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“ROWING, NOT DRIFTING”

Black Organizational Reform before World War II

Black Settlement in Grand Rapids

During the First Great Migration, nearly 1.6 million black southerners headed north between 1910 and 1940. Initially, almost 40 percent of them settled in eight large cities, five of which were in the Midwest, but many ended up in smaller “off-line” locations, such as Grand Rapids.¹ Many blacks “were only temporary guests” in the larger cities before moving on. The influx of black migrants in Grand Rapids before World War II underscored the extended migratory streams that flowed beyond big cities and gave rise to new vibrant black communities in such second-tier cities.² Patterns of black life in these cities often diverged from rather than replicated those of the larger metropolises.

In the primary cities, dramatic urban change compressed blacks into ever-more-constricted neighborhoods and ultimately produced physical ghettos. Some secondary cities, such as Gary, Indiana, which adjoins Chicago, did indeed have patterns of segregation similar to those of their larger counterparts. However, such cities as Grand Rapids and Lansing exhibited characteristics different from those of the archetypical model. White restrictions and prohibitions there were principally aimed at establishing a rigid occupational structure and de facto segregation rather than a fully segregated residential structure. Blacks in such places as Grand Rapids and Lansing were not “knit together . . . by black institutions that nurtured them” in districts that “assumed the pattern of a self-contained city” as they were in New York, Chicago, and Detroit.³ Although African Americans were lured by the same desire for educational opportunities, better living standards, and employment opportunities as their neighboring counterparts, their settlement experience contrasted sharply.

Located 150 miles northwest of Detroit and 170 miles northeast of Chicago, the Furniture City fed off both locations. The black community there grew from

665 in 1910 to 2,795 in 1930,⁴ a pattern shared by other secondary cities. In Lansing, the black population increased from 354 in 1910 to 1,638 by 1940. Although larger metropolitan areas experienced a greater numerical increase of black migrants, the population growth in numerous midsize cities was substantially higher in proportion to their previous black populations. The dispersion of black migrants into secondary cities had significant consequences.

The manner in which blacks reached Grand Rapids varied. According to a 1940 National Urban League (NUL) study of 319 black migrant families in Grand Rapids, more than half relocated from midwestern or Rust Belt states, with most of the remainder arriving directly from the South.⁵ In the absence of “migration clubs” and other critical migratory networks vital to the process of “chain migration,” they relied on local black organizations, such as the Grand Rapids Study Club (GRSC), the Grand Rapids National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (GRNAACP), and the Grand Rapids Urban League (GRUL), to forge a dynamic black community. These three institutions represented different strategies in the grassroots insurgency that challenged the northern version of Jim Crow. Their roles are best told in the individual life histories of their members in the two decades before World War II.

In 1927, Lucille Skinner moved from Kansas City to Grand Rapids, where she met and married her husband, Floyd, who had graduated from the University of Michigan School of Law and returned to Grand Rapids to practice. Oliver M. Green, a World War I veteran, also earned a Michigan law degree and became an attorney.⁶ Among his many accomplishments, Green received the distinguished honor of being the first black elected to the Grand Rapids Bar Association in 1925. Emmett Bolden was born and reared in Grand Rapids. After graduating from Howard University, he returned to open a dental practice. Milo Brown came to Grand Rapids from Cassapolis, Michigan, attended Worsham College of Embalming in Chicago, and returned to become Michigan’s first black mortician outside Detroit. Sarah Carter moved with her family to Grand Rapids from Alabama in 1922. She married Henry Glover, a chauffeur, shortly thereafter and in 1927 was hired as a maid at a local hospital. Lucille Skinner became the president of the GRSC, and Sarah Glover an active member. Floyd Skinner, Oliver Green, Emmett Bolden, and Milo Brown became active members of the GRNAACP. The activities of these individuals joined those of others to develop a sense of community in the face of conspicuous and often hostile white discrimination before World War II, after which “Michigan’s Jim Crow customs were often disguised in arguments about free enterprise and the freedom of association.”⁷

Northern Jim Crow

In early November 1924, nearly six thousand Ku Klux Klansmen representing more than fifty counties descended on Grand Rapids for a three-day Western

State Klonvokation. The Michigan Klan, with membership projected at nearly twenty thousand, joined with locals in preparation for their first public rally in the city. Local Klansman Wilbur Ryman presented the request for the parade permit, assuring city officials that his "organization [was] not in the business of violating the law."⁸ He guaranteed city commissioners that the parade would not be disruptive, noting as evidence the Klan's "orderly handling" of much larger gatherings ranging from 150,000 to 200,000 people and recent parades in Lansing, Saginaw, Adrian, Tecumseh, Jackson, and Kalamazoo.

Inspired by a common message that condemned "foreigners," in particular Jews and blacks, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) adapted its message to suit specific resentments of a particular community.⁹ Northern Klan members traveled throughout the state of Michigan and made their presence known "in many communities with parades, picnics and campaigns to elect friendly officials."¹⁰ With remarkable success, the Klan mobilized large numbers in the Midwest, particularly in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana. By the early 1920s, the KKK even established a "club" at Gerald R. Ford's high school, South High, which was considered one of the most prestigious secondary schools in Grand Rapids.¹¹

Local law enforcement permitted public displays of white supremacy, and state laws and city ordinances placed minimal restrictions on KKK parade demonstrations. Even though an area Klansman had set off three bombs just months prior in Traverse City, Michigan, city officials in Grand Rapids maintained they lacked authority to stop the impending rally. Ganson Taggart, the city attorney for Grand Rapids, proclaimed that the City Commission had "the right to refuse or grant a permit for a parade" only if participants decided to wear masks forbidden by law.¹²

The 1924 parade was canceled due to inclement weather, but the Klan finally held its procession on Independence Day, July 4, 1925, complete with a band and multicolored floats promoting its principles. The event gave spectators a firsthand look at the KKK in all its ceremonial glory as the junior order or youth division, women of the Klan, and Klansmen marched unmasked throughout the streets of downtown Grand Rapids.¹³

The Klan parade was only the most dramatic episode of a range of proscriptions of race mixing in public institutions, social activities, and employment in and around Grand Rapids. Discriminatory signs located in the windows of restaurants and businesses up and down Division Street declared, "Prices subject to change without notice." Even a basic commodity, such as coffee, routinely cost black customers five times as much: They paid fifty cents, while whites paid only ten cents. Although no overt campaign existed to drive out blacks living in Grand Rapids, as there had been in Gary, Indiana, blacks realized that Jim Crow pervaded every aspect of public life.¹⁴ Few social, cultural, and economic options were available for blacks in the city. The city's social clubs, theaters, restaurants, and hospitals banned or restricted blacks.

Lucille Skinner recalled, “In the 1920s, Blacks were not even allowed to enter the building of White literary clubs.”¹⁵ William Gaines, a black plumber, recalled in 1904, “If a colored man goes into some of the restaurants here and asks to be served, the proprietors tell him to go way back in some dark corner. In some places they come out plainly and tell him that [they] do not wish for his patronage and they will not entertain him.”¹⁶ Similarly, in 1913, Reverend Henri Browne faced the harsh reality of discrimination in Grand Rapids when a storeowner refused to sell him a pair of shoes simply because he was black.¹⁷ Blodgett Memorial, Butterworth, and St. Mary’s, the city’s three major hospitals, assigned patients to segregated wards.¹⁸ In addition, “Negro and white insurance clients are segregated in the records. . . . Negro clients are on pink sheets, while those of white are kept on white sheets.”¹⁹ These are only a few examples of the countless stories of discrimination that represented a codified system of prejudicial treatment in Grand Rapids.

Sarah Glover’s experience was typical of many black women in Grand Rapids before World War II. Like several female migrants who entered the city with high school diplomas in hand and training experience at their disposal, they found themselves relegated to positions in domestic service. The prejudicial treatment Glover encountered upon arriving in the city surprised her. She later reflected, “I came from the South where all we knew was discrimination. When I came here, I thought it wouldn’t be as bad, but I soon found out it was under-cover. In the South you knew where you couldn’t go. Here you had to guess.” Although she had been employed as a teacher in the South, in Grand Rapids Glover came up against the school board’s policy not to hire black teachers in the 1920s, leaving her with few options in her new Midwest community.²⁰ She “wanted to stay busy, so when a lady leaving the hospital needed a companion,” she took the job. She received greater compensation for her services as a companion in the North than she did as a teacher in the South, but she still dreamed of a teaching job.

In 1927, Glover accepted a job as a maid on the semi-private and private floors at Blodgett Hospital. For seventeen years, she scrubbed floors and performed a number of housekeeping duties throughout the hospital. After completing her daily tasks, she assisted the nurses. “The nurses used to call me ‘Miss Sunshine’ because I would cheer up the patients,” Glover recalled. “I’d come over and say you look good today and crack a joke. That used to get most of them smiling again.” But life did not always smile back at Glover. Although she acquired years of practical experience feeding and caring for patients, she “was rejected as a nurse’s aide because of her skin color.” Although not formally recognized as a valuable asset, Glover’s ability to perform nursing duties allowed the white nurses time to handle additional tasks. Yet hospital officials determined that promoting Glover “was against the rules,” and they continued to pay her only for maid service, despite the fact that her routine and responsibilities closely resembled those of a nurse’s aide.²¹

Discriminatory practices were not limited to public accommodations and private institutions. Blacks faced a rigid color line in employment that dated back to the turn of the century. The restrictions placed on blacks applied to public and private employment opportunities. Examples are numerous. According to NUL records for 1940, of the 1,330 workers employed in various municipal offices, only 10 were black, 9 of them in menial jobs. The Board of Education, with 1,186 employees, had only 1 black worker, who worked in the maintenance department. The Bureau of Public Health Nursing, Michigan Social Security Area Office, Michigan State Employment Service (Grand Rapids Office), local office of the Federal Works Agency (WPA), and the Kent County Board of Social Welfare had no black workers among their nearly three hundred employees collectively.²²

Blacks found employment prospects limited even in quasi-public institutions. The eight public utilities, for instance, with more than a thousand workers, employed only three black workers as janitors. Similarly, exclusionary trends were evident in four insurance companies. These companies together employed more than a hundred workers in their Grand Rapids offices, but not a single black person. This pattern of discrimination was replicated in local banks. Despite the fact that blacks provided revenue from property mortgages and rental units, only one black person secured a job—as a maintenance worker—in seven banks that employed more than three hundred people.

These discriminatory practices became the standard for private enterprise. In Grand Rapids, the emergence of the furniture industry proved essential to the growth of the city's economy. With more than fifty-four furniture makers in the city by 1910, the federal census reported, "by far the most important industry [was] the manufacture of furniture," and it recognized Grand Rapids as the "center of the furniture industry in the United States."²³ By 1910, "one in every three wage earners found work in the furniture factories."²⁴

But manufacturing jobs in the Furniture City remained closed to black residents. For some time, owners of industry used labor unions to justify the maintenance of racial barriers. They argued that white laborers would protest the use of black workers in the plants. Although most unions discriminated against minority laborers, often the union views of exclusion simply reinforced employers' discriminatory hiring policies. The preferential hiring practices ensured employment opportunities for the growing supply of immigrant labor. Dutch and Polish newcomers, in particular, benefited from the available jobs, providing a sufficient labor pool for employers disposed against hiring black laborers.²⁵

The Dutch and Polish communities were well established in Grand Rapids. By 1910, Dutch immigrants were easily the most sizable immigrant group in Grand Rapids, making up 42 percent of the city's population. Germans were second, constituting nearly 17 percent.²⁶ In her study of ethnic groups in the city, Mary Patrice Erdmans notes, "The foreman and shop floor managers were likely to be native-born German Americans and Swedish Americans, while the

skilled and unskilled workers were Dutch (60 percent) and Polish (25 percent), primarily immigrants.”²⁷ The Immigration Commission records of 1911 indicated that on average, the Dutch earned nearly 8 percent more than Poles in the furniture industry.²⁸ Thus, Polish immigrants “made lower wages, they were in more unskilled positions, and they were more likely to be paid by piecemeal,” placing them “on the bottom stratum in factories.”²⁹

Although Polish laborers occupied the lowest rung in the furniture industry, blacks remained on the outside looking in. This “lockout” continued well into the 1930s, as the two leading industries in the city, furniture and automobile manufacturing, “refused to hire black workers.”³⁰ In lieu of skilled jobs, blacks labored primarily in unskilled service occupations, such as busboys, bell-boys, waiters, porters, and maids.

A few industries in the city had closed-shop agreements in Grand Rapids. A knitting-mill official noted, “Only whites can be employed [on] account [of] many female employees.”³¹ The Nash-Kelvinator Corporation, which employed nearly three thousand workers, also had an agreement with the United Automobile Workers of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). However, an administrator for the company reported that the plant had “no jobs suitable” for blacks. The small number of black industrial workers was not a result of union bias. A 1940 study conducted by researchers from the NUL noted that “Grand Rapids [was] not a union-controlled town.” Instead, it explained, “the Negro does not, to any great extent, have the union as a barrier to his entrance into the majority of industrial establishments.” Nevertheless, the study revealed a number of prejudices present in industrial hiring practices. Therefore, although union restrictions should not be disregarded, the “Negro’s plight” went “beyond union restriction in this community.”³²

By the late 1930s, the furniture industry in Grand Rapids had lost ground to “newer centers of furniture manufacture in the South and West.” By then the two “most important single industries and the largest individual employers [were] General Motors Corporation—Stamping Division plant, makers of body parts, and the Kelvinator Division of the Nash-Kelvinator Corporation, makers of mechanical iceboxes, etc.” But the pattern of discrimination remained intact. Each of these industries employed roughly two thousand workers, but virtually no blacks.³³

The NUL study disclosed a number of reasons why industries in Grand Rapids refused to hire blacks. Comments from industry administrators, which ranged from “habit and custom dictates” to “employees would object if we hired Negroes to work beside them,” revealed a managerial policy that explicitly banned black industrial workers. In 1928, the president of the American Seating Company, which had nearly 1,300 white workers and no black laborers, expressed concern over the absence of minority workers. He explained, as did a number of industry officials, that no policy suggesting racial restriction existed in his company. Instead, he said no “competent” blacks had applied.³⁴

Blacks who applied were kept out by a citywide closed-door policy. Like Glover, who was excluded from the nursing profession, black women workers faced an impossible job market. Although white women worked largely in white-collar jobs, black women could labor only in domestic and personal service roles. According to the NUL occupational statistics for 1930, "Over 60 per cent of Negro males and 93 per cent of Negro females were employed in occupations classified in the laboring and the domestic service classes."³⁵

In the face of rigid exclusionary customs in virtually every facet of urban life, blacks in Gary and Grand Rapids demonstrated a complex sense of political consciousness. Despite relatively small numbers from 1900 to 1940, the black community in Grand Rapids organized to resist northern Jim Crow. It is important to note that although the black population in both communities was increasing, Gary's black population far surpassed that of Grand Rapids. In 1930, the black population in Gary reached nearly 18 percent of the total population of 100,000, while blacks in Grand Rapids remained at less than 2 percent of the total population of 165,000. The black population in Grand Rapids displayed a collective defiance, which had roots in the growth of local black institutions. Although not always as combative as Gary's black population, blacks in Grand Rapids challenged racial injustice in a multitude of ways, making their opposition to oppression known.

To navigate the racial impediments that white citizens devised, blacks turned inward for solutions. Repression intensified segregation, and discrimination ultimately spawned an organized self-help movement among blacks in Grand Rapids that was designed to enhance their state of affairs. Blacks closed ranks, reaching out only sparingly and strategically, in response to the pervasive disaffection among whites, and they pledged a commitment to self-help and racial solidarity. It "was mainly a black do-it-yourself effort which struggled beneath the surface of other public affairs."³⁶

This movement came at a point when the minority community was quadrupling, and black residents placed a premium on social welfare and respectability. The unprecedented push for change came from all angles, but this chapter focuses primarily on the efforts of the Grand Rapids Study Club (GRSC), the Grand Rapids National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (GRNAACP), and, to a lesser extent, the Grand Rapids Urban League (GRUL), which was not formalized until 1942 and formally incorporated in 1943.³⁷ Although such organizations as the GRSC placed a premium on self-improvement, such groups as the GRNAACP attempted to dismantle the public relevance of northern Jim Crow. At times these two divergent tactics generated tensions within the black community reminiscent of the civil rights protest ideology put forth by W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington's pragmatic self-help model. However, to categorize these groups narrowly fails to capture the internal disagreements that represented the complexity and fluidity of the individual members. The GRSC, the GRNAACP, and the GRUL utilized different

approaches, but they sought to accomplish analogous goals. The strategic divisions merely reflected a small variation of how blacks confronted the injurious and offensive nature of discrimination in Grand Rapids. Self-improvement directly addressed the internal needs of the marginalized black community, while the outward battle against northern Jim Crow forced full recognition of black legal, social, and economic rights. Therefore, at times, it was necessary for the black community in Grand Rapids to embrace both strategies.

Such organizations as the GRSC, the GRNAACP, and the GRUL emerged as sites of refuge for blacks living within the Jim Crow parameters of Grand Rapids. Each association, as documented by the GRUL, worked “toward the elimination of discrimination, segregation and prejudice from the general American scene, and work[ed] toward first-class citizenship for all Americans.”³⁸ The chronicles of black organizational reform efforts exist as an integral part of the history of black racial uplift in small urban communities during the twentieth century. Exploring this spectrum of organizations helps map the development of a dominant intraracial approach to racial advancement, and it illustrates how the attitudes and practices of reform organizations affected the lives of fellow black citizens within the inner city. The testimonials of these societies are also part and parcel of the larger narrative documenting the black urban experience in cities throughout the country, encapsulating the aspirations and experiences of black migrants new to the urban arena. Furthermore, these testimonials illustrate the types of programs and services that blacks established to meet the political, social, and cultural needs of their community despite racial adversity. Thus, the individual and collective action of blacks in Grand Rapids to dismantle the public arm of segregation represent a crucial moment in the city’s black freedom struggle.

Sisters in the “By-and-By”

Every Thursday, Glover “would get off work early as a maid at Blodgett Hospital and ride a streetcar to the [GRSC] meetings.” Through her membership in the GRSC, Glover found some relief and encouragement. The racial and gendered nexus among black women of the club provided a much-needed release from the constant reminders of degradation within the polarized city. Racially banned from such organizations in the white community and exiled from recognized leadership positions in male-dominated black institutions, black women found in the GRSC a place to congregate and share ideas. Moreover, clubs afforded black women “an opportunity to escape from the confines of their religious domains, freely express their views, fully engage the political issues of the day, and actively participate in an organization that gave full vent to their talents.”³⁹ Glover proclaimed, “I joined because there was no place to go for black women to study. And they would charge a fee of 25 to 50 cents if you didn’t study your topic. Course that was a lot of money back then.”⁴⁰ Most of

the members in the club, domestic servants like Glover, could not afford to forfeit their weekly earnings, but the thought of intellectual development and community made the risk worth it. Forced to work jobs below their qualifications and left with few avenues to pursue their love of learning, they turned to the meetings of the GRSC for intellectual stimulation, social relief, and political activity.

The GRSC, which had been in existence since 1901, was formally organized on November 10, 1904, by several black women at the home of Louisa Gaines. Its purpose was to "provide helpfulness in study, sewing, and general charity."⁴¹ However, the GRSC's self-help mission, which emphasized continued learning, quickly evolved into a much more comprehensive ideological mission devoted to improving the lives of the black community. The Grand Rapids Ladies Literary Club and Women's City Club barred black women. Born of discrimination, therefore, the GRSC promoted educational, social, and moral uplift as well as economic improvement as the pathways to racial progress. The philosophy of self-improvement and racial solidarity among the GRSC members served as a counter to white disaffection toward black causes and needs. According to the club song entitled "Smiles":

*There are clubs that stand for progress
There are clubs that stand for fame
There are clubs that only strive for
Pleasure, and each day
Make life a selfish game
But our club is ever pressing onward
We don't drift, but row against the
Stream
We are large in word, in thought, in action
We are proud of our Study Club.*⁴²

GRSC members extended this ideology to the black community, and many women received their first involvement in civic affairs through the GRSC. Some members simply sought the camaraderie of the all-black female association, while other black women found refuge in the club's message and goals.

An affiliate of the Michigan State Association of Colored Women (MSACW), the GRSC participated in a larger black women's club movement that united black women in the state and across the Midwest. Founded in 1898 at a Chicago meeting of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, one of the nation's most established women's organizations that had more than one hundred thousand members, the MSACW clubs proved critical in the creation and maintenance of networks for black migrants.⁴³

Such organizations as the GRSC facilitated migrant adaptation to the city. Without established migratory networks, the GRSC proved critical in the

development of the city's black communal infrastructure. GRSC members exemplified what historian Darlene Clark Hine describes as "the connection between migration and black social-class formation and between migration and the rise of protest ideologies which shaped the consciousness of the 'New Negro.'"⁴⁴ This group of remarkable black women came together to address their needs and the larger concerns of the black community. According to the *Grand Rapids Magazine*, "This revolution wasn't born in the front parlors over brandy and cigars, but in the kitchens over rising loaves of bread and in the laundry rooms over soapy washerboards."⁴⁵ In their effort to carve out a modicum of dignity, these women made a conscious decision to battle the iniquitous racial system that denied minority residents of Grand Rapids social autonomy, respectability, and intellectual dominion. Incorporating politics and pleasure, black working women in the city established the first organizational structure that turned segregation into "congregation." As historian Earl Lewis aptly writes, congregation "symbolized an act of free will, whereas segregation represent[ed] the imposition of another's will. . . . [Blacks] discovered, however, that congregation in a Jim Crow environment produced more space than power. They used this space to gather their cultural bearings, to mold the urban setting."⁴⁶

During the Jim Crow era, black working people carved out social space and constructed what historian George Lipsitz calls a "culture of opposition" through which to express their own concerns as well as social and cultural practices outside the spotlight and gaze of white authority. The GRSC provided such a social space for black women in Grand Rapids. The all-black club presented its members with a refuge from the daily humiliation and indignity of racism and the day-to-day degradation of domestic labor. The social environment of the GRSC afforded black women the occasion for fellowship with likeminded thinkers in a collectivist setting free from outside influences, including black men. In this forum, black women registered their discontent, developed inspirational companionship, and derived a degree of political and social autonomy.⁴⁷

Such a space proved especially valuable in the early 1900s, as a trickling of migrants moved to Grand Rapids from the South and Midwest. Blacks migrated to escape economic hardships, racial oppression, disfranchisement, and violence, but they found that a variation of each obstacle existed in Grand Rapids. The city's racial atmosphere did not bode well for crafting solutions to educational, social, and economic concerns in interracial cells. Therefore, black women created solutions from within to improve and protect their community. Because wealthy furniture makers and other employers recognized Thursday as the maids' day off, the GRSC made Thursday afternoon its weekly gathering date. Not all businesses provided maids with an entire day off on Thursday; many employers made their domestics work a half-day. However, this restriction did not deter many of the members from convening at the weekly meeting. These women hurried through their duties inside the homes of wealthy white

businessmen and rushed off upon completion to catch a streetcar after work to make the 2:30 P.M. start time.⁴⁸

Initially, many women joined the GRSC because no other outlets for continued education existed for black women. As vital as the local NAACP chapter and the NUL, which evolved later in Grand Rapids, the GRSC enriched the lives of blacks living in the city. These women created a space for themselves and their families to escape rigidly enforced inequality. Elizabeth Tolliver, a club member, remembered vividly during the Jim Crow era that black women in Grand Rapids "just wanted to feel free to go where we wanted to go." The GRSC allowed black women to forge important kinship bonds. "We felt that keenly," she stated. "They [the white community] encouraged us to meet on our own. I hope they didn't think we wanted to be in their club."⁴⁹ Tolliver's sense of black pride resulted from the autonomy of the GRSC. According to historian Robin D. G. Kelley, the form of congregation experienced by members in the GRSC permitted "black communities to construct and enact a sense of solidarity; to fight with each other; to maintain and struggle over a collective memory of oppression and pleasure, degradation and dignity; to debate what it means to be 'black,' 'Negro,' 'colored,' and so forth."⁵⁰

Lucille Skinner, who had been a member of the black Study Club in Kansas City, understood that the GRSC embodied the virtues of reform needed for communal self-improvement in a segregated city. The GRSC's emphasis on educational achievement among black women immediately prompted Skinner to join the movement toward a meaningful social, political, and educational alternative to northern Jim Crow in Grand Rapids. A natural leader, Skinner was appointed the club's president in 1928, and she began to build lasting relationships with other black migrant women also committed to self-help.⁵¹

Few black families lived in Grand Rapids during the late 1930s when Tolliver migrated to the area and married the pastor of True Light Baptist Church. The GRSC provided the expanding black community with a place to socialize. "There was never a dull moment. We'd have parties, teas and guest programs," Tolliver explained. "Some of the guests brought in by the club had national reputations for the black cause," including such notables as black poet Langston Hughes, black author and television journalist Louis Lomax, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and former Howard University Dean William Pickens.⁵² In the 1930s, Pickens journeyed to Grand Rapids to address the GRSC twice, and on his second visit he "was appointed an honorary member" of the club, becoming the first inducted male member.⁵³

Grand Rapids Magazine reported that black women employed as domestic servants began asking critical questions, such as "How were [blacks] faring in other parts of the country? How could [blacks] in Grand Rapids stay informed on the issues?"⁵⁴ The programs organized by the GRSC exposed the black population of Grand Rapids to the most current and innovative thinkers in black culture and race ideology. Moreover, racial uplift extended beyond rhetoric for

the members of the GRSC. Every day club members set aside the harsh realities and demeaning nature of discrimination that occurred in the work sphere and the public sphere. The GRSC was a space absent of racial judgment and male influence. Moreover, the club further reified the personal self-improvement beliefs posited by each of the individual female members. The internalized belief of racial uplift shared among the members defined their social status within the community. Although they were domestic servants on the surface, underneath the sheath existed well-read, self-aware, complex women who prided themselves on achievement. The women of the GRSC embodied the spirit of self-reliance. In an effort not only to satisfy their own incessant desire for accomplishment but also to motivate and steer the burgeoning black community toward success, the club women put their motto “Rowing, Not Drifting” into daily practice.⁵⁵

For instance, in the early 1920s, club member Hattie Pinkney established the Christmas Savings Club within the organization. Initially, club members designated the money for social venues and communal entertainment. Deliberation among the club members sparked an alternative use for the funds in 1928. At that time, GRSC records indicated, “people were buying lots, and building cottages in Idlewild, and it seemed a wise course for us, also, to put money in lots up there.” The investment in property, it continued, represented a successful venture in which the women of the club pooled their resources, and in April 1928 the GRSC purchased several lots. Also known as “Black Eden,” Idlewild was one of the few vacation resorts that permitted blacks to purchase property. Despite the attraction of a vacation home in rural northwestern Michigan, the members of the club voted not to build a clubhouse in Idlewild. Rather, according to the GRSC report, “An offer was made and the lots were resold, the money banked.” The money acquired from the Idlewild investment ultimately served as a substantial contribution toward the purchase of the GRSC headquarters in 1935, located on 427 James Avenue in the central city. Previously, GRSC members had rotated hosting the meetings “until funds were saved to purchase a building.”⁵⁶

Exclusive affairs, such as the GRSC’s annual anniversary dinner and the Membership Tea, also secured funds for developmental projects in the black community. Such events, whether the annual anniversary dinner or a simple potluck dinner, afforded black community members opportunities to satisfy their social cravings while simultaneously providing essential funds for community uplift projects. Some of the affairs were extremely elegant and afforded blacks an opportunity to shed their work uniforms and dress up in their best evening apparel. “Seeing oneself and others ‘dressed up,’” Kelley writes, “was enormously important in terms of constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotype of the black body, and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted.”⁵⁷ GRSC member Skinner recalled that in “those

days, everyone dressed up for functions such as these especially if they were at night."⁵⁸ GRSC members orchestrated a number of gatherings that provided blacks with a recreational space filled with entertainment for working-class families.

The personal time, money, and effort sacrificed by these women often went unacknowledged, yet GRSC members and their supporters labored hard with extreme pride for the betterment of the black community. As the GRSC tune "I Love a Parade" pronounced, the organization provided blacks with a place of congregation. According to the song:

*We want a Club House
A Place we can meet and get off the street
And have lots of fun.
We want a Club House
A place of our own that we can call home
And bring in our friends.
That you can't come here
That you can't go there we'll nevermore hear.
Our children can dance, our children can prance
They'll run, skip and play and no one will say; nay; nay.
We want a Club House
A place we can meet and get off the street
So, we want a Club House.*

Thus the GRSC, through its extensive network of leisure activities, quickly evolved into "a popular site for various social functions within the black community because there were few other places to go."⁵⁹

But the GRSC functioned to satisfy much more than a social dimension in the lives of its members; it also catered to their intellectual needs. In 1928, newly appointed GRSC president Skinner "saw to it that members kept up with their subjects, and made sure they turned them in on time."⁶⁰ Each meeting was designed to widen the scope of knowledge of every member. According to one report, "Consistent with their dedication to learning, each member also [was] expected to recite a quote and verse that ha[d] inspired them since they last met."⁶¹ Also, the highlight of each meeting included a special guest speaker or presentation from a club member. GRSC members selected research topics of interest. If club members could not determine a topic, then "they were assigned a subject by the committee,"⁶² and they were expected to present their topic to the group. Discussions focused on, but were not limited to, such issues as birth control and sickle cell anemia as well as race relations in the United States and abroad.

Most of the women used the lessons learned from their organizational experience in the GRSC to support other civic groups in the city. Glover and

Skinner, like many of the club members, maintained active memberships in other communal organizations, such as the GRNAACP, the GRUL, the Progressive Voters League (PVL), and the Grand Rapids Civic Club. Glover recalled how, as a member of the PVL, she “went from house to house to encourage people to register and vote.” She continued, “We tried to show them the necessity of voting and we ran two or three people for the City Commission.” Actively engaged in traditional politics, during the years of the Depression, Glover and other organizers of the PVL paid workers to take people to the polls, because most did not have money. Covering such expenses as gas facilitated political participation among blacks otherwise unable to get to the polls. According to Glover, there “was a lot of footwork in those days” as workers went “house to house” to spread general political awareness, because so many people did not have telephones.⁶³

Such members as Glover epitomized the “row” and “not drift” mentality of the GRSC. Glover “never stopped trying,” despite the many obstacles of inequality she was forced to endure. Eventually, Glover’s determination produced tangible results, and she spread her rowing ideology within the Grand Rapids black community. Although she participated actively in other organizations, the security and autonomy afforded by the exclusively female organization made the GRSC a unique and special place where black women could congregate.

Their shared labor and discrimination experiences undoubtedly brought GRSC members closer together. They had not only a common passion for learning but a working knowledge of the difficult and often dirty work associated with domestic labor. The physically arduous domestic work also came with an equally strenuous mental strain. The humiliation of performing maid services intensified among the members, because they had acquired education and were engaged in establishing a vibrant black middle-class community. Although the domestic service work regularly chipped away at their self-esteem, the club reaffirmed their self-respect and validated their worth. “Blacks could not go where they wanted to go, or do what they wanted to do, they had to make their own activities,” Skinner recalled.⁶⁴ The club afforded its members an opportunity to create their own identities as black women in Grand Rapids. That is not to say these women did not sustain their identities in the work or home sphere; rather it recognizes the multipositionality of their identities and acknowledges the obstacles of race and sex in both settings.

The Early Struggle for Integration

DuBois arrived in Grand Rapids in 1917 to cultivate the seeds of change. He delivered a talk to the Sunday Evening Club, sponsored by the Park Congregational Church. Although DuBois’s talk, entitled “The World’s War and the Darker Races,”⁶⁵ received a moderate response from the *Grand Rapids Press*, the address resonated among blacks in the community and inspired the forma-

tion of a local chapter of the NAACP.⁶⁶ Nearly fifty black residents gathered two years later, on January 3, 1919, with the Great Lakes district organizer of the NAACP, Rev. Robert W. Bagnall, to charter the Grand Rapids chapter. The attendees paid a single dollar and in return received a subscription to *Crisis* magazine and membership in the NAACP. It took only twenty-two days for the NAACP's national office to confirm the charter for the Grand Rapids branch.⁶⁷

In the wake of the KKK rally in 1925, dentist and NAACP member Bolden decided to challenge the growing parameters of Jim Crow in the city. Bolden knew that despite the close residential proximity, in the early decades of the twentieth century, whites in Grand Rapids preferred to keep the races socially separated in all aspects of public city life. Blatant forms of discrimination in restaurants, theaters, and even health facilities revealed an unmistakable color line. However, reluctant to accept the increasing racial animosity, blacks organized the Grand Rapids branch of the NAACP to help eliminate the strictures of racial discrimination. The leadership of the GRNAACP represented a burgeoning population of black professionals. Their guidance shaped the organizational and ideological goals of the GRNAACP and most of the total black community reform efforts prior to World War II.

Bolden's action came at a time when the KKK's parade raised racial tensions in the community. But he embodied a spirit of determination and heightened expectations. Bolden promptly allied himself with an emerging cadre of local black activists with similar credentials and aspirations to challenge Jim Crow, including attorneys Green and Floyd Skinner; another dentist, Cortez English; and physician Eugene E. Alston. This new generation of college-educated professionals began their careers inspired by the "New Negro Movement" of the Roaring Twenties, which centered on an extraordinary proliferation of black writers, artists, musicians, and actors. Although known broadly as the Harlem Renaissance, the "New Negro Movement" did not take place exclusively in New York. The cultural flowering of black self-confidence in artistic works, public life, and politics arose in communities across the United States. Although blacks in Grand Rapids welcomed self-determination, the ideological fervor of the emerging leadership cadre around Bolden firmly believed it was necessary to lessen race discrimination. The enforcement of northern Jim Crow and the growing sense of assurance and confidence among the rising urban black middle class made the city a fertile environment for the efflorescence of black pride and organization.⁶⁸

Although professionals were well represented in the new NAACP chapter, membership also included many with less prestigious occupations. A railroad porter, Thomas E. Benjamin, served as president; the vice president was a waiter, Basil Ray; a custodian, J. Ed Jones, and a printing superintendent, George M. Smith, filled the offices of treasurer and secretary, respectively. This union of professionals and ordinary black residents charted the course for the GRNAACP and began a strategic assault against inequality within the city

limits.⁶⁹ Within a year, GRNAACP Secretary Smith founded the *Michigan State News*, which, according to historian Randal M. Jelks, “became a statewide promotional vehicle for the NAACP.”⁷⁰ Perhaps the most important contribution came from members’ willingness to challenge the implicit foundation of northern Jim Crow.

On the evening of December 14, 1925, Bolden attempted to purchase main-floor seat tickets for a vaudeville show and film downtown at the old Keith Theater. Bolden no doubt could afford such seating, but the color of his money was not the issue; rather, the color of Bolden’s skin presented the most immediate difficulty. According to a *Grand Rapids Press* article, “It took guts—or sublime ignorance—in those days for a black to ask for a seat anywhere but in the balcony.” The balcony section, dubbed sarcastically by whites as “Nigger Heaven,” was a concession to the blacks’ wanting to experience the fine arts, but only under the restrictions of segregation. Bolden did not agree with the spurious idiom, and he sought to experience the white man’s heaven situated on the first floor.⁷¹

The theater employees gave Bolden the customary runaround. And although that road had a certain familiarity, “it wasn’t something he’d learned to live with.” Bolden’s determination on that night intersected with good fortune, as a white man standing in line behind him overheard part of the exchange at the right time. As a dental supplier, the white gentleman came into frequent contact with Bolden. He inquired about the conversation and asked whether Bolden intended to go to the show. Instead of creating a scene, the doctor simply said that “the main floor, where he wanted to sit, was said to be sold out.” Incredulous, the white dental supplier responded, “I don’t believe it,” and he stepped up to the window and without delay purchased two tickets located on the main floor.⁷² Clearly, the theater accepted money from both black and white patrons, but money from a black hand could buy only a seat in the less-glamorous “Nigger Heaven” section of the theater. Bolden found this situation offensive and unacceptable, as did his white acquaintance, and both were willing to stand for justice. Bolden took the next step and brought a civil rights suit against the theater.

It was not the first such case in Grand Rapids. Nearly five years earlier, a verdict by Judge M. L. Dunham awarded the sum of \$250 to Rev. William Nelson DeBerry, pastor of St. John’s Congregation Church in Springfield, Massachusetts; Rev. Alexander C. Garner, a pastor in Washington, D.C.; and Rev. Charles Wesley Burton, pastor of Lincoln Memorial Church in Chicago, Illinois. The three black pastors came to Grand Rapids to attend the National Congregation Council of America conference. On Sunday, October 26, 1919, they walked into the Livingston Hotel, intending to eat dinner at the hotel cafeteria. The manager of the cafeteria, Robert E. Jones, refused to serve the black ministers and declared that people of color could not dine within the hotel premises. That

year the legislature had revised the Civil Rights Act of 1885, which guaranteed to all equal access to public accommodations regardless of race, creed, or color.⁷³

Bolden's case also appeared to be a clear civil rights violation. "One of the several local theaters to draw a color line," city historian Gordon Olson writes, "the Keith restricted individuals of African descent to seats in the balcony."⁷⁴ The enforcement of Jim Crow troubled not only Bolden but also other members of the newly originated NAACP chapter. With the support of the GRNAACP, Bolden filed suit in Superior Court against the theater's holding company, the Grand Rapids Operating Company. Green served as counsel for Bolden, while Skinner, still a law student, assisted with legal research.

Under Michigan state law, discrimination in public accommodations was forbidden in any form.⁷⁵ Green contended that under Michigan law and the Civil Rights Act of 1885 (amended in 1919), the holding company clearly denied Bolden equal access. This was part of a strategy to combat the practices of businesses that ignored the law and required blacks to enter in separate entrances, pay higher prices for commodities, and assemble in segregated sections without consequence, despite the fact that the civil rights statute outlawed prejudicial bias based on race, creed, or color in all public spaces.

In 1925, Green filed three cases of discrimination against the Keith Theater, aiming to substantiate a regular pattern of prejudicial treatment in its daily operation. In each instance, Green based his suit on discriminatory seat assignments based on racial preferences. The court decided to combine the first two lawsuits, which were filed separately on April 10, 1925, into one in *Glenn v. Grand Rapids Operating Corporation*.⁷⁶ William Glenn and Roger Grant, the litigants in the initial suits, were both born and raised in Grand Rapids. Both had graduated from high school and received jobs as porters at the Pantlind Hotel, and the GRNAACP hoped their respectable status would assist them in their case. Although Green stated that he won the case, perhaps with a negotiated settlement, the GRNAACP wanted the discrimination issue settled entirely.⁷⁷

Bolden, Green, and the GRNAACP remained determined to eradicate the application of Jim Crow within the Grand Rapids community. It did not hurt that Bolden, unlike Glenn and Grant, had a formal education after high school and managed to secure an elite occupation. A well-known athlete in the community and an accomplished professional, he ran as a candidate for the Grand Rapids School Board. Although he finished dead last, receiving only 1,165 votes, his candidacy provided much-needed publicity for his discrimination lawsuit, which had received minimal attention from the local press.⁷⁸ Moreover, the Keith Theater's defense attorney, Julius Amberg, filed numerous motions, which he hoped would exhaust the prosecution's financial resources. It nearly worked, but Green overcame financial hardships to keep the case open. Additionally, as noted by historian Jelks, "To add insult to injury, during this time a police

officer beat Green for entering the front door of the police station.”⁷⁹ Although Green filed suit against the officer, he subsequently dropped the charges.

The holding company held firmly to the position that as a private enterprise, the theater could exclude any individual regardless of the condition, and Judge Leonard Verdier agreed. Verdier had a reputation for making racist decisions. Just months before, he had sentenced a black man to life in prison for armed robbery and had declared at sentencing, “If you were in some other states, you would have been lynched.”⁸⁰ Although the initial decision supported the holding company, Green appealed to the Michigan Supreme Court, which subsequently overturned the decision on June 6, 1927. Although the decision went almost unnoticed in the local press, the verdict captured the headline of the *Chicago Defender*: “Court Rules Against Jim Crow Tactics: Reverses Decision in Theater Case.”⁸¹ Bolden eventually received approximately \$200 in compensation for damages, but the victory produced a more satisfying result for blacks by forcing the Keith Theater to dismantle its segregated seating policy. The trial represented a political milestone for blacks within the community. For such blacks as Brown, this landmark decision served as inspiration to attack additional injustices throughout the community.

As a charter member and officer of the GRNAACP and charter member and eventual president of the GRUL, Brown embraced a politics of struggle that wove together various approaches designed to achieve favorable circumstances for urban blacks. His self-determination often caused Brown to have minimal tolerance for blacks who did not share his devotion to breaking down racial walls. “I tell them that they have to get on the ball,” he proclaimed. “They have to qualify themselves for better jobs of all kinds. What they need is more and greater motivation. I keep telling them not to give up.”⁸² Brown embodied the steady persistence of black activists in Grand Rapids. He also epitomized how ordinary black citizens fluidly crossed organizational lines labeled integrationist or separationist. Like so many blacks in Grand Rapids, Brown constructed a pragmatic politics of survival that contradicted absolute dichotomies between civil rights and black power.

Brown purchased a house at 603 Jefferson Avenue from which to operate his mortuary business. The Depression of the 1930s forced him to move into a residence that accommodated both his family and his business within a single unit. He continued to work and live there, after several remodeling endeavors, well into the 1960s. Although he had no problem developing his business, families often had difficulty paying for the services rendered. Over the years, Brown “developed a plan for his clients to prepay for the funerals the families might have.”⁸³ He set the money aside in a special bank account, and the interest drawn on the money submitted by the family was returned to them. The agreement resolved the complications on both sides, as it allowed Brown to get paid on time and let families concentrate on emotional matters during a time of critical loss.

Brown's business acumen led to entrepreneurial success. The Brown funeral home expanded from a one-man shop to a business that employed an additional four full-time and four part-time workers. As Brown established himself within the community, black residents began to call on him for matters unrelated to work. "They started dropping in or calling me on the phone," Brown attested, "to ask for advice and help of one kind or another. I became a counselor without portfolio." It was clear that Brown's decades of service engendered trust among the black community.⁸⁴

Brown did not work alone in his efforts to defuse racism in the community. Aware of the harm caused by Jim Crow, Skinner actively combated discriminatory forces. A lawyer with "exceptional power and skill," Skinner generally represented clients who were poor and black. His efforts for change, although extensive professionally, also came in the form of civic activity, as Skinner served as the president of the GRNAACP for five terms.

Throughout the Great Depression, Skinner and Brown used the GRNAACP platform to engage in local politics. Cofounded by Skinner and Brown in 1926, the PVL worked diligently to organize black voters to win political concessions in a corrupt system of city politics. As forerunners of the voting rights movement during the 1920s and 1930s, "we knew where every black in town lived . . . and we organized in every way we could think of to get all of them to vote," Brown recalled. "We used the telephone to remind them of upcoming elections and set up a transportation service to get those to the polls who didn't have cars or another way of getting there."⁸⁵

The PVL ran black candidates for local municipal offices, including Smith for City Commission and Brown for mayor. Although unsuccessful in its attempts to win an elected position, the organization continued to make its presence known. In particular, Skinner headed the PVL fight against City Commission candidate Harry C. White, who advocated segregated neighborhoods throughout the city. The PVL successfully launched a campaign to organize black voters in opposition to White in the third ward and proved an "effective means of marshaling the black community's voting power."⁸⁶ "We were too militant to be scared," said Brown. "Walking house to house, block to block, members of the Progressive Voters League registered between 1,400 and 1,500 of the city's black population."⁸⁷ The ability to organize so effectively ultimately produced patronage from the local political machine in the form of employment opportunities for blacks at the Civic Auditorium and at the polling stations in city elections.⁸⁸

In many ways, Skinner embodied the integrationist aspirations of Smith, founder of the *Michigan State News*. Both remained emphatically opposed to any hint of segregation, and their integrationist beliefs led to internal conflict in the black community surrounding the creation of the GRUL and, subsequently, the establishment of a separate recreational facility for blacks.

Contradictions of Activism

In June 1927, the city's Interracial Council, made up of black and white Protestant church affiliates, researched the recreational needs of the local black youth. With Ethel Burgess at the helm, and joined by committee members Thomas E. Jefferson, Vivian Gould, Daniel B. Lampkins, and C. C. Stillman, the Interracial Council decided to begin with a comprehensive study of the black community.⁸⁹ Burgess wrote to Eugene Kinckle Jones of the NUL to request assistance in conducting the citywide survey. Jones agreed and assigned Charles Johnson, the director of the Department of Research and Investigations, to complete the study for a \$400 fee.⁹⁰

At the request of the Grand Rapids Welfare Union, the agency responsible for the distribution of funds to social service organizations, Jones was invited to come to Grand Rapids on September 22, 1927, to discuss the importance of local black recreational centers. Jones also suggested, "Wherever the Negro population of 1,000 or more is recorded, there is a need for a special Negro social worker."⁹¹ The notion of a professional black social worker resonated with the Interracial Council. Shortly thereafter, the group suggested that "a Grand Rapids branch of the National Urban League be organized for the promotion of social work among colored people, that a trained Negro social worker be employed and that the Grand Rapids Urban League, if and when organized, be made of a member of the Welfare union."⁹²

Many NAACP activists opposed the creation of the GRUL. Black leaders, such as Smith, Bolden, and Skinner, according to historian Jelks, believed "self-segregation was just as bad as the policies of formal and informal Jim Crow."⁹³ Hoping to find clarity, the chair of the Interracial Council, Ida W. Wilson, wrote to DuBois on December 28, 1927. The Interracial Council, she stated, "work[ed] for the betterment of the Negro population of about 5,000 and other residents of the city." With segregated YMCA and YWCA facilities, she wondered "how best to address the needs" of the black community and at the same time confront "the problem of segregation" in the community.⁹⁴ She also requested that DuBois come to Grand Rapids and address these issues. DuBois accepted but noted, "I would not like to express my judgment concerning a racial policy in a city that I know practically nothing about." His response captured the complicated nature of race in such cities as Grand Rapids. He added, "I am opposed to racial segregation as a principle but I am compelled to recognize it continually as a fact. How, where, and when principle can be successfully defended must, of course, be a matter of judgment among those who know all the circumstances."⁹⁵

In 1928, a study of Grand Rapids conducted by R. Maurice Moss for the NUL concluded, "Justifiably or not, this is the issue which has overshadowed every other matter before the Interracial Council; the issue on which the most intense feeling has been aroused; the issue toward whose solution the least

progress has been made.”⁹⁶ In his interviews with local black leaders, Moss discerned the contempt blacks reserved for the local YMCA and YWCA. Despite the use of public funds to build community swimming pools, each organization regularly banned black usage. Moreover, YMCA administrators openly admitted to their prejudicial selection of patrons but noted that if the organization permitted blacks entrance, it would result in “serious defection on the part of their present white membership.”⁹⁷ Separate accommodations, according to YMCA officials, would easily remedy issues on both sides. Moss seemed inclined to concur: “Negroes entertain the conception of these Associations as on par with hotels, railroads, etc.—that is, public affairs which should be open to everyone on an equal basis and which, if necessary, may be forced by law to make available to Negroes their facilities”⁹⁸ However, he considered the two organizations similar to private agencies with the ability to select their clientele. This sentiment echoed the argument of the owners of the Keith Theater in Bolden’s case. Therefore, such men as Moss, Skinner, and Smith skeptically assessed the NUL’s agenda in Grand Rapids. On the surface, the NUL’s position and Moss’s reasoning appeared to contradict the integrationist strategy of the GRNAACP.

In the spring of 1930, when the Interracial Council endorsed the idea of establishing a separate Grand Rapids Negro Welfare Guild to address the recreational needs of the black community between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, Skinner adamantly objected. Although it appeared the Negro Welfare Guild would offer services that such organizations as the YMCA and YWCA refused to offer to black residents, Skinner viewed the separate organization as a continuation of northern Jim Crow. Burgess argued that the GRNAACP missed the point. In a sixteen-point response, she noted that several members of the Welfare Guild also maintained dual membership in the GRNAACP. Moreover, she noted, the real issue—the needs of local black youth—remained neglected. “We wish supervised recreation for their idle time,” she stated. “It is only in organizations of his own race,” Burgess continued, “that the Negro youth is trained in leadership.”⁹⁹ That northern Jim Crow made both approaches necessary was a reality both sides failed to fully recognize. However, the Great Depression muted most of these internal concerns, as the black population in the city actually declined and blacks became less reliant on social agencies and more dependent on state and federal aid.

Skinner’s position contained a degree of irony. In the face of “racial barriers in places of public accommodation such as restaurants, bars, nightclubs,” he established a regular opportunity for blacks to enjoy nightlife. Although white audiences enjoyed black performers, such as Cab Calloway, at the Ramona Gardens dance hall, blacks waited in the back alley with the hope that Calloway would come out during intermission.¹⁰⁰ Skinner and Brown sought to ease the social humiliation experienced by blacks banned from places of leisure, such as Ramona Gardens, so together they founded Club Indigo, which was located on

South Division near Wealthy Street. Club Indigo provided an atmosphere in which blacks could freely associate and indulge in leisurely activity among friendly faces. While socializing at Club Indigo, blacks could listen to “the best black jazz musicians . . . and the finest black entertainers, headliners from Chicago, Detroit and other Midwest cities.”¹⁰¹ Organized social amusement among blacks served as a critical form of escape from the constant degradation encountered on the job and in hostile public spaces.

Club Indigo served a crucial need for black residents restricted from white entertainment venues, yet it seemed to stand at odds with Skinner’s integrationist stance. Moreover, Skinner’s wife, Lucille, was the president of the GRSC, which advocated a self-help formula for the black community. These contradictions reveal the complexities in minorities’ opposition to the world of Jim Crow. From the public legal efforts of the GRNAACP to the behind-the-scenes infrastructure established by such organizations as the GRSC, blacks agitated, built coalitions, and closed ranks to survive in the city. Although these groups operated from varying vantage points, their efforts remained complementary to the struggle for freedom. Blacks needed the vibrant communal stability provided by the GRSC, but at the same time, they had to confront northern Jim Crow head on to exercise their full rights. GRNAACP activists did exactly that.

These combined efforts constituted the collective “Row, Not Drift” mentality of the black community prior to World War II. The entire black community identified with the humiliation of race prejudice; however, the process of finding relief often varied, contingent on the issue of the day. Despite the fluidity of responses from within the black community, the constant target remained overt racial discrimination. This was soon to change, providing a host of problems for the black community. On reflection, Brown commented that racism post-Jim Crow was “more subtle and less easy to define or root out. We still have a way to go.” Thus, as blacks successfully managed to peel back the layers of Jim Crow and step out of “Nigger Heaven,” many found themselves fighting for nonexistent work positions, social mobility, and respectability in a white man’s hell. Black organizations geared toward self-improvement set the agenda for what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls the “long civil rights movement.” In Grand Rapids, however, it was less of a movement in the traditional sense and more of a long freedom struggle for black equality. Their efforts affected the city’s political, social, cultural, and economic fabric. Paradoxically, for each success that black actors experienced in Grand Rapids, whites seemed to engineer a more potent responsive form of racism. Although blacks triumphantly challenged northern Jim Crow in public accommodations and even secured new employment positions, by the late 1940s, whites had constructed an inconspicuous form of managerial racism designed to limit black progress while maintaining the city’s prestige and economic prosperity. It became clear that racism was not a static feature in Grand Rapids; rather the forces of racism continued to evolve in extremely complex ways.

Numerous daily acts reminded blacks in Grand Rapids that the ominous reality of racial violence and discriminatory conduct was part of northern life. Yet the long fight for freedom in secondary cities, such as Grand Rapids, has remained situated on the periphery of conventional civil rights narratives, which focus primarily on the South and larger northern cities. Even though recent studies have turned their attention to civil rights and black power in the North, these works have overlooked the intense struggle for freedom in such places as Grand Rapids and the people who made that history, such as Lucille Skinner, Sarah Glover, Elizabeth Tolliver, Louisa Gaines, Hattie Pinkney, Emmett Bolden, George Smith, Oliver Green, Milo Brown, and Floyd Skinner.¹⁰²