When, for example, a public campaign emerged to rid Waterloo of "undesireable Negro elements," the local police judge called on Bess for cooperation and support. Repeatedly the minister demonstrated his executive and diplomatic skills, as he joined ministerial and community-wide efforts to bridge the gap between the races in Waterloo.

One problem that concerned Waterloo's blacks in these years had to do with public recreational facilities. In May 1914 the City Council restricted bathing at the municipal beach to white citizens. Infuriated black residents asked Reverend Bess to take their protest to the Council's next meeting. Bess obliged and tried to negotiate a settlement. While accepting restrictions on the use of the municipal bathhouse and on the rental of bathing suits, Bess charged that the Council could not legally prevent blacks from swimming in the Cedar River. As he reminded the politicians, "Waterloo is too far north to maintain such racial discrimination."

Resolution of the beach controversy—in favor of removing restrictions on black bathers—initiated a period of calm in race relations in Waterloo. While stories of East Side vice and criminality continued to make local headlines, identification of blacks with illegal activity lessened considerably in 1914 and 1915. Indeed, it was because race relations had improved so much lately that East Side community leaders feared the damaging effects of *The Birth of a Nation*. Thomas Dixon's novel,

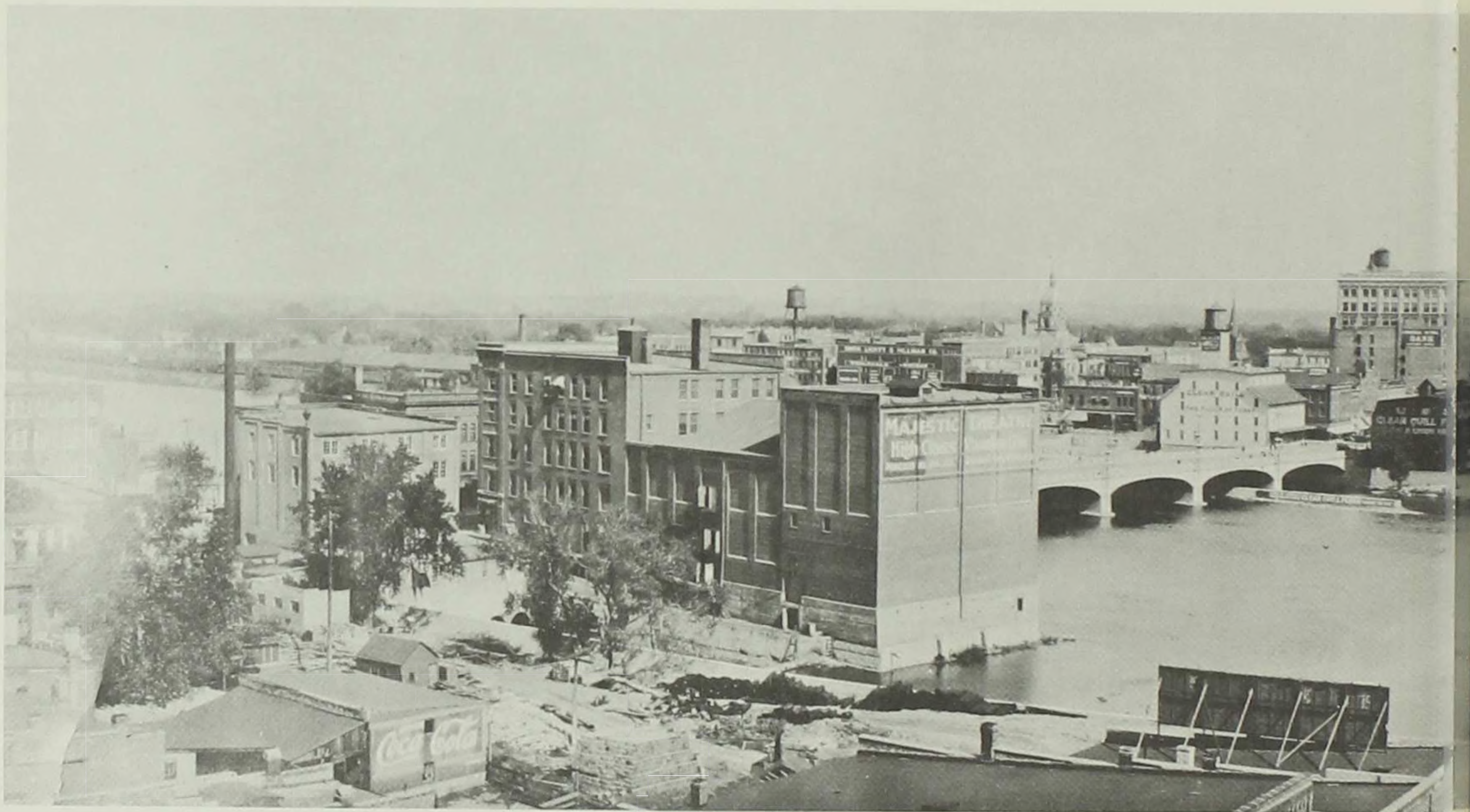


Racial stereotypes presented in D.W. Griffith's movie The Birth of the Nation, as well as scenes such as this one depicting a Ku Klux Klan march, troubled advocates of racial harmony. (Culver Pictures)

on which the film was based, portrayed black Americans as a degraded people, victimized by history and condemned to live in poverty and ignorance. Such a view contradicted all that Waterloo's black organizations had tried to achieve since 1912.

Bess himself steered clear of the limelight during the movie protest. Speaking in the name of the local black community was G.W. Collins, president of the Young Men's Sunday Club of the A.M.E. Church. In December 1915 Collins brought a petition to Waterloo Mayor R.C. Thompson asking that the film be banned in local theatres. Arguing that the

movie would inflame tensions between black and white, as it had elsewhere in the nation, the petition appealed to community pride: "The races in Waterloo today are at peace, and harmony prevails. Our people have jobs and are working every day and supporting their families. . . . We trust that you will take your place in this matter with the other cities of our country that have barred this play in order that their citizens might be protected from the fiery darts of prejudice and slander by this wolf in sheep's clothing." However, the Council chose to ignore the petition.



A panoramic view of Waterloo, ca. 1911-1914, facing northeast from the west side of the Cedar River (SH)

About four hundred black men and women lived in Waterloo in 1915, only one percent of the city's population. Fewer than twenty had been there five years before; the rest had arrived since then to take advantage of new job openings in what the local papers had taken to calling "The Factory City of Iowa." The great prosperity of Black Hawk County farmers who shopped in Waterloo and shipped their produce from its depots caused the town to boom in the years before World War I. Farm profits built factories and shops in the city, and the city attracted workers to run them. Many of the newcomers were black southerners concerned that the trends of the day boded them ill in the land of the boll weevil and Jim Crow segregation laws. The pages of the *Chicago Defender* and other northern black newspapers available in Mississippi and Alabama told black workers of an alternative to the heightened climate of political and economic repression that befell the South beginning in the 1890s. Columns in the *Defender* extolled

the virtues of Northern life, describing in detail the money to be made and chances for personal advancement. They also provided advice for potential migrants. To be sure, readers were told of the prejudice and discrimination that might greet them in the North, but the papers' columnists showed very clearly the way to economic freedom.

In the fall of 1911 skilled shopmen walked off their jobs on the nation's railroads in support of efforts by union organizers to win recognition from the Illinois Central Railroad Corporation. Striking shopmen at the Illinois Central's large maintenance and repair terminal in Waterloo convinced their unskilled assistants—most of them Italian and Bulgarian immigrants—to leave with them. Because shutdown of the Waterloo shop threatened to halt the company's traffic in northern Iowa and tie up railroad service throughout the Middle West, Illinois Central officials immediately tried to replace the striking machinists, moulders, and blacksmiths with non-union men. When local



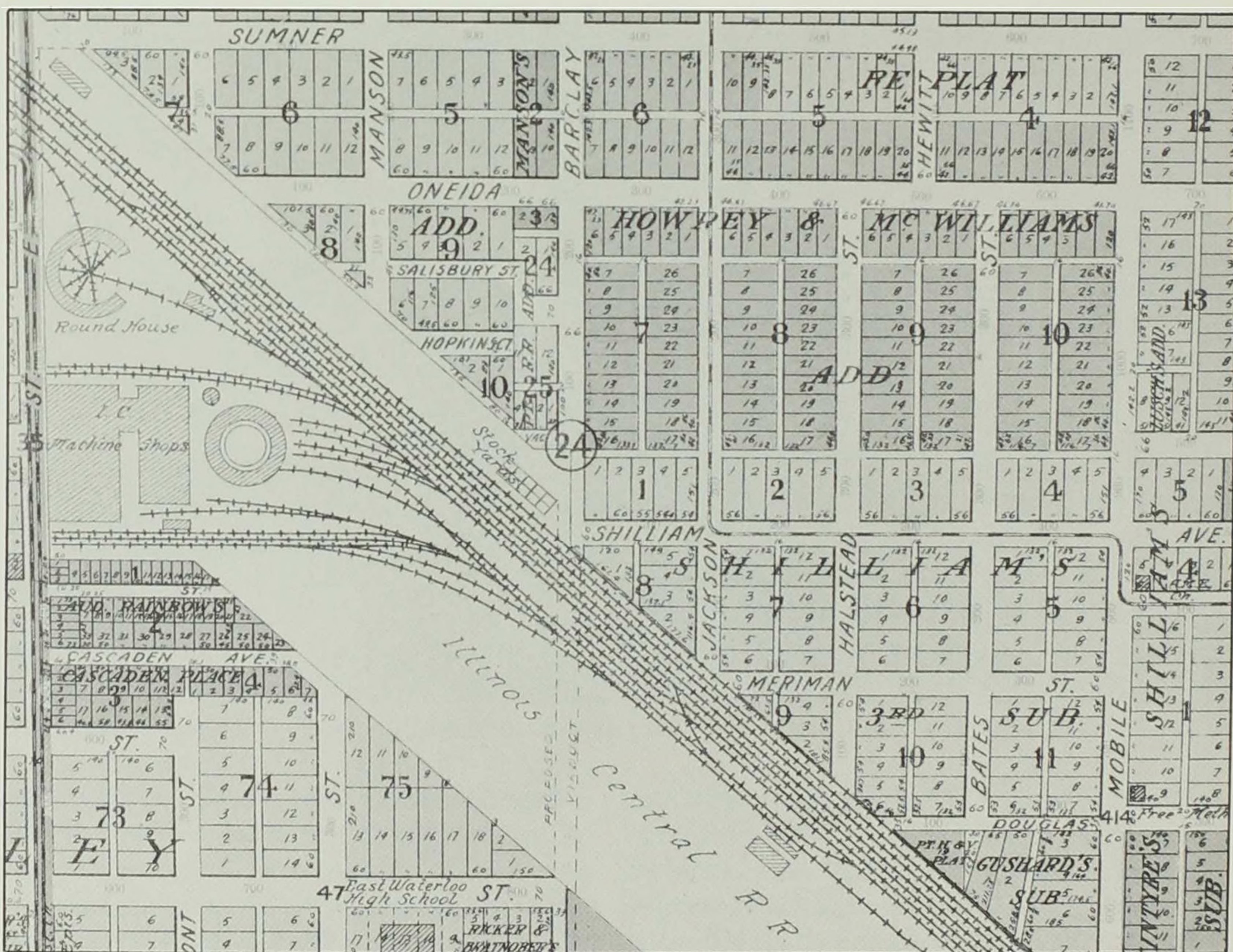
Waterloo during the years of the ICRR strike suffered special hardships beyond those common to newcomers in any American city. Many Waterloo residents supported the strikers' demands for union recognition, and most were sympathetic to their desire for greater economic security. Understandably, local people looked with hostility at the Southern workers brought into the community by company officials for the express purpose of breaking the strike. Combined with racial prejudice, this enmity made for generally hostile public feelings toward the city's growing black population. Adding to the tension was an editorial campaign in Waterloo newspapers that insisted upon identifying East Siders with vice and criminality, regardless of social distinctions among the people who had moved into the area. Local journalists argued that the rising black population brought increased lawlessness to the city, ignoring the fact that white citizens—many of them quite prominent politically—directed most underworld activity on the East Side.

In 1912 the city fathers had outlawed saloons in Waterloo. Such good intentions notwithstanding, local citizens remained as thirsty as ever and created a booming market for bootleg liquor. The first bootleggers—all of them white—set up shop in poorer neighborhoods where police patrols were infrequent. In time the East Side, home for generations of newcomers to Blackhawk County, became a haven for distillers and liquor dealers, and their barrooms attracted gamblers, prostitutes, dope peddlers, and all kinds of underworld characters. Waterloo's newspapers found enough evidence of black participation in this illegal activity on what became known as "Smokey Row" to convince most readers of the *Courier* and the *Times-Tribune* that the responsibility for crime in the city rested with its black population. That most blacks had come to work in factories rather than in gambling halls or that

recruits proved insufficient to the shops' labor needs, the company looked for help beyond the city limits, particularly within the ranks of its own less profitable Southern lines. Extensive advertising in Mississippi and neighboring states offered special inducements—notably free passage—to men willing to relocate in the North. Within weeks, Southern workers were boarding trains for cities on the Illinois Central, including Waterloo.

The railroad strike had already lasted more than a year when Earl Lee decided to leave the South with the Illinois Central in 1913. Several fellow workers from the railroad's Watervalley, Mississippi plant accompanied Lee for part of the trip northward but they disembarked before reaching Iowa. Once in Waterloo, Lee lived in a railroad bunk car inside the IC yards and began work immediately. Only after the tensions of the strike had subsided did he obtain a small room near the tracks and begin planning to bring his family to Waterloo.

Workers such as Earl Lee who arrived in



The Illinois Central shops and surrounding neighborhoods on Waterloo's East Side, from The Atlas of Waterloo, 1916

the halls themselves were owned by white businessmen, escaped the newspapers' attention. It was simpler to blame men like Earl Lee for robbing the community of its moral fiber.

Housing among Waterloo's blacks resembled that in other American cities in the 1910s. Generally speaking, it was crowded, dilapidated, and overpriced. Despite popular references to a "Negro section," however, initially black citizens did not live in strict segregation in one neighborhood. They lived wherever they could afford the rent, all over the city. Of course, many newly arrived workers found quarters as close to the Illinois Central shops as possible. Some blacks, like Earl Lee, rented

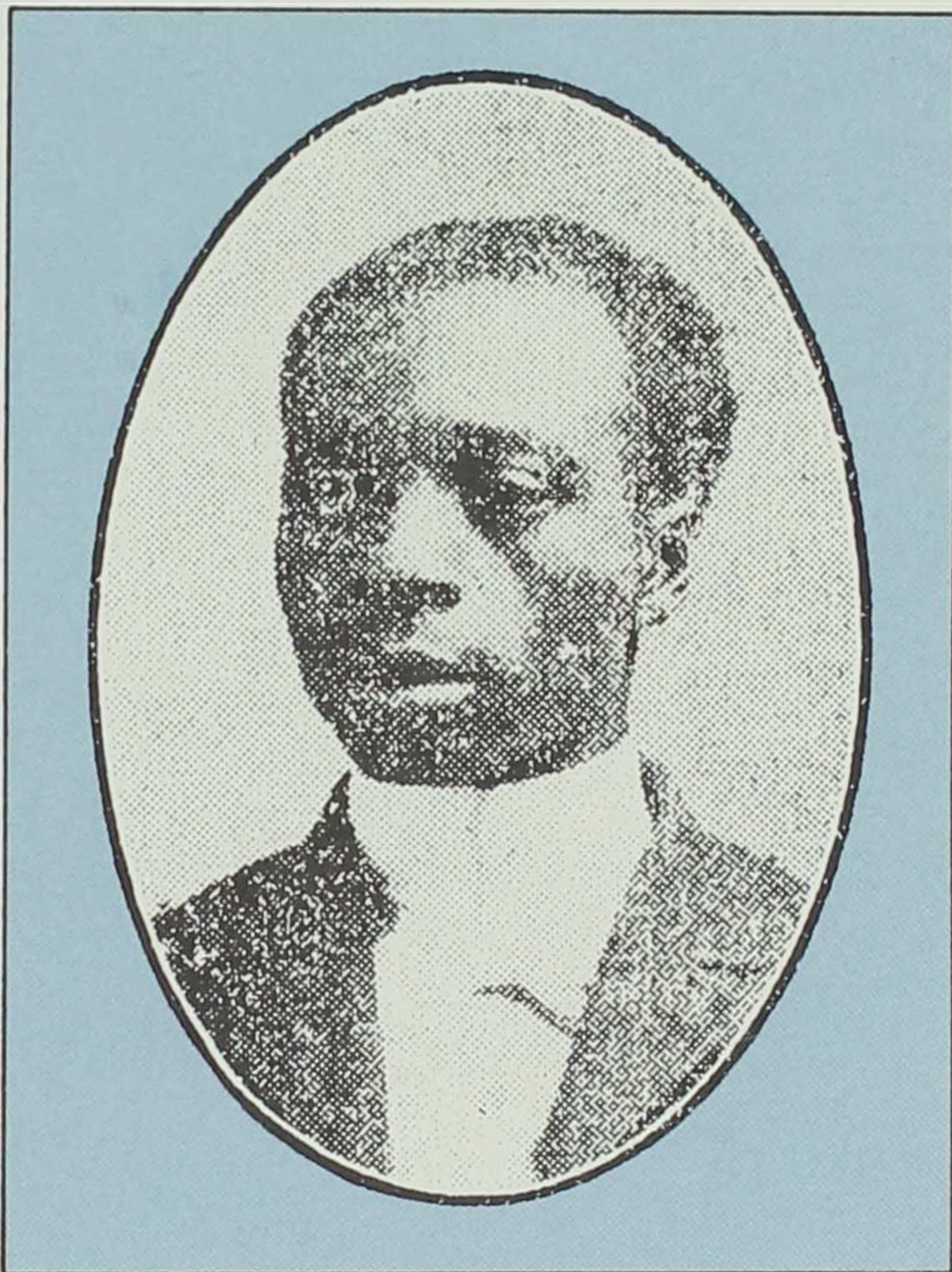
rooms in boarding houses on Dane or Halstead Street. Such places—often operated by black families—took in as many as twelve roomers. In summer months, when the number of new arrivals increased, many were forced to accept temporary shelter in box cars provided by the Illinois Central. Even in the winter, however, crowding was typical. Unusual was the black family that could afford to live without taking in boarders or sharing space with another family, at least in the early years.

Time brought improvement for some of the city's blacks. By 1915, for example, seven black citizens owned homes. Each had been financed without help from local lending institutions;

banks rarely granted mortgages to black families, regardless of economic standing. Among those so denied who became homeowners in Waterloo were a minister, a chiropodist, a machinist, a cook, two laborers, and a housekeeper. Few of them faced restrictions in choice of location, but in time local realtors adopted restrictive covenants and forced black homeowners and renters into specific neighborhoods. Signs of this trend appeared in a statement issued by land developers in 1915 that a new residential area near the Illinois Central yards was closed to "Indians or persons of African, Chinese, Japanese, Greek, Italian, Serbian, or Bulgarian descent." Few blacks took comfort in being grouped with other immigrants; memories of the railroad strike prevented mutual aid between, for example, the Italians and the black Southerners.

Exercise of the restrictive covenant gradually produced definite territorial boundaries between white and non-white residential districts. Whether by design or accident, the white realtors' restrictive covenants forced Waterloo's Afro-Americans to set up housekeeping shoulder-to-shoulder with pimps and bootleggers. The emerging black district filled a triangle bounded by the Illinois Central tracks, Sumner Street, and Mobile Avenue, about twenty square blocks in all. Less than fifteen percent black in 1915, this triangular neighborhood was ninety-four percent black five years later.

While employment and housing trends reinforced black isolation within the community as a whole, important forces were improving conditions among Waterloo's blacks and opening lines of communication between them and the city's white population. Church groups took the lead here, beginning in 1913 with the organization of an A.M.E. Church, whose congregation soon raised enough money to appoint a minister—the young Reverend I.W. Bess—



Reverend I.W. Bess, 1914 (courtesy Waterloo Courier)

to a full-time salaried position of \$600 annually.

Gathering at first in the parsonage on Bates Street, the church requested the help of the inter-denominational Ministerial Union in securing a lot and a meeting house. The ministers' group agreed to underwrite purchase of a church site and then arranged the donation of a railroad chapel from the Illinois Central. By 1914 the refurbished chapel had been relocated on the corner of Mobile and Albany Streets. In the same spring, a second black congregation organized in an empty store on Mulberry Street. Headed by Reverend R.A. Broyles, the Antioch Baptist Church received financial assistance from the city's white Baptist churches as well as from the Waterloo Ministerial Union. It too thrived, despite Broyle's reputation for strict adherence to very traditional methods of worship, including a profes-

sion of conversion from each member of the congregation. An internal dispute forced the pastor to resign in 1915, but under his successor—Reverend J.W. Bowles—the church maintained its position of leadership within the black community.

The two churches continued to be important outlets for the expression of black opinion on public issues, but as the congregations increased in size the ministers began to place greater priority on internal discipline and self-sufficiency and to spend less time as spokesmen for the community. The fate of Reverend Bess's protest against *The Birth of a Nation* illustrates just how far Waterloo's black community had come in three years, but also shows how far it had to go. Although carrying the weight of the city's two black congregations—and thus most of the respectable black citizens in Waterloo—the protest was largely ignored, both by the theatre, which showed the movie, and by the city's two daily newspapers, neither of which took a stand.

Reverend Bess remained in Waterloo until September 1916, when he was transferred to Illinois and replaced by Reverend H.C. Boyd. To the end, he continued his work for better race relations and a stronger community, concluding his tenure by writing the Saturday Sermonette in the *Courier*. Sensing his conference would reassign him, Bess chronicled the "good fight" blacks had fought in the face of hardships and discrimination. They had built a church, found and held jobs, purchased homes and been good citizens. The Bess legacy was that Afro-Americans of Waterloo, if given an opportunity to develop and excel, would prove to be a credit to the city.

But progress was difficult during the years before 1920, because many obstacles blocked the path to success that Reverend Bess had envisioned. The continued presence of the Smokey Row crowd, heavily patronized by all classes of Waterloo whites and many farmers

from the nearby counties, meant the public's attention centered on the bootleggers and houses of prostitution. Indeed, to many blacks and temperance people it was becoming clear that some citizens and public officials were happy to have such services provided during a period of prohibition and moralistic reform, and were content to isolate the activities so as not to corrupt their own children. However, there were other, more serious impediments to racial understanding and to the growth of black community institutions. Segregation of housing, the color line, and racial stereotyping in the press all served to limit black progress in the years after the showing of *The Birth of a Nation*.

The attempt by the Board of Realtors to prohibit sales of houses to blacks in white districts continued in 1916 when the Board petitioned the City Council to pass an ordinance to this effect. Although the Council refused to comply, the Board informally imposed the ban anyway, forcing respectable blacks to remain within the vicinity of Smokey Row. By the end of the Great War, nearly all blacks lived in the triangular area immediately north and east of the IC yards; only a handful resided on the West Side and even those lived within a few blocks of the river which divided the city. This segregation meant that impressionable children were exposed to a seamy side of life with which they had been unfamiliar in rural Mississippi. Churches had to compete with the bacchanal of nearby parties, and parishioners encountered embarrassing comments and stares from men drinking bathtub gin on porches and steps. Shootings, stabbings, and brawls were commonplace. These events, often sensationalized in the press, meant that all blacks of Smokey Row were associated with vice and crime.

Not only did the press create and perpetuate this image, it also treated blacks in a slighting fashion. While the editorial pages of both Waterloo dailies spoke of upholding racial equality



Participants at the District Sunday School Annual Meeting of 1914 gather for a group portrait. Reverend I.W. Bess is seated in the front row, extreme left. (courtesy Clifford Smith)

and giving the respectable black an opportunity to prove himself, stories elsewhere in the paper depicted the black as being roguish and childish. References were made to "red hot tempers and black reputations" and articles about razor fights were common. Other articles were written in dialect liberally laced with "yas, sah, yas sah" and other phrases suggested an ignorant and deferential behavior. Such racial stereotyping made it difficult for blacks to attain equality or respect in any social relationship with whites.

The color line was also present. While no segregationist Jim Crow measures became laws in Waterloo, an unofficial color line began to emerge as the black population increased. Many restaurants and cafes would not serve blacks, and some theatres limited the seating available to them. A Buxton, Iowa lawyer,

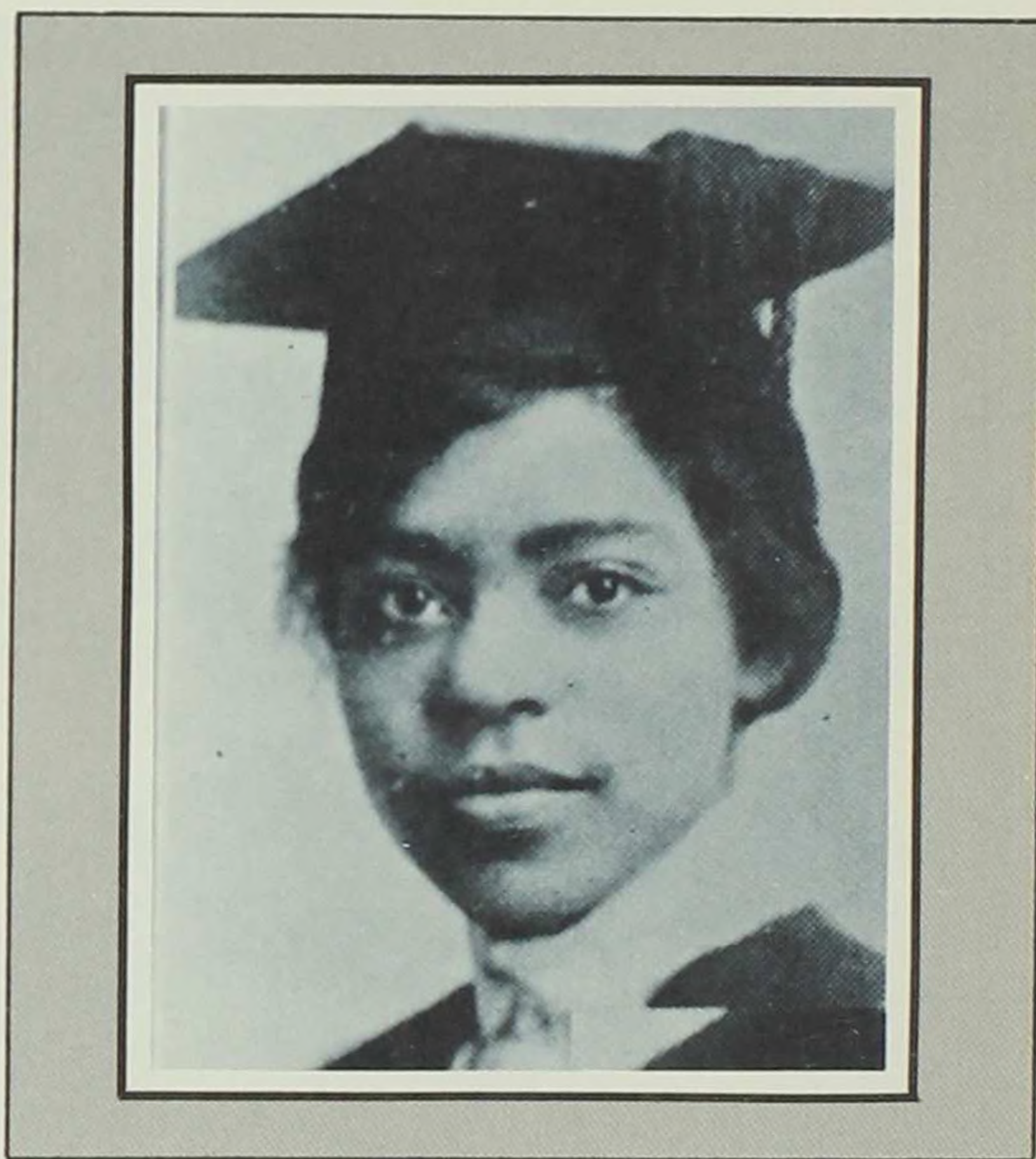
George Woodson, who was in the city to participate in a court case, was denied service in a local cafe. He pressed charges but the case was eventually dropped after several court delays and other obstacles were placed in his way. Public transportation was not segregated but many blacks found it convenient to sit towards the rear of the trolley cars in order to avoid hostile comments and possible confrontations. In 1918 the white workers in the IC shops were invited to march in the Memorial Day parade but black workers were not. Only after they had reminded the organizers that they too had contributed to the war effort were they allowed to participate, and then only at the end of the march. Ironically, the only place in Waterloo that did not apply the color line was the Smokey Row area, where blacks and whites could carouse on an equal footing.

Despite the difficulties and harassment there were many individuals who were able to excel and, in the tradition of Reverend Bess, develop feelings of pride and self-respect within the black community. Lovely and talented Vivian Smith was one who exemplified such excellence and commitment. Her family moved from Kentucky to Waterloo shortly after the IC strike began. In 1916 she received a B.A. in English from Iowa State Teachers College in nearby Cedar Falls, the first black to do so in the school's history. An accomplished violinist and pianist, she was active in nearly all A.M.E. Church activities. But her interests went beyond this, for she was a dedicated suffragette. She served on the Waterloo Suffragette Council and was active in seeking passage by Iowa of the constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote.

Another who sought to improve the status and image of the black community was J.D. Hopkins, proprietor of a small restaurant and pool hall across from the IC yards. From this vantage point he could see the hardships of those less fortunate than he and the need for action to obtain help for those in distress.

In 1918 he organized the Colored Settlement Association located in the St. Paul Masonic Temple. It sought to discuss the problems that confronted blacks in the city and to find assistance from the appropriate agencies for law-abiding citizens. Organizations like the Association established important community programs, including one conducted at the YWCA to help black women from the South adjust to urban life. In addition, black citizens' groups asked that the police and city officials drive the lawbreaking element from the city and provide protection for respectable black residents.

Other organizations reflected the growing strength of the community as well. A brass band was formed by Sidney Scheers to entertain local people. The Colored Giants baseball team won fame by defeating opposing teams in



Vivian B. Smith in 1916, from The Old Gold, yearbook of Iowa State Teachers College (courtesy UNI)

cow pastures and sandlots of the area. A community committee organized the Emancipation Day celebration at Electric Park every August. Visitors came from around the state, from Chicago, and even from Mississippi and Louisiana to watch the parade, listen to speakers and then dance well into the night.

Perhaps there was no greater effort made by blacks to show they belonged than that made during the Great War. When patriotic appeals for service in the Army went out in mid-1917, blacks in Waterloo responded by volunteering, only to learn that the few Negro Regiments were already oversubscribed. It was not until after the 92nd Division, a black combat unit, was formed that they could be enrolled and sent off to Camp Dodge near Des Moines for basic training. On a glorious morning in July, 1918 the largest contingent of young black soldiers-to-be left Waterloo for Camp Dodge. Most of the black population had turned out to see them off, and the parade wound its way through the city to the Chicago Great Western

depot. The mayor, city councilmen, and other public officials headed the march while the young men and their well-wishers followed in step to the music coming from a large truck carrying the brass band. At the station an informal concert was held, with patriotic songs and traditional favorites from the South being played. As departure time neared, the Red Cross distributed cigarettes and farewells were made. The train left amidst tears of joy and fear and cries from the crowd of "bring back the Kaiser." During the course of the war over fifty black men from Waterloo served in the Army. Several lost their lives in the European combat.

While the men were overseas, those remaining also did their part for the war. Individuals bought Liberty Bonds and the churches were organized to sell war savings stamps. In December 1917, Carrie Bright became the operator of the elevator at the Paul Davis's Dry Goods Store the first black woman to take over a man's job, and thereby free him for military service. She took great pride in her contribution to the war effort. Others soon followed, and many black men, unable to gain acceptance into one of the military units, were able to fill positions vacated by Greeks, Italians, and Bulgarians. Only the denizens of Smokey Row did not contribute. Many of them soon found callings elsewhere, as the police used the local labour shortage to "offer" them positions or find them regular, respectable employment.

The period of World War I was relatively harmonious, but the harsh economic and social consequences of the War were to bring changes. Returning soldiers reclaimed their former positions, creating large numbers of unemployed, and after a decline in the vice and crime rate during the War, there was a resurgence, resulting in an adverse reflection on all blacks. There was a general increase in the informal segregation policies applied to blacks

as their numbers increased and they became more visible in society. Blacks could no longer passively accept these conditions and by 1920 their attitudes were beginning to change. A recently formed chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People began to demand equal treatment under the law. Additional black citizens moved into Waterloo and brought with them new economic ambitions and a heightened concern for education and social services.

Thus the period of community isolation and self-reliance nurtured by Reverend Bess was ending. The years from 1911 to 1919 had been ones of building and consolidation from within for the black community. Faced with a new environment and unfamiliar social conditions, the majority had relied on their religious traditions for strength during a difficult time of adjustment. Reverend Bess's leadership proved instrumental in establishing a sense of pride and a feeling of stability that helped offset the various restrictions placed on black residents. Bess's successors in positions of community leadership, men such as the local Baptist ministers and businessman J.D. Hopkins, upheld this tradition of self-help. Vivian Smith's career, for example, served as an important symbol of the possibilities for individual advancement. Yet by also demonstrating the benefits of increased interaction between black and white residents, this new generation of black community leaders pointed the way to continued progress in the future. □

Note on Sources

Resource material for this paper includes the manuscript Iowa State Census of 1915, Waterloo city directories for the years 1911-1920, articles in *The Waterloo Evening Courier* and *The Waterloo Times-Tribune*, and numerous interviews with early black settlers in Waterloo.

An annotated version of this article is on file at the State Historical Society of Iowa.