

Economic boom, but not for everybody

■ Higher wages elude area's working poor amid low jobless rate

By ALDEN LOURY
News-Gazette Staff Writer

CHAMPAIGN — With its growing property tax base, low unemployment rate and thriving retail community, Champaign County appears to be enjoying economic bliss.

But a significant segment of Champaign County is not a part of the area's economic success story.

Many Champaign County residents live in poverty. And according to state poverty figures and Project 18's 1997 Community Report Card, things are getting worse.

According to 1990 census data, 3,130 or 8 percent of Champaign County families were below the federal poverty level. There were 264,413 or 9 percent of Illinois families below the federal poverty line during the 1990 census.

While there is no more recent poverty data available at the county level, national and state child poverty levels have increased by nearly 5 percent, according to the Report Card.

"It's hard for me to understand on the face of it," said University of Illinois economist Elizabeth Powers about the perception that poverty is rising in the county.

"If this is accurate, it's a bit strange," she added.

Poverty rates are pretty strongly tied to jobs, Powers said. And historically, Champaign County has had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state. Preliminary October figures show the county's jobless rate at 2.3 percent.

Some, however, suggest it's not the number of jobs but the kind of jobs that has contributed to the county's level of poverty.

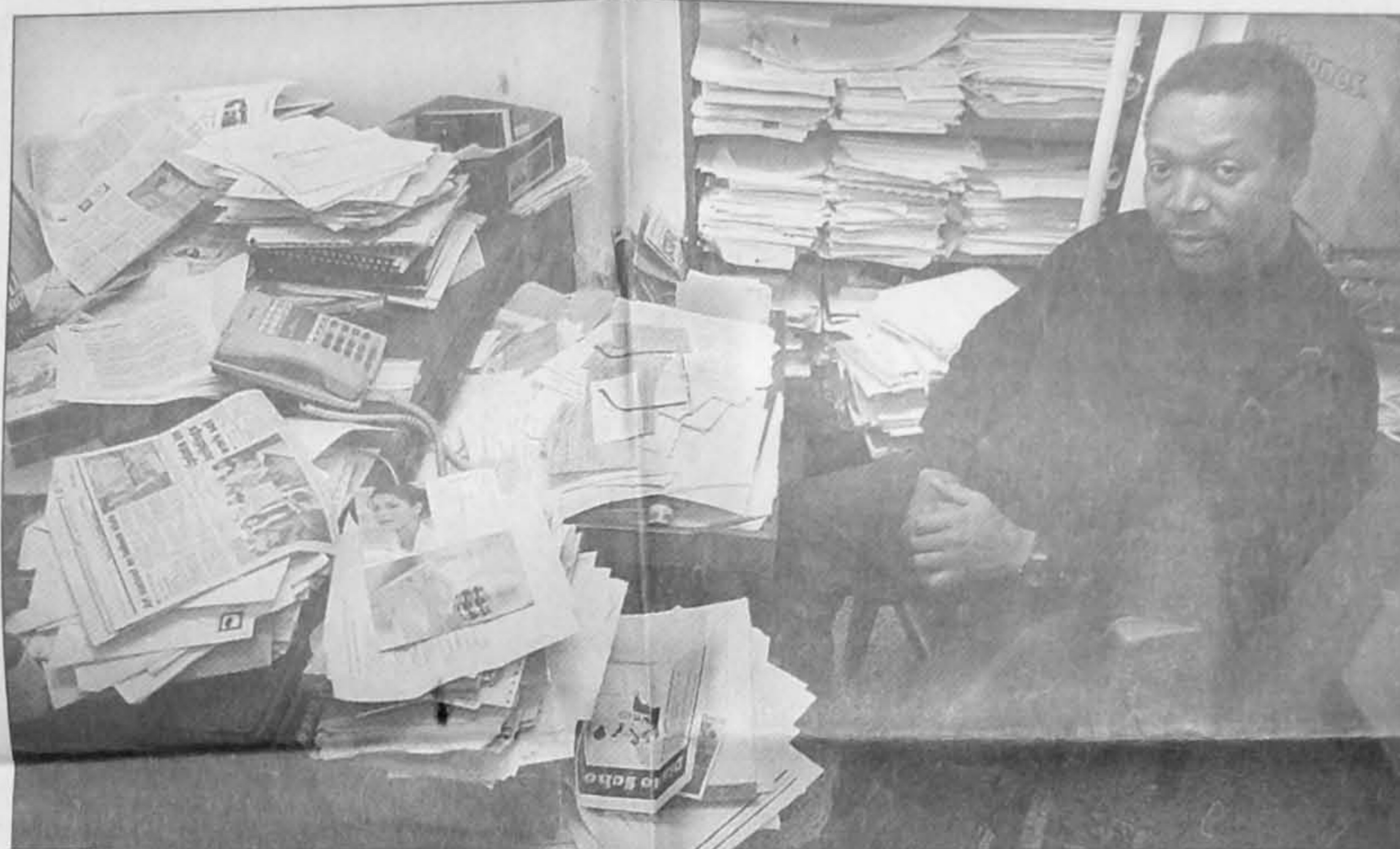
"In this community we do have high employment but much of that is in low-wage employment," said Ron Stuyvesant, regional executive director of the Children's Home & Aid Society of Illinois.

According to preliminary October 1997 data from the Illinois Department of Employment Security, wage-earners in Champaign County earn about \$2 dollars less an hour than other workers in the state and nation.

The national average is \$13.29 an hour. The state average is \$13.49 an hour. In Champaign County, the average hourly wage is \$11.40.

Darrel Auterson, chief executive officer of the Greater Champaign-Urbana Economic Partnership, said the majority of the county's work force is in a service-based capacity.

In addition, Auterson said the county has a relatively low number of manufacturing jobs that typically come with



News-Gazette photo by Robin Scholtz

Community activist John Lee Johnson, an advocate for the poor, poses in his office at the Champaign County Health Care Consumers office. He was there last week. 'I think it's the fact

that those few among us who have been able to enjoy the benefits of economic growth ... have forgotten about those who are poor,' he said.

higher wages and benefits.

"We have a lot of families and parents who are working minimum wage jobs ... who are unable to support their families (adequately)," Stuyvesant added.

A 1996 survey of more than 1,250 Champaign County employers conducted by the Illinois Department of Employment Security also shows that the most-worked manufacturing, service, finance, insurance, real estate and trade industry jobs pay low wages.

The survey indicates that 12 of the 16 job categories with 100 or more employees in the county paid less than \$7 an hour.

With those kinds of wages, Tracy Parsons, president of the Urban League of Champaign County, said it is extremely difficult to move poor people to higher income levels.

"That's why our poverty numbers are not matching the growth of our community," Parsons said.

"We as a community have to do a better job of strengthening the skills of the lower end of the poverty spectrum so that they can remove themselves as much as possible from (that) poverty status," Parsons said.

A number of initiatives working to reverse the tide of poverty are already under way through job training, entrepreneurship and government action.

Several groups that offer job training

and job search assistance are preparing to launch the Workforce Preparation Center in January, Parsons said.

Parsons said the center will focus on helping the unemployed or low-wage-earners use the \$5- to \$6-an-hour jobs to build a strong employment history and job skills needed to advance.

Auterson said a number of local employers have jobs waiting for that group once they develop more skills.

"We hear this just about every (visit) we make," Auterson said. "If they could

just get folks that have the necessary skills."

Parsons said another group including University of Illinois and local government and community officials is working to help those interested in starting their own businesses get started.

The city of Champaign recently approved the use of nearly \$1.6 million to help revive the city's traditionally black business district along North First Street.

Auterson also said the arrival of new

Flex-N-Gate and RPS facilities will bring more than 450 higher-wage jobs to the community by the year 2000.

"It's definitely a very challenging dilemma but I think we are making some progress," Auterson said.

Community activist John Lee Johnson, however, argues that progress is not happening fast enough.

"I think it's the fact that those few among us who have been able to enjoy the benefits of the economic growth have forgotten about those who are poor," said Johnson, an advocate for the poor.

He believes schools, businesses and city governments must make more of a commitment to providing a quality education, equal access to jobs and a fair share of government resources to the poor.

"It's one thing to talk about how wealthy we are but not talk about how poor we are. Those are the areas of the dialogue that are left out," Johnson said.

Johnson said that as long as the county struggles with poverty it will also continue to struggle with crime, drugs, gangs and other social conditions many believe are closely tied to poverty.

The report card calls poverty "the most widely used indicator of child well-being." Children living in poverty are more likely to die during childhood, score lower on standardized tests, drop out of school, have children out of wedlock, experience violent crime and end up as adults living in poverty, the report card says.

"That doesn't mean that people in poverty always have those things, but there's just too high of a correlation between those (conditions) and poverty," said Jeanne Gerriets, director of Project 18.

The report card also says that the slow growth in wages, and the growth in the proportion of children living in single-parent families account for much of the increase of children living in poverty in recent years.

Champaign County wage survey

The 1996 Occupational Wage Survey, conducted by the Illinois Department of Employment Security, shows that the most-worked manufacturing, service, finance, insurance, real estate and trade industry jobs in Champaign

County pay low wages.

The survey indicates that 12 of the 16 job categories with 100 or more employees paid less than \$7 an hour.

Occupational category	Workers in wage survey	Firms responding to survey	Median hourly wage	Entry hourly wage	Fast food worker				
Cashier (all)	341	29	\$5.25	\$5.13	445	12	\$5.00	\$4.55	
Cleaner, housekeeping	129	13	\$6.33	\$4.75	110	18	\$5.25	\$5.00	
Clerk, production	203	6	\$11.00	\$5.25	255	35	\$18.08	\$11.54	
Clerk, sales	199	11	\$5.25	\$5.13	471	9	\$6.75	\$5.30	
Clerk, shipping/receiving	120	19	\$7.53	\$6.13	268	18	\$4.45	x	
Cook, fast food	123	11	\$5.61	\$4.75	104	12	\$5.88	\$5.38	
Driver	153	9	\$5.00	x	122	32	\$9.66	\$6.88	
					224	6	\$6.74	\$5.25	
					212	14	\$3.55	x	

x - insufficient survey response

Note: The survey included responses from 1,254 firms in Champaign County that employ 6,929 workers.

NEWS / EAST CENTRAL ILLINOIS

Johnson to help lead North First project

By J. PHILIP BLOOMER
News-Gazette Staff Writer

CHAMPAIGN — John Lee Johnson is doing work for the city once again.

The former city council member and one of the city's most dependable critics is about to take a lead role in the long-planned effort to redevelop North First Street.

Johnson, who also lives on North First Street, works in housing advocacy for the Illinois Center for Citizen Involvement.

The city is hiring the agency, and Johnson in particular, under a \$5,000 contract as project facilitator for the North First redevelopment, according to documents going to the city council Tuesday.

Johnson will be teamed with Champaign residents Dennis McConaha and William Cork. The latter pair are being hired under an approximately \$20,000 contract for project coordination tasks.

McConaha is a consultant who has extensive experience in redevelopment efforts locally, elsewhere in Illinois, in South Carolina and in Britain. As a team, McConaha and Cork also conduct military base reuse studies for the Army's Construction Engineering Research Laboratory.

City planner Ivy Lewis said McConaha and Cork are being relied on for the technical expertise in forming rehabilitation plans for properties and organiz-

ing financing.

Johnson has responsibility for forming a business organization among existing and prospective businesses, putting together plans for security, appearance and marketing.

McConaha said Cork first observed the notice in the newspaper about the project, "and thought we'd be a good match."

McConaha grew up in Champaign and is familiar with the history of the black-owned business district.

He was with Control Data in the early 1980s helping spearhead incubation efforts for small businesses.

"The combination of Cork and myself and John Lee, and of

course the city planning organization, financial institutions and small business resources we're familiar with can all contribute to the success of this project," McConaha said.

"I'm confident of the potential for success," he added. "It is an ambitious project, but one in dire need of taking place."

City staff members have been working with businesses and property owners in the area for the past year.

There are 27 primarily commercial properties in the North First Street planning area, according to a report from city Planning Director Bruce Knight. Ten are vacant lots, and three contain vacant buildings.

The average building in the ar-

ea needs more than \$80,000 in improvements, with estimated needs for buildings ranging from \$47,500 to \$174,000, the report said. The estimates included structural, mechanical and aesthetic improvements, the report said.

Lewis said spending plans for the area are incomplete and will have to be adjusted according to the activity that gets under way.

For next fiscal year, starting July 1, \$150,000 has been budgeted in anticipation of land acquisition and demolition costs. Another \$150,000 is available for redevelopment assistance on North First as well as within the entire east-side business area, meaning the business district east of the tracks.

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3 hired to head First Street redevelopment

By J. PHILIP BLOOMER
News-Gazette Staff Writer

CHAMPAIGN — The First Street redevelopment project has gotten some ringing endorsements from city officials, even though one was on the hollow side.

Two veteran economic development consultants were hired to coordinate a plan for a public/private reinvestment in the traditionally black-owned business district.

Consultants Dennis McConaha and William Cork were hired as project coordinators, with community activist John Lee Johnson of the Illinois Center for Citizen Involvement hired as facilitator.

McConaha and Cork are in-

involved in military base reuse studies and have experience in small business development projects around the country.

Council member Jerry Schweighart didn't have any problems with them, but he questioned what Johnson's qualifications were to lead the project. That information was not provided council members, he said, as it is for other positions they are required to act on.

Johnson is assisting McConaha and Cork mainly by helping organize area business and property owners. A longtime housing advocate, Johnson said he would have preferred to have been in the lead role, and as it is, he was asked by city officials to participate in the project because of

his experience with these issues.

"I recognize this is my home, and this is the last place I'd be considered an expert on anything," said Johnson, a frequent critic of the council. "But let me assure you, I have a heckuva lot of experience in this area over the last 30 years."

The Illinois Center for Citizen Involvement will be paid around \$5,000 for Johnson's work, and the others are under contract for about \$20,000. Their responsibilities consist of helping business owners make business and rehabilitation plans and arranging financing. The project is to be done by Oct. 1.

Council members were for the most part optimistic about the plan. The city has set aside

\$150,000 for next fiscal year in anticipation of land acquisition and demolition costs. More is available from other sources.

"I'm looking forward to John Lee beating on us from the inside instead of the outside," said council member Marty Smith.

Phillip Rowell, a council candidate in the last election and a community activist in his own right, urged the council to refrain from making First Street a "political football."

"There's a lot of undercurrent of discussion about this," Rowell said. "Many look to North First Street as a beacon. This is not a social services project or a political endeavor but an economic development project aimed at fostering small business."

Sheriff's employees



weather

Today:

Sunny;
High: 81 Low: 50
more Weather on 2

First Street up for renovation

City of Champaign hopes to revitalize 'depressed' part of town

by Emily Kline
Daily Illini reporter

The city of Champaign has decided to make contributions to rebuild the area around North First Street. Teamed up with local banks, the city distributes loans to businesses to help them rebuild and compete in the commercial area.

The purpose is to revitalize a business area in a "depressed" part of Champaign, according to at-large City Council member Tom Bruno.

As the first reconstruction project on First Street begins on the Lone Star Lodge and High Twelve Club, the question is raised over why it took so long to start developing that section of Champaign.

John Lee Johnson, community activist and former City Council member, said loans in Champaign traditionally have not been directed toward the African-American business area of Champaign and Urbana.

He said that the difficulty in getting loans is "because (the businesses) were operated and owned by African Americans."

"Banks didn't want to allow black people to create a business infrastructure ... so what occurs is they create loan barriers which they know a typical black business person will not be able to meet."

Several area banks refused to comment on these allegations.

Although Bruno agreed that banks are less likely to make loans



Chuck Cass The Daily Illini

Roosevelt Brown dances at the High Twelve Club, 208 N. First St., Champaign, Wednesday afternoon.

to owners in the predominantly African-American area of North First Street, he had a different take on the situation.

"I suspect their reluctance has more to do with the perception that the loans involve risk than it has to do with racism," Bruno said.

Council member Jerry Schweighart called this a common banking practice.

"If you don't have the money to put into it, the bank won't make the loan. They have guidelines, and bad loans tighten those regulations. There is nothing racial about it," Schweighart said.

Johnson said he believes the

\$10 million expansion at the nearby police station gave the banks a feeling of protection.

"It was only then that banks were willing to consider a partnership with the black-owned businesses on First Street," Johnson said.

Even with the police station nearby, the banks would not agree to make the loans until the city stepped in, according to Johnson.

"Banks stay away from risky ventures," Bruno said. "That's why the city's help can be so important (to) provide the comfort level that enables banks to make loans."

With a lack of "disposable wealth," according to Johnson, the community around First Street needed the city's financial support.

"It's risky to start a small business. The failure rate is high," Schweighart said. That is why banks can be reluctant to give loans to a "depressed" community, he added — they are afraid they won't be paid back in full.

Another fear about the project, according to Schweighart, is that "we (the city) stuck our neck out too far."

more First Street on 6

First Street next in line for renovation

First Street from 1

He said it was a bad idea to not put the business' own money in. He added that he fears the loans will not make the businesses take responsibility because the terms are advantageous to the business owners.

"If business went bad, they could easily walk away," Schweighart said.

Bruno agreed that Schweighart's fears might materialize but the city needs to take up a venture such as this project.

"It's a risk that the city needs to bear, to help create a viable economic district in such a high profile location."

Even with the city and banks teamed up with the loans, the city cannot fund all the potential rebuilding projects on its own.

There is only a limited number of tax dollars available from the city, Johnson said.

"(The rebuilding) of low-income neighborhoods of Champaign and Urbana cannot be fulfilled only through local tax dollars. The local bank must be willing to risk investments and support these neighborhoods," Johnson said.

Schweighart fears the investment might "put the city at risk ... and I don't think we can put everyone in business, (but the city) had to take a chance." He said the loans would not be made without the city's backing.

"What the banks had was an overriding protection of their loans through the grants that were given by the city for each business in the area," Johnson said.

According to Johnson, the reason the community hasn't gotten the loans earlier is because the black business owners "may need technical help to do that. It's no different than white business people who have attorneys, architects, engineers and developers to put their money to use." He said he feels the black community in Champaign lacks this kind of support.

Schweighart, Bruno and Johnson agreed the first project of rebuilding the Lone Star Lodge should generate more businesses wanting to take part in the loans and rebuilding.

"That fact that it has historically served a minority population is just extra reason to support this business district," Bruno said.



Through the Years: African-American History Comes Home

The experiences of African Americans in Champaign County represent universal themes of human existence: family, work, education, religion and friendship. The census reveals that the "first wave" of nineteenth century African American migration (late 1860's through 1880) produced a tenfold increase from 48 African Americans in 1860, to 230 by 1870 and 462 in 1880. Between 1900 and 1920, the number tripled from 351 to 1,620. According to the latest census, 16,559 African Americans resided in Champaign County in 1990. Champaign County African Americans built and developed institutions—churches, businesses and social groups—married, raised families, worked, served in the military and contributed to the economic, political, social, and cultural development of Champaign County.

During the months of June through October, 1998, the staffs of the UIUC Afro-Ameri-

can Studies and Research Program, UIUC Kruttschnitt Art Museum and the Early American Museum, coordinated by Val Littlefield, Afro Staff Associate, worked with members of the Champaign County African-American History Committee (CCAANC) to organize and develop an exhibit on Champaign County African Americans.

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Big Four Railroad Station, Champaign, Illinois ca. 1910. The railroad system served as transportation for migrating African Americans as well as an employment source.

Chancellor's Minority Postdoctoral Fellows

by Consuelata Kabonene and Val Littlefield

The Chancellor's Minority Postdoctoral Fellowship Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign assists underrepresented minority faculty members in developing their careers as scholars. For those members of underrepresented minorities committed to university teaching and research, the Fellowship program provides a stipend, close association with faculty and the university and assistance in furthering the fellow's development as a productive scholar. Fellowship recipients Earline Rae Ferguson and David Wright joined AASRP in 1997.

Earline Rae Ferguson, Assistant Professor of History at Illinois State University, joined the Afro-American Studies & Research Program in September, 1997 as a Chancellor's Minority Postdoctoral Fellow for 1997-1999. She is also affiliated with the Department of History. Ferguson earned her Ph.D. in History from Indiana University Bloomington in 1997. Her dissertation, "A Community Affair: Black Hoosier Women's Clubs, Indianapolis, 1870-1917," examines black club women's tireless efforts in social welfare and community development.

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A Newsletter of the
Afro-American Studies
and Research Program
University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign

www.aasrp.uiuc.edu

"Through the Years is a rich visual tapestry exploring the contributions of African Americans to Champaign County's business, religion, and the arts."

— George Scheetz, Director, Champaign Public Library

...from page 1

The exhibit "Through the Years: African-American History Comes Home," opened on October 24, 1996 with a panel discussion by Champaign County African-American History Committee members: Carrie Banks, Nate Dixon, Doris Hoskins, Cheryl Kennedy, Estelle Merrifield, and CharLotte Nesbitt. Roland Brown served as moderator, and Dianne M. Pinderhughes, Director of Afro-American Studies, gave the welcoming remarks. The exhibit was on display at the Afro-American Studies and Research Program from October 24 through December 20, 1996. During that time, approximately 500 people, including students from area schools such as Rantoul and University High, viewed the exhibit. The exhibit was also made available to area schools and public institutions upon their request. Booked well into 1998, the exhibit was displayed at the Champaign Public Library, January 1997; Parkland College, February, Yankee Ridge School, Urbana, March - May; Douglass Branch Annex, Champaign, August; Urbana High School, September - October; Centennial High School, Champaign, November - January 1998; Urbana Middle School, February, 1998; and, St. Joseph Grade School, St. Joseph, Illinois, March, 1998.

The exhibit consisted of poster-sized panels displaying photos, newspaper articles, quotes from oral histories, and other historical documents such as receipts, letters, graduation programs, and census records. In addition, local residents supplemented the panels with memorabilia such as barber and hair stylist equipment, high school yearbooks and personal items such as tea pots, hair combs, lace, and china.

Several themes addressed Champaign County's complex history:

Early Families (1850 - 1970)

African Americans migrated to Illinois from border and southern states, primarily Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Indiana, Mississippi, and Georgia. Most came in search of jobs. Some stayed in Champaign County and found employment with the Illinois Central Railroad

shops, the Big Four Railroad shops (Columbus, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Chicago) and the University of Illinois. The railroads offered jobs in the unskilled labor categories and the University of Illinois provided jobs mainly for cooks and domestics in the fraternity and sorority systems.

Religion (1863-1970)

The one institution African Americans could own were churches and they persevered in organizing and building them. It is not unusual then that African American churches undertook an active leadership and maintenance role in the political, economical, social and cultural lives of the community. Although religion gave many African Americans solace, it often provided them with the ability to channel an inner strength into action. Churches were the center of a community's activities. In addition to providing a place for worship, it provided a place for meetings, socials, and often served as a school. The oldest church in Urbana-Champaign is Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church founded in 1863. Salem Baptist Church was founded in 1867 and St. Luke Christian Methodist Episcopal was organized in 1909.



Military (1900-1970)

From the Revolutionary War to the Persian Gulf War, from Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell, African Americans have been an integral part of American military history. Urbana-Champaign residents can be counted among this group of participants including Elia Utley, Earl E. Smith, Cecil Nelson, Sr., Cecil Nelson, Jr., Paul Pope, Nathaniel Banks, Charles McGee, Cecil Bridgewater, and William Frank Earnest. These men served during World War I and II and provided a legacy of patriotism for which Champaign County can be proud.



Businesses (1900-1970)

Champaign County African American

businesses, like others, attempted and often succeeded in securing a part of the American dream: property ownership and community building. They started businesses and formed fraternal and social organizations in an attempt to provide racial uplift as well as self-help for themselves. Of course, some did better than others. By 1911, George W. Smith, a former slave and one of the first African American landowners in Champaign County, owned 437 acres of farm land in the Broadlands.

Community Activism (1930-1970)

Champaign County African Americans agitated for better housing, the right to live in any neighborhood, the right to eat at any eating facility, for equal employment opportunities, and the right to live on the University of Illinois campus. For the most part, they were successful in obtaining their goals. Examples of community activism include Romeo Green and Kenneth Stratton, Champaign natives and U of I students, working with an interracial group in the 1940s and protesting housing conditions in North Champaign, more than two-hundred people meeting at Bethel AME in 1964 to protest policies of the Champaign County Board of Realtors; and Mary Alexander co-founding the Champaign-Urbana Improvement Council "to open up new job areas for colored people" and organizing boycotts against local stores.

Education (1880-1970)

In one way or another and to one degree or another, African Americans have made extraordinary sacrifices for education for centuries. Since the early days of slavery education has been seen as "the salvation of the race." The history of Champaign County African Americans' quest for an education is the story of the relentless, sometimes painful, and often triumphant pursuit of that salvation. U of I student William Frank Earnest's family moved from Homer, IL, around 1917 to Champaign to provide him with housing since African Americans were not allowed to live on campus. Erma Bridgewater's parents fought in the 1920s for the right of their daughter and other local school students to swim in the school swimming pool. Sometimes an education did not provide the ideal outcome. For example, Bridgewater completed a degree in Sociology at the U of I in 1937 and could only find a job as a maid at the University's Newman Hall.

Arts and Entertainment (1880-1970)

Champaign County African Americans have been active in the Arts and Entertainment since

1. Nathaniel Banks and grandson, Frank E. Banks, early 1970s; 2. The Stella & Hanes Baker Family, Children L-R: Edward, Ester, Edna & Doris, ca 1916; 3. Champaign-Urbana Eastern Star, Date unknown; 4. Social Organization, Cavalier Club, ca 1950; 5. UIUC Students, 1910, back row standing, left side, Carrie Alice Lee; 6. Bethel AME Church, Founded in 1863; 7. U.S. Navy Band, WWII, back row, 3rd from left, Cecil Bridgewater; 8. Pete Bridgewater Quintet, 1950s; 9. Smith Family: George W. second from left, seated 1888; 10. Cecil D. Nelson, Sr., WWI; 11. Ace Barbershop, founded in 1920s; 12. The Elizabeth Lewis & Theodore Crawley Wedding, ca 1925.

arriving. Community members such as Cecil Bridgewater, Sr., Pete Bridgewater, Jack McDuff, Cecil Bridgewater, Ron Bridgewater, Maurice McKinley, J.B. Lenoir, Raymond Scott, Ray Hines, Fay Hines, Dr. Harry Ellis, Doris Hoskins, William Warfield, Ollie Watts-Davis and Dee Dee Bridgewater contributed to local, national and international music arenas.

Fraternal & Social Organizations (1940-1970)

Since African American communities often received limited funding from county, city state and federal agencies, fraternal and social organizations often raised funding for community health and educational needs. Such organizations provided scholarships for students to attend college and financial support for the operation of day-care centers and health clinics. Organiza-

tions in Urbana-Champaign included the Knight Templars, the University of Illinois AKA Sorority, the Gardenia Social Club, the Kavalier Club, the Masons, and Eastern Star.

Afro-American Studies received numerous inquiries and requests for interviews concerning the exhibit. David Inge, Creative Specialist, UIUC WILL Radio Station, interviewed several CCAAHC members. A feature article by Greg Kline on the exhibit was printed in the *Champaign-Urbana News Gazette* on Sunday, November 3, 1996. Local CBS affiliate, WCIA Television Station, aired a series of segments on the exhibit in February 1997. Other local media provided publicity of the exhibit as well. UIUC *Inside Illinois* and the *Champaign-Urbana Octopus* newspapers as well as the Urbana Covenant Hospital Auxiliary newsletter, *Edition*, featured stories on the exhibit.

Financial and in-kind support for the Champaign County African-American History Committee and the Afro-American Studies and Research Program project was instrumental in supporting "Through the Years." The following are graciously thanked.

- Busey Bank
- Busey-Carter Travel
- Carle Foundation
- Horizon Bookstore
- Illinois Power
- Jerry's IGA
- East Central Illinois Chapter of Links Inc.
- Mid-America Travel
- State Farm Insurance
- Timpone's Restaurant
- Urbana Free Library Archives
- UIUC Affirmative Action Office
- UIUC African American Cultural Program
- UIUC College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
- UIUC Educational Policy Studies Dept.
- UIUC History Dept.
- UIUC Political Science Dept.
- UIUC Office of Minority Student Affairs
- The Champaign County Park District
- The Early American Museum
- Champaign-Urbana Visitors Bureau and Partnership Illinois
- Carla Bloom, AASRP
- Linda Duke and Victoria Ford, Krannert Art Museum
- Lisa Gatzke, Mike Herbert, and Tylor Munson, UIUC Art & Design Program
- George Arnaya, Graphic Solutions
- the Champaign County African-American community for preserving and sharing their histories.

Individuals are too numerous to list, but special recognition should go to:

The Champaign County African-American History Committee, a volunteer committee under the sponsorship of the Early American Museum and the Champaign Park District, was organized in 1992 to work with local organizations and individuals from Champaign County and surrounding areas to help organize and preserve historical records dealing with the African-American experience in Champaign County. The committee meets monthly and current members include:

- Mrs. Mary Alexander, Community
- Mrs. Carrie Banks, Community
- Rev. Roland Brown, St. Luke CME Church
- Mrs. Jean Burkholder, Urbana School District
- Mr. Nate Dixon, Champaign County Park District
- Mrs. Linda Duke, UIUC Krannert Art Museum
- Mrs. Vicki Ford, UIUC Krannert Art Museum
- Mrs. Doris Hoskins, Community
- Mrs. Kathryn Humphrey, Community
- Mrs. Cheryl Kennedy, Early American Museum
- Mr. Cal Lee, Champaign School District
- Mrs. Hattie LeNoir-Price, Parkland College
- Mrs. Val Littlefield, UIUC Afro-American Studies & Research Program
- Mrs. Sherry Mayberry, Champaign/Urbana Visitors Bureau
- Mrs. Barb McGee, Champaign Park District
- Mrs. Estelle Merrifield, Community
- Mrs. Dorothy Moreland, Community
- Mrs. CharLotte Nesbitt, Champaign Public Library
- Mrs. Hester Suggs, Community
- Mrs. Mary Grace Thomas, Community
- Mrs. Barbara Wysocki, University High School

Prepare for the Future

by Estelle Merrifield

The exhibit, "Through the Years: African American History Comes Home," opened on the evening of October 24, 1996 at the UIUC Afro-American Studies and Research Program and included a panel discussion by members of the Champaign County African American History Committee (CCAAHC). The following speech was given by Mrs. Estelle Merrifield:

I have been asked why I am a member of the Champaign County African-American History Committee. After much thought, I realize that history, any history, has been a favorite hobby of mine all of my life. I like to relate to people. There is much to be gained in remembering the past, and more to be gained by projecting into the future that which has been learned as it relates to the improvement of people. Technology changes, but human nature has been the same since the beginning of time.

Some of us arrived in this area around 1860 traveling by wagon, usually pulled by mules. One side of my family came from the eastern coast, originating in and around Mt. Airey, North Carolina. The other side of my family came from the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. Other families came from Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky and Arkansas. Most family members came escaping oppression for economic reasons after the Civil War. Religion and faith were the threads that held our families together. Even until this day religion and faith and family ties keep us together. Men were the head of the family, strong men. Women were the keepers of the home. The family Bible was, in most families, the recorder of family connections.

Most of Champaign County's early Negroes were former slaves. As slaves they had many talents. They were the builders of plantations, the workers of the fields, the makers of furniture, the wood-choppers, dressmakers, and tailors. But as freedmen, when they arrived in the North, they found that these jobs were closed to them. They often worked as maids, farmhands, barbers, laborers, cooks, housekeepers, railroad gandy dancers, and there were a few ministers of the gospel. It was not the land of opportunity that they had been led to believe. They were still Colored.

Afro-American families settled in communities in and around Champaign County. Some settled near Broadlands, some near Newman, some in Tuscola, across the county line, some in Bellflower, some in or around Mansfield, Homer, Sidney, Ogden, Gibson City, Hoopston, Darville and Loda. Many of these families were related. When one family became established, they would send for others to come north. Many of the relatives traveled on to Chicago and worked in steel mills, stock yards and as barbers, beauticians and laborers.

We, as an historical group [CCAAHC], are trying to establish a permanent record, something that the children of our community can point to with pride and realize the dignity and resourcefulness that was a part of their heritage. When they look at the newly renamed streets of the Martin Luther King subdivision; when they see the Illinois Memorial Stadium, the Dr. Harry D. Ellis Subdivision, Wesley Park, and Bridgewater Park; when they see the names of early families such as Pope, Lee, Britt, Rivers, Alexander, Jordan or Edwards; and when they see streets named Holt, Phillips, Nelson, or Foxwell, they understand that there are reasons for Urbana-Champaign honoring and remembering members of the African-American community. These are just a few of those persons and families.



Mrs. Estelle Merrifield, CCAAHC member, holds photographs of her great grandparents Jordan and Angeline Anderson, residents of Urbana in the 1860's.

OFF-LIMITS FOR HORSES

■ Shawnee forest ban covers sensitive areas — B-2

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT MATTERS

■ Parade, events being held Saturday — B-3

LOCAL

The
News-Gazette

Friday

September 17, 1999

B

First Street development to start soon

■ Northern strip's projects could begin this month

By ALDEN LOURY

News-Gazette Staff Writer

CHAMPAIGN — There may finally be light at the end of the tunnel leading to a redeveloped North First Street.

It has taken more than three years, but the first sign of construction could come next week. That's when city officials say building permits could be submitted for two projects along the underdeveloped stretch of First Street just north of University Avenue.

And a third project is in the making, officials said.

"We're hoping for a groundbreaking within the next couple of weeks. I'm sure it'll be in September," said city planner Karen Stonehouse.

She said the Rose & Taylor Barber Shop and Beauty Parlor, on Monday, could close on a \$255,000 project to build a new building at 124 N. First St. The city is contributing a \$107,000 grant toward the work.

John Lee Johnson of the Illinois Center for Citizen Involvement, hired by the city to help move projects forward, said the Lone Star Lodge 18 could also close on a more than \$550,000 project to rebuild its building at

208 N. First St.

The lodge wants to demolish the existing two-story building to make way for a new 6,000-square-foot building that would also occupy two vacant lots to the north.

The city is providing the lodge with a \$296,000 loan. Lodge members are also contributing nearly \$135,000 in sweat equity, Johnson said.

The city first adopted the North First Street Redevelopment Plan in April 1996. The plan is an attempt to revive the 100, 200 and 300 blocks of North First Street, at one time a busy corridor of black-owned businesses.

Under the plan, the city can

provide up to \$150,000 in grants for eligible work. However, those seeking help must have a viable business plan and must secure financial backing from local lenders.

The plan was passed amid much fanfare, but progress has been slow, largely due to city staff shortages. The city has since added an additional staff person to work exclusively on North First Street projects and others in areas targeted for redevelopment.

But Stonehouse said construction should have a domino effect on the remainder of the corridor.

"I think finally seeing some dust flying in that neighborhood

will be big," she said.

Johnson said construction of a third project could begin in early 2000. He said the Jackson family plans to reopen its once popular restaurant in the 100 block of North First Street.

Stonehouse said a handful of others have talked about possibly opening various businesses there. The city has hired a firm to help acquire unused buildings that could house those businesses.

The effort could also gain momentum once the police station expansion is complete and when the city begins "streetscaping" improvements along North First Street similar to those seen downtown.

The police station, located directly opposite the North First Street businesses, is in its final stages of work. Construction of new sidewalks and other improvements is scheduled to begin next year.

Included in the streetscape project are: First Street from Green to Washington streets; University Avenue from the Illinois Central Railroad tracks to Wright Street; and portions of nearby Chester Street.

Despite the delay, Johnson believes the effort can still produce what many envisioned it would back in 1996.

"This is going to be one of the key mark areas in our city," he said.

3 finalists selected for Rantoul's police chief

By TIM MITCHELL

News-Gazette Staff Writer

RANTOUL — A panel of area

WWII unit toasts the reluctant liberation of Hitler's

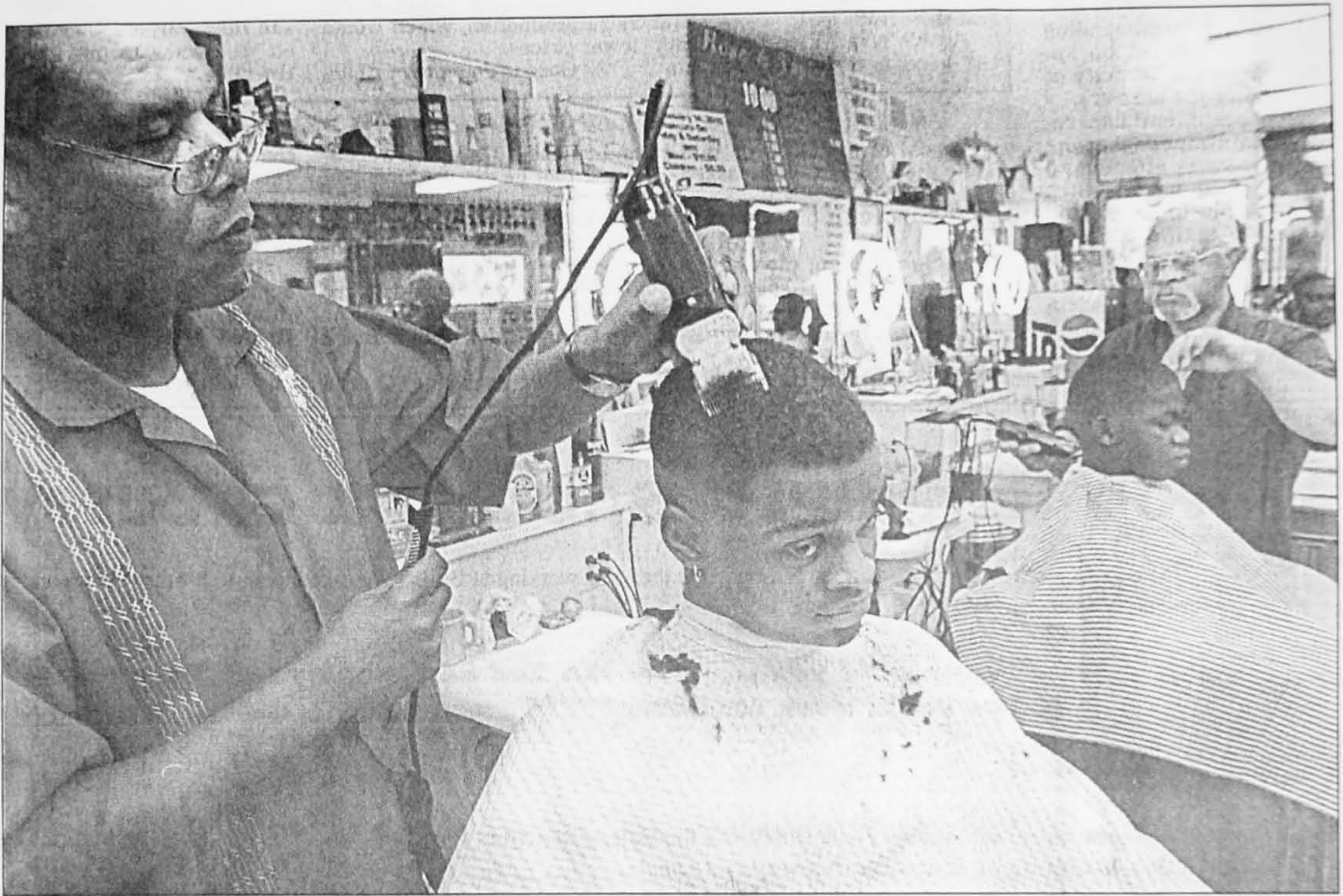


piece of bronze shot through his head," said Mickey Funke of Michigan.

The war in Europe had just ended when the combat engineers visited Nuremberg. They had known the end was coming for months.

"Long before that, the Germans were surren-

“The building itself doesn’t hold a lot of memories, but the atmosphere does.”
 — Phillip Edwards, a customer at Rose & Taylor Barber Shop, which opens at a new location today



News-Gazette photo by Robin Scholz

Joe Taylor, left, shaves Simon Hill's head at the Rose and Taylor Barber Shop at 204 N. First St., C, on Friday. At the next chair is co-owner Lum Rose. The two barbers are having a grand opening today for a new shop at 124 N. First St.

Rose and Taylor barbers making move

By TOKUMBO BODUNDE

News-Gazette Staff Writer

CHAMPAIGN — There's no place like Rose and Taylor Barber Shop, which has been like home to many of its customers for decades.

So even though it's moving, there aren't many long faces among waiting customers. They know that the shop won't really change — just its location.

Barbershop co-owners Lum Rose and Joe Taylor head the 40-year-old business at 204 N. First St., C. The two, who have been cutting hair together for 23 years, will celebrate the grand opening of their new shop at 124 N. First St., C, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. today.

Fellow barbers, local leaders, city planners, and faithful customers plan on attending.

The new shop is part of Champaign's North First Street Redevelopment Plan, adopted in 1996 to revive an area that historically has been home to several black-owned businesses. Construction also began recently on the Lone Star Masonic Lodge 18 to be located at 208 N. First St.

"You don't see too many black businesses in Champaign," Taylor said. "This is an opportunity to have a nice, updated business."

"I kinda have mixed emotions," Rose said. "The atmosphere's always been

good. (But) the new place will have more room." The shop will also have a snack bar and a beauty salon.

"You can see where everyone's doing this," said Rochelle McFarland, putting her hands to her eyes to illustrate people peering in the window.

McFarland, who is with the Professional Cleaning Service, and a few others spent Friday adding finishing touches to the new shop.

Marble-colored floors, shiny red swivel seats and gleaming mirrors await customers who will get their hair cut on Tuesday when the new shop opens for

See MOVING, A-6

Moving

Continued from A-1

business.

It's nothing like the cozy, worn-in feeling of the old location, though. No hair on the floor. No rows of half-used hair care products lining the wall. No blended sound of daytime soaps, music, casual conversation, and razors humming. Not yet anyway.

"It has a back-home kind of feel to it," said Eric Beck, a college adviser. He compares Rose and Taylor to barbershops from his Chicago hometown. "You need that sometimes."

Beck and seven others patiently wait for their haircuts. No one is in much of a hurry. It doesn't seem to matter whether customers wait 10 minutes or an hour for a haircut.

"It doesn't seem that long because you're enjoying yourself," said Phillip Edwards, an Urbana firefighter.

"Go talk to the man with the Miracle Whip on his face," Beck jokes, pointing toward Edwards, who has shaving cream on his face.

Edwards and other customers nearby laugh, while the two



News-Gazette photo by Robin Schorr

The Rose and Taylor Barber Shop, at 204 N. First St., C, is relocating to another Champaign address at 124 N. First St. Today marks the grand opening. Business resumes Tuesday.

men tease each other.

"The thing I like most about this place is the people," Edwards said. "Talking with other black men about fathering, religion, things like that." Edwards has been coming to Rose and Taylor for about eight years.

"The building itself doesn't

hold a lot of memories, but the atmosphere does," he said. Rose and Taylor, who don't expect to lose any customers, know that as well.

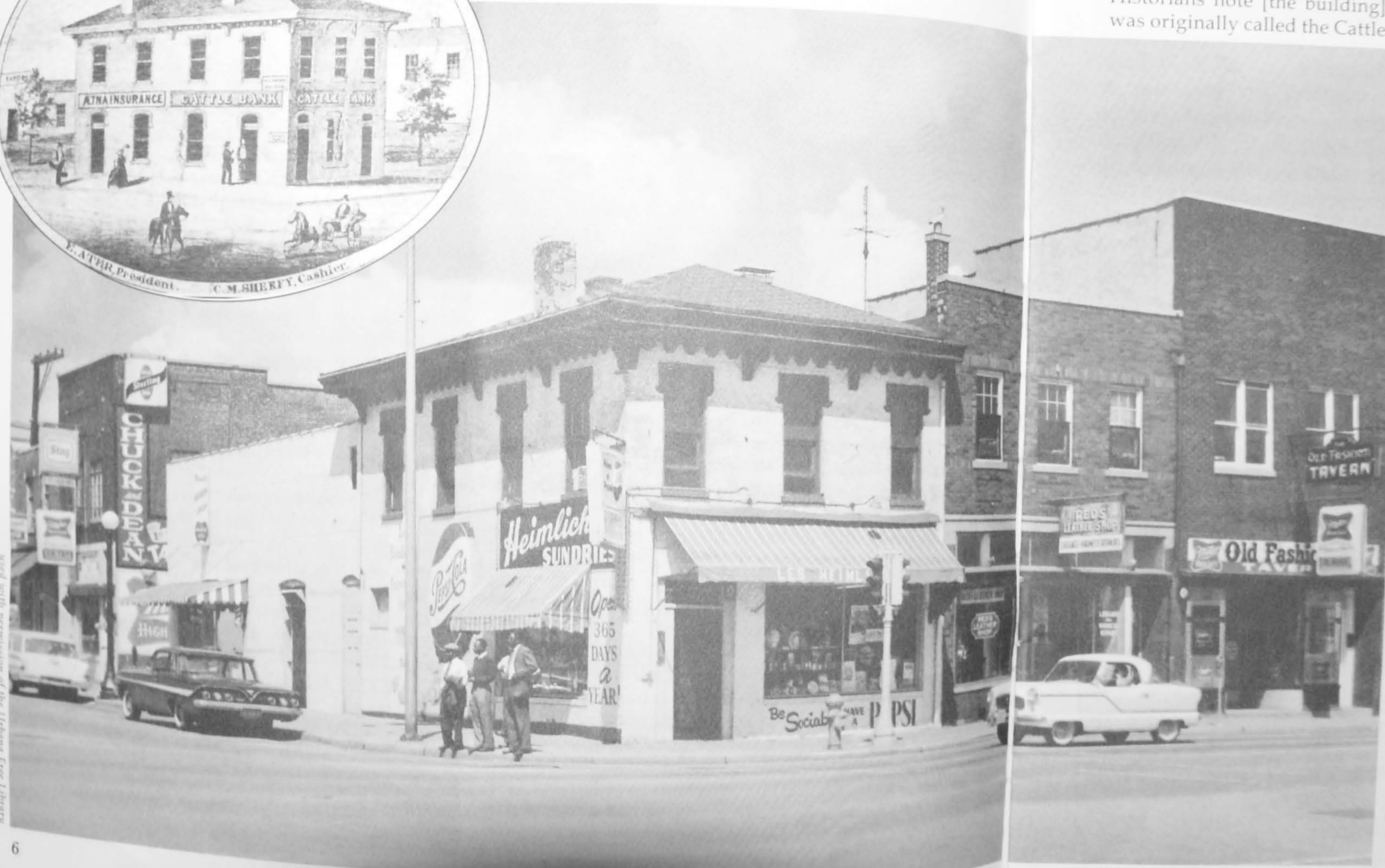
In fact, Taylor said, they're only taking one other thing with them.

"Just the clippers."

PART I

THE OLDEST SURVIVING BUILDING IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY STILL HAS A FEW STORIES TO TELL. THE FACT THAT THE CATTLE BANK IS STILL STANDING IS THE BEST STORY OF ALL.

BY DANIEL McCOLLUM



corner of First Street and University Avenue. Heimlicher, who lived in the apartment above his store "escaped possible injury by walking out... just prior to the starting of the blaze." (*News-Gazette*, January 15, 1971, Sect. 1, p. 3).

In that same article, there was a significant amount of historical information about the site and building:

Historians note [the building] was originally called the Cattle

before the present was built, the lot was by a general store which thriving business with Illinois Central Railroad building its main line what is now Champaign was known "Chicago Branch;" Line" ran from LaSalle directly south to Cairo.)

The article placed of the fire-damaged building 1856. The articles of information were not drawn signed until December which would suggest building was not actually constructed until the following year. It was pictured Alexander Bowman Urbana-West Urbana of

It was recognized the building was "...one of the landmarks in Champaign. Subsequent reports were specific; the Cattle Bank oldest surviving commercial building in Champaign- (actually for the county area). In fact, the Cattle Bank was second oldest documented building in the county oldest was the Ater house which was destroyed 2000 as part of the Urbana Library expansion project

One of the earliest known images of the Cattle Bank (inset upper left) is on the map of Urbana and West Urbana, drawn by Alexander Bowman and engraved by Charles Shoben Engraving and Printing of Chicago about 1858 or 1859. The photograph on the left shows the Cattle Bank building in 1962 when it was operated by Heimlicher as a sundries business.

used with permission of the Urbana Free Library

BIOGRAPHY: JOHN LEE JOHNSON

John Lee Johnson is a life-long resident of the Champaign-Urbana area. Mr. Johnson began his community services in 1960, working with youth gangs in the northeast area of Champaign-Urbana. Through this involvement, in 1961 he organized the Northeast Champaign Youth Movement, which consisted of twenty youth gangs.

In 1962, he co-founded the People's Poverty Board (PPB), which helped in establishing the Community Action agency in Champaign County. The PPB did considerable work with urban renewal, integration of Champaign-Urbana public schools, employment discrimination, and political empowerment. These activities and others found him co-sponsoring "The Plain Truth," a weekly paper addressing socio-political issues and satires.

From 1965 through 1967, Mr. Johnson became a project manager for the Illinois Department of Mental Health, working through a special project sponsored by the Adler Subzone Clinic. During the course of this work, Mr. Johnson helped organize the Concerned Citizens' Committee (CCC), which established Project 500 at the University of Illinois. This project expanded educational opportunities to black Americans and other minorities. The CCC also fostered the first space utilization agreement between the University of Illinois and the black community, as well as led the fight and search for low cost recreational space, which led to the expansion of Douglass and Centennial Parks.

In 1969, Mr. Johnson was instrumental in establishing the Community Advocacy Depot, a community based design, advocacy, and outreach center specializing in urban renewal, environmental impact assessments, and intercity economic development projects.

Mr. Johnson was elected to the Champaign City Council in 1972, serving until 1982 as the first elected person to represent District 1, which includes the downtown and campustown business districts. During his term of office, he authored and sponsored the first city affirmative action ordinance, as well as fighting for and casting the deciding vote to unionize municipal employees in Champaign. His public support gave rise to the appointment of the first black police chief in Champaign, and the first meaningful inclusion of minorities in local government affairs.

Mr. Johnson's tireless efforts over a 20 year period resulted in the redevelopment of the black ghetto area know as Oak/Ash. He is also the first candidate ever to seek two offices at the same time; in his campaign for re-election in 1976, Mr. Johnson also filed for the Champaign Board of Education. Throughout his political life, he has been a pathfinder. This is Mr. Johnson's third attempt to become mayor of Champaign.

He has served on the Regional Planning Commission since 1979, and has also served the county as a member of the Community Block Grant Advisory Board and the Economic Revolving Loan and Scholarship Committees.

Mr. Johnson has received numerous honors and awards. Among these, he was the first recipient of the William Chalmer Award for Public Services, and the 1984 recipient of the Citizen of the Year Award presented by the Champaign County Urban League.

Presently, as an active member, he supports the work of the Concerned Citizens for a Better Neighborhood, which was the winner of the Governor's Home Town Award. He is also a member of the Garden Hills - Spaulding Community Citizens' Group and the Black Community Network of Champaign County. He is currently the chair of the Eads Street Development Corporation, which is concerned with redevelopment of low-income areas in Champaign County.

Mr. Johnson has been a factor in every major decision in the black experience of Champaign County for the past thirty years, and through his persistence has had a considerable impact on the course of racial cooperation in Champaign County.

Biography
John Lee Johnson
(1941-)

John Lee started his community services at 17. He is a lifelong resident of Champaign Urbana and a member of 1959-1960 class at Urbana High School. He started his community involvement with an early childhood friend Roy William. Roy and John began their friendship in the early 50's. Both were known in their community for fighting the police patrols in the Black community. They were known as non-traditional community leaders in that they spoke against the traditional Black leadership and took on all segments of the general community in questioning police management and quality of life in the Black community.

John came to the University community in the early 60's seeking support from the NAACP on a charge that he had excited a riot which had caused an injury to a member of the Champaign Police Department. It was during this experience that John came face to face for the first time with the campus experience and noticed how unorganized the Black student body was in 1963. From his visit to the campus soliciting legal defense funds he decided with his friend Roy Williams and a third friend Peter Rasmussen, a graduate student in mathematics, to form the People's Poverty Board (1963-69). Through the People's Poverty Board John worked to organize the Blacks on campus into a group that expressed a greater interest in the issues facing Black America than the day to day issues facing students in the pursuit of their education. In 1967 he organized the first Black culture weekend on campus dedicated to the spirit and mind of African-American people. This was supported by the People's Poverty Board writing one of the first modern newspapers exclusively for Black students called the Spectrum. In Spectrum Mr. Johnson wrote a poem to Black students called "The Fighting Black Illini," in which he drew parallels into the turmoils that were going on in communities in Black America to the false tranquility that he felt was existed on campus among Black students. Johnson proposed to Black students that they organize themselves into a political force and dared them to join and establish the Black Student Association (BSA), one of the first to be established in the nation at a land grant university. BSA was started in 1966.

He proposed to the University through BSA, that the African-American undergraduate population was smaller than that of the African graduate student population. Johnson alleged that this was ridiculous and constituted a form of discrimination against African American students. Working through BSA Johnson organized Project 500, which he recruited over 100 applicants from the Champaign-Urbana community. Working from his experience at the Hillel Foundation Johnson proposed through BSA to the University that a cultural center be established to aid Blacks in their transition from their community through the University experience. This was done in 1968. The experience of the Jewish students and their cultural program inspired John to work towards a similar entity for African American students. In 1967 he approached the Chancellor concerning the need for a cultural program for Black students. The Afro-American Cultural Program for Black students at the University of Illinois was founded in 1968. Johnson worked to break down the barriers to African Americans to the various unions at the University and helped to establish the Affirmative Action Department on campus, the Clerical Learner program, and to amend the University Merit System rules that granted Blacks entry level employment to the University. In 1970 Johnson established the Community Advocacy Depot (CAD)-a collaboration between the school of Architecture and the Department of Planning working in the Black community that undertook the redesign and redevelopment of the Black ghetto in Northeast Champaign. This was goal was achieved between 1970 and 1990. This program is responsible for the Oak/Ash area and the North First St. Project, which is currently working towards completion. It also designed and advocated the first single-family detached public housing units built in Champaign County. Johnson was the first non-student/African-American person to serve on Graduate Student Association (GSA) and Undergraduate Student Association (UGSA) governing boards and the Illini Union Program Activities Board. He worked to open the doors to University facilities (Huff /Men's Old Gyms and the English Building).

Johnson has consulted and been a guest lecturer in numerous departments over four decades and continues to advocate for a stronger community role to the Office of the Chancellor and the Office of the Mayors of Champaign and Urbana.

Black Community Network
(30 black professional and retired persons who meet on a monthly basis to discuss issues affecting the black community)

Community Advocacy Depot (1970-79)
(Provided technical assistance to community based groups, individuals, and government on issues of environment, land use, housing, and the economy.)

- Developed first review of R-U District, University of Illinois
- Designed and initiated clearance of northeast Champaign Oak/Ash Project area
- Designed Springfield Urban Renewal Project area
- Consulted with numerous groups, persons, and governments throughout Midwest

Concerned Citizens (1967-79)

- Established Project 500 and recruited 125 black students in C-U area
- Designed and built Bradley Park Apts. 98 units of 236 low/mod. income housing
- Established Alternative Education Program to offer tutorial services and provide a comprehensive learning program for 2500 youths in the C-U inner city

Neighborhood Youth Design Depot
(Offered black youths a different view of community issues.)

Northeast Champaign Cultural Techniques Institute

Northeast Champaign Housing Development Corporation
(Built and marketed 21 FHA 225 single family detached housing units.)

1960-67

People's Poverty Board
(Emphasis on integration of C-U public schools: Organized around issues of racism, fair housing laws, employment, urban renewal, and credit transactions.)

Northeast Champaign Youth Movement
(Brought together 25 youth gangs to halt gang wars
and redirect their energies towards positive
community involvement.)

Plain Truth
(First black newspaper serving northeast C-U.)

Co-directed low-income family planning project for
National Urban League, Family Services, and
National Child Study Association to equip
low-income families to meet the challenges of
urban life.

Director, C-U Social Service Program, Dept. of
Mental Health, Adler Center Zone V (1965-67)
(Assisted families in combating the impact of
poverty on the mental health of the family.)

Awards:

First recipient, Chalmer Award for Public Service
American Civil Liberties Union (1985)

Recognition of services, Land of Lincoln Legal
Assistance Foundation (1980)

Citizen of the Year, Champaign County Urban League
(1984)

Recognition of services, Champaign County Regional
Planning Commission (10 years)

Certificate of Merit, Champaign Police Dept. (1981)

Numerous writings, lectures

**PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

John Lee Johnson is a 59-year resident of the Champaign-Urbana community. For almost four decades, he has worked serving the Champaign-Urbana area through a variety of economic development programs to redevelop the low to moderate neighborhood of the Champaign-Urbana area. Mr. Johnson was an early advocate of a strong neighborhood based participation program in the city of Champaign's first urban renewal program in the early 1960s.

Mr. Johnson organized the Concerned Citizens committee, a community based group of citizens who monitored the city's urban renewal activities, and organized the Concerned Citizen/Interfaith Churches, a non-profit Housing corporation. This organization sponsored the first FHA 236 housing community of which consisted of 98 apartments within the city's urban renewal program. In addition, to the concerned citizens committee, Mr. Johnson established the northeast Champaign Progressive Housing organization which sponsored and marketed 12 FHA 235 single family detached homes in the Champaign Urban Renewal Project. These activities contributed to the city of Champaign becoming one of the few communities of America ever to close-out an urban renewal program.

To address the continued development needs of low income residents of the Champaign Urbana area, Mr. Johnson established in 1969, the CAD, Community Advocacy Depot. The CAD was a planning partnership between the University of Illinois School of Architecture and Planning Department. Through this partnership, Mr. Johnson planned the redevelopment a 150 acre dilapidated neighborhood in northeast Champaign. All aspects of design and redevelopment was supervised by Mr. Johnson with the actual plan being articulated by him before the Champaign City Council. During the tenure period that the CAD existed, Mr. Johnson worked in numerous states and on committees providing a hosts of technical support addressing neighborhood redevelopment and affordable housing.

For the past twenty years, Mr. Johnson has been involved in the redevelopment of neighborhoods in the Champaign-Urbana area through advocacy work with the cities of Champaign and Urbana - Community Development Block Grant Annual Planning which has contributed to a very strong community renewal policy in the twin cities.

In addition, he has developed a strong partnership with the banking communities through use of the Community Reinvestment Act. He was one of the first outspoken critics of the lending policies within our banking community. Mr. Johnson's efforts established numerous CRA committees within Champaign's banking systems, and began a partnership with banks to expand affordable housing through the Federal Home Loan Bank of Chicago and the Illinois Housing Trust Fund. In the past ten years, Mr. Johnson has developed a multi-bank partnership along with a consortium of local governments in Champaign and Urbana to sponsor new affordable homes under a program called HOMEbuild. We are now into the third HOMEbuild program coming to a complete total of 20 homes in this phase. Mr. Johnson has sponsored 140 homes in total, and has prepared and has had approved numerous applications to local government for CBG and HOME funds and numerous applications to the Federal District Bank and Illinois Housing Development Authority. He organized the first CHDO, Community Housing Development Organization, certified by the city of Urbana. This CHDO serves as a sub-recipient and is the leading arm for Champaign and Urbana for the construction of new affordable housing. He has put together numerous development teams, architects, engineers, and attorneys to provide a complete development

team for the development of affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization. His teams have been supported by extensive bank mortgage funds and local government participation.

Historical Brief:

John Lee Johnson
Program Manager, Illinois Center for Citizen Involvement
Birth, 1941 to Present, 2001

Personal Background

John L. Johnson was born to Thomas Delux Johnson and Mamie Carr Johnson on August 7, 1941 in the Champaign County Hospital which is now the Champaign County Nursing Home. He was the seventh of twelve children, and they all dwelled in a two-bedroom frame home located at 201 E. Columbia Street, Champaign, IL. (Now known as the Oak-Ash area.) Along with other youths of that neighborhood, their playground was the Northfork Railroad track and the Illinois Central track, the junkyards, alleyways, and vacant of their neighborhood. As a child, Mr. Johnson constantly asked his mother why they lived in such a small home...why it was so dark at night in their neighborhood...why didn't they have things for play. These discussions later had a profound impact on John Lee's life.

He attended the Champaign segregated elementary school system. He entered Lawhead Elementary School at the corner of Fifth and Grove streets. In the late 40's, he went to Williard Middle School at the corner of Fifth and Church streets. He was described as a very talkative child whom the teachers had to constantly get after for his attention. He was generally liked by his fellow students, and he was constantly gathering students to him to hear the imaginary stories and tales he told to entertain them and himself. He entered Champaign Jr. High School as his first integrated school experience in the early 50's where he continued to talk and entertain. While at the same time his curiosity grew as he made comparisons between his neighborhood and those he would walk through going to and from home on his way to school. He continued to be seen by his neighborhood friends and peers as an exceptional person because of his gift for gab and his imagination. He was known by the nickname of "Muddy Rivers." Which denotes a person who possessed an endless flow of talk, just as a river. It was not unusual for John Lee to hold court to the late evenings throughout his neighborhood entertaining children about old movies, poking fun at them, and simply expressing himself from those things that he may have seen during that day. These virtues were carried throughout his educational life and when his family moved from 201 E. Columbia St., Champaign to 1409 W. Dublin St., Urbana, IL in 1955, John transferred to the Urbana High School.

During his two years experience at Urbana High School, John Lee learned a greater appreciation for the importance of education. There he met several teachers. Ms. Lawson who became his learning mentor by the talks she gave her class each morning on her experience during the depression and how important learning was to her. Those talks inspired John Lee for the first time. From these talks he made a promise to himself that he would always champion the cause of learning and do everything in his power to make sure that other children did not miss their opportunity for learning as he

had done in the early years of his life. During his time in school he again became a champion of conversation, being known by the teachers and the student body as charismatic person who could speak on any subject. Often he would lead the debates in his classroom. More than not, teachers turned away from him to encourage other children to participate in the discussions. John possessed terrific talent for drawing poetry and was among the leading art students at Urbana High School. During this period, John also continued his campaign of open neighborhood talks, he found himself with members of the Champaign Police Department who felt he talked too much, and did not like the idea that he held court, and would routinely publicly criticized their actions in his neighborhood.

Throughout his teenage life and into adulthood, he continued to be in conflict with some elements of the Champaign Police Department who resented his relationship to his community. It was not unusual to find John Lee Johnson being arrested every weekend on charges of interfering with the duties of a police officer or exciting riots. This became so commonplace that anytime John Lee appeared on the scene, that a Champaign Police squad car pulled up, he was arrested. No matter how many times this repeated itself, John Lee Johnson always returned for more.

First Community Activities

The basis from which John Lee Johnson gained his knowledge and expanded the knowledge about his community came from a twenty-year relationship with a neighborhood friend, Roy Williams. This friendship was unique because the two were inseparable. Everywhere you saw John Johnson, you saw Roy Williams. Their partnership was such that their whip was so enormous, people would gather just to hear their commentary on random topics which they requested Johnson and Williams to speak upon for their enlightenment. Their duo found them involved with the Interfaith Council and the desegregation of the Champaign schools. They were the leading voice in opposition to the Northeast Urban Renewal Program and they were a voice against the University of Illinois campus, and the lack of equal opportunity afforded the Black community of Champaign. This duo created the first sustained Black newspaper in northeast Champaign, "The Plain Truth." They established the People's Poverty Board, and for the first time created an integrated progressive coalition. Mr. Peter Rasmussen became the first non-black person who worked in northeast Champaign addressing the political problems that the Peoples Poverty Board discussed in the issues of Black youth. Mr. Johnson brought together all of the Black youth group except one in this area, calling them the Northeast Champaign Youth Movement in an effort to engage them in a series of issues that were community related and self-related issues for them as growing youngsters. This was during the 60's where gang violence escalated itself in the Northeast communities of Champaign. Mr. Johnson challenged the NEYM to become responsible by changing their names to the Blanks and demanding that they earn their roles as young Black citizens. He then organized the Black Revolutionary Party. He again challenged the members of the Blanks to become positive images for their communities by being instruments of significant social change. As this moved ahead, the People's Poverty Board moved to the University of Illinois to seek

membership that would assist and allow them to gain greater access in the University. The Black Student Association (BSA) was organized by the People of Poverty Board in an effort to give greater racial clarity and a political meaning to Blacks who were attending the University's Urbana campus. The Plain Truth wrote one of the first Black newspapers for the campus for which John Lee contributed several poems. In particular, "The Fighting Black Illini."

This entry into the University opened the doors for a series of University based community activities. A meeting with the chancellor in which greater employment access was demanded which created the Learner Program, Clerical Training program, and access to trade craft programs. In addition, the People's Poverty Board demanded that the University be opened to the youth of Northeast Champaign and to non-student Blacks just as it was opened to non-student Whites. In support of this discussion, leaders of local groups from the Black community which composed the leadership of the Black Revolutionary Party met with the chancellor. They requested his assistance in speaking to the Champaign City council and the Champaign Park board to expand the facility at Douglas Center and to improve the recreational facility for African-American children in Northeast Champaign. The Black Revolutionary Party also met with Mr. Ed Nesitigan, the program director of the campus YMCA, where they asked for the use of the campus space as a recreational site facility for themselves. This became the first campus YMCA and Black community relationship.

Highlights of Employment, Activism and Advocacy*

- Johnson takes job with Adler Zone Center, State Mental Health Department, as an advocate for the poor in examining methods to strengthen and improved mental health.
- Johnson established the Concerned Citizen committee, the first sustained community organization to have an open public forum covered by the press where issues of race and poverty were discussed.
- Johnson established the Community Advocacy Depot as the first instrument by which the Black community could participate and take control of urban renewal activities in the northeast areas of Champaign. The CAD was the first community and school of architect partnership in our nation where it was controlled by the community.
- Johnson worked to establish the Special Education Opportunities program in 1967 to expand Blacks enrollment at the undergraduate level at the University of Illinois.
- Johnson recruits 150 local youth to attend the University of Illinois.
- In 1966, Johnson was named Staff Organizer for Project Enable which provided a forum for education and neighborhood action for a better living environment, the first organized effort to eradicate household poverty sponsored by the Urban League of Champaign.
- Johnson accused by Champaign citizens that his Black Revolutionary Party was recruitment for the Black Panther Party.
- Johnson established the first comprehensive post-school program for Black youth at five elementary schools in the Urbana-Champaign area in partnership with the

membership that would assist and allow them to gain greater access in the University. The Black Student Association (BSA) was organized by the People of Poverty Board in an effort to give greater racial clarity and a political meaning to Blacks who were attending the University's Urbana campus. The Plain Truth wrote one of the first Black newspapers for the campus for which John Lee contributed several poems. In particular, "The Fighting Black Illini."

This entry into the University opened the doors for a series of University based community activities. A meeting with the chancellor in which greater employment access was demanded which created the Learner Program, Clerical Training program, and access to trade craft programs. In addition, the People's Poverty Board demanded that the University be opened to the youth of Northeast Champaign and to non-student Blacks just as it was opened to non-student Whites. In support of this discussion, leaders of local groups from the Black community which composed the leadership of the Black Revolutionary Party met with the chancellor. They requested his assistance in speaking to the Champaign City council and the Champaign Park board to expand the facility at Douglas Center and to improve the recreational facility for African-American children in Northeast Champaign. The Black Revolutionary Party also met with Mr. Ed Nesitigan, the program director of the campus YMCA, where they asked for the use of the campus space as a recreational site facility for themselves. This became the first campus YMCA and Black community relationship.

Highlights of Employment, Activism and Advocacy*

- Johnson takes job with Adler Zone Center, State Mental Health Department, as an advocate for the poor in examining methods to strengthen and improved mental health.
- Johnson established the Concerned Citizen committee, the first sustained community organization to have an open public forum covered by the press where issues of race and poverty were discussed.
- Johnson established the Community Advocacy Depot as the first instrument by which the Black community could participate and take control of urban renewal activities in the northeast areas of Champaign. The CAD was the first community and school of architect partnership in our nation where it was controlled by the community.
- Johnson worked to establish the Special Education Opportunities program in 1967 to expand Blacks enrollment at the undergraduate level at the University of Illinois.
- Johnson recruits 150 local youth to attend the University of Illinois.
- In 1966, Johnson was named Staff Organizer for Project Enable which provided a forum for education and neighborhood action for a better living environment, the first organized effort to eradicate household poverty sponsored by the Urban League of Champaign.
- Johnson accused by Champaign citizens that his Black Revolutionary Party was recruitment for the Black Panther Party.
- Johnson established the first comprehensive post-school program for Black youth at five elementary schools in the Urbana-Champaign area in partnership with the

University of Illinois, Parkland College, Mass Transit Authority and the local school districts.

- Johnson runs for seat on the Champaign City Council in 1972.
- Johnson elected District Representative to become the first Black district representative in Champaign County.
- Johnson alters Affirmative Action plan for the city of Champaign, Ordinance 1300.
- Johnson proposes the city housing authority.
- Johnson demands greater affirmative action for African-Americans in all phases of city government setting the stage for the first Black Chief of Police, Bill Dye.
- Johnson co-authored the first landlord/tenant ordinance which was approved in Urbana.
- Johnson demanded the redevelopment of the eastside of District 1.
- Johnson calls the siting of the Police Department located at First and University.
- Johnson urged the city to redevelop the Oak-Ash area which is now the Martin Luther King subdivision.
- Johnson develops Bradley Park apartments; the first central state 236 subsidized low-income housing development.
- Johnson develops 235 single family detached homes to closeout the first city urban renewal program.
- Johnson blocks the use of UDAG funds for downtown development and city reapplies the funds for first-time homebuyers.
- CAD designs the first HUD approved single family detached public housing for Champaign.
- CAD completes design research for a cost-effective new Douglas Center.
- CAD proposes the first eastside redevelopment plan for North First Street.
- Johnson proposes the first comprehensive plan for the redevelopment of the Eads at Lincoln area in Urbana.
- The first Federal Home Loan Bank housing in the northeast area of Champaign is developed by Johnson.
- Johnson examines the educational performance of Black children in the Champaign and Urbana schools on a continual basis.
- Johnson files complaint to the Office of Civil Rights for the educational performance of African-American children in the Champaign school in 1997.
- Greater civil rights are sought by Johnson for African-American children and their parents in public schools of Champaign in 1998.
- Johnson becomes the first facilitator for the city of Champaign to redevelop the North First Street area.
- Johnson offers the first redistricting map for the Urbana Board of Education.
- Deciding vote cast by Johnson to unionize the city's workforce.
- Johnson urges the televising of city council meetings.

*Various news articles have been attached to this document for your review. The sources of these articles are the Champaign Urbana Courier, the News Gazette, and the Daily Illini.