

Introduction

This book first appeared in the autumn of 1983 to acknowledge in one small way the contributions of Black residents of Champaign-Urbana to the social, economic, and cultural life of the community. Except for a few doctoral dissertations at the University and the oral history project at the Douglass Branch of the Champaign Public Library, Black citizens have been systematically ignored in all records of the community. They are not even mentioned in the standard local histories, although Blacks have been in Champaign-Urbana at least since the 1860s.

Admittedly, even with revisions and the addition of three portraits in this edition, this effort must still be considered just a beginning. The photographs and captions in *In All My Years* are intended to be vignettes which offer glimpses of the individuals portrayed. Some of the photographs were made within the settings of homes and places of business; others with simple black backgrounds. We were primarily interested in evoking the strength and dignity of individuals who have not only endured, but eventually prevailed through very difficult times. What has emerged is a composite picture – strikingly at variance with traditional stereotypes – of individuals who have valued family, church, community, and themselves as human beings. We photographed people who successfully managed businesses when the odds were decidedly against them. We also photographed articulate people who all their lives found themselves relegated to service occupations, but nonetheless excelled in those avenues available to them and, most importantly, maintained their essential humanity.

We have tried to avoid a strident tone and message, not to deny the bitter legacy of the past, but to demonstrate the more positive attributes of each of the persons portrayed. These are common people, friends and neighbors, each of whom throughout their lives demonstrated a quiet heroism.

The advanced age and fragile health of many of the participants have lent an air of urgency to our actions as we believe they should in other projects with older persons. Many of the people we wanted to photograph have passed away. They include George Pope, Sr., Alice Lee Pope, Ernest Cook, Edwin Cook, Herbert Nesbitt, Sr., Mel Winfield, Ernest Nelson, Sr., Helen Hite, Dr. Landel Dufay, Albert Alexander, Charles Phillips, Sr., and others. It should be noted that in the brief time since the photographs were made, two of the participants, Ruth Hines and James Algee, have passed away. Others were too ill or otherwise unavailable at the time the photographs were made, such as Mattie Burch and Clifford Johnson, who, at age 103, was the oldest person in the twin cities. Still others could not be included simply because of limitations to the size of the book and exhibit. Their absence in no way diminishes their contributions.

One of the most satisfying aspects of this project has been the active involvement and cooperation of a number of individuals and organizations. The idea for *In All My Years* originally grew out of a documentary portrait project funded by the Illinois Humanities Council. Funding for the project itself came from a grant from the Junior Women's League of Champaign, an organizational grant from the Illinois Arts Council and an LSCA Title III grant administered by the Illinois State Library. Staff at both the Illinois Humanities

Council and Illinois Arts Council also offered many valuable suggestions which ultimately led to a stronger project.

Cosponsoring the project were the Champaign Public Library and Information Center, The Urbana Free Library, the Illinois Historical Survey, and Parkland College Library. Michael Cahall, former director of the Champaign County Historical Museum, Frederick Schlipf, director of The Urbana Free Library, Judith Drescher, former director of the Champaign Public Library, and John Hoffmann, director of the Illinois Historical Survey, were especially helpful and supportive in the project.

Linda LaPuma Bial quietly critiqued and arranged the photographs, then reviewed and edited all of the text. Laurie McCarthy, director of the museum, provided the impetus for publishing this revised edition.

Charlotte Nesbitt, Director of the Douglass Branch of the Champaign Public Library, not only brought all of the participants to our attention, but she scheduled all portrait sittings and undertook a large portion of the research. Without her conscientious efforts *In All My Years* simply would not have been possible.

It is hoped that this book will generate greater interest and research in the history and present condition of the Black community not only in Champaign-Urbana, but throughout the country.

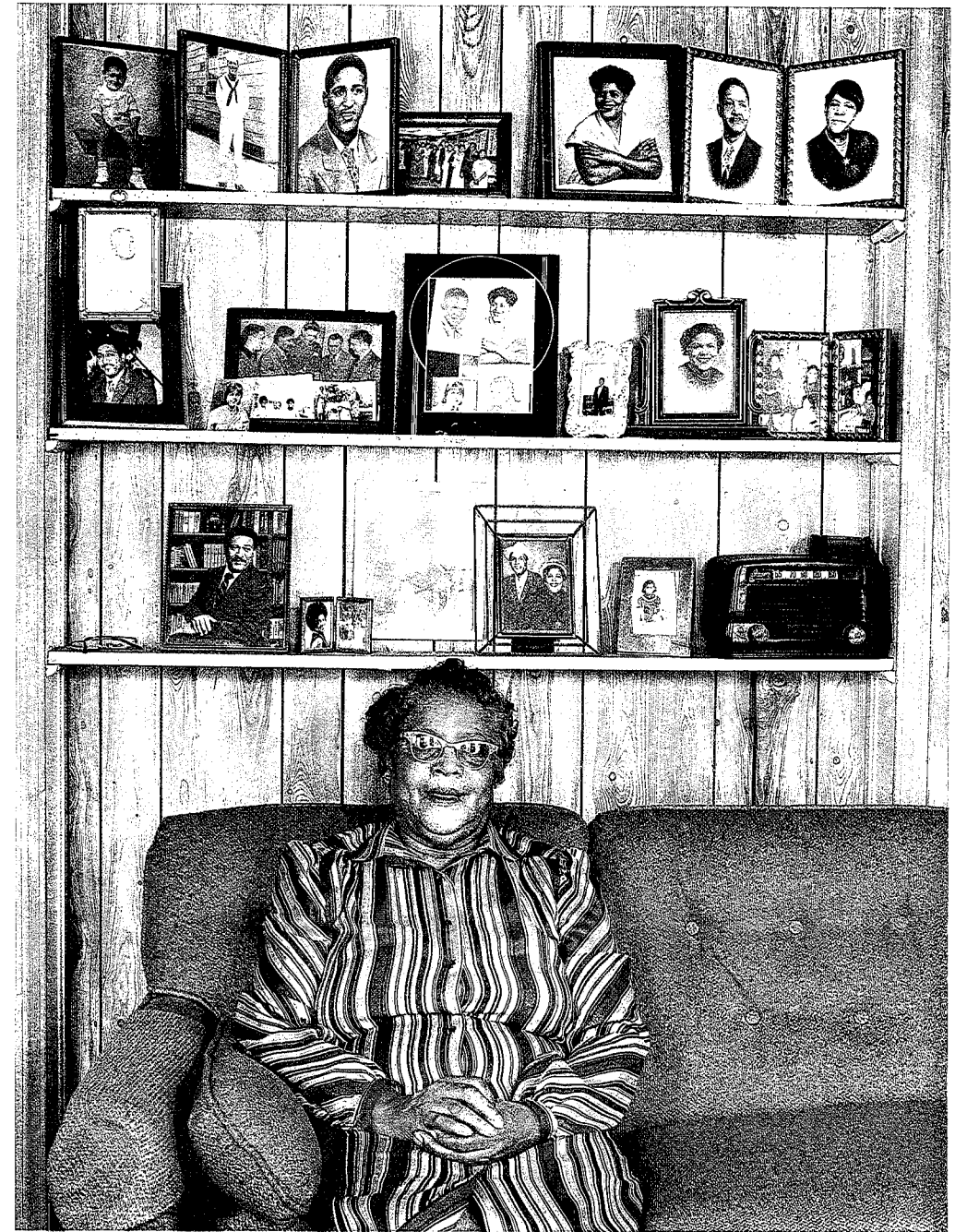
Bernice Chambers

Born in Liberty, Mississippi, Mrs. Chambers came to Champaign in 1920 when she was thirteen years old.

She has been a cook at the University of Illinois residence halls, but especially values her family and her church work at Salem Baptist Church.

She has been actively involved in the community and is presently director of the Douglass Peace Meals program.

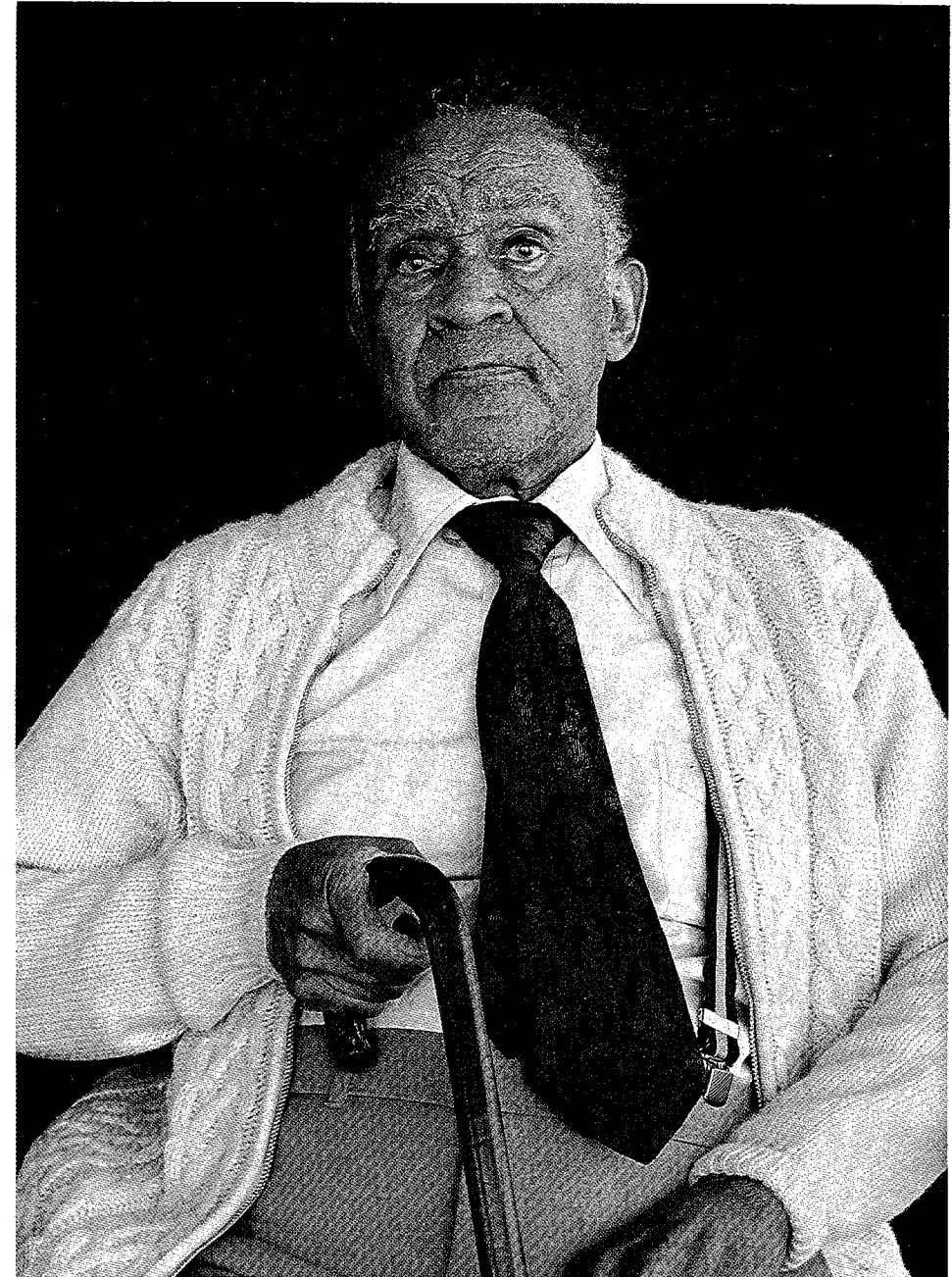
Her family originally came to Champaign to visit relatives, but her father got a job on the Illinois Central line and the family stayed. For over fifty years they lived on the corner of 4th and Tremont.



Richard R. Edwards

Born in 1897 in Carmi, Illinois, Mr. Edwards came to Champaign in 1915. According to his son, he "came up here looking for work. Joined his brother here." The second Black mail carrier in Champaign, he worked for over thirty years for the post office. His son (who was the fourth Black mail carrier in Champaign) says, "Heck, everybody in town knows him."

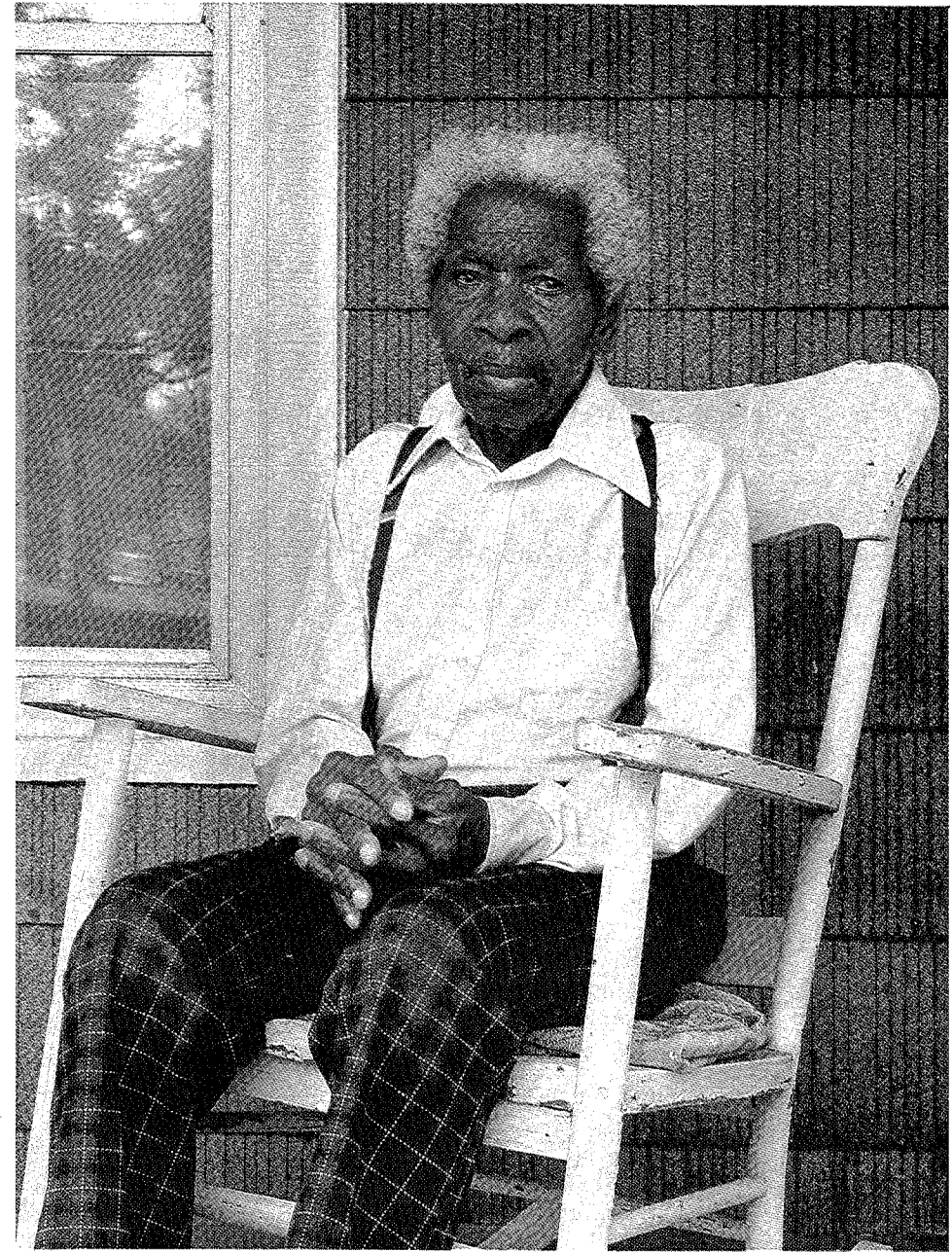
Mr. Edwards was also Deputy Probation Officer for Champaign County for six years and, a former president of Douglass Center, he was one of the group who founded the center in 1943 dedicating the building to "the youth of today - our hope for tomorrow."



Reverend William Houston Shaw

Reverend Shaw was born September 27, 1891, in Wilmington, North Carolina, where he lived until he was twelve years old. He worked as a carpenter and preached in Pennsylvania and West Virginia before coming to Champaign in 1942. In regard to making a living he says, "I lived where I could go. Did anything I could do."

He came to Champaign when his first wife died. He worked in landscaping and remodeling in Champaign-Urbana and was last employed at Chanute for several years.



Reverend Earl Kennedy

Reverend Kennedy was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, in 1918 and raised on a farm in Greensboro, Alabama. He moved to Chicago for "economic reasons" and attended high school there.

He studied for the ministry at ITL Seminary in Atlanta and Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, after which he became pastor of his first church in Robbins, Illinois. He is currently in his eleventh year as pastor of St. Luke's Methodist Church in Champaign.

"I love working with young people," says Reverend Kennedy, an active volunteer at Douglass Center where he supervises the gameroom, referees volleyball games, and announces softball games over the PA system.

"I have certainly enjoyed my years as pastor at St. Luke's," he says. "When I leave St. Luke's I will retire. I won't pastor at another church."

