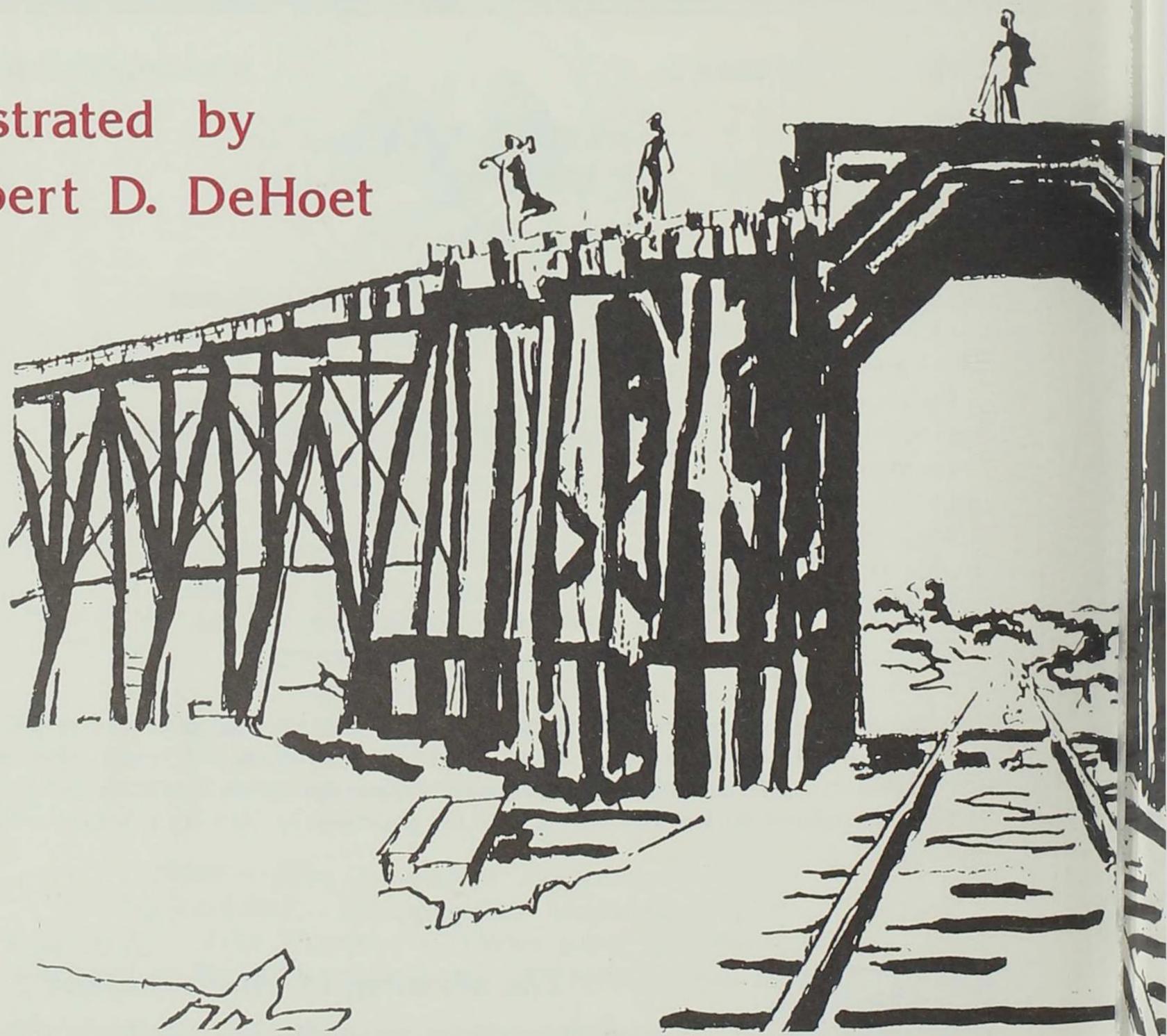


Blacks and Whites in An Iowa Town

Illustrated by
Robert D. DeHoet



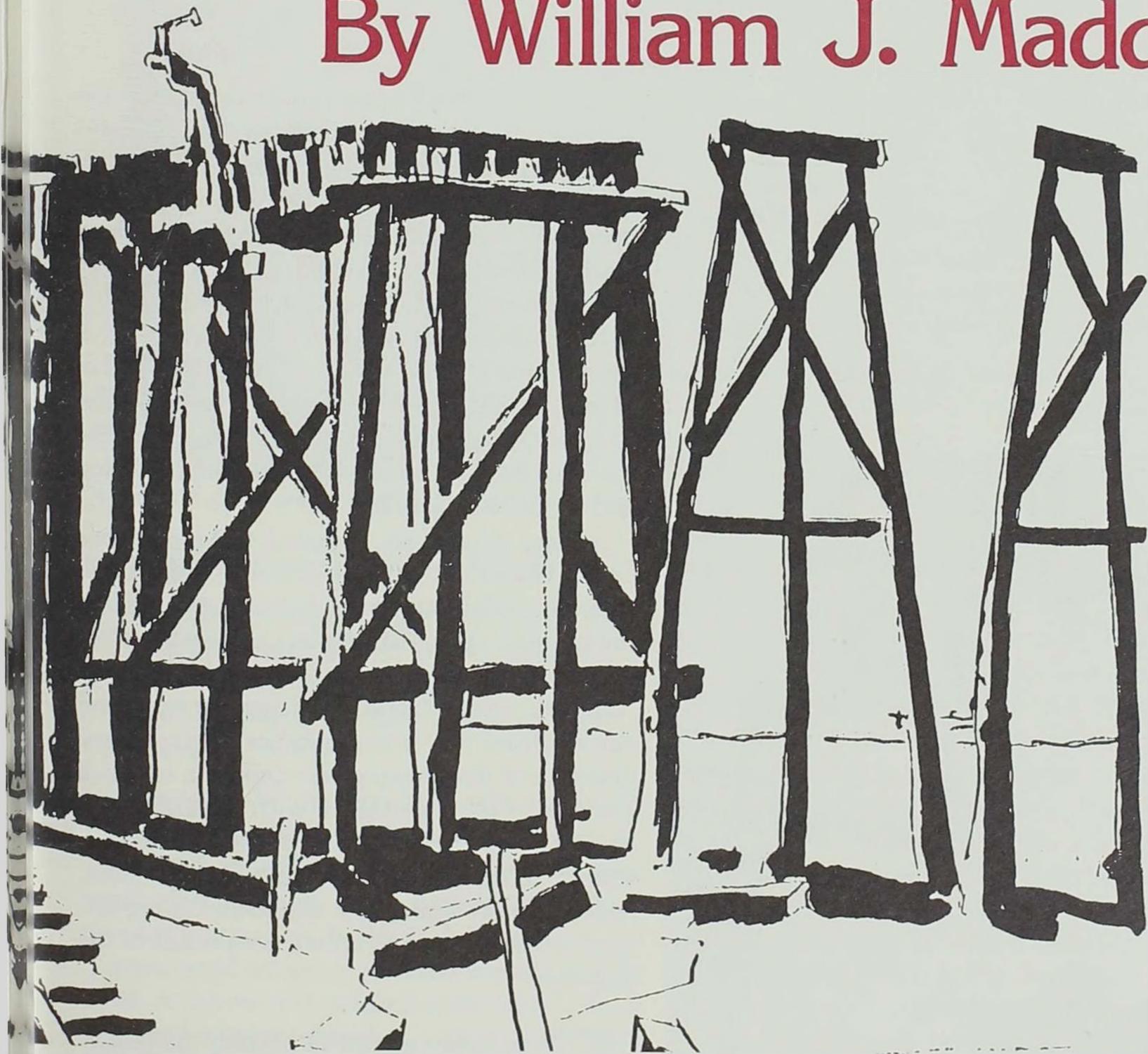
In November 1951 the townspeople of Manly, Iowa reacted with disbelief and anger when they received the news that a black student from Manly had been denied

admission to a University of Iowa sorority on the basis of her race. Grace Marken, the president of Phi Gamma Nu and a Manly native herself, had recommended that the student, Gwen Moore, be accepted into the sorority. When her sorority sisters voted unanimously

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to deny membership to Moore, Marken resigned in protest, telling the press that she could not belong to a racist organization. "After all," she said, "I have to live with myself."

Marken's action sparked controversy in Manly and elsewhere. Several civic and

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the people of Manly remained angered by the injustice done to one of their citizens.

A month prior to the sorority incident, Manly's predominantly white high school had elected a black homecoming king and queen. When asked about the event years later, one of the students elected said, "I cannot think of any instance when I heard a derogatory comment about my being homecoming king." He went on to describe Manly in general:

I didn't feel any racial tension in Manly, Iowa. It never crossed my mind that I was any less or any greater than anybody else. We were all just people.

But race relations in Manly had not always



Manly High School Homecoming King and Queen, Leroy Dunn and Delores Dunn, October 1951 (courtesy William J. Maddix)

been so equitable and harmonious. In 1919 the *Manly Signal* printed this headline: COONS ARRESTED; MAKE GETAWAY. The news article concerned

five colored men who were busily engaged in gambling in a boxcar on 'smokey row.' Four of the dusky sports were landed in the calaboose and locked in the cage.

In the 1920s Manly was marked by segregation at the workplace, in the schools, and in virtually every social sphere. It is apparent that a great many changes occurred in Manly between 1919 and 1951. How and when did these changes come about? How, in fact, did Manly acquire a relatively large black population?

In 1913 the Rock Island Railroad built a roundhouse in Manly. Only 346 people lived in Manly in 1910, but active recruiting by the railroad brought laborers swarming into the town in droves. By 1920 the town's population had increased to 1476.

Among those who migrated to Manly were ninety blacks. They came primarily from small towns in Oklahoma and Arkansas, attracted by the railroad's promise of jobs and free housing. But the jobs were ones that whites termed "nigger's work" (such as removing soot and cinders from the inner chambers of steam engines), and the housing was merely a series of boxcars, each furnished with a table, two chairs, and a few cots. The residents were resourceful, however; they carpeted their floors, papered their walls, and sometimes hung artwork in an attempt to create homes out of the boxcars.

For many whites in Manly, the boxcar community north of their town was a devil's playground: a cluster of informal casinos where black men guzzled whiskey and shot craps. To a certain degree this was true. On one occasion a black man shot another man for fleeing with the money during



A gathering of blacks from Manly and Mason City at a Mason City social club (courtesy William J. Maddix)

a crap game. According to the *Kensett News*:

The row started over a game of "craps" in the Negro bunk car near the roundhouse, and it is said it was a vicious fight while it lasted, as nearly all were armed with revolvers or "razzers."

But whites went too far in their criticism when they characterized such incidents as typical. Whites exaggerated black crime, even as they ignored it in their own community, where gaming houses and brothels flourished.

Interracial tensions reached a peak in July 1922. A nationwide railroad strike was in progress, but blacks refused to join it, since they had been barred from the all-white unions. Whites retaliated by forcing them from the roundhouse. According to a black roundhouse worker, white strikers "all ganged up in cars and drove down [by the roundhouse] and blowed their horns and blowed and blowed and

blowed until a fellow had to go." The worker's wife added, "Later the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross down there. I was so scared, I wanted to leave Manly." Other black women were afraid, too, and as a group they asked Rock Island officials to excuse their husbands from the roundhouse until the strike was over. Company officials granted their request.

When the strike ended, the Ku Klux Klan remained as a political force in Manly that was anti-Catholic as well as anti-black. Klansmen often appeared in public, a dozen or so at a time, wearing hoods and robes. Many whites were intrigued by the Klan and attended cross burnings, not necessarily because they sympathized with the Klan, but because they were attracted by the inevitable fistfights that occurred between white Catholics and the Klansmen.

Initially, blacks in Manly avoided direct confrontations with the Klan. As time passed and

as the Klan became increasingly unpopular in the white community, blacks united against the Klan members. Eventually the Klansmen limited their activities to burning crosses only at the fringe of the black community.

By 1930 the Klan had changed its strategy. As blacks gathered at the New Bethel Baptist Church for Christmas services that year, several Klansmen entered the rear of the church. They marched to the altar and put a brown paper bag under the Christmas tree, then marched from the church in silence. The bag contained fifty dollars. Blacks who were present at the time interpreted the "gift" of money as an attempt to induce the blacks not to venture beyond the confines of their own neighborhood.

White fear of alleged black crime had previously served as one of the Klan's rationales for advocating strict segregation. The purchase of the *Manly Signal* in 1921 by Rush Culver ended the era of magnifying black crime. When major crimes occurred, Culver reported them, but he also reported social and religious activities within the black community. Culver condemned the town's Ku Klux Klan and, in so doing, became a friend of the black community.

Culver facilitated contact between blacks and whites through his newspaper. When blacks sought to raise money for their church by holding bake sales, Sunday dinners, or musicals, Culver vigorously encouraged whites to attend. Many whites did so, not only those from Manly, but people from nearby towns as well.

The *Signal* also gave extensive and favorable press treatment to the Manly Colored Giants, a black baseball team that was one of the most successful in northern Iowa. The newspaper covered all the Giants' games, even when the team travelled to other towns in the area. Occasionally the *Signal* described the chicanery of the Giants' opponents: they would often hire



Manly school children in the 1930s (courtesy Willia J. Mac

players from out of town, in hopes of defeating the talented Giants.

The most intriguing games, from the standpoint of the residents of Manly, pitted the Giants against the Manly Vets, the town's white team. These contests were heated but friendly affairs; the fans were more concerned about the quality of baseball than they were about which team won. Since baseball skill, not skin color, determined the final score, blacks were in a position to compete on an equal basis with whites. And they did that rather well, winning most of the games against the Vets and eventually earning their respect. In 1926, when both the Giants and the Vets were losing players, the Vets invited the Giants to merge with them, and the Giants accepted.

The integrated baseball team raised hopes of integration elsewhere in Manly, but the Depression caused racial tensions to increase once again. The railroad work force decreased from



Maddix)

369 workers in 1930 to 305 the following year, due to a decrease in the volume of rail cargo. Blacks lost their jobs more frequently than whites. Since they were excluded from the all-white railroad unions, blacks were employed only as maintenance workers and were the first to be fired. When the diesel engine replaced the steam engine in the early 1930s, maintenance crews were further reduced, because fewer men were needed to maintain the new engine. Blacks who lost their jobs grumbled about union policies that ultimately preserved jobs for whites at their expense. There was little they could do, however, except seek other jobs.

Finding alternative employment was difficult in a single-industry town; consequently, about thirty blacks left Manly to look for jobs elsewhere. Blacks who stayed in the area travelled to nearby Mason City in search of jobs in the cement industry and in the packing houses.

But they were rebuffed in these attempts and were forced to accept employment as bellhops or as laborers in car washes, for these were the jobs traditionally relegated to blacks in Mason City.

Some enterprising blacks circumvented these limited options. During the 1920s many blacks had raised chickens and pigs and had cultivated gardens that yielded cash crops. When the railroad layoffs began and economic disaster seemed imminent, some blacks intensified and expanded their farming operations. One man rented sixty acres of farmland and added more pigs and cows to his stock. Another man purchased forty acres of land, which he and his son farmed.

By 1933 the racial tension that had characterized the previous three years tapered off with the return of jobs and steady incomes. Although black and white baseball players had reinstated segregated teams in 1932, they merged once again in 1933. Blacks and whites also began to socialize together more freely—at black-sponsored musicals and plays in Manly's previously segregated opera house; at a variety of community and social-club gatherings, including athletic events, fund-raising drives, and communal dinners; and even at black funerals.

The most significant social gains during the Depression years occurred in the school system. In 1933 a black youth was elected captain of the football team. Five years later his brother was elected vice-president of the junior class. Other black youths excelled in a variety of activities: as honor students in the classroom, as running backs on the football field, as leading actors on the stage, as select speakers in all-school ceremonies, and (on the elementary school level) as captains of spelling-bee teams.

Despite these apparent advances, race relations were not entirely congenial. The Klan had disbanded by 1933, but certain precepts and attitudes re-

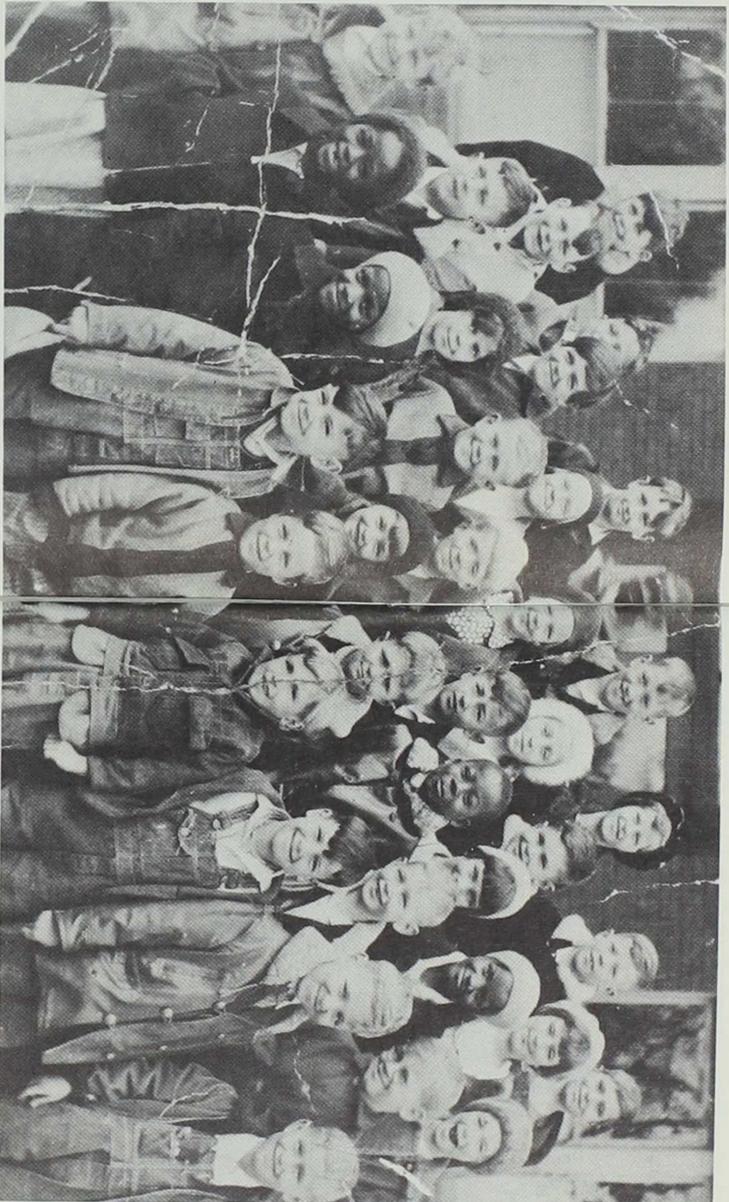
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A Manly farmer feeding his pigs in his backyard in the 1920s (courtesy William J. Maddix)

mained inviolate among its members and sympathizers. Restrictive covenants, as well as racist behavior, prevented blacks from building or buying homes in the white community. When blacks built a new home in the white community for their minister, whites burglarized the home, covering its floors and walls with excrement. Legal means were employed by Manly's largest landholder, George L. Bosworth, who decreed that blacks could never buy property which he had originally sold.

World War II served as a catalyst for coalescing the energies of blacks and whites on a previously unprecedented scale in Manly. Rush Culver contributed to the war effort by reporting the whereabouts of both blacks and whites who were fighting overseas or working in defense-related jobs. Culver also printed letters from soldiers on the front page of the *Signal*. One black man in training at the Hampton Institute wrote:

Negro sailors are now a part of our campus. They are sent here to become sea-

men. . . . I see Lafayette Robinson [another black from Manly] every day, as he is studying to become a machinist's mate, and I am studying to become a machinist's draftsman.

During the war Culver also initiated the "North Manly News," a section in the *Signal* which, like other small-town newspaper columns, reported every event in the black community, regardless of importance. These reports tended to blur the perceived differences between the races, and whites began to realize that the activities and values of blacks were very similar to their own.

Alice Smith shattered long-standing social barriers when she recommended that her club, the United Servicewomen, admit black women who had sons fighting overseas. Several whites objected, but the vast majority agreed. According to Smith, "We had some who wasn't happy, [but] they all settled down and worked together." Eventually interracial ties within the group became so close that one black was

elected president and another became its historian. Other blacks were selected as delegates to county and state conventions.

Black and white women joined hands in such groups as the PTA and the Band Mothers' Club, as well as in a variety of ecumenical church groups. Shortly after the war, a choir from St. Paul's Evangelical Church performed for the New Bethel Baptist Church's thirty-second anniversary, and Manly's mayor addressed the congregation. Four years later black and white women held their World Day of Prayer service at New Bethel in the black community. That same year New Bethel fielded a softball team in the town's Church League. The unity of the war years was further exemplified by the decision of the Manly Town Council to incorporate the black community into Manly proper. Thereafter, the black community was eligible for road maintenance, sewer usage, water lines, and other governmental amenities.

As in the 1930s, the most significant changes during and after the war occurred in the school system. Academic achievements by blacks were increasingly recognized. Social groups became integrated to the extent that black students did not feel compelled to associate only with other blacks.

Gwen Moore, who later became embroiled in the sorority incident at the University of Iowa, expressed a similar sentiment. Though she acknowledged that name-calling and fighting had occurred between blacks and whites in grade school, she observed that students eventually began choosing friends on the basis of merit and mutual interest, not race. In addition to earning several music and scholastic awards, Moore

was president and valedictorian of her high school graduating class.

Leroy Dunn, the homecoming king of his class in 1951, remembered Manly as an extremely progressive town. Whites encouraged blacks to participate in all activities, he said, recalling that he never encountered racism until he left Manly. A white classmate of Dunn's said there was community pride in Dunn's accomplishments. Concerning race relations in the school, he noted that "both races were aware of skin color, but that awareness was not negative." He conceded that the parents of both races "were not quite as close, because communication didn't exist for them as it did in our age group. Yet friendship did exist; a good working relationship was there."

Unfortunately, Manly was an exception to the pattern of American race relations in the twentieth century. The incident involving Gwen Moore and Phi Gamma Nu was one of dozens of local controversies that developed across the nation in the 1950s. These years marked the difficult beginnings of more equitable relations between black and white Americans. Manly provided a viable scenario for racial relations, one that might have eliminated the need for the violent confrontations of the emerging civil rights movement. □

Note on Sources

Research materials consulted for this article included *Manly's Memories*, prepared by the Manly History Committee (Manly, Ia.: The Committee, 1977); files of the *Des Moines Register*, the *Manly Signal*, and the *Kensett News*; and interviews with John and Coma Page, Leroy Dunn, Cecil Douglas, Ed Pinta, and Alice Smith. Also valuable were correspondence with Doris Page and records in the Worth County Courthouse in Northwood.