

Blacks in the Diaspora

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GENERAL EDITORS

Gender, Race, and Politics
in the Midwest



*Black Club Women
in Illinois*

Wanda A. Hendricks

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high mortality rates plagued the many blacks who sought shelter in the state.

Many of the blacks who migrated to Illinois prior to the turn of the century were attracted by the state's reputation for racial tolerance. Indeed, few legal, social, and political restrictions greeted migrants. Yet Illinois was the site of some of the worst race riots in the nation during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

For black female activists, the confluence of these circumstances presented some unique challenges and opportunities. By 1920 they had helped to establish the largest national network of black club women in the country, created scores of women's associations, developed a political network, and cast ballots for the first black elected to Chicago's city council. In Chicago alone, there were more than seventy social and political clubs.² Even in rural areas, where there were fewer clubs, women participated and demonstrated a commitment to the community, providing valuable service to those in need.

It was a genuine concern for the problems faced by blacks in both rural and urban areas that drew women to association building. When the call went out for a national network of black women to be formed, club women in Illinois eagerly joined. The creation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896 was both an affirmation of their efforts and a method of organizing women's clubs nationwide in the struggle for voting rights and health and educational programs for women and their communities. Three years later, one of the largest state organizations of black club women, the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (IFCWC), was born.³ Its primary goals were linking the state's women to the NACW, elevating the image of black womanhood, providing social and economic services to blacks throughout the state, and contributing to the welfare of African American women.

The IFCWC united the voices, resources, and skills of hundreds of women in the state. Its multiple layers of local and regional organizations united middle-class women from every area into the largest African American social welfare agency in

the state. Like the NACW, the IFCWC adopted a constitution, bylaws, and a motto, opened its membership to any woman with the financial resources and the time to commit to uplift, provided for the cultural benefit of its members, and developed strategies to nourish the black community. Because the number of black women in rural and urban areas shifted over time, the club made no distinctions between those areas heavily or less populated by blacks when it planned its annual meetings. Conventions were held in northern, central, and southern cities and towns such as Peoria, Springfield, Evanston, Jacksonville, Quincy, Danville, Champaign, Bloomington, Monmouth, Rock Island, Moline, Galesburg, and Carbondale. But because nearly 80 percent of blacks resided in urbanized areas by the second decade of the twentieth century, members did adapt by reflecting the changes in the election of officers and in the types of programs they created.

A variety of women sought membership in the association. Almost all were middle-class and educated. Many were native to the state, while others were migrants. Most had some connection with the community in which they resided through both secular and religious work. They all pledged to be dedicated soldiers in the struggle against inequality. It was these members who enabled the IFCWC and regional and local affiliates to create, support, and manage an extensive list of social, cultural, and political agencies. The IFCWC had a large following, claiming nearly eighty groups by 1921, with at least ten members in each.

While the migration that brought so many black Southerners to the state came to represent both an escape from oppression and a promise of opportunity, it presented major challenges to the reform network of club women. The social programs organized by these women became vital to the survival of the black community. Largely through their own volunteerism and fundraising, they combated the problems of homelessness, unemployment, illiteracy, high mortality, and inadequate health care that plagued African Americans. They opened kindergartens, day nurseries, orphanages, settlement

ington, Canton, Champaign, Danville, Du Quoin, Galesburg, Joliet, Lovejoy, Moline, Monmouth, Peoria, Rock Island, and Springfield gained other leadership positions.⁹ The strategic inclusion of women from all geographical areas of the state reflected the quest to maximize resources and an attempt to minimize the impact of the largest and most organized group of club women on the less influential club women in other regions of the state.

Over the years, other executive board positions were added. By 1907, the heads of the Ways and Means Committee and the Social Improvement Committee began to take active roles in the decision-making process. Eventually, a chaplain, a parliamentarian, a statistician, and a historian were also included.¹⁰

Membership in the IFCWC was selective and was designed to attract middle-class race women with the economic means and the time to volunteer. In order to join, individuals had to pay a five dollar fee, and women's clubs had to have at least ten members, incorporate social and benevolent components, and pay a two dollar fee. Individuals maintained life member status as long as they remained financially stable in a local club. Privileges included all the rights of a regular elected delegate. In addition, city and district federations with a membership of ten or more clubs were granted admittance. The fee of two dollars entitled them to one delegate for every ten clubs.¹¹

Another important order of business during early deliberations was choosing a motto that would symbolize their mission and uniquely characterize the middle-class women who sought membership in the federation. Self-help and racial uplift drove them to be community developers and reformers, but it was the importance of advancing and improving the lives of women that led them to adopt the slogan "Loyalty to Women and Justice to Children."¹² The motto reflected the group's concern about the negative impact of race and gender discrimination on black women's lives and their goal of defending black womanhood. It also expressed their interest in influencing the lives of the children of the black community.

Every aspect of the organization's outreach was governed

by its mission. Effecting social change and providing the opportunity for uplift were the motivating forces behind the establishment of twenty-four standing committees that tackled domestic, educational, and cultural issues unique to women. There were arts, crafts, and music departments, which encouraged the growth of clubs such as the Imperial Art Club of Chicago, the Art and Study Club of Moline, the Domestic Art Club of Bloomington, the Progressive Art Club of Rock Island, and the Social Art and Literary Club of Peoria, where members read the classics, did needlework, and listened to classical music.¹³ Committees on hygiene, temperance, and civic responsibility were set up to teach women about the necessity of cleanliness, abstention from alcoholic beverages, and the importance of self-help. The mothers' department instructed black women about child rearing and other domestic duties associated with the family.¹⁴ To be sure, the dissemination of these middle-class Victorian values reflected an attempt by the club women to direct, and to a degree control, people's lives, and suggests that they believed that it was their job to be the moral caretakers and uplifters of the masses.

As a philanthropic agency, the IFCWC also funded several projects. The primary criterion for beneficiaries was that the objective had to coincide with the mission of assisting women and children. For more than twenty years, the IFCWC provided financial resources to the YMCA, the YWCA, the Phyllis Wheatley Home, the Amanda Smith Orphanage, the Old Folk's Home, Provident Hospital, and various day nurseries in Chicago. Other contributions went to the Lincoln Colored Home in Springfield, Yates Memorial Hospital in Cairo, the Lillian Jameson Home in Decatur, the Home for Dependent Children in Bloomington, the Woman's Aid Community House in Peoria, and the Iroquois Home for girls in Evanston.¹⁵

In keeping with its mission, the IFCWC also funded educational programs. With the goal of establishing more kindergartens and making them an integral part of the public schools, the federation allocated 20 percent of its funds for providing financial assistance in the form of educational scholarships to

ensure that several African American youth could attend college. In addition, a special-purpose fund went toward increasing the number of African American kindergarten teachers.¹⁶

The federation also set aside funds for members who were "financially unable to attend" the annual convention. The Pioneer Fund provided transportation costs and afforded those women who otherwise would not splurge on such a luxury the opportunity to travel to many parts of the state. This assistance proved fruitful. Black women in Chicago, Peoria, Springfield, Evanston, Jacksonville, Quincy, Danville, Champaign, Bloomington, Monmouth, Rock Island, Moline, Galesburg, and Carbondale increasingly organized local clubs to assist the masses. Moreover, the conventions provided an arena for dialogue between members on civic, social, and economic matters. State delegates described and discussed the programs in their local organizations, and NACW delegates reported on the activities of the national organization. Officers unveiled plans for future projects.¹⁷

The IFCWC adapted to the social and economic changes in black lives. The increased demands on the organization's resources by the large numbers of migrants attracted to Illinois by economic opportunity in several major industries challenged club women to develop more sophisticated ways to simultaneously recruit members, expand their resource base, and aid the masses, particularly those in urban areas. To that end, regional districts were created that divided the state into three sections. These sub-federated organizations were modeled after the IFCWC in that they were overlapping networks of localized clubs situated in the northern, central, and southern regions of the state. Each had its own governing body and by-laws, and each acted as a philanthropic, benevolent, and/or cultural agency. These sub-federations provided the opportunity to engage as many club women as possible in the reform efforts, to encourage the creation of clubs in rural and urban areas where women had not yet organized, and to acquaint women with the various strategies used by area clubs as well as those throughout the state and the nation.¹⁸ An additional benefit

was a reduction in travel expenses. The regional associations allowed those who could not afford to attend IFCWC conventions to stay abreast of important issues.

The oldest and largest district was organized in the spring of 1906. Thirteen clubs met in March at the Frederick Douglass Center in Chicago to unite club women in the city. Soon after, the following associations joined the new City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (CFCWC): the Ida B. Wells Club, the Phyllis Wheatley Club, the Women's Civic League, the Frederick Douglass Center Women's Club, the Necessity Club, the Mother's Union Club, the Cornell Charity Club, the Julia Gaston Club, the Volunteer Workers' Club, the North Side Woman's Club, the Ladies' Labor of Love Club, the Imperial Art Club, and the Progressive Circle of King's Daughters Club. The group adopted the motto "From Possibilities to Realities" to reflect their mission statement: "To promote the education and welfare of women and children. To raise the standard of the home. To secure and enforce civil rights for minority groups and to foster interracial understanding, so that justice and goodwill might prevail among all people." A popular association among women in the city, the CFCWC included more than seventy women's clubs on its roster nearly ten years after its inception.¹⁹

Elected to serve as the first CFCWC president was Cordelia West, who had migrated to Chicago from Evanston, Indiana, sometime during the last half of the nineteenth century. Her three-year term lasted from 1906 to 1909. As an active club woman, West at one time presided over the Ida B. Wells Club and the Volunteer Workers Club. She also held the offices of first vice president (1900), chair of the Ways and Means Committee (1901), organizer (1902, 1914, and 1915), and parliamentarian (1918) of the IFCWC. Soon after the state legislature passed the suffrage amendment, enfranchising women, she became heavily involved in Chicago politics.²⁰

In 1921, under the reign of Irene Goins, the CFCWC incorporated and became the Chicago and Northern District Association of Colored Women.²¹ Subsequent presidents of the

FOUR



Race Riots, the NAACP, and Female Suffrage

THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

In 1909, Ida B. Wells-Barnett boarded a train in Chicago bound for Cairo, a small river town located at the southern tip of the state. She was going there to investigate the lynching of a black man.¹ As the most active anti-lynching crusader in the country, Wells-Barnett had learned through her investigations that racial hatred and mob violence had long been a painful part of Illinois history. The steady pace of African American out-migration from the South between 1890 and 1910, coupled with a pervasive fear of economic competition, succeeded in transferring problems once believed limited to Southern culture to Middle America. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the heightened racial tensions between African Americans and whites led to an alarming increase in violent attacks against blacks. Fearing the lynchings and beatings, and forced out of towns and cities throughout the region, many blacks fled.

The brutal crimes directed against blacks in Illinois proved to be a watershed in race relations. Between 1900 and 1915, the quality of life for African Americans in the state deteriorated. At least twelve lynchings took place, and the number of racially motivated incidents continued to climb. In each case

the victim was an African American man. Yet the entire black community was affected, because the rioting occurred in their neighborhoods, bringing with it property damage and loss of life.

The first of these incidents occurred on June 6, 1903, in Belleville. David Wyatt, a black teacher, was hanged, doused with kerosene, and set on fire for shooting a white superintendent who refused to renew his teaching certificate. Later that summer, John Metcalf of Danville, accused of murdering a white man, was hanged from a telephone pole while a mob of citizens fired shots at his body. Unsatiated, the mob then dragged Metcalf's body to the county jail and burned it.

Before it became the site of yet another mob murder, Cairo, situated at the convergence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, had bustled with river and railway commercialism during the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1890 its population stood at more than ten thousand, of which African Americans accounted for more than one-third.² The majority of the black populace consisted of Southern migrants who had come seeking economic opportunity, social equality, and political freedom. Illinois offered them jobs, equal access to education and public accommodations, and voting privileges.³ As a result, many African Americans found success in Cairo. John J. Bird won an appointment to the Trustee Board of the Illinois Industrial University at Champaign. William H. Fields opened a medical practice. Others gained employment as police officers, mail carriers, and state civil servants.⁴ Yet Cairo, like other Midwestern towns, was not free of racial problems. In 1909 William James, a black coal driver, was arrested and charged with the rape and murder of Anna Pelley, a saleswoman in a local store. A white mob dragged James out of the jail, hanged him, and shot him several times. Mob participants also cut out his heart and chopped it into pieces, carrying them away as souvenirs, then torched his body. There were no arrests.⁵

The most famous and one of the most brutal racially motivated incidents occurred in the state capital, Springfield. In the summer of 1908, Joe James, a young African American drifter,

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