

# Entrepreneurism a hallmark of black community

BY THE CHAMPAIGN COUNTY  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY COMMITTEE

The Champaign-Urbana African-American community has had many enterprising business owners through its history.

In the early 1900s, a triangle-shaped area bounded by First Street on the east and Water Street on the west just east of the Illinois Central Railroad tracks contained many black-owned businesses, including restaurants and a pool hall. The Harris and Dixon Taxi Cab Co. in this area catered primarily to cooks at the University of Illinois.

In the good old days, Mrs. Carr made the best hot tamales and distributed them in converted baby buggies for 5 cents each or three for a dime; Mrs. Taylor had a restaurant at Dublin and Wright streets specializing in fish sandwiches; Mrs. Herbert Clark sold pastries, pies and cakes (especially lemon pies) at Dublin and Mathews in Urbana; Three Sisters sold "the best fish and chicken this side of heaven"; The Chicken Shack, at 503 E. Grove St. in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Will McDuff, provided delivery and was open late at night, ideal for a snack after a dance or party; Mrs. Ollie Macklin's Tea Room on East Hill Street in Champaign had a soda fountain and catered to teen-agers; Mom and Pop Gardener operated their restaurant on North Poplar Street; Hattie and Mel Winfield's tavern (the original Blue Island Tavern) was in the 800

block of North Poplar Street in Champaign and later moved to the old Colombia Hotel; in the 600 block of Grove Street in the back yard of a home there was a miniature golf course; Mrs. Romeo Green operated an eating and dancing establishment for junior and senior high school students; "Cry Baby" Mac Brewer and Mrs. Mac had a full service restaurant specializing in sweet potato pies on North Poplar Street and a place for dancing on the corner of Fourth and Vine streets, Tuxedo Junction After Hours (the sweetest music in town.)

Now, next door to Tuxedo Junction on Fourth Street was a place called Larry's. Larry's was operated by Mr. Percy and Mrs. Lucille Larry. Their specialty was chittlins and Southern cooking.

Joe Sommers operated Dagwoods (Jukebox Saturday Night for the high school students.) Judge Sommers was the first black elected justice of the peace and later magistrate in Champaign County.

Arnold Yarber, following in his grandmother's footsteps, established Po Boy's Bar-B-Que at the same location that Mrs. Carr had her eating establishment. It is still in operation.

In 1951, Mr. and Mrs. Roscoe Tinsley opened Tinsley's Cleaners. The business offered cleaning, pressing and alteration services and provided pickup and delivery. Tinsley's Cleaners was in business until the early 1970s.

## An abundance of barbers, beauticians

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Entrepreneurial blacks often sought business opportunities with low overhead or that could be run from their homes. So barbershops and beauty parlors were a frequent choice.

In the early 1900s, Frank Jordan owned and operated an emporium in downtown Champaign. It was on Main Street near the Illinois Central Terminal. Jordan had at one time more than ten barber chairs and featured haircuts, shaves, facials and baths.

Locally, Van's Barber Shop was launched in 1937 by Van Thompson, who remained involved in the long-lasting enterprise well into the 1970s. Although he received only an eighth-grade education and had no formal barber training, Thompson's shop prospered for many years in the basement at 29 Main St.

The more prosperous black-owned shops catered to "whites only." A black man could get his hair cut after hours when the shops were closed. This practice continued until 1940, when the first inductees of the 99th Pursuit Squadron arrived at Chanute.

There were other black-owned shops that catered to "blacks only."

Ace Barber Shop was owned and operated by Arthur C. Merrifield. It was first on University Avenue and later moved to North First Street. He had three chairs. His nephew, Fred M. Merrifield, operated the shop after his death until 1972. Many barbers, including Speedy McDowell and Roy Sugs, apprenticed themselves to Merrifield and Lincoln Wesley and later took barber exams, passed the state boards and opened shops of their own. The older barbers passed the art of barbering to the next generation.

Beauticians were trained in much the same way. In the early years, some were fortunate to attend the Madam Walker College for Beauticians in Indianapolis. In the late 1930s and early '40s, a few were able to attend the Champaign Beauty College.

The beauticians formed an organization and eventually united with national organizations. They learned the latest styles each year, operated successful shops and became prominent businesswomen.

Prior to 1930, most of the hairdressers had shops in their homes. They hot-pressed hair with iron combs. Curling irons, heated on little gas burners, were used to style the hair. Great skill was required to keep from burning the hair. Woe be unto the child that wiggled at the wrong time.

In the 1960s and '70s, at the time of the civil rights movement, the Afro natural style and the braid became popular. Many of the older barbers were not able to cope, suffered financial decline and sold their shops to younger barbers and beauticians.



In 1976, Anna Wall Scott was the Democratic candidate for Congress from the 21st District. Here, she attaches a campaign sign to the Democratic Tent at the Champaign County Fair in July 1976.

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