

WE DID WHAT WE HAD TO DO: BLACK WOMEN AND THE
STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA,
1900-1940

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Cornell University 2011

During the early twentieth-century, black Oaklanders were connected to the efforts of other African Americans across the nation, who were likewise politically active and in conversation about a broad range of strategies and approaches to challenge racism. Black women were especially engaged in this dialogue and vigorously sought ways to make further contributions to the black freedom struggle. In a shift that began during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, women's roles, namely those of middle-class women, expanded outwards from the limits of the home. Many women became active participants in temperance and suffrage movements, and also organized on their own to confront local problems. For a number of black women, including those in Oakland, the founding of women's clubs, sororal organizations and associated activities became their primary channel of activism and race leadership during the early twentieth century. Drawing upon oral histories, personal and organizational records, and other supporting documentation, this dissertation traces the progression of black female activism in Oakland,

California beginning in 1900 and culminating in the years before World War II. I specifically place the activities of black clubwomen and collegiate women at the center of my narrative and examine how they addressed various social and economic needs plaguing the black community. I contend that their activism developed within the framework of two differing ideological positions, one was defined by racial self-help and a gradualist approach to racial integration and the other was more explicitly framed by political activism and direct action. I argue that the activities of Oakland's black female activists were, in a number of ways, in full alignment with the efforts of their sisters in other parts of the country. However, in some ways, the small size of Oakland's black demographic, coupled with the privileged position of some of its black female actors, made Oakland and the activism of its women an exceptional case, particularly within the scope of early twentieth-century black female activism. Such conditions would have great implications for the trajectory of both the local and national black freedom struggle, well into the World War II and post-World War II periods.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Christina Harris is a native of Shreveport, Louisiana. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Dillard University in 2002 and her Master of Arts degree in History from Cornell University in 2006.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who are writing or will have to write a dissertation. Though the process is arduous and at times unpredictable, I encourage you to stand strong and persevere. Because of this experience, I am a firm believer in the saying: *the race is not given to the swift nor to the strong but to those who endure until the end.*

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INTRODUCTION

Oakland, located on the San Francisco Bay about eight miles east of the city of San Francisco was transformed into a boomtown when numerous defense-related industries were established there in 1940. Employment opportunities in the shipbuilding and canning industries, among others, attracted thousands of migrants to the East Bay city. During this period of sudden and rapid change, Oakland's African American population grew from 8,462 in 1940 to 47,562 by 1950.¹ This major shift in the black demographic had both an intraracial and interracial impact. The sheer volume and diversity of black newcomers displaced the sense of camaraderie and solidarity, which framed Oakland's pre-war African American community. Furthermore, the increase in black visibility resulted in the hardening of the color line in the city, in a way different from what had been prevalent before the war. African American newcomers responded to these changes by building institutions, establishing social networks, and working courageously to set into motion what developed into the post-World War II civil rights movement.

World War II and its aftermath are certainly watersheds in the history of Oakland and its African American community. However, to fully grasp and understand the significance of these periods, we must begin long before 1940. It was not simply the arrival of World War II migrants and various organizing

traditions from the South and other locales that framed Oakland's post-War black freedom struggle; but, it was their contributions, coupled with influences nascent from a long history of black political activism and social advocacy in the city that framed the post-World War II movement. During the 1940s and 1950s, a new generation of black activists would build upon this rich legacy of organizing to shape a labor-civil rights coalition that would in effect push for and secure the passage of civil rights legislation in California. Moreover, with the coming of the 1960s, labor and civil rights politics in Oakland would overlap with the burgeoning student and anti-war movements. Given the convergence of activism among younger and older generations of African Americans, coupled with that of student and anti-war protesters all in one geographic space, it is more than coincidental that Oakland inspired some of the most creative political projects in the country during the 1960s.

For Oakland's African American community in particular, this radicalism borne of a tradition, dating back to the nineteenth-century, was heavily directed by African American women. Since the 1850s, black women had organized churches, benevolent and social organizations, and were at the forefront of Oakland's nineteenth-century civil rights struggle for equitable public school education. Their efforts not only demonstrated an abiding commitment to serving the black

¹ Bay Area Census, City of Oakland (Alameda County); Census, 1860-1940; 1950-1960. Metropolitan

community but also asserted their leadership in the black freedom movement. This little known legacy of black female service and activism continued to evolve in the twentieth-century, as the city and its African American community experienced a number of changes brought on by local and national developments.

This dissertation traces the progression of black female activism in Oakland, California beginning in 1900 and culminating in the years before World War II. My work specifically places the community involvement and activism of African American clubwomen and collegiate women at the center of the narrative and examines how these women addressed various social and economic needs plaguing the black community. I argue that their activism developed within the framework of two differing ideological positions; one was defined by racial self-help and a gradualist approach to racial integration and the other was more explicitly framed by political activism and direct action. I contend that the activities of Oakland's black female activists were, in a number of ways, in full alignment with the efforts of their sisters in other parts of the country. However, in some ways, the small size of Oakland's black demographic, coupled with the privileged position of some of its black female actors, made Oakland an exceptional case, particularly within the scope of early twentieth-century black female activism. Such conditions, I maintain, would have great implications for the trajectory of both the local and

national black freedom struggle, well into the World War II and post-World War II periods.

This thesis is broadly situated among a growing body of community studies written in the past three decades that have focused on the experiences of African Americans in the urban context. Beginning in the mid-1980s, scholars moved away from using racial and spatial segregation or ghetto formation as the fundamental conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding black urban life. These scholars made African American agency the focal point of their narratives.² In his seminal work Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945, historian Joe William Trotter, Jr. contributed considerably to the field of urban history with his study of African Americans in Milwaukee. Trotter detailed the development and growth of Milwaukee's black community as a result of the "Great Migration" of southern African Americans into northern industrial cities after 1910. Milwaukee had one of the smallest black populations of any industrial city during the period—less than one thousand in 1910. By 1945, Milwaukee's black demographic increased ten-fold, but never constituted more than 2 percent of the total population.³ Although the degree of residential segregation in Milwaukee

² Some of these works include: Peter Gottlieb, Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); James R. Grossman, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Earl Lewis, In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

³ Joe William Trotter, Jr. Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 6 and 149.

increased with the rise of the city's black population, "Milwaukee did not witness the emergence of a sharply defined black ghetto."⁴ This situation contrasted with that of other northern industrial cities where black ghettos emerged by the 1920s as a result of discriminatory practices and racial violence.

In addition to providing a new paradigm for studying the black urban experience, *Black Milwaukee* was also insightful in its discussion of rising class antagonism within the black community. The production demands of World War I facilitated the expansion of a small, but highly visible entrepreneurial black middle-class. Unlike their pre-war counterpart, which mainly provided services to white Milwaukeeans, this emerging class catered almost exclusively to the growing community of black industrial workers. With this shift in their clientele, racial segregation was economically advantageous for some of these black entrepreneurs. Their economic self-interest often complicated their response to integration efforts—a position that created conflict within the black middle-class. Moreover, in the three decades between World War I and World War II, the process of black proletarianization and an attendant rise in working-class consciousness among black industrial workers caused further strain on intraracial relations. While black-on-black class divisions and conflicts developed increasingly during both World Wars as well as during the interwar period,

⁴ Ibid, 74.

divisions did not produce an irreconcilable breach in Milwaukee's black community. Under extreme conditions, challenges to racial hostility obscured mounting class tensions.⁵ Similar to Milwaukee, Oakland's black population was significantly smaller than that of other industrial cities in the years preceding World War II, which also had a pronounced influence upon intraracial and interracial relations in the city. As a result of the protracted growth of Oakland's black demographic from 1900 to 1940, class lines were not yet distinctive and thus, not a significant cause of racial disharmony. Similarly, while black Oaklanders were confronted with racism and white discrimination, as a result of their small size and diffusion throughout the city, blacks did not experience the tumultuous violence fed by virulent racism prevalent in industrial cities, such as Chicago.⁶

While Trotter's monograph remains a foundational study in broadening analyses and historical narratives of black urban experiences, his model does not offer a substantial incorporation of women into the narrative. Given the demographic similarities between Oakland and Milwaukee during the early twentieth-century, my study provides an ideal opportunity to bring black women from the margins of community study particularly in a small city during the pre-

⁵ Ibid, 80-225.

⁶ Paula Giddings, Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching (New York: Amistad, 2008).

World War II era.⁷

This dissertation intends to specifically expand the historiography of African Americans in Oakland and the urban West. Although in recent years, a number of works have examined the history of African Americans in the urban West, only a handful have explored Oakland.⁸ Even here, there is a gap. Marilyn S. Johnson's 1993 publication The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II centers on the experiences of African Americans and other migrants through an exploration of the social, economic, political, and cultural impact of World War II on Oakland and other East Bay communities. Gretchen Lemke Santangelo's 1996 Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community examines the migration and settlement experiences of southern black women who came to the East Bay during World War II. Lemke-Santangelo specifically recounts the cultural work and collective action of these working-class women and its effect on the black community. Robert Self's 2005 publication American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland focuses on the

⁷ Some studies on black women and the urban space include: Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and Family from Slavery to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Dolores E. Janiewski, Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender and Class in a New South Black Community (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Tera Hunter, To 'Joy My Freedom': Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁸ Some of these works include: Keith E. Collins, Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940-1950 (Saratoga, California: Century Twenty-One Publishing, 1980); Douglas Henry Daniels, Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Franciscans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Albert S. Broussard, Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954; Quintard Taylor, The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910-1963 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

urban crisis that transformed Oakland from 1945 to 1978. He looks specifically at black Oaklanders' postwar struggle for racial equality and the challenges posed to urban underdevelopment and suburban overdevelopment. Chris Rhomberg's 2007 No There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland examines successive episodes of political insurgency in Oakland beginning in the 1920s and giving special attention to the 1960's Black Power movement's social and political impact.⁹ All of these works are important contributions to the historiography of the urban West, as well as to scholarship on African Americans in Oakland. However, unlike my study, their chronological focus is on the World War II era and beyond.

Since the late 1980s, at least two works have explored Oakland's pre-World War II African American community. Lawrence P. Crouchett, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Martha Kendall Winnacker's 1989 work, Visions Toward Tomorrow: The History of the East Bay Afro-American Community, 1852-1977, though very brief (sixty-one pages), provides an account of notable people and institutions in Oakland's pioneer African American community, and also narrates Oakland's expansion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This work is mainly useful as a short who's who narrative. Delores Nason McBroome's 1993 publication Parallel Communities: African Americans in California's East Bay,

⁹ Marilyn S. Johnson, The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Robert Self, American Babylon:

1850-1963 looks at black institution building in four East Bay cities: Alameda, Berkeley, Oakland, and Richmond. McBroome argues that through these institutions African Americans attempted to fulfill their own “California Dream” of equality and to establish legitimacy for themselves and future generations. McBroome’s reconstruction of black community development is insightful. Yet, she limits her perspective on black progress to the realm of political institutions. Hence, the work lacks a full scope assessment of the efforts of individual community members. While the two previously mentioned works are important in positioning the narrative of Oakland and the East Bay black community within an expanded chronological framework, neither work moved beyond issues of race to address substantially the complexities of gender and class. This dissertation’s focus on the activism of middle-class African American women expands the narrative and the historiography by offering a discussion and analysis of race, class and gender in pre-World War II Oakland.¹⁰

Aside from its contribution to the general field of African American urban history and the history of African Americans in the urban West, this study broadens our understanding of the twentieth-century black freedom struggle. Best

Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2005); Chris Rhomberg, No There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Lawrence P. Crouchett, Lonnie G. Bunch, III, and Martha Kendall Winnacker, Visions Toward Tomorrow: The History of the East Bay Afro-American Community, 1852-1977 (Oakland: Northern California Center for Afro-American History and Life, 1989); Delores Nason McBroome, Parallel Communities: African Americans in California’s East Bay, 1850-1963 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993).

known as the birthplace of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, most scholarship on African American activism in Oakland makes that the sole subject of inquiry.¹¹ Only recently have scholars begun to situate the founding of the Party in a larger historical framework of an activist tradition within the city's black community. Nonetheless, much of this scholarship begins in the immediate post-World War II period and centers on themes of male leadership and working-class resistance. I suggest a more complex and longer tradition of activism in the city largely predicated upon efforts to attain civil rights. My trajectory makes visible the activism of Oakland's black women, black pioneers, and the black middle-class as I chart an activist genealogy established long before the arrival of black World War II migrants and of course, long before the Black Panther Party.¹²

Perhaps most significantly, this project is the first to explore the activism of

¹¹ Some of the works on the Black Panther Party include: Bobby Seale, Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton (New York: Vintage, 1970); Huey Newton, Revolutionary Suicide (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Elaine Brown, A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story (New York: Anchor Books, 1993); Hugh Pearson, The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995); David Hilliard, This Side of Glory (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001). Charles Jones, ed., The Black Panther Party Reconsidered (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Kathleen Cleaver, Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹² My research is aligned with current trends in civil rights historiography, particularly in that I situate a community of African Americans in the West within a larger national narrative of the black freedom struggle as it developed in the early twentieth century. For some of the recent works exploring the development of the black freedom struggle in the North and West, see: James R. Ralph, Jr., Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Robert Self, American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Martha Biondi, To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jack Dougherty, More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Matthew J. Countryman, Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Thomas Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North (New York: Random House, Inc., 2009).

black clubwomen in any city of the urban West during the years preceding World War II. Most histories written about the black women's club movement have been either general treatments or have focused on the activities of women in the North and South.¹³ Oakland, however, experienced an unprecedented proliferation of black women's clubs between 1900 and 1930. While Oakland's black population increased only gradually during this period, migration was steady enough to present unique challenges and opportunities for black female activists. Primarily through club activity, buttressed by an ideology of racial uplift, women practiced self-help. Some scholars have questioned the viability of self-help as a practical and effective political schema. They argue that notions of self-help and uplift were inherently flawed—that is—its elite advocates' emphasis on the moral depravity of “the masses,” reinforced ideas that supported beliefs in an African American pathology.¹⁴ I suggest that clubwomen's application of racial self-help in Oakland, yielded a different result. The small size of Oakland's black population mitigated class concerns or class interests within the black community as the most prominent rationale for self-help. Calls for racial self-help in Oakland prior to World War II

¹³For example, see Anne Meis Knupfer's Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in the Turn-of-The-Century Chicago (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Wanda A. Hendriks' Gender, Race, and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois, 1890-1920 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Deborah Gray White, Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Floris B. Cash's African American Women and Social Action: The Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001); Paula Giddings, Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching (New York: Amistad, 2008).

¹⁴ Kevin Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

migration, were a means of black survival, support and progress and not made by a class of petit bourgeois elites hoping to maintain their status in the midst of flagrant inequality. Class tension was not an easily observable concern until the World War II and post-World War II periods when a clear dichotomy between the “old-timers” (native black Oaklanders) and the “newcomers” (black World War II migrants) developed.¹⁵ This perspective is perhaps one of my most original contributions to the study of women and urban African American history.

Another original perspective is my effort to connect the newspaper columns of black journalist Delilah Beasley to the larger black clubwomen’s movement for progress, uplift and racial equality in Oakland. While Beasley’s book, The Negro Trailblazers of California and newspaper columns have attracted attention for their role in illuminating middle-class African American social and civic life, her impact on black-white relations in Oakland has hardly been examined.¹⁶ The most comprehensive discussion to date on Beasley, her historical research, her journalism and activism is Lorraine Jacobs Crouchett’s Delilah Leontium Beasley:

¹⁵For other works on racial uplift, see: Stephanie Shaw’s What A Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), which emphasizes uplift’s effectiveness, particularly its agency and autonomy; Patrick Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) which looks at uplift as an intellectual and political development of black protest in the antebellum North; Michele Mitchell, Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) concerns racial uplift and other ideologies African Americans considered to bolster their collective progress between 1877 and 1930. Central to Mitchell’s thesis are the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality.

¹⁶ Rodger Streitmatter, “Delilah Beasley: Voice for Accommodation and Conciliation” in Raising Her Voice: African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994) 73-83.

Oakland's Crusading Journalist.¹⁷ The book offers a short chronicle of Beasley's early life, a brief survey of her introduction to California and its African American community, a discussion of her book and the significance of her columns for African Americans. Crouchett does not delve into the impact of Beasley's *Oakland Tribune* columns on interracial dialogue in the East Bay nor her political ideology. As a loyal advocate of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, Beasley used her columns to promote racial accommodation and gradualism. As a clubwoman, she viewed this advocacy of interracial understanding and cross-racial cooperation as a means of ultimately furthering racial integration.

This study is also the first to examine the activism of black collegiate women in the West. During the first two decades of the twentieth-century, a younger generation of black women emerged as activists through black sororities. The black sororal movement began in 1908 on the historically black campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C.; by the 1920s, black co-eds attending the predominantly white University of California at Berkeley were key figures in this movement. Collegiate women at Berkeley chartered the first chapters of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta sororities in the West, thereby creating a network of support and a means of public service both during and after their matriculation at Berkeley. A few scholars, such as Jeanne Noble, Richard Breaux

¹⁷ Lorraine Jacobs Crouchett, Delilah Leontium Beasley: Oakland's Crusading Journalist (El Cerrito, California:

and Stephanie Evans, have written studies on African American women's higher education in the twentieth century.¹⁸ Missing from current studies is any examination of African American collegiate women in the West. My study, which focuses on Oakland, also includes the black women who attended the neighboring University of California at Berkeley. I contend that during the 1920s and 1930s, these college educated sorority women transformed their experiences with racism on Berkeley's campus into a call for social and political activism in their communities.

This project's discussion of black female activism is thematically and theoretically influenced by the scholarship of historians such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Deborah Gray White. In their works Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920, and Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994, these historians put forth intricate narratives of black female agency that skillfully approached issues of race, class and gender.¹⁹

Higginbotham analyzed the intersection of race, gender and class within the

Downey Place Publishing House, 1982).

¹⁸ Jeanne Noble, Negro Woman's College Education (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1956); Richard Breaux, "Maintaining a Home for Girls": The Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Clubs at the University of Iowa, 1919-1950." The Journal of African American History, Vol. 87, Cultural Capital and African American Education (Spring, 2002), pp. 236-255. Stephanie Evans, Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954 (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Deborah Gray White, Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994 (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999).

black church as well as the larger African American community. She thereby uncovered black women's role in making the Baptist church a powerful institution for social and political change during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, a period known as the nadir²⁰ of American race relations. During this crisis, the black church provided a forum through which the race could funnel crusades for civil rights and devise programs of racial self-help.²¹ Higginbotham convincingly argues that black Baptist women developed a distinct discourse of activism and resistance, which enhanced the race's efforts to improve socially, economically and politically. Higginbotham's narrative of the black Baptist women's movement was also useful because she addressed the issue of class. The leadership of the women's movement in the black Baptist church promoted middle-class values through the lens of respectability.²² It was believed that such ideals supported efforts toward racial progress while guaranteeing white recognition of African Americans as respectable citizens. The women in Higginbotham's study rejected socio-economic status as an indicator of their value

²⁰ Rayford W. Logan, The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901 (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

²¹ For more information on the various functions of the black church, particularly during the post-Reconstruction era, see W.E.B. Du Bois, ed., The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University: Together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903); E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); Carter G. Woodson, History of the Negro Church (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921).

²² For new works on the "politics of respectability, see Victoria W. Wolcott's, Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and E. Frances White's, Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

and posited that African Americans could claim respectability through their behavior; thus, despite their economic position, women could define themselves outside the parameters of prevailing racial stereotypes. According to Higginbotham, respectability, “equated non-conformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice.”²³ It can be argued that black Baptist church women’s promulgation of a particular set of moral values and behavior reflected an internalization of prevailing racist stereotypes and in many ways left little space for those who did not conform. However, one could also argue that respectability, in spite of its paradoxes and limitations, did have bona fide political utility. In the particular case of Oakland, the efforts of black female activists to present positive images of black humanity not only challenged stereotypes but also created tangible spaces for interracial cooperation and black social advancement in the city.

In *Too Heavy A Load*, Deborah Gray White suggests that as black women defined themselves as race workers, there were often ideological discussions about the type of leadership they should exercise and debates about the ways they directed their activism. White attributes the contestation to the challenges black women faced in grappling with their race, class and gender identities. White maintains that debates permeated and greatly influenced activism on a national scale. Her assessment, which informs this study, also defined the activism of

²³ Higginbotham, 203.

Oakland's black women.

Like the women who moved to politicize the post-Reconstruction Baptist church, the African American women of Oakland played an integral role in contouring narratives of politics, community, and progress in the years leading up to World War II. Though Oakland's black women shaped their activist agenda according to the particular needs of their community, this influence is best understood within the broader national context of discussion among African American women about race progress. Moreover, as part of the black middle-class, black female activists saw themselves as chief agents in serving the needs of the black community and helping solve the race problem in Oakland. However, with changes brought on by mass migration into the city during World War II, black women, as well as Oakland's black community faced new obstacles both within and outside of their community. Black women engaged questions concerning their position within Oakland's changing cultural, social and political milieu. Though tested by their uncertainty, they nonetheless found a way to assert their activist voices and make additional contributions to the black freedom struggle.

The chapters for this study are organized both chronologically and thematically. Chapter One is entitled *Making A Way Out Of No Way: Black Pioneers, Education and the Self-Help Tradition in California*. It explores self-help within California's pioneer black community as seen and traced most clearly

through educational efforts. Elizabeth Scott Flood, among other community members, were in the forefront. Through education, the self-help tradition became firmly entrenched as an important strategy of the black freedom struggle within the state. Building on this theme, chapter one proposes that in addition to meeting a specific need of the race—educational activism commanded the attention of white state legislators and local school board members. In concert with political activities such as those exercised via statewide colored conventions, activism in education hastened the black struggle for equal access to public school education.

Chapter Two entitled *Accepting the Call: The Roots of Black Women's Club Activity in Oakland* introduces the black women's club movement within a larger tradition of racial self-help. Chapter two begins with an exploration of demographic change and institutional development in Oakland's black community from the 1870s to the turn of the century. The chapter also places the advent of black women's club activity in Oakland within the context of female activism in California during the late nineteenth century. Within this state and local framework, I link the founding of Oakland's first black woman's club to a broader national narrative and ideological framework.

Chapter Three entitled "*Deeds Not Words*": *The Activism of Oakland's Black Clubwomen*, looks at the actions of the city's black clubwomen as they often worked collectively and individually in tandem with political efforts to advance the

social position of the race. I explore efforts by prominent black clubwoman and journalist Delilah Beasley during the protest against *Birth of a Nation* sponsored by the NAACP. I also examine the founding of the Fanny Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery and the Linden Center (Branch) of the YWCA. In addition to addressing a specific need of Oakland's black community, the objectives of these two institutions were part of the larger social welfare agenda of the national black women's club movement.

Chapter Four is entitled *Delilah Beasley, Black Progress and the Uncertain Road to Racial Understanding*. Here I examine the efforts of Oakland's black clubwomen to bridge the racial divide, particularly through the work and activism of Delilah Beasley. As a reporter for the *Oakland Tribune* Beasley served as conduit between Oakland's black and white communities. Her articles, particularly the "Activities Among Negroes" section of the Oakland Tribune from 1923 to 1934, were written to engender conversation between the races, particularly between black and white women.

Chapter Five entitled *Sisters Called to Serve: Higher Education, the Black Sororal Movement and the Changing Tide of Black Female Activism* looks specifically at the chartering of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta sororities at the University of California at Berkeley. I explore how black women used their membership in these organizations as a foundation for continued activist

work and public service after leaving college. Looking at specific women, I examine how their endeavors refashioned the trajectory of activism among black women in the larger community.

Chapter Six is entitled *Where Do We Go From Here: Southern Migrants and Black Struggle*. This chapter concerns World War II's effect on African Americans in Oakland—particularly as a wave of new black migrants entered the city in search of employment opportunities. I discuss the city's changing demographics and social relations from 1940 to 1945 and also trace changes in the structure and leadership of Oakland's black community. I assess what impact, if any, such changes had on the activism of black women and the trajectory of the ongoing black freedom struggle in Oakland.

The *Epilogue* summarizes the major themes and arguments developed throughout the dissertation with regard to African American women, the black community, and the city of Oakland.

CHAPTER ONE

MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY: BLACK PIONEERS, EDUCATION AND THE SELF-HELP TRADITION IN CALIFORNIA

Gold was discovered in Coloma, California at General John Sutter's Mill in January of 1848. The pull of El Dorado and the dreams it inspired drove thousands to the West by land and sea. Black and white newspapers throughout the country printed stories and articles detailing the experiences of migrants and their adventures in the gold mines. Like their white counterparts, African Americans were persuaded to travel to the Pacific Coast with the hope that they too might attain a piece of the economic security so often written about in these published accounts. In November 1849, Frederick Douglass' *North Star* reprinted a letter highlighting the adventures of Dr. W.J. Brent of New Orleans. Dr. Brent began his letter by ensuring its readers that he was a reliable source, with an opinion, "formed from actual observation." Brent had just returned from a trip to the gold mines and confirmed that gold was plentiful; and in fact, "the whole country, for a space of five or six hundred miles or more, [was] filled with gold." Dr. Brent asserted that there was "no mistake about the gold, and the newspaper stories ...[were] not much magnified." He encouraged the readers of his letter to travel west and "take up a spade full of earth any where in the gold region," as they

would find “more or less of the metal in it.”¹ Dr. Brent’s was one of many personal narratives that projected African American success both in and beyond the scope of California’s gold country. In February of 1850, William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* published a letter sent by a group of black San Franciscans announcing the formation of a mutual aid society. The letter declared that the group of men was “doing something for [themselves] to promote [their] future welfare.” The letter exclaimed that the men were “making from one to three hundred dollars per month, and [had] formed a Society of Relief, for [their] own benefit and those of new comers.”² Letters such as these published in the *North Star* and *Liberator* not only encouraged migration to the West, but also ensured African American migrants that upon their arrival, they would find institutional support.³

Although economic security both in and outside of the gold mines largely motivated everyone migrating West, African Americans were also in search of social autonomy and freedom. Newspaper reports detailing black and white gold miners laboring side by side conceivably projected a sense of social openness in the new frontier unlike the North or the South. African Americans were perhaps even more hopeful about the future of California’s racial landscape when a

¹ *North Star*, “A Southerner’s View of Gold Digging.” Reprinted from *The New Orleans Bulletin*,” November 30, 1849.

² *Liberator*, “Colored Association in California” Samuel I. Davis, February 15, 1850.

³ For more information about African Americans during the gold rush, see Rudolph M. Lapp’s *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977); Delilah Beasley’s *The Negro Trailblazers of California* (Los Angeles: published by author, 1919); Kenneth Goode’s *California’s Black Pioneers: A Brief Historical Survey* (Santa Barbara: McNally and Loftin, Publishers, 1974).

proposed black-law, which would have forbade free African Americans from immigrating to the state, was rejected by a vote of 31 to 8 at the constitutional convention.⁴ Nonetheless, African American migrants quickly discovered that many of the same legal infringements, which had sorely fashioned their lives in the North and South, were also planted in the West. African Americans were not prohibited from migrating to California, however the state's constitution created a number of other restrictive social barriers.

The constitution limited voting rights to: "Every white male citizen of the United States, and every white male citizen of Mexico, who shall have elected to become a citizen of the United States."⁵ Hence black men could not vote, even if they owned property. Moreover, in 1851, the California legislature passed the "Civil Practice Act," which further proscribed people of color. Section 394 provided that: "No Indian or Negro, or persons having one-half or more Indian [or] Negro blood, shall be allowed to testify as a witness in action in which a person is a party." Furthermore, Section 14 of the "Criminal Act," provided that, "no Black or Mulatto person or Indian shall be allowed to give evidence in favor or against a white man."⁶

Article IX Section 2 of the state constitution provided for the establishment

⁴North Star, "FREE NEGROES ADMITTED—The proposed clause of the Constitution," December 21, 1849.

⁵ California State Archives, Constitution of the State of California. 1849. Enrolled, original copy. 19 pages. Microfilm Roll No. MF2:10(5A).

of a publicly funded system of common schools to promote “intellectual, scientific, moral and agricultural improvement” among the state’s residents.⁷ The legislatures of 1851 and 1852 passed enacting legislation for Article IX Section 2, providing for a school fund to be apportioned according to the number of children ages 5 to 18 residing in the state’s various cities and townships. No education legislation passed between 1851 and 1854 made any mention of race; however, de facto segregation was commonly practiced. In 1854, when black parents in San Francisco appealed for public schooling for their children, instead of integrating them into an already established public school, on May 22, 1854, the San Francisco Board of Education established a separate “colored school” in the basement of the St. Cyprian African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁸ The first hint of legally mandated segregated schools came in 1855 when Section 18 of the school law required that the school fund apportionment census be restricted to white children. This clause was extended in 1860, when schools were prohibited from

⁶ Delilah L. Beasley, Negro Trail Blazers of California (Los Angeles: Times Mirror Print and Binding House, 1919), 56.

⁷ California State Archives, Constitution of the State of California. 1849. Enrolled, original copy. 19 pages. Microfilm Roll No. MF2:10(5A). It is important to note that two years prior to the meeting of California’s first Constitutional Convention, a three-man committee was commissioned by the San Francisco City Council to establish the city’s first public school. Ironically, Captain William Leidsdorff, a wealthy black businessman, served as a member of that committee. Despite Leidsdorff’s contribution in establishing what would become California’s first public school, the children of his race proved unwelcomed in the state-supported school system, which shortly thereafter developed. For more information on this development, see Beasley, Negro Trailblazers, 172. For more information on William Leidesdorff, see Gary Mitchell Palgon, William Alexander Leidesdorff: First Black Millionaire, American Consul and California Pioneer (Atlanta: Lulu Press, 2005); Sue Bailey Thurman, “William Alexander Leidesdorff” in Pioneers of Negro Origin in California (San Francisco: Acme Publishing Company, 1952).

⁸ William Warren Ferrier, Ninety Years of Education in California, 1846-1936: A Presentation of Educational Movements and Their Outcome in Education Today (Berkeley: Sather Gate Book Shop, 1937) 97-98; Charles M.

admitting “Negroes and Mongolians” under threat of losing all funding from the state.⁹

Of the many unjust laws and mandates enacted against African Americans, perhaps the denial of equal access to a public education was the greatest barrier to their social advancement. Attainment of an education not only provided greater opportunities for improved economic and living conditions but, during a time when the moral decency and intellectual capacity of African Americans was continually called into question, the acquisition of knowledge worked in concert with efforts to defend the character and humanity of the race. Black Californians organized statewide colored conventions to discuss ways in which to formally address the state legislature regarding education. However, the greatest movement in the push to gain equitable access to an education for black children was put forth among networks of parents and extended kin. Black Californians did this by adopting the tradition of racial self-help and drawing on their own institutions. At the forefront of this movement throughout the state of California were two individuals: Elizabeth Thorn Scott Flood and Jeremiah Burke Sanderson. Flood, Sanderson, and their families became the center of early black community and institutional development in Oakland.

Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 12; Beasley, 173.

⁹ Ferrier, 98 and Wollenberg, 25.

Elizabeth Scott (Flood) was born Elizabeth Thorn in New York City in 1828, a time when New York's free black community was deeply involved in addressing issues affecting their social, political, and economic conditions.¹⁰ Scott lived most of her adult life in California. However, her coming of age in New York profoundly influenced and perhaps catalyzed her activism once arriving and settling in California. Scott migrated to California from New Bedford, Massachusetts with her first husband Joseph Scott sometime between 1850 and 1853. Not much is known about their early lives once reaching the Pacific Coast. However, Joseph apparently died shortly after their arrival.¹¹ Elizabeth Scott then moved with her young sons Oliver, Andrew, and Horatio to Sacramento.¹² In Sacramento, she optimistically anticipated opportunities for economic security and for her children, a brighter future.

Jeremiah Burke Sanderson also migrated to California from New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1854. During the antebellum period, New Bedford was a refuge for self-emancipated enslaved persons and an important focal point of the

¹⁰ Although the census records suggest that Elizabeth Scott Flood was born in "about 1824," when Flood died in 1867, according to newspaper accounts, she was 39 years old. As such, I deduce that Scott Flood was born in 1828. Year: 1850; Census Place: *New Bedford, Bristol, Massachusetts*; Roll *M432_309*; Page: 223; Image: 25. Ancestry.com. *1850 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. M432, 1,009 rolls.

¹¹ When the 1850 census was taken, Joseph and Elizabeth Scott were still residents of New Bedford, Massachusetts. However, sometime thereafter, the Scotts migrated to California. However, I am unable to specify the year.

¹² In written accounts of Elizabeth Scott's life, she is termed a "widow" upon arriving to Sacramento. Moreover, her marriage to Isaac Flood in 1855 further verifies that Joseph Scott died sometime shortly thereafter his and Elizabeth's arrival to California. See Tricia Martineau Wagner's *African American Women of the Old West* (Guilford: The Globe Pequot Press, 2007) for more information.

abolitionist movement. Frederick Douglass made New Bedford his first home after escaping slavery in 1838; leaders of the abolitionist movement such as William Lloyd Garrison and William Cooper Nell frequented New Bedford in their efforts to encourage abolitionist fervor.¹³

Jeremiah Sanderson himself was an active participant in the anti-slavery movement in Massachusetts—often working the lecture circuit and at one time, working as an agent for the *Liberator*. In addition to his work in the abolitionist movement, Sanderson was active in the overall struggle for civil rights in the state. During his final year in Massachusetts, 1854, Sanderson was a delegate and also served as secretary at the State Council of Colored People of Massachusetts Convention, which convened in Boston.¹⁴ Among the topics discussed were the anti-slavery movement, education, and the cause of civil rights.¹⁵ In California, Sanderson continued his activism, serving in 1855 and 1856 as secretary for California's first two statewide colored conventions. Sanderson initially moved to California to improve his financial standing and then return home. In an 1857 letter to his wife Catherine, he wrote the following:

¹³ For more information on New Bedford Massachusetts' antebellum black community, see Kathryn Grover's *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

¹⁴ The convention was held in accordance with a resolution passed at the National Convention of the Colored People of the United States in Rochester, New York, July 6th, 7th, and 8th, 1853. During this convention, states were asked to establish state councils to act in conjunction with the national council. For more information see the *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention held in Rochester*, July 6th, 7th, and 8th, 1853.

¹⁵ Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions, 1840-1865* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980) 88-95.

“So you will see I have made another change; discouraged, sick at heart, and doing but little in Sacramento, I was ready to accept any chance to do anything that seemed to offer a reasonable prospect of saving something;-- just then Mr. Young a gentleman of this Town [Shasta] offered me \$75—per month, ... my plan is to work with him, through the season, until late in the summer to dry season—perhaps to the last of July and then come home... After having been in this State three years, it is hard for me to impose these conditions upon myself; I know not if I shall be able to stay but I will try; and is it for myself? No; it is because I have always hoped and do hope to do something better for my family here, than I can at home...”¹⁶

Despite his intentions, Sanderson never did go home. In fact, some three years after writing this letter, his wife and children joined him in San Francisco.

Much of Scott and Sanderson’s activism prior to their migration and settlement in Oakland occurred in San Francisco and most prominently in Sacramento. Both cities were appealing to black migrants because of their well-established networks of African American kinship, as well as employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector and the maritime industry. Like Sanderson and Scott, many black San Franciscans and Sacramentans were transplanted Northerners. Hence, in establishing the first black institutions in these cities, they often created institutions like those they left behind. The first of these institutions was the church. The black church was the cornerstone of African American institutional life and a key element in the push for racial equality. Most noticeably in the North, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church

¹⁶ Letter from Jeremiah B. Sanderson to Catherine E. Sanderson, February 27, 1857, Jeremiah Burke Sanderson papers, [ca. 1857-1912], BANC MSS 75/70 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

demonstrated an incessant commitment to this objective. Throughout the nineteenth-century, the laity and clergy of the northern and southern AME Church consistently spread an ethos of racial improvement and solidarity. On the West Coast, with the 1850 founding of St. Andrew's AME Church in Sacramento, the AME Church became the first black denomination in the state. Delilah Beasley described the AME Church as the "leading spirit in the building of California for the Negro..." and strongly supportive of "all the movements for the uplift of the Negro race during pioneer days."¹⁷ The AME Church was a particularly ardent supporter of education. As previously mentioned, the first "colored school" established in the state was housed in the basement of the St. Cyprian AME Church in San Francisco. In addition to their support of common schools, AME churches also established Sabbath schools to further promote literacy in the black community.¹⁸

In Sacramento, Elizabeth Scott was the engine behind the founding of the first school for black children. On May 29, 1854 when she first opened a private school for African American children in her home, fourteen students (among them some adults) came through its doors. Within months, the numbers increased. In an effort to accommodate more students, in August of 1854, Scott and a committee of Sacramento's black community members established a public school to be housed

¹⁷ Beasley, 158-159.

at St. Andrews AME Church. Scott's pupils were transferred to the new location and she was employed as its first teacher, for \$50 per month. The new school also welcomed indigenous and Chinese students. In recognition of Scott's pioneering efforts, the committee raised money to purchase the lot and the home where Scott had opened her private school. After its purchase, the committee dedicated it as a landmark to the "education of colored youth."¹⁹

Within a year of Scott's school's relocation to St. Andrews, she remarried and moved to the Oakland area with her second husband, Isaac Flood. Her school was closed and later reopened under the leadership of Jeremiah Sanderson who moved to Sacramento shortly after his arrival in California. Upon the occasion of reopening Scott's school on April 20, 1855, Sanderson noted:

"Today I opened a school for colored children. The necessity for this step is evident. There are thirty or more colored children in Sacramento of proper age to attend school and no school provided for them... They must no longer be neglected, ... A school they must have. I am induced to undertake this enterprise by the advice of friends and the solicitation of parents. I can do but little, but with God's blessing I will do what I can."²⁰

Upon reestablishing the school, Sanderson, with the assistance of Sacramento's black community, petitioned the Sacramento City School Board to support the school with public funds.²¹ In his July 10, 1855 petition, Sanderson recounted the

¹⁸ Journal of the Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the Ministers and Lay Delegates of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Held in Bethel Church, San Francisco, From September 4th to September 10th, 1863.

¹⁹ Wagner, 104; Ferrier, 101; Beasley, 174.

²⁰ Beasley, 174.

²¹ Samuel Colville, ed. Colville's Sacramento Directory (Sacramento: James Anthony and Company, Book and Job Printers, 1855), 72; Beasley, 174.

broader history of the current struggle of African Americans to procure the rights of a public school education for their children and also summarized the history of the school for black children in Sacramento. After discussing these points, Sanderson ended his petition with the following plea:

“Gentlemen, you have just been elected the board of education for the City of Sacramento. The parents of the colored children appeal to you; they respectfully and earnestly ask your attention to the school for their children. They ask you to take it under your protection and patronage and to continue such appropriation for its support as in your wisdom and liberality may seem required to make it permanent and efficient for the training of their children’s minds, than whom they know none need instruction more than those children that they may become upright and worthy men and women.”²²

The school board approved Sanderson’s petition and decided to take over Sacramento’s “colored school.”²³ Sanderson only taught at the school in Sacramento for a couple of years after this significant achievement. As his 1857 letter to his wife indicated, he worked for a short time in Shasta.

The independent founding of Sabbath schools and common schools are a testament to the educational commitment of African Americans. Nonetheless, they still hoped to challenge the state’s inequitable education laws on a political scale. As black institutional life took form in the state, African Americans now had structural platforms upon which they could launch and channel larger efforts. The state’s black pioneers joined together and commenced the colored convention

²² Beasley, 174.

movement.²⁴ The subjects discussed at the statewide conventions in 1855, 1856, 1857, and 1863 range from the right of testimony in courts to the issue of voting rights. However, education was atop the agenda of all four conventions.

Of the three conventions held prior to the Civil War, the 1856 convention was the largest, drawing sixty-one delegates from seventeen counties. It was also the convention that discussed the education issue most actively. Delegates resolved that in addition to the “common law...the common school, [was] the only hope of a free and enlightened people; the former their shield, and the latter, their guide...”²⁵ In encouraging African Americans to seek an education, the convention’s business committee recommended that African Americans engage in agricultural pursuits and cultivate a knowledge of the arts and sciences, believing that such pursuits might “...dissipate prejudice and proscription, by establishing the fact of [African Americans’] ability to compete with [...] oppressors in those branches requiring practical skill, ingenuity, and high intelligence.”²⁶ As of 1856, African Americans were denied equitable access to both the common law and the

²³ Beasley, 175; Sue Bailey Thurman, Pioneers of Negro Origin in California (San Francisco: Acme Publishing Company, 1952), 38-40; Winfield J. Davis, History and Process of the Public School Department of the City of Sacramento, 1849-1893 (Sacramento: D. Johnson and Company, 1895) 25-26, 42, 44, 57.

²⁴ The first Negro Convention had been held in 1830 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The purpose of the inaugural convention of “free persons of colour” was to primarily discuss the pros and cons of emigration. As free blacks in the North were confronted with the passage of inequitable laws, and slavery continued to prevail as the scourge of American life, Convention President Richard Allen, as did other African Americans began to contemplate the practicality of whether a life of opportunity and success was attainable in America. For detailed information about the first Negro Convention and the Negro Convention movement generally, see Howard Bell’s, A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement (New York: Arno Press, 1969) and Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1964 (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

common school. Nevertheless, there was a general confidence that the educational goals were attainable if the spirit and drive, which emanated from the black community and from the colored convention movement was sustained. One of the more futuristic delegates at the 1856 convention, N.F. Henry of Tuolumne County spoke seriously about founding a college for blacks in California. Most delegates, however, argued, “the proposal to establish a College proposes... that those whom it is to benefit, have advanced well beyond and above the endowments of public schools.” Given their current circumstances, one delegate pragmatically asked, “what have we to do with anything like a College?” The results of the 1856 convention were to table all proposed resolutions on the grounds that they were “visionary and impracticable” but to make concerted efforts to encourage the founding of common schools for black children throughout the state.²⁷ African Americans comprising Oakland’s pioneer black community embraced this challenge—chief among them Elizabeth Scott Flood.

Oakland was founded in 1852 as part of Alameda County and officially incorporated by the state in 1854. By 1860, 40 African Americans lived in Oakland and in the neighboring town of Brooklyn.²⁸ Elizabeth and Isaac Flood were

²⁵ Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California (San Francisco: J.H. Udell and W. Randall, Printers, 1856) 13.

²⁶ Ibid, 23.

²⁷ Ibid, 38.

²⁸ United States of America, Bureau of the Census. Eighth Census of the United States, 1860. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860. M653, 1,438 rolls. The town of Brooklyn was created in 1856

included among those counted as the East Bay's first African American residents.

Isaac Flood, a native of South Carolina arrived to California sometime in 1849.

Soon thereafter, he lived and mined temporarily in El Dorado County—the heart of the gold country.²⁹ Not much is known about Flood's life during his time in El Dorado County. According to California's 1850 census records, Flood was married at some point that year. During the remainder of the 1850's, he migrated and lived briefly in a number of cities and towns throughout the state before finally settling in Brooklyn.

When the Floods arrived in the Oakland area, they encountered, according to local historians, a “sand-swept little village in a grove of oak trees beside a sluggish estuary.”³⁰ The East Bay township paled in comparison to its northern California neighbors Sacramento and San Francisco. However, the Floods and a host of other African American men and women bonded together to create the institutions that were to become the heart of Oakland's black community. Hopeful about the future of black community development, they realized that any hopes for a prosperous future and sustainable community lay in the training of their children. Just as she had in Sacramento, Flood solicited support for the founding of a school

by a merger of the smaller townships of Clinton and San Antonia. It was annexed by Oakland in 1872 and is now the area known as East Oakland.

²⁹ 1850 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. Seventh Census of the United States, 1850. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850. M432, 1,009 rolls. Year: 1850; Census Place: Dry Creek, El Dorado, California; Roll M432_34; Page: 428; Image: 357.

to educate black children in Oakland.

In 1857, she opened what became Oakland's first school for children of color in her home. Members of the black community supported her efforts, paying tuition on top of paying taxes for the public schools from which their children were barred.³¹ The burden was great, but their shared vision of racial advancement and equality gave them oneness of purpose. Between 1857 and 1862, Flood continued to teach in her home; however, in 1863, the Shiloh AME Church became the sponsor of her school. Elizabeth and Isaac Flood and others founded Shiloh AME in 1858. Shiloh AME was the first black church founded in the East Bay and was originally designated as an African Methodist Episcopal Church "mission" because it had no permanent pastor.³² In 1863 the church purchased the abandoned Carpentier School House.³³ The 22-by-38 foot room served as both chapel and schoolroom and housed Flood's school for four years.

In 1866, a revised school law had a provision that mitigated education prohibition of children of color in public schools:

³⁰ Mabel W. Thomas, Oakland, 1852-1938: Some Phases of the Social, Political and Economic History of Oakland, California, (Oakland: Oakland Public Library, 1939) 314.

³¹ Beasley, 177.

³² Centennial Souvenir Booklet, First AME Church. The Churches Collection, Oakland African American Library and Museum. Shiloh secured its first permanent pastor in 1874—fortuitously, the appointed pastor was Jeremiah Sanderson. Prior to his arrival to Oakland to become pastor of Shiloh AME, Sanderson had often filled the pulpit in other towns throughout the state, as well as in his hometown of New Bedford. Although not ordained while in Massachusetts, Bishop Thomas M.D Ward ordained Sanderson as a minister on March 30, 1872 in Stockton, California. Sadly, in 1875 Sanderson was killed tragically. While walking home from a prayer meeting, Sanderson crossed the railroad tracks and was struck by a train. For more information about Sanderson as a pastor, see William Wells Brown, The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements (Boston: Robert F. Wallcutt,

“Upon written application of the parents or guardians of at least ten such children to any board of trustees or board of education, a separate school shall be established for their education...When there shall be in any district any number of children other than white children whose education can be provided for in no other way, the trustees, by a majority vote, may permit such children to attend schools for white children, provided that a majority of the parents of the children attending such schools make no objection in writing filed with the board of trustees.”³⁴

In 1866 black parents from Oakland and Brooklyn petitioned the Brooklyn school board to provide for the education of black children living in Alameda County.

After months of delay, the Brooklyn Board of Education voted to establish a public school for black children. This need became particularly imperative when Elizabeth Flood died of an unknown illness in 1867 and the school she founded closed its doors.³⁵

The Brooklyn Colored School opened in January of 1867. In February, the Oakland Board of Education voted to send its black students there. An article in the *Oakland Daily News* reported: “The Board of Education...voted to allow the teacher of the Brooklyn colored school \$1.50 per month for each pupil that she received from Oakland. This is the cost of each white pupil to the city. The act seems to us fair and appropriate.”³⁶ This decision allowed Oakland’s Board of Education to provide access to public education to the city’s black children, yet

1865) 91-92 and Pastoral Credentials of the AME Church, Jeremiah Burke Sanderson papers, [ca. 1857-1912], BANC MSS 75/70 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³³ Ferrier, 102. The Carpentier School House was built in 1853 as a white public school.

³⁴ Ibid, 99.

³⁵ Directory of the Township and City of Oakland, Together with the Townships of Brooklyn and Alameda, For the

avoid the issue of integration. Mary Jane Sanderson, daughter of Jeremiah Sanderson, taught the one class school. Sanderson was only 16 years old when she started teaching at the Brooklyn school but she had a teaching certificate and contemporary sources agree that she was an excellent teacher.³⁷ In June 1869 a reporter for the *San Francisco Elevator* wrote:

“...we took occasion to visit the colored Public School conducted by Miss Mary J. Sanderson. There are about a dozen scholars on register, mostly very small children. The school was in good order... We heard some of the little ones recite their lessons, and were much pleased with their proficiency, particularly when we understood that a few months ago they did not know a letter.”³⁸

Despite Sanderson’s excellence as a teacher, by 1871, enrollment at the Brooklyn Colored School steadily declined. Between 1869 and 1871, a number of prominent black families moved from the Brooklyn school district, most of them, to Oakland. According to Delilah Beasley, “the distance usually was too far for the children to attend the colored school...After the removal out of the school district of the families of Lewis Whiting, J.P. Dyer, and Isaac Flood, the district was practically emptied...”³⁹ In order for the school to remain open, the revised school law of 1866 required an enrollment of at least 10. An article printed in the *Oakland Daily News* reported that the number of “colored children” attending the Brooklyn Colored

Year 1870 (B.F. Stilwell, 1870).

³⁶ *Oakland Daily News*, February 6, 1867.

³⁷ Sanderson Family Bible, Mary J. Sanderson born October 3, 1854. Jeremiah Burke Sanderson papers, [ca. 1857-1912], BANC MSS 75/70 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Beasley, 230.

³⁸ *San Francisco Elevator*, June 1869.

School had decreased so that it was below the number required by law to maintain a separate school. Thereby, at a meeting of the Brooklyn school board held in July 1871, trustees voted to “discontinue” the Brooklyn Colored School.⁴⁰

The black children of the Oakland and Brooklyn school districts were again without a “colored school.” The Brooklyn School Board resolved this issue by ignoring the state code and admitting those black students remaining in its school district into the regular public schools. In Oakland, however, school integration would not come as quickly. When black parents organized and petitioned for integration, the Oakland Board of Education refused, citing that state law did not require that this be done.⁴¹ Commenting on the school board’s position, an article in the black San Francisco newspaper the *Pacific Appeal* noted that the Oakland incident meant that African Americans were having “their children driven from the free schools in [their] county for which they are taxed in common with other citizens...” The article warned that the “Colored citizens will be compelled...to take this whole question [of segregation] before a state or United States Court.”⁴² In November 1871, the *Pacific Appeal* invited “friends from San Francisco, San Jose, Sacramento, Marysville and elsewhere” to attend a conference to address the

³⁹ Beasley, 177-178.

⁴⁰ *Oakland Daily News*, July 28, 1871, p.3.

⁴¹ *San Francisco Bulletin*, October 5, 1871.

⁴² *Pacific Appeal*, October 7, 1871.

educational needs of black children.⁴³ The conference convened in Stockton, California at the Second Baptist Church on November 20. Conference attendees demanded the overturning of oppressive school laws and vowed to petition the state legislature toward that end. At the conclusion of the conference, its executive committee began preparing the petition. However, as they were drafting the petition, Assemblyman Seldon V. Finney of San Mateo introduced a similar bill to the state legislature in January 1872. His bill asked that all mention of race be removed from California's school law and that every public school be required to admit all children. Finney called on California to "cast off its prejudices and rise to the level of justice, liberty and law."⁴⁴ By February 1872, the conference's executive committee had finished its petition. Assemblyman William R. Wheaton of San Francisco presented it to the assembly. After some debate, unfortunately, both measures (Finney's and the executive committee's) were defeated. The school law that eventually passed in 1872 repeated the requirement that "the education of children of African descent...be provided for in separate schools."⁴⁵

At about the same time that Assemblyman Finney introduced his measure in the legislature, a member of the Oakland school board called on his colleagues to reverse the board's policy statement and open public schools "for admission of all

⁴³ Ibid, November 18, 1871.

⁴⁴ Ibid, November 25, 1871; Beasley, 178; Pacific Appeal, February 3, 1872.

⁴⁵ Ibid, February 17, 1872; February 24, 1872; March 16, 1872; School Law of California (Sacramento, 1872) 20-21.

children...without reference to race, color or condition.”⁴⁶ Moreover, at a meeting held at Shiloh AME Church, members of Oakland’s black community drafted a petition to request admission of African American children into Oakland’s public schools on an unrestricted basis. As one of the local representatives of the Stockton education conference’s executive committee, Isaac Flood presented the petition to the school board. After reviewing the petition, the school board voted, five-to-two in favor of the petition and resolved that after July 7, 1872, “all children of African descent who may apply for admission to the Oakland public schools shall be received.”⁴⁷ Lydia Flood, the daughter of Isaac and Elizabeth Flood became the first black student to integrate the school system.⁴⁸ Lydia’s father and especially her mother had been seminal leaders in the education movement in California’s black community; thereby it was only fitting that on the occasion of school integration in Oakland, their ten-year old daughter be the first to take such a historic and momentous step.

California’s state legislature did not legally grant African American children the right to attend publically supported schools until 1880.⁴⁹ The efforts of California’s black pioneers, however, demonstrated that local people, local institutions and local movements created the challenges that eventually overturned

⁴⁶ Beasley, 178. *Pacific Appeal*, January 6, 1872

⁴⁷ Beasley, 178-179; *San Francisco Elevator*, May 4, 1872.

⁴⁸ John Swett, *History of the Public School System in California* (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft and Co., 1876), 205-206; Beasley, 172-187.

California's discriminatory school laws. In cities throughout the state with "sizable" black communities such as San Francisco and Sacramento, and "emerging" black communities such as those in Oakland and Brooklyn, African Americans utilized the tradition of racial self-help to facilitate the educational process for the race's children.

Elizabeth Flood, the architect of two of the state's first "colored schools," was testament that women were integral to this process. While not considered the "official" political actors and leaders of the black community, African American women like Flood supported California's nineteenth-century civil rights movement through their leadership and service to the community. As local and national events during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century made it necessary for black Oaklanders to continue organizing in their own self-interest, black women continued as key figures, not only in the way of community development and institutional expansion, but also became more involved in the ongoing struggle for civil rights in the city.

⁴⁹ Wollenberg, 25.

CHAPTER TWO

ACCEPTING THE CALL: THE ROOTS OF BLACK WOMEN'S CLUB ACTIVITY IN OAKLAND

Oakland's black community experienced a steady increase in size from 1860 to 1900. The city's black population in 1860, minus those living in the township of Brooklyn, comprised 11 people. In 1869, Oakland was chosen as the western terminus for the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. As the end of the line, the western section of Oakland became home base to a growing number of railroad employees, namely African American Pullman porters and their families.¹ The extension of the railroad to Oakland also generated rapid expansion in the city's economic sector. Local entrepreneurs established new hotels, restaurants, markets, saloons, and boarding houses in West Oakland to offer services to railroad employees.² These developing employment opportunities created a demand for new workers and encouraged black migration to Oakland during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. By 1900, Oakland's black population had grown to 1,026.³ The influx of black newcomers was enough to support an increasingly complex social structure, which included a number of new institutions and organizations. Among the first were literary and benevolent societies. In 1876,

¹Thomas and Wilma Tramble, The Pullman Porters and West Oakland (Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia Publishing, 2007).

²Putting the "There" There: Historical Archaeologies of West Oakland, 1-880 Cypress Freeway Replacement Project. Robert Douglass, "A Brief History of West Oakland," 34. Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University, 2004.

black entrepreneur James Monroe Bridges founded the Literary and Aid Society. The society provided a forum for black intellectual and cultural life and also offered assistance to needy members of the black community.⁴ In 1884, Occidental Lodge No. 2484 of the Odd Fellows and its female auxiliary, the Household of Ruth were established; they sponsored literary, social and musical events.⁵ Black women also founded a mutual aid association—the Ladies Beneficial Society. This society was run independent of any fraternal order and offered aid to sick members of the black community.⁶ In 1897, black Oaklanders took on a very ambitious service project when they opened the Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored People. A black woman named Emma Scott originally conceived the idea for the home in 1892; however, due to planning and funding issues, it would take five years before the home was operational. When the home opened in the fall of 1897, it was the first of its kind in the state to provide congenial care for elderly African Americans.⁷

The ever-expanding population of Oakland’s black community also created the need for a greater variety of religious expression. In the 1890s, “three men and

³ Quintard Taylor, In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996) 201.

⁴ Literary and Aid Society, “Articles of Incorporation, 1876.”Oakland Public Library, History Reading Room; Beasley, 132.

⁵ As a national auxiliary the House of Ruth was formed in 1858 by the members of the Odd Fellows to receive their “wives, widows, widowed mothers, sisters, and daughters.” For more information on the Household of Ruth, see Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz’s What A Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁶ Tramble, 119.

⁷ Beasley, 105.

five women” founded Oakland’s first African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Greater Cooper AME Zion.⁸ Also established during this time was the city’s first black Baptist church, Beth Eden. On February 17, 1889, a small prayer group began to meet on a regular basis in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hommanger. It was out of this prayer group that the Beth Eden Baptist Church was founded on April 20, 1890.⁹ Rev. George Gray of Mississippi was briefly appointed the church’s pastor. After a series of other pastors, in 1895, the church called Rev. James C. Allen of El Paso, Texas. During his tenure, the Cosmos Club was founded by Beth Eden members: Mary Cole, Hattie E. De Hart, Helen Jones, Ella V. Harrod and Mrs. L.D. Gardner on June 20, 1899. This was a significant development, as the Cosmos Club was the first black woman’s club founded in the state of California.¹⁰

The Cosmos Club was founded at the same time that club activity among the state’s white women developed. Beginning in the 1880s, white women’s clubs in California flourished as focal points for personal liberation and political activism.¹¹ White clubwomen formed a national organization in 1890, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), and a California affiliate, the California Federation of

⁸ Souvenir Program, Golden Anniversary 1898-1948, The Greater Cooper A.M.E. Zion Church. The Churches Collection, the African American Library and Museum of Oakland.

⁹ Building Our Legacy. Beth Eden Baptist Church. Oakland, California. The Churches Collection, the African American Library and Museum of Oakland.

¹⁰ Newspaper clipping, “Beth Eden Women Among Founders,” African American Library and Museum of Oakland. Papers of Beth Eden Baptist Church.

¹¹ “Mrs. Robert J. Burdette’s ‘Club Creed,’” Chautauquan 36 (Feb. 1902): 535.

Women's Clubs was founded in 1900.¹² In 1902, the GFWC held its national convention in Los Angeles. It was at this convention that African American women were formally excluded from membership in the organization. Following the passage of this resolution, California's white clubwomen had to decide whether or not to allow black clubwomen into their state federation. In the year leading up to the 1902 convention, white San Francisco clubwoman Mabel Craft eloquently remarked upon the issue by pleading with her colleagues that if they were truly about service and could not "find it in [their] hearts to do what [they] c[ould] to help the colored women... [they] had better break up [their] federation."¹³ In spite of Craft's plea, California's white clubwomen opted instead to reinforce the color line and decided to exclude black clubs and its women from its ranks.

The black and white women's club movements in California developed against the backdrop of the Progressive Era. As a social movement, the Progressive Era represented America's urge to respond to shifting conditions wrought by industrialization. One of the most important shifts occurring was the transformation of the role of women in society. During the latter half of the nineteenth-century, women's roles, namely those of middle-class women, expanded outwards from the limits of the home. Many women became active

¹² For more information about the woman's movement in California, see Gayle Gullett's Becoming Citizens: The Emergence and Development of the California Women's Movement, 1880-1911 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

¹³ San Francisco Examiner, November 9th and 26th 1901.

participants in temperance and suffrage movements, and also organized on their own to confront local problems. In California, white female activists were especially involved in the suffrage movement. In 1896, suffragists across the state hoped to rally support behind passage of an amendment that would give women the right to vote. Suffragists took the issue directly to California voters for a statewide referendum. While Populists, prohibitionists, Republicans and unions supported the measure, during statewide elections held on November 3, 1896, it was defeated by a sizable majority.¹⁴

It does appear that there were some African American women participants in the 1896 suffrage campaign. First and foremost among them was Sacramentan Naomi Talbert Anderson. Anderson moved to California in 1895. Prior to her arrival, she had been, for nearly thirty-years, heavily entrenched in the movement for women's suffrage in the Midwest. During the 1870s and 1880s, she was a member of the National Woman Suffrage Association. After the organization merged with its rival, the American Woman Suffrage Association to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890, she remained an active member.¹⁵ During California's 1896 suffrage campaign, Anderson was a paid

¹⁴ San Francisco Call, "Women Suffragists, Planning for Effective Campaign Work in Southern California" August 1, 1896, p. 4. For more information about California's Woman Suffrage Campaign, see Susan Scheiber Edleman, A Red Hot Suffrage Campaign: The Woman Suffrage Cause in California, 1896. California Supreme Court Historical Society Yearbook, Volume 2 (1995). Women's Suffrage miscellany, 1911. Located in Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Women's Suffrage Collection.

¹⁵ The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) was formed on May 15, 1869 in New York City. The NWSA was created in response to a split in the American Equal Rights Association over whether the women's movement

member of the state's Woman Suffrage Association. Her job was to give speeches in African American communities throughout the state, with the goal of organizing black women into separate local suffrage clubs.¹⁶

In one speech, Anderson told an audience gathered at the First Colored Baptist Church of San Francisco¹⁷ that “the negro alone was set free, but the negress was very little better off now than during the days of slavery.” She reminded “all men who had been in bondage” to remember and help liberate women “from their latter day slavery.” In this speech and others, she often drew connections between the voteless woman and the plight of formerly enslaved African Americans—urging black men to support efforts to set their mothers, daughters and sisters free from the “bondage” of disfranchisement. Anderson made further appeals to the interests of black Californians when she observed that “the black laws on California’s statute books would never be canceled until women had

should support the fifteenth amendment. Its founders, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton opposed the fifteenth amendment unless it included the vote for women. Contrarily, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), founded by abolitionists Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell in the fall of 1869 supported passage of the fifteenth amendment and believed that if it included the vote for women, it would most likely not pass in Congress. Members of the AWSA believed that success for women’s enfranchisement would come more easily through state-by-state campaigns. In the 1880s, it became clear that the campaign for women’s suffrage might be best served if the two organizations merged their efforts. After several years of negotiations, the two organizations merged in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). For more information about the NWSA and the AWSA, see Aileen S. Kraditor, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981). Naomi Anderson’s identification with the NWSA offended many African Americans at the time, due to their critical stance of the pending fifteenth amendment. For more information about Anderson’s positioning among black suffragists, see Rosalyn Terbog-Penn’s, African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 42 and 49-50.

¹⁶Edelman, 107.

¹⁷ The First Colored Baptist Church of San Francisco was later remained Third Street Baptist Church.

their rights and casts their votes against them.”¹⁸ Anderson’s remarks spoke precisely to the efficacy and potential political power of black women, if granted the franchise.

It is difficult to fully evaluate the impact of Anderson’s campaign on a statewide level. However, it does appear that her speeches in the San Francisco Bay area had an effect on members of the black community. An article published in the *San Francisco Call* in August of 1896 assessed the outcome of Anderson’s work in the area. The writer noted that in the weeks following Anderson’s speech, sixteen suffrage clubs were organized. The article also noted that Oakland’s African American women formed several suffrage clubs and held at least one rally described as “enthusiastic and spirited.”¹⁹ While Anderson galvanized some active support for the suffrage amendment among Oakland’s black community and particularly, its women, it appears that during the 1890s, female suffrage was not as much of a priority to the mass of Oakland’s black women as were civil rights and racial progress. Since the 1850s, Oakland’s black women had observed the limited results of the male led convention movement in California. Though the convention movement, coupled with the activism of black community members had been successful in battles against legally mandated school segregation and in challenging the legal ban on black testimony in civil and criminal cases, de facto

¹⁸ San Francisco Call, “Fight for Freedom: Woman Suffragists Are Preparing for a Vigorous and Well-Organized

discrimination still loomed forcefully in the state. African Americans in Oakland were particularly faced with discrimination in the area of employment and were often barred from public accommodations.

The number of African American men employed in Oakland doubled between 1880 and 1900; however, they were still denied access to jobs that would afford more economic and social advancement. For example, in 1892, a black delegation petitioned the Oakland Board of Police and Fire Commissioners to appoint an African American man, Alonzo Young to the police force. They noted that Young had passed the qualifying examination a year previously and that several policemen had been appointed since then. Despite their best efforts Young did not get the appointment, nor was any other African American awarded a civil service position.²⁰ Black professionals also found it difficult to establish careers in Oakland. In 1896, Washington J. Oglesby became the first African American to pass the California state bar exam, only to have the state Supreme Court refuse to admit him to practice.²¹ Employment options for black women were much more limited. The majority of black women were homemakers but for those who did work for wages, domestic service remained the most available option. Moreover, in the public domain, contact between black and white communities was minimal

Campaign,” August 1, 1896, p. 8; San Francisco Chronicle, September 5, 1896.

¹⁹ San Francisco Call, August 1, 1896, p.8.

²⁰ Oakland Daily Times, November 23, 1892.

²¹ Oakland Independent, December 14, 1929.

due to Oakland's small and scattered black population. However, when African Americans did venture to dine in restaurants, or make use of recreational facilities, for example, service was "frequently refused to Negroes."²² In Oakland during the early twentieth-century, African American men established chapters of civil rights organizations such as the Afro-American Council, for example, with the hopes of posing collective challenges to such instances of racial segregation and discrimination. Black women supported the efforts of black men but also believed that as women, they too should organize to resolve Oakland's racial problem.²³ For Oakland's black women, the founding of women's clubs and associated activities became their primary channel of activism and race leadership during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The national black women's club movement began in 1895. On July 29th, 30th, and 31st of that year, per the request of Boston clubwoman Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, clubwomen from across the country, including prominent New York clubwoman Victoria Earle Matthews and "Mrs. Booker T. Washington" — Margaret Murray Washington²⁴ — converged on Boston, Massachusetts for the First

²² Delores Nason McBroome, Parallel Communities: African Americans in California's East Bay, 1850-1963 (New York: Garland Publishers Inc., 1993) 32.

²³ The Afro-American Council was a group started by newspaper editor T. Thomas Fortune and Bishop Alexander Walters of the AME Zion Church in Rochester, New York in the fall of 1898. For more information about the Afro-American Council, see Benjamin R. Justesen's, Broken Brotherhood: The Rise and Fall of the National Afro-American Council (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

²⁴ For more information about Margaret Murray Washington, see Jacqueline Anne Rouse, "Out of the Shadow of Tuskegee: Margaret Murray Washington, Social Activism and Racial Vindication," Journal of Negro History, Winter-Autumn 1996, Vol. 81, no. 1/4, p. 31-46.

National Conference of the Colored Women of America. The women gathered in protest of an open letter written by white journalist and Missouri Press Association President John W. Jacks in which he adamantly argued that black women had “no sense of virtue and of being altogether without characters.”²⁵ Ruffin and other members of the Women’s Era Club thought it fitting that black women gather to discuss ways in which to educate “the public to a just appreciation” of the nature of African Americans and African American womanhood. After three days of meetings, the women announced the creation of the National Federation of Afro-American Women—an organization that united black women’s clubs throughout the country. Margaret Murray Washington was elected president of the organization. At the time that the National Federation of Afro-American Women was created, similar efforts to unite black women’s clubs were being made by the National League of Colored Women in Washington, D.C.—a group headed by Mary Church Terrell. By 1896, plans were completed to combine the Federation and the League into what became the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC), the oldest black women’s organization in the United States. Mary Church Terrell was elected the first national president of the NACWC and served from 1896-1900.²⁶

²⁵ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 242. Jacks’ statements were quoted in the *American Citizen* July 12, 1895.

²⁶ For more information on Mary Church Terrell, see her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Co., 1986 [1940]).

It is believed that Victoria Earle Matthews' 1897 visit to the Bay Area planted the seed for club activity in the minds of Oakland's black women.²⁷ Matthews was born in slavery in Fort Valley, Georgia in 1861. She was largely self-educated and worked as a free-lance journalist and short story writer. She served as a national organizer of the NACWC from 1897-1899 and in the early 1890s, was a staunch supporter of Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching crusade. She was best known, however, for her social reform work in support of black women and girls. In February 1897, Matthews established the White Rose Mission in New York City. The purpose of the settlement house was to help "women with no note of pleasure or wholesomeness in their lives and young girls growing up in an atmosphere of gross ignorance and moral degradation" by training them "in the principles of self-help and right living."²⁸ It was, perhaps, because of her prominence as a black leader and her commitment to "missionary work," that Matthews was invited to deliver a speech at the annual convention of the International Society of Christian Endeavor in July 1897.²⁹

In her speech before the assembly entitled, *The Awakening of the Afro-*

²⁷ Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, Lifting As We Climb (Washington: National Association of Colored Women, 1933) 116-117.

²⁸ Steve Kramer's "Uplifting Our Downtrodden Sisterhood": Victoria Earle Matthews and New York City's White Rose Mission, 1897-1907." Journal of African American History, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 2006), 244-248.

²⁹ The International Christian Endeavor Society was founded in February of 1881 in Portland, Maine under the leadership of the Rev. Francis Edward Clark. The purpose of the organization was to encourage young people to accept the Christian faith and in doing so, encourage them to work for Christ. For more information on the International Christian Endeavor Society, see Rev. Francis Edward Clark's The Christian Endeavor Manual: A Text-Book on the History, Theory, Principles, and Practice of the Society, with complete Bibliography and several Appendixes (Boston and Chicago: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1903) 11-20.

American Woman, Matthews recounted the journey that a number of African American women had traversed, from the vestiges of slavery to freedom. When speaking about the nature and composition of African American womanhood within this context, Matthews declared that there was “no attribute of womanhood which had not been sullied...[or] despoiled in the crucible of slavery...” Nonetheless, from the shadows of such a dim past, Matthews proudly contended that African American women had begun the process of reclaiming those loss qualities of womanhood, such as “...virtue, modesty, the joys of maternity, even the hope of morality,” which had presumably been compromised by the institution of slavery. According to Matthews, the first step made by African American freedwomen on this journey to reclaiming their “feminine space” was to establish homes for themselves, “[their] race [...and]—an abiding place for husband, son, and daughter.” Matthews also made note of the developing club movement among the nation’s African American women. She said that within the past few years, the educated daughters of “ex-slave women” had aroused themselves to the necessity of organization for “their own protection, and for strengthening their race.”³⁰

For the black women in the audience, Matthews’ words, perhaps, prompted reflection upon their position as women—particularly black women; and further

³⁰ Victoria Earle Matthews, “The Awakening of the Afro-American Woman,” (1897). Shirley Wilson Logan, With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1995) 149-155. Published with the permission of the Yale Collection of

affirmed the ways in which their race and gender identities not only warranted, but would give further purpose and meaning to their public service and activism. In 1897, Oakland's black women were already part of a long-standing tradition of black female agency, going back to the pioneering works of Elizabeth Flood. Oakland's small contingent of African American women seemed distant and isolated from the larger, more established black communities of the North, South, and Midwest where the majority of black club activity occurred. However, with the founding of the Cosmos Club in 1899, Oakland's African American community and its women were forever linked to a larger chain of activism and movement for racial progress.

Adopting as its motto, "not failure, but low aim is a crime," the Cosmos Club was aptly renamed the Fannie Jackson Coppin Club, not long after its founding, as a tribute to educator Fanny Jackson Coppin.³¹ After graduating from Oberlin College in 1865, Coppin was appointed principal of the Female Department of the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia. In less than five years, she became principal of the entire school—the first black woman to hold such a position. As principal of the Institute and through a number of other endeavors, Coppin contributed to the social, economic, and intellectual

American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Quote taken from page 149, 151 and 153.

advancement of African Americans in the Philadelphia area and across the country.

The Fannie Jackson Coppin Club, like its namesake, was also dedicated to the cause of education. The club specifically endeavored to bring out the literary, musical, creative and administrative talents of its members, present outstanding artists for the enjoyment and inspiration of the community, and to pursue philanthropic endeavors. The club's first philanthropic act was to donate one-hundred dollars to Tuskegee Institute to keep a young boy in school for one year.³² In March of 1919, in keeping with its creative mission, the club presented the world-renowned tenor Roland Hayes to his first California audience.³³

The Fannie Jackson Coppin Club's philanthropic focus and its aim to develop the intellectual and cultural education of its members, as well as members of Oakland's black community, were objectives it shared with a number of black women's clubs in other regions of the country. As the terrain of black female activism continued to evolve during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, clubwomen engaged in debate about how their activism and service might expand. Many clubwomen believed that as women, they exercised their greatest influence on behalf of the race in their roles as wife and mother. Margaret Murray

³¹ Fanny (with an ie) was used to designate the club's name. Although Fannie the person, was spelled using a "y." For more information of Fanny Jackson Coppin see Linda Perkins' Fanny Jackson Coppin and the Institute for Colored Youth, 1865-1902 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987).

³² Davis, 117. Unfortunately, the year this occurred is not specified.

³³ Letter to Ronald Hayes. November 9, 1961. Papers of the Fannie Jackson Coppin Club, The Colored Women's Club Collection, the African American Library and Museum of Oakland.

Washington believed that it was the black woman's "earnest [and] faithful service for the highest development of home and family" that would "result in the solution of the so-called race problem."³⁴ For others, the solution to the "race problem" lay in black women assuming more wide-ranging roles and being a corrective force in the public arena. Scholar-activist Anna Julia Cooper, for example, argued that while black women did essential "race work" in the home and community as wives and mothers, she also insisted that the time had come for woman's "personal independence... intellectual and moral development, [and] for political activity...."³⁵ The ideological concerns of black clubwomen rested at the epicenter of the debate between race leaders Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Washington, a staunch proponent of African American self-help, discouraged political agitation as a means of obtaining civil rights; and instead argued that the process began most earnestly in the home and community, and a persistent dedication to hard work and industriousness. Washington's ideological positioning is explained most clearly in his 1895 *Atlanta Exposition* address. Speaking before the predominantly white audience at the Cotton States and International Exposition, Washington asserted that the, "wisest among [his] race underst[oo]d that the agitation of questions of social equality [wa]s the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come...must

³⁴ Margaret Murray Washington, "Social Improvement of the Plantation Woman," National Association Notes, July

be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.”³⁶

Washington’s position advocated separate black institutions, racial economic cooperation, and political protest in the form of the defense of black social and cultural integrity. Washington did not abandon the hope of racial equality but believed that integration would occur gradually, upon a foundation of interracial understanding and cooperation.

W.E.B. Du Bois, though not disagreeing with Washington’s sentiments of racial self-help, also felt that African Americans should never underemphasize their ultimate goal of full integration. He did not believe in a gradual approach toward racial integration but rather, championed persistent and direct political protest. Du Bois also proposed that racial advancement and integration would occur by way of the activism of an exceptional few. As noted in his 1903 essay *The Talented Tenth*, Du Bois suggested, “the negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”³⁷ He conjectured that among the African American populace, a singular group of well-educated men and women would set the agenda for the progress of the entire race and would pursue all means to bring about racial equality.

1904.

³⁵ Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (Xenia, Ohio: The Aldine Printing House, 1892) 22-24; 68-69, 75, 78.

³⁶ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 3*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 583–587.

³⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York, 1903). Du Bois would later revise his position on elite leadership, his view was at the center of

In her essay entitled *The Club Movement Among Colored Women of America*, leading black Chicago clubwoman Fannie Barrier Williams asserted that “Among colored women [--] the club [wa]s the effort of the few competent on behalf of the many incompetent.”³⁸ In positioning themselves as the “competent” of the race, black clubwomen took care to separate themselves from the “masses”—those whom they endeavored to serve. Similarly, Virginia educator and black clubwoman Rosa D. Bowser noted in an essay entitled, *What Role Is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race?* “...Not only must these upright Negro women take their roles... it is highly essential that they be with the element to be uplifted, yet certainly, not of it.”³⁹ Even W.E.B. Du Bois made a distinction between the status of black clubwomen and others of the race. In his observance of the black clubwomen gathered for a convention of the NACWC in 1899 in Chicago, Du Bois noted the following:

“Undoubtedly the women assembled at Chicago [at a NACWC convention] were rather above the average of their race, and represented the aristocracy among Negroes. Consequently their evident intelligence and air of good-breeding served also to impress the onlookers.”⁴⁰

The national leadership of the black women’s club movement subscribed to

the prevailing discourse at the turn of the century. For information regarding this ideological shift see Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 15-33.

³⁸ Fannie Barrier Williams, “The Club Movement Among Colored Women of America,” Booker T. Washington, N.B. Wood, and Fannie Barrier Williams, *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of The Upward Struggles of the Negro Race* (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900) 379-405.

³⁹ Rosa D. Bowser, “What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race?” [1902] Daniel Wallace Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

⁴⁰ Cited in Charles H. Wesley’s, *The History of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs*. (Washington,

Du Bois' "talented tenth" model of leadership. Through the motto of the national organization, "lifting as we climb" black clubwomen positioned themselves as race leaders and as those most able and prepared to solve the "race problem." While clubwomen were ideologically divided on the issue of political activism, they nonetheless agreed that their most important cause was the defense of black womanhood and humanity. Black clubwomen conceived of their roles as not only teaching, but also modeling "respectable" home life, childcare as well as the social mores of deportment of all African Americans but chiefly, the race's women. Throughout the twentieth-century, the national association displayed a stalwart dedication to "raising to the highest plane the home life, moral standards and civic life of the Black woman and the race."⁴¹

The women at the helm of Oakland's black clubwomen's movement did not champion one ideology over another but created and defined their own paradigms of racial improvement. The opposites of Booker T. Washington's pragmatic stance toward racial advancement and W.E.B. Du Bois' idealism of equal opportunity were the frameworks within which Oakland's black clubwomen conducted their work. At times, their approach toward racial advancement emphasized black communalism and interracial understanding over direct confrontation and political agitation. This position is evidenced by their creation of an orphanage, day nursery,

D.C.: The Association, 1984) 48.

and the “colored” branch of the YWCA in response to mounting white discrimination. Clubwomen, however, did not eschew the ultimate goal of racial integration. They believed that their efforts to assist black children, black women and to present positive images of African Americans to white Oaklanders would slowly but surely bring about cooperation between the two communities. This perspective is demonstrated clearly through the writings and activism of journalist and clubwoman Delilah Beasley.

During the 1920s and 1930s, however, members of intercollegiate black-Greek letter sororities at the University of California at Berkeley were engaged in dialogue about racial reform methodology. Changes made to their national organizations’ social activist agendas and the steady rise of racial hostility in the East Bay area not only influenced their approach to confronting local racial issues but also denoted a gradual shift of black female activism in the city toward a more blatant Du Boisian model.

⁴¹ National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, Inc. “Fact Sheet.” Papers of the California State Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. African American Library and Museum of Oakland.

CHAPTER THREE

“DEEDS NOT WORDS”: THE ACTIVISM OF OAKLAND’S BLACK CLUBWOMEN

When the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC) was incorporated in 1904, there were an increasing number of clubs operating under its auspices. The majority were located in cities in the North and South, however, a growing number were scattered along the Pacific Coast, most prominently throughout the state of California. During the first two decades of the twentieth-century, black women in Oakland established clubs and institutions to address the growing demands of the black community. The collective and individual work of clubwomen not only reified the tradition of racial-self help in Oakland and its promotion of education, character development and racial gradualism but they also supported the goals of the national club movement to protect and educate black children and defend the integrity of black womanhood.

In 1905 the Rev. J.H. Kelley, pastor of the Third Baptist Church of San Francisco returned from an annual session of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). In his report on the proceedings of the 1905 convention, he described an exhibition organized by the women in attendance. He also announced the convention’s next session was to be held in Los Angeles and asked the women in his congregation to form a club and prepare an exhibit of artwork for the next meeting. Thus, a group of Third Baptist Church members organized the Art and

Industrial Club. Members included: “Mrs. Emma Berther, President; Miss Lillie Brown, Secretary; Mrs. J.B. Winkey, Treasurer; and Mesdames Nuby, J.B. Martin, Fannie Wall, Simpson, Robinson, S. Meadow, J. Payton, Geraldine Withers, and others.” The members of the newly formed Art and Industrial Club put together a display of artwork as requested by Rev. Kelly; however, as a result of the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco, the NBC’s 1906 annual session did not take place. Nonetheless, the Art and Industrial Club did not disband, but organized permanently. In 1906, a branch of the Art and Industrial Club was formed in Oakland and devoted itself to the arts and to the “uplift of the race.”¹

A year after the formation of the Art and Industrial Club, another group of the city’s black clubwomen organized a mother’s club. Members of the Mother’s Charity Club, as it was called, were dedicated to philanthropic endeavors. During its earliest years of activity, the Mother’s Charity Club “fed and cared for many children and sick and needy persons.”² According to East Bay clubwoman and political activist Frances Mary Albrier, the Mother’s Charity Club in Oakland was modeled after such clubs that had been organized by black women in other parts of the country. In terms of Albrier’s own life experiences, she recalled the importance of mother’s clubs to the survival and prosperity of the black community in her hometown of Tuskegee, Alabama. According to Albrier, Tuskegee’s Mother’s

¹Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, Lifting As They Climb (Washington: National Association of Colored Women, 1933),

Club “raise[d] money...for students who weren’t able to go to school or pay for their uniforms or books...” and also “went North and to Chicago [...] [to] gather up clothing...[to] send...back to the Mother’s Club for needy students--[...].”³

With the founding of clubs such as the Mother’s Charity Club, the Art and Industrial Club and countless others during the first decade of the twentieth-century, Oakland’s black clubwomen gained national attention. In an article written for *The Crisis Magazine* in 1912, clubwoman Addie Hunton passionately described the organization of black women’s clubs in Oakland as a “divine fire.” She exclaimed:

“In Oakland...[one] of the most cosmopolitan of American cities, where Mexican, Chinese, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish women are freely mixed with their American sisters, we are told that the colored women stand out as representatives of...culture.”⁴

The “divine fire” of activism, as described by Hunton, continued well into the twentieth-century and as will be seen, was instrumental in making the state of California vital to the life and vibrancy of the national club movement among African American women. Indeed, the number of black women’s clubs grew so

107.

² *Oakland Independent*, December 14, 1929, p. 7.

³ Frances Mary Albrier, “Determined Advocate for Racial Equality,” Women in History Oral History Project, Black Women Oral History Project, Bancroft Library, the University of California at Berkeley, 1979, 22.

⁴ Addie W. Hunton, “The Club Movement in California,” *The Crisis Magazine*, Vol. 5 No. 2 December 1912. Addie Hunton is best known for her club activity, as well as her lifelong work with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). During World War I, Hunton was one of four nurses sponsored by the YMCA to work in France. Prior to her work during World War I, Hunton taught in a school in Portsmouth, Virginia and during the time of her address, was the “lady” principal at the State Normal and Agricultural College in Alabama—now Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University. For more information on Hunton, see Johanna Selles, *The Hunton Family: A Narrative of Faith Through Generations*, Emmanuel College,

dramatically in Oakland that leading clubwoman Elizabeth Brown⁵ thought that their activities might be most beneficial to the community if they collaborated and joined their efforts. In 1913, Brown spearheaded the formation of the Northern Section of the Federated Colored Women's Clubs of California (NFCWC).

The NFCWC was the northern California arm of the California State Association of Colored Women (CSACW). The CSACW had been formed in 1906 with the object to work towards the “higher social, economic and cultural development of the colored women of California [and] to assist through organized endeavor in raising the social, economic and political status of colored people of the United States generally, and of California especially...” The motto of the state association, “deeds not words,” reflected the pragmatism and dedication of California's black clubwomen, principally as they labored intensively throughout the state to make real their mission and objectives.⁶

Assuming as its motto, “Charity is the golden chain that stretches from Heaven to Earth,” the Northern Federation was formed to present the African American clubwomen of Oakland with an opportunity to voluntarily associate

University of Toronto.

⁵ A Missouri native, Elizabeth Brown moved to Oakland with her husband, army lieutenant John Brown, sometime after the onset of the Spanish-American War (1898). After purchasing and settling in a home in West Oakland, Brown quickly became an active member of the city's black community. In addition to her involvement with the women's club movement, Brown was an active member of the Household of Ruth, president of the Mite Missionary Society, as well as vice-president of the Church Aid, both auxiliaries of the Fifteenth Street (formerly Shiloh) AME Church. Moreover, Brown also served on the executive board of the NAACP. For more information on Brown, see Beasley, *Negro Trailblazers*, 229-230.

⁶ Constitution and By-laws of California State Association of Colored Women. Collection of the California State Association of Colored Women. African American Library and Museum of Oakland.

together to “take care of destitute poor minor orphans of both sexes, [...] destitute poor working girls [:] to provide for them home, food and clothing; [and] to nurse, attend and watch them when sick.”⁷ While the activism of the Northern Federation was particularly focused on the well-being of African American women and children, their efforts also supported the black community’s movement to defend the character and humanity of the race.

In 1913, the Northern California Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed. It represented the cities of Oakland, San Francisco, Richmond, and Berkeley. One of the chapter’s earliest public efforts was its 1915 participation in a nationwide protest against the showing of D.W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation*. According to L.A. Brown, a member of a number of “negro organizations in the city,” *Birth of a Nation*, was “an infamous libel against the negro race...[showing] all the worst traits of animals ...[and crediting] them to negroes of the reconstruction period following the civil war.” He continued, “this picture has caused much trouble in other cities where it has been shown, and is aimed as a blow at the development of the negro race.”⁸ Brown’s thoughts reflected a deep concern held by a number of African American residents regarding the showing of *Birth of a Nation* in Oakland. Brown and others

⁷ Articles of Incorporation of the Northern Section of California Federated Clubs of California. Collection of the California State Association of Colored Women. African American Library and Museum of Oakland.

⁸ Oakland Tribune, “Colored Residents to Protest ‘The Clansman,’” May 9, 1915, p. 28.

believed that the negative images, which the film depicted, threatened any claims to racial equality.

At a mass meeting organized by the NAACP, resolutions were adopted against the proposed production of the film in Oakland. Once drafted, the resolutions were to be presented to the Mayor of Oakland, Frank R. Mott and to the city's Chief of Police, Walter J. Petersen. Both of these men, along with the city's Commissioner of Public Works, comprised Oakland's censorship board.⁹

Contained within the resolution were a number of declarations, which spoke pointedly of the community's desire to protect its image. A portion of the document read that the film "...destroy[ed] peaceful and harmonious relations now existing between the black and white races...[and] incite[d]...race prejudice and hatred of one race toward another." The resolution contended that the principal features of the film pertaining to African Americans were misleading, vicious, and a "stigma upon the best element of colored people, and an insult to the entire colored community." The resolution reminded its readers that in spite of the film's portrayal of African Americans, it was important to bear in mind the unparalleled achievements made by the race "by [its] ambition, industry, educational attainments, [and] accumulation of property holdings..." Accomplishments, which had, in their opinion, "more than counteracted the stigma that 'The Clansman' film

⁹ Ibid.

[...] stamped upon the Negro.”¹⁰

After completing the petition, it was first given to the city council. Upon presentation, “[i]t was explained,” that the “city commissioners ha[d] no power to take such action, as censorship, [as it was] vested in a board consisting of the mayor, commissioner of public works, and chief of police.” As such, a delegation of black Oaklanders led by prominent black attorney Lawrence Sledge, proceeded to the mayor’s office. Once arriving and presenting their petition to the mayor, he refused to exercise his privilege on the censorship board and consequently, their petition was denied. The delegation left the council chamber, making it clear that they would proceed further in their attempts to bar the showing of the film. Specifically, NAACP leaders attempted to stop the screening by swearing to a warrant charging a violation of the city ordinance prohibiting immoral and crime-depicting exhibitions and performances. Nonetheless, *Birth of a Nation* was shown in the city’s MacDonough Theatre. Yet perhaps due to the efforts of Oakland’s black community, “many objectionable features [were] cut out.”¹¹

While the protest against *Birth of a Nation* developed, clubwoman and journalist Delilah Beasley engaged in her own challenge against the film. As a contributor to both the *Oakland Tribune* and the black-owned *Oakland Sunshine*,

¹⁰ *Oakland Tribune*, “Colored Citizens Object to Film,” May 12, 1915, p.12.

¹¹ *Oakland Tribune*, “Council Refuses to Prohibit Play, May 18, 1915, p.9; *The Crisis* October 1915, “Birth of a Nation,” 295-96. It is important to note that in 1921, California banned the film.

Delilah Beasley's earliest pieces in both newspapers concerned the film.¹² Beasley attacked the vile caricatures of African Americans in the movie. She decided that the best way to counteract these images was to show the public more realistic and constructive images of the black community. In her first article against the film, printed in the *Oakland Tribune*, Beasley reported Booker T. Washington's critique of the film. In a subsequent article in the *Oakland Sunshine* she acknowledged that her *Tribune* article had deliberately omitted Washington's advice that African Americans demonstrate their opposition before the film opened— as a campaign against a currently playing film would only attract more people to see it. Beasley wrote:

“I omitted these parts that would cause the other race to criticize our actions in the fight we were...waging...I have always maintained that news of especial interest to us as a people ought to be discussed in our papers among ourselves. But if a bit of news...would have a tendency to better our position in the community, then it should not only be published in our own race papers, but in the papers of the other race as well...”¹³

In alignment with her position that her articles were aimed at bettering the race's position in the community, for both papers, Beasley profiled prominent African American visitors to the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San

¹² George Staniford and Benet A. Dewes founded the *Oakland Tribune* as a daily newspaper in 1874. Beasley was hired as a columnist for the *Tribune* by its publisher, former US Congressman Joseph R. Knowland in 1915. The *Oakland Sunshine* was a black newspaper started in Oakland in 1902.

¹³ *Oakland Sunshine*, “Colored Race at the Exposition, June 26, 1915, p. 2.

Francisco and offered accounts of African American exhibits at the fair.¹⁴

In one piece she insisted that the contributions of African Americans at the exposition not be limited to the more traditional and perhaps stereotypical contributions to which they most often were attributed. For example, while Beasley was “delighted” with the “very favorable mention in the daily press” of the Hampton Institute Quartet, she also hoped that “the general public [would] not forget that the band, whom everybody delights to honor for their wonderful performance of real classical music, was trained by a colored man,” Captain Walter Loving, a Spanish-American War veteran. Similarly, she praised a concert organized by singers from communities throughout the region. The “well-balanced program” she wrote, included songs representing the “heartaches and sorrows of an oppressed soul” but also renditions by which the music lovers in the audience could witness “the heights to which the negro voice is capable of being trained.” In other articles, Beasley praised exhibits that revealed race progress overtime—“from the cotton fields to a clinic of negro doctors and nurses in a colored hospital.”¹⁵

¹⁴ The Panama Pacific-International Exposition was the 1915 World’s Fair held in San Francisco, California. The fair ran from February 20th until December 4th, 1915—and was widely considered to be a great success. It is important to note that in 1914, the PPIE issued a request for titles by which the exposition should be known. 1,300 suggestions were submitted and the submission of Virginia Stephens, a twelve-year old African American girl from Oakland’s suggestion, “The Jewel City” was selected. For more information on the Panama Pacific-International Exposition, see the Panama Pacific International Exposition Company’s, The Panama-Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco 1915 (San Francisco: Robt. A. Reed, 1915).

¹⁵ Oakland Sunshine, “Negro under the American Flag at the Panama-Pacific Exposition,” July 17, 1915, p. 2; Ibid, August 28, 1915, p. 2; Ibid, September 4, 1915, p. 2.

Beasley's articles on the black presence at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition were a specific response to portrayals of African Americans in the film *Birth of a Nation*. However the underlying premise of her articles was to create a "better racial understanding" between Oakland's black and white communities by "giving to white readers," she once wrote, "a knowledge of the efforts, ability and progress of the Negro peoples throughout the world." She believed such information would, over time, inspire cooperation between the races.¹⁶ Beasley's articles in the *Oakland Tribune* remained dedicated to this mission and to a great extent supported and bolstered the collective activist agenda of the black women's club movement.

By 1920, Oakland's black population was 5,294. The growth of the city's black demographic during the first two decades of the twentieth-century was largely attributed to the arrival of black migrants, predominantly from the South, in search of employment opportunities in numerous manufacturing industries, including metals, canneries, bakeries, automobiles, and shipbuilding.¹⁷ As more and more women entered the workforce, the need for social services mushroomed. However, as the black population of the city expanded, lines of racial segregation also hardened in the landscape of children's institutions previously opened to blacks. The Ladies' Relief Society, the oldest nonsectarian charity in the city,

¹⁶ Delilah Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes," *Oakland Tribune*, January 4, 1931, p. T-7.

officially endorsed racial segregation in its children's home. In 1915 the new "Rule one" of the children's home read, "Only children of Anglo-Saxon parentage shall be admitted into this institution." However, by 1916, the rule had been reworded to read, "Children of the colored or Asiatic races are not eligible for admission into the Home."¹⁸

The Northern Federation responded by founding a home and day nursery to support black working mothers and care for orphaned African American children. Federation President Fanny Wall and Financial Secretary Hettie Tilghman spearheaded the project. After years of planning and fundraising, the home opened in 1918 on Peralta Street in West Oakland. Initially, the home was called the "Northern Federation Home and Day Nursery." It was subsequently renamed to honor Fanny Wall who was the first woman to run the charity on a daily basis.¹⁹

The Fannie Wall Home and Day Nursery provided a space where clubwomen could care for "homeless, dependent, and neglected children" and also provide "day care for children of working parents..." In offering such services the clubwomen hoped that their efforts would "preserve and strengthen family life in

¹⁷ United States of America Bureau of the Census. Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, T623, 1854 rolls; Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, T625, 2076 rolls); National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸ Ladies' Relief Society of Oakland, California, Forty-Fourth and Forty-Fifth Annual Reports. December 31, 1915, (Oakland: Carruth and Carruth Co. Printers, 1916) 27; and (Oakland: Carruth and Carruth Co., Printers, 1917), 30.

¹⁹ Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey, "Fannie Wall Children's Home (Christian and Anna Suhl House)" (Oakland: 1989). Papers of the California Association of Colored Women's Clubs, African American Museum and Library of Oakland.

the community; [and] prevent delinquency.”²⁰ Their concern about delinquency is best understood as part of the broader social welfare agenda of the NACWC.

From its inception, the NACWC committed itself to the welfare of black children and explicitly tied their child welfare work to the future of the race. Indeed, Mary Church Terrell, the NACWC’s inaugural president thought child welfare was the key to ending America’s “race problem.”²¹ Terrell believed that clubwomen’s children’s programs put younger generations of African Americans upon a solid foundation of integrity, morality, physical and mental strength. Upon such a foundation, Terrell proclaimed, future generations would not be moved by the “floods of proscription, prejudice, and persecution” that may descend upon them.²² During the nineteen teens and nineteen twenties, the NACWC aimed to protect black children from what they deemed the harmful effect of rapid urban growth. They opened schools and other facilities designed to care for and educate African American children. For example, in Atlanta, clubwomen opened reform and training schools for black adolescents; and in Chicago, the clubwomen there founded an orphanage, the Federated Home for Dependent Colored Children, Inc.

²⁰“The True Story of Fannie Wall Home” Papers of the California Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, African American Museum and Library of Oakland. E.H.N., “The Fanny Wall Home,” Oakland Independent, December 14, 1929, 3; Hausler, “Fannie Wall Children’s Home,” 2; “Letter to Mother’s Charity Club,” in African American Museum and Library at Oakland (Oakland: February 29, 1916). Fanny Wall, the person and Fannie Wall, the place, have different spellings.

²¹ Mary Church Terrell, “The Duty of the National Association of Colored Women to the Race,” AME Church Review, 16 January 1900, 340.

²² Ibid, 346.

in the late 1920s.²³ Like these organizations in Atlanta and Chicago, the clubwomen in charge of the Fanny Wall Home and Day Nursery were also concerned with education and the overall care of black youth. Housemothers, as they were called, ensured that the children not only attended school on a regular basis but also received positive moral and religious training through regular church attendance. The club's supervisors also made certain that the home offered "planned [...] and wholesome recreation," to Oakland's African American boys and girls in order that the children might enjoy, "healthy and normal relationships" with one another. In this regard, the home sponsored activities such as swimming trips, weekly trips to athletic fields, as well as organized play on community playgrounds. Moreover, to provide children the opportunity to showcase their creativity and talents, the home held a musical hour in which children enjoyed singing, folk dancing, musical, as well as dramatic activities; and, a weekly newspaper, "The Fannie Wall Children's Voice," edited by the children themselves, demonstrated individual talents in written and artistic expression and ingenuity.²⁴

²³ Davis, 129 and 36.

²⁴ "The True Story of Fannie Wall Home" Papers of the California Association of Colored Women's Clubs, African American Museum and Library of Oakland. E.H.N., "The Fanny Wall Home," Oakland Independent, December 14, 1929, 3; Hausler, "Fannie Wall Children's Home," 2; "Letter to Mother's Charity Club," in African American Museum and Library at Oakland (Oakland: February 29, 1916). The California Voice, Friday, September 12, 1941 "Report on Children's Home Activities." Papers of the California Association of Colored Women's Clubs, African American Museum and Library of Oakland.

Through the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), black clubwomen also addressed racist attributions by demonstrating a commitment to Christian education for black women in the city. In 1920, they established a "colored" branch of YWCA. As national organizations, both the YWCA and the YMCA emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in response to a massive population shift that brought large numbers of native-born rural white migrants and immigrants from Europe to American cities. The resulting population increase affected the cities' physical environment and spatial dimensions and also their social structure. Members of the white middle-class were concerned about the moral welfare of the growing number of city-bound men and women, as well as their potentially disruptive impact on the urban landscape. In the eyes of these middle-class reformers, cities were corrupt and bound to ruin the pure and innocent youth—particularly those from America's rural areas. Yet, these middle-class urbanites feared that the perceived moral debasement of these men and women would corrupt other segments of the urban population. Determined to safeguard the souls of these young people and to preserve the established urban order, reformers launched the YMCA and YWCA as agents of Christian morality and traditional values.²⁵

²⁵ Nina Mjagkii and Margaret Spratt, Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 1-19.

The purpose of Oakland's Linden Center (Branch) of the YWCA was to associate young women in personal loyalty to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; to lead them into membership and service in the Christian Church; to promote growth in Christian character and service through physical, social, mental and spiritual training, and to become a social force for the extension of the kingdom of God."²⁶ In a dedication service led by the Rev. J.M. Brown of the First AME Church (formerly Shiloh and Fifteenth Street AME), the women leaders were encouraged to "go forward in the honor and glory of Christian womanhood," to accept their branch of the YWCA, as a "gift from God" and "pledge their support to its work."²⁷

The African American clubwomen who founded and operated the Linden Branch of the YWCA labored to create an environment in which to develop good Christian character and promote education among African American women and girls. One of the premier programs of the branch was its Girls Reserves. The Girls Reserves Movement of the YWCA was focused on responding to the needs and concerns of teenage girls—ages 13-18. According to the YWCA's *Girl Reserves Movement Adviser's Manual*, the plight of African American girls was the cause of great anxiety among YWCA leaders nationally. The manual noted that in many African American neighborhoods, there were neither positive nor educational

²⁶ "The Spectator," Journal of the Linden Branch of the Y.W.C.A. January 1931-December 1931,3.

recreational facilities for young black girls and that many of them “lacked Christian leadership.”²⁸ To meet this objective in their own community, Oakland’s YWCA leaders provided a number of positive and “orderly” recreational activities for the members of their Girls Reserves program. They sponsored reading groups and they encouraged the girls to participate in activities such as poetry and writing, which promoted artistry and self-expression. YWCA leaders believed that teenagers who participated in the Girls Reserves would “grow in body by striving for the best in health...by thinking clean thoughts, doing good deeds...and grow in spirit through service.”²⁹

The Linden Branch also took a special interest in supervising the employment pursued by black migrant women. They implored their sisters not to take up careers in the entertainment industry—particularly as blues singers—nor especially engage in prostitution. Their anxiety regarding these specific career choices was directly connected to a larger campaign to challenge misrepresentations of black womanhood. During the twentieth-century, black women remained targets of racial stereotypes. In 1904, a southern white woman argued that black women were a great menace to the moral life of any community and were also responsible for the “degradation” of black men. “When a man’s

²⁷ Ibid, 5 and. 22.

²⁸ The Girls Reserves Movement: A Manual for Advisers (The National Board of the Young Women’s Christian Association of the United States of America, September 1918) 29 and 31.

²⁹ The Spectator, 5.

mother, wife and daughters were all immoral women,” she argued, “there was no room in his fallen nature for the aspiration of honor and virtue.” She concluded her racist rant by saying that though she had sometimes read about “so-called virtuous negro women” the idea was inconceivable and that she could not “imagine such a creature as a virtuous black woman” existed.³⁰ It is such racist opinions that made the vindication of black women’s reputations such an integral part of the activist agenda of the national black women’s club movement.

Oakland’s black clubwomen believed that participation in the types of jobs or leisure activities nascent with, for example, the nightclubs and blues clubs housed on Seventh Street in West Oakland “spread evil influence and disseminate[d]... immorality.”³¹ Clubwomen also complained that these establishments were masculine, represented “forbidden pleasure” and potentially blurred the lines between conventional and unconventional behavior. In examining the relationship between the blues culture and the black women’s club movement, scholars have examined why club members attempted to keep women away from the lure of becoming blues singers. Female singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith wrote and sung songs that affirmed lesbianism, celebrated female sexuality, exposed male infidelity and explored other themes that, in the minds of black clubwomen went against standards of convention and also compromised

³⁰ The Independent, “Experiences of the Race Problem,” March 17, 1904.

their efforts to present black women as upright and chaste women.³² Whereas black clubwomen combated negative images of black womanhood and sexuality through “conventional” self-presentation, blues women instead asserted their power as full sexual beings. Black female blues singers not only sang about life as many black women lived it but also publicly affirmed black female sexuality with “style and variety.” Blues women removed black female sexuality from the legacy of “her slave past” and made it something of value, empowerment and liberation.³³ Despite the dilemma that blues women’s representation of black female sexuality proffered to the ideology and creed of the clubwomen’s movement, the NACWC’s national projects continued to reflect the association’s mission to assist all women, in reaching what they considered “a higher plane of womanhood.”³⁴ Hence, public programs, such as their Better Home Project were implemented to improve living conditions, monitor the conduct and dress of new migrants and “indoctrinate...newcomers” with values of, “domesticity, chastity, and thrift.”³⁵

Prostitution was also a matter of concern in Oakland, as well as in other

³¹ David J. Pivar, Purity Crusader: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1973), 160; National Notes, July 1924.

³² Carol Batker, “Love Me Like I Like To Be”: The Sexual Politics of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women’s Club Movement,” African American Review 32 (Summer 1998): 202-203; Hazel Carby, “It Jus Be’s Day Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Black Women’s Blues,” Radical America 20 (1986); Angela Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billy Holiday (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) 20 and 41.

³³ Deborah Gray White, Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves (New York: W.W. North & Company 1999) 127-128.

³⁴ National Notes, June 1924.

³⁵ *Ibid*, March 1929, October 1929.

urban black communities during the early twentieth-century.³⁶ In New York, for example, most prostitution had become increasingly concentrated in black and poor ethnic neighborhoods. In his autobiography, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem recalled that outside his church, “harlots would stand across the street on Sunday evening in unbuttoned Mother Hubbards soliciting men as they left...service.”³⁷ Similarly, in Chicago, prostitution was relegated to the city’s poorest neighborhoods. One former chief of police in Chicago, for example, issued a semi-official statement to the effect that persons “involved in prostitution who confined their business to the west of Wabash Avenue and to the east of Wentworth Avenue would remain immune from police harassment.” Predictably, this neighborhood was largely composed of black residents.³⁸ In an attempt to deter black migrant women from prostitution, Chicago’s Phyllis Wheatley Club opened the Phyllis Wheatley Home to provide employment services, recreation and lodging to accommodate female migrants.³⁹

In California during the mid-nineteenth-century, prostitution among black women was not widespread, a remarkable fact compared to the “lawlessness

³⁶ For more information about prostitution in and out of the black community, see Ruth Rosen, The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982; Judith R. Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980) Kali N. Gross, Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

³⁷ Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Against the Tide (New York: R.R. Smith, 1938), 49-57.

³⁸ Chicago, Vice Commission of Chicago, The Social Evil in Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions, with Recommendations (Chicago: Gunthrop Warren, 1911) 38.

³⁹ Wanda A. Hendricks, Race and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 54.

among the men and women of the opposite race.”⁴⁰ By the end of the century, however, there are indications that the number of black women following that pursuit in some cities in the state, may have been out of proportion to their population. For example, in San Francisco, “Negresses” were noted as a distinct subgroup of prostitutes in the city, with a separate section of brothels. In Los Angeles, African American staffed and run brothels were frequent concerns of the city’s black press and women’s organizations. And likewise, during the early twentieth-century, it was West Oakland’s black community that became notorious for its prostitutes. While prostitution does not seem to have been significantly more prevalent among blacks than other women in California, it was, just as a number of other careers, widely associated with vice and a negative image of black womanhood.⁴¹

Though a number of black women found employment as a result of the World War I industrial boom, there were those who remained unemployed or whose employment opportunities were heavily restricted to the lowest-paying, menial jobs, namely within the domestic and personal service sectors. In an effort to broaden the employment options for the city’s migrant black women, as well as those black female Oaklanders who found themselves unemployed, the Linden

⁴⁰ Beasley, 40.

⁴¹ Seattle World, Jan. 4, 1899; Jesse Kimbrough, Defender of Angels: A Black Policeman in Old Los Angeles (London: 1969) 36-39, 122-124; Robert C. Francis, “A Survey of Negro Business in the San Francisco Bay Region” (M.A. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1928), 20.

Branch of the YWCA provided employment opportunities and vocational training. Through its Employment Committee, the branch organized and maintained an “adequate placement and advisory service for girls and women” and sought to “become informed about local and countrywide conditions, with reference to unemployment, working conditions and wage scales.” The branch successfully placed unemployed women in full and part-time positions and sponsored training courses, for example, in “Cooking, Scientific Cleaning and Dining Room Service.”⁴²

By the mid-1920s, the membership and the charitable works of Oakland’s African American clubwomen had made a definite impression upon the national leaders of the black women’s club movement. The executive board of the NACWC elected to have the fifteenth biennial convention of the organization in Oakland. Held August 1st through the 5th 1926, NACWC national president Mary McLeod Bethune led a delegation of over 150 women in celebrating the clubwomen’s accomplishments and planning future activities. This biennial meeting was of particular historical significance, as it was the first convention held by a body of “colored women west of Denver.”⁴³ Remarking on the work of Oakland’s black clubwomen, Bethune also extended her courtesies to the Oakland African American community for their hospitality and praised their upward progress:

⁴² The Spectator, 13.

“we find that the spirit of development and growth among our people has permeated the west as is evidenced by the beautiful homes and well kept premises and business establishments...we are privileged to enjoy the modern comforts now offered us, that the social activities of the West are unsurpassed by those of any other section; that the religious life is as profound and that intelligence, liberality and efficiency mark the conduct of affairs quite as much as in any other section.”⁴⁴

In keeping with its focus upon the upward progress of African Americans, one of the major points of discussion during the NACWC’s 1926 convention was interracial cooperation, particularly between black and white women. This had been a goal of the “colored” women’s club movement upon inception. For a number of the movement’s leadership, dialogue and reform activities between the races were possible vehicles for surmounting the barrier of racism that existed in the country. Fannie Barrier Williams once wrote that the:

“...National association [sic] has made it possible for many bright colored women to enjoy the fellowship and helpfulness of many of the best organizations of American women. It has certainly helped to emancipate the white women from the fear and uncertainty of contact or association with women of the darker race...”⁴⁵

Whether a display of virtuous womanhood by the nation’s and more specifically Oakland’s black clubwomen, coupled with a broader exposure to the achievements and progress of the race would lead to greater racial understanding and cooperation and by extension greater social, economic and political

⁴³ *Oakland Tribune*, “Activities Among Negroes,” July 29, 1926.

⁴⁴ Minutes of the Fifteenth Biennial Session, National Association of Colored Women. Papers of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, 53.

advancements for African Americans, was yet to be determined. Nonetheless, throughout the earliest decades of the twentieth-century, Oakland's black clubwomen, led by journalist Delilah Beasley continued to make inroads towards the realization of the goal.

⁴⁵ Booker T. Washington, N.B. Woods, Fannie Barrier Williams, A New Negro for A New Century, Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Club Movement among Colored Women in America," (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 402.

CHAPTER FOUR

DELILAH BEASLEY, BLACK PROGRESS, AND THE UNCERTAIN ROAD TO RACIAL UNDERSTANDING

During the 1926 proceedings of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) 15th biennial convention in Oakland, delegates called for the establishment of "Inter-Racial" commissions in various parts of the United States, similar to those of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). The Commission on Interracial Cooperation was founded by a small group of white men in Atlanta, Georgia in 1919. Within a few months of its establishment, CIC organizers invited African Americans, including President of Morehouse College, John Hope, to join. The CIC functioned as the major race reform organization in the South during the period between the world wars. The commission hired field workers for each southern state who assisted local interracial committees in addressing their communities' specific needs. Although the CIC never openly challenged segregation or advocated racial equality, it did strive for dialogue, an end to racial violence and better treatment for all classes of black men and women.¹ Black clubwomen believed that interracial commissions, "like those which...proved so beneficial to both whites and colored residents of the Southern States," were desired in other parts of the country so that the "problems of both

¹ For more information on the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, see Robert B. Eleazer's, A Real Approach to the Race Problem: Origin and Work of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (Religious Education Association, 1931).

racess may be understood...”² During one of the morning sessions of the convention, William Winton Alexander, the CIC’s first Executive Secretary (Director) was scheduled to address the delegation. He was unable to attend the convention but, in a statement read, he expressed confidence that other interracial commissions would be formed to carry out the work similar to the organization now functioning in the South.³ At the conclusion of the convention, clubwomen across the country resolved to take steps in their communities to bring “sane, conservative Negroes and white people” together in conference for the establishment of mutual understanding and racial goodwill.⁴

One of the attendees at the 1926 biennial convention was Delilah Beasley. At executive committee meetings during the convention Beasley brought greetings on behalf of the Oakland press and especially the *Oakland Tribune*, expressing white citizens’ “appreciation of the character of the women in convention assembled.” Beasley’s presence was also valuable to the national organization. As a black woman journalist, she would chronicle the convention’s proceedings and present the work of the national “colored” clubwomen to a mainstream audience.⁵

As a journalist for the *Oakland Tribune*, Delilah Beasley had for a number of years worked to raise the image of African Americans in the minds of whites.

² *Oakland Tribune*, Beasley, “Inter-Race Board Urged Here By Colored Women; Convention Moves to Extend Mixed Commission Throughout the Country,” August 4, 1926.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Minutes of the Fifteenth Biennial Session, 52.

Her efforts not only supported Oakland's black freedom struggle, but also specifically addressed one of the original goals of the black women's club movement—racial understanding and interracial cooperation. Before Beasley's columns, mainstream newspapers in the Bay Area, including the *Tribune*, often characterized African Americans as inferiors or as criminals and rarely wrote about black civic affairs and daily life. Such glaring negative coverage or, simply the lack of black representations fueled reliance among African Americans on the black press.⁶ Delilah Beasley's columns, therefore, were a welcome addition to the field of journalism. She expanded the boundaries of mainstream press coverage of Oakland's black community by presenting positive images of African Americans to the predominantly white reading audience of the *Oakland Tribune*.

Delilah Beasley was born in 1867 in Cincinnati, Ohio. The 1870 census records show a three-year old Delilah living with her mother, Margaret, her father, Daniel, and a younger sister named Catherine. Delilah's father Daniel was apparently born in Ohio around 1820.⁷ Her mother Margaret was a native of Tennessee; however, her status as either enslaved or free is unknown. By the time of the 1880 census, the "Beesling" family had welcomed three other children,

⁵ National Association of Colored Women, Fifteenth Biennial Session. Oakland, California, August 1-5, 1926, 13.

⁶ Black newspapers in the Bay Area included the Oakland Sunshine, the Pacific Appeal, the San Francisco Elevator, and Western Outlook.

⁷ Year: 1870; Census Place: Cincinnati Ward 22, Hamilton, Ohio; Roll: M593_1217; Page: 726; Image: 474.

Daniel Jr., John, and Elanor.⁸ The 1880 census also lists both of Delilah's parents as "Maimed, Crippled, Bedridden, or otherwise disabled."⁹ Although the details of their illnesses or handicaps are unknown, sometime during the next decade, both of Delilah's parents died, within a period of nine months of each other. As a result, Delilah and her siblings were separated.

Delilah Beasley's work as a journalist began in her native Ohio in the 1880s. She wrote brief items about church and social activities for the *Cleveland Gazette*, an African American newspaper.¹⁰ Beasley first reported for a mainstream newspaper in 1886. She began sending items to the Sunday edition of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, a regional daily newspaper.¹¹ Following her parent's death, however, Beasley's nascent journalism career was disrupted. She was forced to seek immediate full-time employment and worked briefly as a maid in the home of a Cincinnati judge. After that, she moved to Chicago and earned a living as a massage therapist. She then relocated back to Ohio where she continued working

⁸ According to the census record, this was the spelling of Eleanor used.

⁹ Year: 1880; Census Place: Cincinnati, Hamilton, Ohio; Roll: T9_1025; Family History Film: 1255025; Page: 51.2000; Enumeration District: 129; Image: 0237. It is important to note that in the 1880, Delilah's sister "Catherine" is listed as "Kathrenka."

¹⁰ The Cleveland Gazette, the first black newspaper in Cleveland, was founded August 25, 1883. During its first twenty years, the Gazette maintained an average size of four pages and an average circulation of five thousand. The Gazette ceased publication in 1945. For more information, see David D. Van Tassel and John J. Grabowski, Encyclopedia of Cleveland's History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

¹¹ The Cincinnati Enquirer was a daily newspaper founded in 1841; by the 1880s it was a major regional newspaper. It published sixteen pages each day, covering Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois. The Enquirer also covered national news and published weekly columns from correspondents in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. The Enquirer had the reputation of being courageous, liberal and ultra progressive, and publisher John R. McLean was known for his insistence upon providing a newspaper for all classes. For more information, see Francis L. Dale, The Cincinnati Enquirer: The Extended Shadows of its Publishers (New York: Newcomen Society in North America, 1966) 5 and 20.

as a masseuse, while taking two courses from graduates of the famous Battle Creek, Michigan Sanitarium. In the 1890s, she continued her studies in massage therapy in Buffalo, New York at the Buffalo Sanitarium. In 1910, her skills as a massage therapist led her to California. Apparently greatly inspired by what she saw, particularly with regard to African Americans, Beasley relocated and began research for the book that became The Negro Trailblazers of California.¹²

To complete *Negro Trailblazers*, Beasley used her own limited resources and gathered as much information as she could about the history and culture of black Californians. She combed various sources from newspapers to hospital records in an attempt to reconstruct the path of these invisible black pioneers.¹³ As Beasley conducted interviews and research for *Negro Trailblazers*, she gained the attention of Joseph R. Knowland, owner of the *Oakland Tribune*. In 1915, Knowland hired Beasley as a news correspondent.¹⁴ His reasons for hiring her are unknown; however, one may infer that his actions may have been politically motivated.

Joseph R. Knowland was a loyal and staunch member of the Republican Party. Prior to his career in publishing, he represented the party as a member of the

¹² Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, Lifting As We Climb (Washington: National Association of Colored Women, 1933) 189.

¹³ Delilah Beasley, Negro Trailblazers of California (Los Angeles: published by author, 1919) Preface.

¹⁴ Lawrence Crouchett, Lonnie G. Bunch, III and Martha Kendall Winnacker, Visions Toward Tomorrow: The History of the East Bay Afro-American Community: 1852-1977 (Oakland: Northern California Center for Afro-American History and Life, 1989) 21.

California State Assembly from 1899 to 1903, the California State Senate from 1903 to 1904 and as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1904 to 1915.¹⁵ During the nineteen teens, black support of the Republican Party in California, just as it was nationally, began wavering. Particularly, during the 1912 presidential election, African Americans who had traditionally been loyal followers of the party of emancipation were starting to lose faith. They especially had no faith in party nominee—incumbent President William Howard Taft and his support of “lily-whitism” within the party. Moreover, African Americans were also distrustful of the third party (Progressive Party) candidate, former President Theodore Roosevelt, partly because of abrupt dishonorable discharges he issued to black soldiers involved in the notorious 1906 Brownsville affair.¹⁶ Due to the schism within the Republican Party and a general doubt as to whether Progressives or Republicans would support African Americans and a civil rights program, the

¹⁵ Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-present, Joseph Russell Knowland (1873-1966), Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives, Office of History and Preservation, Washington, D.C. Gayle B. Montgomery and James W. Johnson, One Step from the White House: The Rise and Fall of Senator William F. Knowland (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 8-14. Knowland resigned from the California State Senate in 1904 to fill a vacancy caused by the resignation of Victor H. Metcalf. President Theodore Roosevelt had appointed Metcalf Secretary of Commerce and Labor.

¹⁶ The Brownsville Affair arose from racial tensions between the white residents of Brownsville, Texas, and the all black infantrymen of the 25th United States Regiment at nearby Fort Brown. On the night of August 13, 1906, shots rang out on a street near Brownsville, killing a white bartender and wounding a white police officer. Immediately the citizens of Brownsville cast the blame on the black soldiers of the 25th Regiment at Fort Brown. When soldiers of the 25th Regiment were pressured to name who fired the shots, they insisted that they had no idea who had committed the crime. The soldiers were not given any type of hearing, trial, or the opportunity to confront their accusers. Theodore Roosevelt ordered 167 of the black troops dishonorably discharged because of their “conspiracy of silence.” This dishonorable discharge prevented these men from ever working in a military or civil service capacity. Booker T. Washington got involved, asking President Roosevelt to reconsider his decision in the affair. Roosevelt instead dismissed Washington's plea and allowed his decision to stand. For more information on the Brownsville Affair, see Ann Lane, The Brownsville Affair: National Crisis and Black Reaction (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1971).

Democratic Party's nominee, Woodrow Wilson, became the first Democratic presidential candidate to receive serious consideration from the black electorate. Late in the campaign, Wilson sent an open letter to African Americans, to reassure them of his intention to see "justice done" to them in "every matter..." In a historic break with tradition, W.E.B. Du Bois and other black leaders threw their support to the Democrats. It is not possible to know how many blacks in California voted, but nationally, it is estimated that more than 100,000 African Americans actually voted Democrat, a total that would have amounted to about one-fifth of the national black vote.¹⁷ If assessed within the context of the state's changing political milieu—especially the developing dissatisfaction among African Americans with the Republican Party—Knowland hiring Beasley may be best understood as a goodwill gesture from a powerful, faithful and dedicated Republican to an important political bloc and constituency of the party. Knowland was cognizant of African Americans' growing disillusionment with the party and in hiring Beasley, perhaps wanted to demonstrate his party's commitment and rededication to the black community and its causes.¹⁸

Although Beasley began working part-time for the *Tribune* in 1915, she also

¹⁷ William Deverell and Tom Sitton, California Progressivism Revisted (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 212. Wilson quoted in John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of the Negro Americans (New York: Knopf, 1974), 334.

¹⁸ Thomas C. Fleming, a journalist for the San Francisco Sun Reporter (a black newspaper) believes the reason the *Tribune* hired Beasley stemmed in part from the Knowland's "benign paternalism toward the black community." See "Senator Billy Knowland," The Free Press, Reflections on Black History, Part 61, November 18, 1998, www.freepress.org/fleming/flemng61.html.

continued her work on *Negro Trailblazers*. Her objective in writing *Negro Trailblazers* was to illustrate that as large a proportion of African American men and women were capable of attainments worthy of recognition, as were whites. In doing so, she not only made a case for racial equity, but also increased African Americans' self-esteem, racial pride, and sense of community. Throughout the volume's twenty-five chapters, Beasley documented black achievements and history; exploring topics such as slavery in California, the first "colored" settlers and pioneers of the state, and "distinguished" African American women. However, after devoting nearly nine years to research and to writing the manuscript, she was unsuccessful in convincing a publishing company to accept it. In 1919, Beasley borrowed money from Francis B. Loomis, the general manager of the *Oakland Tribune* in order to pay a printer to publish the book for her.¹⁹

Beasley's publication of *Negro Trailblazers* in 1919 was a formidable accomplishment. Charlotta A. Bass²⁰, noted activist, journalist, and managing editor of the black newspaper, the *California Eagle*, noted that prior to *Negro Trailblazers*, no attempt had been made to put into permanent record the

¹⁹ Letter, Beasley to Elizabeth Loomis, June 25, 1922. Francis B. Loomis Papers, Stanford University, Manuscript Division.

²⁰ Charlotta A. Bass stands among the most influential African Americans of the twentieth century. A crusading journalist and extraordinary political activist, she was at the forefront of the civil rights struggles of her time, especially in Los Angeles. Bass was managing editor and publisher of the *California Eagle*, from 1912 to 1951. The *Eagle*, founded in 1879, was one of the longest running black newspapers in the West. Bass used the newspaper, along with direct-action campaigns and the political process, to challenge inequality for blacks, workers, women, and other minorities in Los Angeles. For more information about Charlotta Bass, see Charlotta Bass, *Forty Years: Memoirs from the Pages of A Newspaper: 1960* (Unpublished Manuscript Available at Southern California

“remarkable progress made by Negroes in the State of California.” Bass hoped that black Californians were appreciative of Beasley’s efforts toward their “uplift and general enlightenment” and would purchase a copy of the book for their homes.²¹ Jessie Fauset²², literary editor of the NAACP’s *Crisis Magazine* praised Beasley’s “interesting and unusual method” of writing and commended her on the “painstaking research” and “documentation.” The greatest strength of *Negro Trailblazers*, wrote Fauset, was its “contribution to our far too little knowledge of Negro explorers.”²³

The impact of Beasley’s book in terms of unearthing the history of black Californians was not uniformly praised. While some commentators emphasized the significance of her sources and the new information she uncovered, others stressed weaknesses arising from her lack of training as a historian. For example, Harvard trained historian Carter G. Woodson expressed his frustration in the *Journal of Negro History*. According to Woodson, “from the point of view of the scientific

Research Library and Schomburg); and Rodger Streitmatter, *Raising Her Voice: African American Women Journalists Who Changed History* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

²¹ Beasley, *Negro Trailblazers*, foreword.

²² Jessie Fauset was born April 27, 1882 Fauset attended the High School for Girls in Philadelphia. Despite the fact that she was the only black person in attendance at that school, she went on to graduate with honors in 1900. Fauset first attempted to pursue her college education at Bryn Mawr College. However, officials there refused to accept her so she instead attended Cornell University. During this time she also was awarded the accomplishment of becoming the first black woman to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and the only black graduate to do so at Cornell before 1921. Fauset completed college with a bachelor of arts from Cornell University, a master of arts in French at the University of Pennsylvania in 1929 and a certificate from Sorbonne, University of Paris. After graduating from college, Fauset went on to pursue a career as a teacher. She left her teaching job, in 1919, after being asked by W.E.B Dubois to move to New York to work with him for *The Crisis* magazine. For more information about Fauset, see Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) and Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, “Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer” (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Company, 1981).

investigator, the work is neither a popular nor a documented account.” Even when considering the valuable information in the book, Woodson wrote he regretted that Beasley did not write *Negro Trailblazers* “under the direction of some one well grounded in English composition.”²⁴ Woodson’s criticism of Beasley, though ungenerous, is understandable. Beasley was not well-educated and certainly, not a trained historian. As a child and adolescent in Ohio, Beasley regularly attended public school; however, after her parents died, she was forced to set aside any further educational pursuits to work a full-time job. Beasley’s lack of education undoubtedly impacted her ability to write and effectively organize her thoughts. “Poor grammar,” however, does not outweigh what Beasley accomplished in writing the first comprehensive history of black Californians; and it should in no way devalue what her book meant in raising African Americans’ view of themselves, their history and their culture.

After a campaign throughout California to promote the sale of *Negro Trailblazers*, Beasley returned to Oakland and devoted her time permanently to a career in journalism. From 1923 until her death from heart disease in 1934, she wrote a weekly Sunday column for the *Oakland Tribune*—“Activities Among Negroes.” Beasley’s employment as a full-time journalist for the *Tribune* made her the first African American woman in the United States to write regularly for a

²³ Jessie Fauset, “New Literature on the Negro,” *Crisis* 20, 2 (June 1920): 79-80

major metropolitan, mainstream newspaper.²⁵ Throughout Beasley's tenure with the *Tribune*, she chronicled the daily activities, achievements, and successes of the local African American community. She gave particular focus to the lives and activities of American women and pushed forth arguments in support of racial equality and interracial cooperation. Beasley hoped that through her articles, white women, especially, would come to recognize that their African American counterparts were "women of culture, education and ambition..." Such articles, nonetheless, also gave Beasley the opportunity to sprinkle her column with non-so-subtle praise of African American women, their civic engagement and their accomplishments.²⁶

For example, Beasley printed the transcript of a radio broadcast in which black UC Berkeley graduate Vivian Osborn Marsh spoke on "The Negro Girl's Contribution to Civilization." Beasley elaborated Marsh's explanation of "civilization"—particularly in the context of a democracy. Women's emancipation, asserted Marsh, was one of the phases of the growth of a democracy. In her view, "democracy [also] include[d] any person, regardless of color, sex, or creed, who by his achievements and contributions to civilization, prove[d] that he [wa]s an asset to democracy." Marsh then proceeded to present arguments in which she stated

²⁴ Carter G. Woodson, review of *The Negro Trailblazers of California*, *Journal of Negro History*, 5, 1 (January 1920): 129.

²⁵ Lena M. Wysinger, "Activities Among Negroes; In Memoriam—Miss Delilah L. Beasley," *Oakland Tribune*, October 14, 1934, B-5.

that African American women were due democracy, as they had, in spite of having to overcome great obstacles, “contributed to civilization as much as any others”—namely through educational endeavors. She continued that even after “negro girls have labored to acquire the needed education and culture, ...doors...[are] shut in their faces, not because of their inability, but because of their color,” continuing that...[t]he cause of the race problem and most other social problems is simply a lack of understanding and sympathy between man and man.”²⁷ Beasley’s reprinting of Marsh’s remarks in the *Oakland Tribune* served a dual purpose. First, Beasley wanted to draw black and white reader’s attention to the perseverance, ambition and accomplishments of black women. For African Americans, recognizing the educational attainments of black women might encourage black readers to raise the levels of their own and their children’s education. However, in supporting Marsh’s argument that because black women had contributed to “civilization” they were owed the same social, political, and economic opportunities as others, Beasley also made a subtle argument for racial and gender equality to white Oaklanders.

Another example of Beasley’s concentration on black women was her column’s focus on African American role models. Beasley incorporated dozens of mini-profiles into her column to praise African Americans who had achieved success in a wide range of endeavors. Most of the role models who appeared in the

²⁶ *Oakland Tribune*, Activities Among Negroes, May 22, 1927.

column were women, whom Beasley routinely referred to as “women of distinction.” Illustrative of the hundreds of individuals Beasley spotlighted was Mary Sanderson (Grasses).²⁸ Beasley wrote:

“Mrs. Grasses has lived a life of service for her race. She has been a member of the choir of Fifteenth Street A.M.E. Church for thirty years. She helped to establish and was for years the financial secretary for the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People.”²⁹

Other women Beasley included in her articles were the first black woman to earn a master’s degree in music, Kansan, Nora Holt; the first black woman admitted to the California bar, Virginia Stephens; and the first black woman to become an aviator, Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman.³⁰

Beasley also portrayed the black community as built on a foundation of morality and social responsibility. She believed that the strong moral fiber at the core of black life inevitably would lead to racial equality. She often publicized the altruistic activities and the commitment of civic-minded African Americans whose activities bettered the conditions of their race. For example, Beasley persistently covered the activities of the Linden Branch of the YWCA. Though separate from the white Oakland YWCA, Beasley regularly announced Linden Branch events, meetings, socials and fundraising campaigns. In her columns, she did not challenge the separate “Y” arrangement, nor did her columns advocate for the full integration

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ This is Jeremiah B. Sanderson’s daughter and the former teacher of the Brooklyn Colored School.

²⁹ Beasley, “Activities Among Negroes,” Oakland Tribune, December 2, 1923, B-3.

of the YWCA. However, her articles heightened awareness of black activities in the YWCA, exposure the larger organization failed to give the black branches.

At times during her career, Beasley also used her press credentials along with her membership in community organizations to further bolster her mission to elicit interracial dialogue and cooperation. For example in 1925, Beasley served as a press delegate for the *Tribune* at the International Council of Women. Founded in 1889 by suffragists such as Susan B. Anthony, the council brought together women from many countries throughout the world to work for women, not only in the cause of suffrage, but on many fronts such as health, international armistice and social welfare.³¹

Delegates representing the NACWC, including national president Mary McLeod Bethune were also present at the 1925 meeting of the International Council of Women. However, when Bethune picked up admission tickets for her members to attend council sessions, she was informed that black delegates would be placed in segregated seating. NACWC members were incensed. An indignant Beasley wrote about the mistreatment of her black sisters in the NACWC in the *Tribune*. “The enthusiasm of the meeting,” Beasley declared, “was crushed when NACWC members” were notified that they would be seated separately and “subjected to segregation.” In an article, Beasley quoted Mary McLeod Bethune,

³⁰ Ibid, March 29, 1925, X-7; September 16, 1923, B-4; January 11, 1931, O-6.

who refused tickets to the meeting in protest and also issued a scathing remonstration:

“Is it possible that the American representative council of the International Council of Women whose object and aim is to work a plan whereby the conditions of all women throughout the world will be uplifted, has accepted our membership, thereby bringing to the capital of the nation colored women representing the brains, culture and refinement of the race, that you might humiliate us in the eyes of women of all the world. I refuse to be party to such an inhuman proposition. I refuse to be a party to such an insult to the womenhood [sic] of colored Americans.”³²

Embarrassed by the protests, the International Council of Women sent a letter to Bethune saying they would allow NACWC members to sit on the first floor with the other members.³³ But that promise was not kept. In further protest, past NACWC President Hallie Q. Brown,³⁴ whom the International Council of Women had asked to develop a black musical program for the convention, led her singers out of the convention hall, followed by delegates from other countries. According to NACWC historian Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, “Miss Hallie Quinn Brown suffered the humiliation of having the singers whom she had assembled and trained from all over the United States to give the concert refuse to sing because there was

³¹ For further information about the ICW see: Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement by Leila J. Rupp (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1997).

³² Delilah Beasley, “Activities Among Negroes,” Oakland Tribune, May 10, 1925, p. 2B.

³³ Beasley, May 10, 1925, p. 2B.

³⁴ Hallie Quinn Brown was President of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs from 1920 to 1924. For more information about her, see Hazel V. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Darlene Clark Hine, Black Women in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

segregation in the house when they were promised ‘there would be none.’”³⁵

Beasley wired the *Tribune* about the events at the International Council of Women’s convention. Local newspapers, as well as the Associated Press also carried the stories. When Beasley read those stories the next day, she was dismayed to see the derisive terms “darkie” and “nigger” used in describing NACWC members. She immediately called a press conference at the convention and implored reporters to refrain from using such racist language. Beasley stated, that “many thinking persons of both races had gathered from across the nation” for the convention “to foster better understanding between the races.” Thereby, as part of that goal, she asked that “no self-respecting person” would make use of such “objectionable terms.”³⁶ While Beasley cannot be credited with revolutionizing how mainstream newspapers represented African Americans, historians have acknowledged that her crusade led to more sensitive references. One black historian commented that Beasley “convinced many editors in the San Francisco Bay area and elsewhere to discontinue use of the contemptuous terms.”³⁷

During her tenure at the *Tribune*, Beasley carefully detailed the successes, as well as the civic activities of African American women (and men). As seen through her campaign against the use of racist language in the mainstream press,

³⁵ Davis, 191.

³⁶ Ibid, 192.

³⁷ Rayford Logan and Michael R. Winston, eds., Dictionary of American Negro Biography (New York: W.W. North, 1982) 32.

Beasley also directly confronted racism in the field of journalism. Beasley however, did not use her columns as a vehicle to document and highlight to the predominantly white readership of the *Oakland Tribune* African Americans' daily, lived experiences and encounters with racism and discrimination in the city. Although it borders on speculation to suggest that Beasley's editors forced this limitation on her, it strains the limits of logic to assume that the first black woman in the history of American journalism to write regularly for a white, mainstream newspaper voluntarily ignored the injustices suffered by African Americans. It seems more likely that Beasley was advised by her white editors that she would be allowed to write the ground-breaking column if the content of that column focused not on controversial topics but on positive ones. Indeed, it may well be that Beasley was specifically chosen as the first of her race and gender to write such a column precisely because of her adherence to an accommodationist and gradualist racial philosophy. Regardless of the details of the arrangement negotiated between Beasley and her white editors, the abuses suffered by African Americans at the time were so extensive that there is no question that Beasley consciously chose to keep them from her column. While Beasley was never militant in her approach to social change, she was a civil rights activist. Hers was a subtle style of an integrationist who sought improved conditions for her people not through dissidence or direct confrontation, but through quiet diplomacy. The most frequent

form of Beasley's activism was her promotion and orchestration of integrated activities. To this end, Beasley dotted her column with accolades for white residents in Oakland. Typical were comments such as: "Oakland is one of the greatest cities in America today in regard to race relations," and "The splendid white citizens here are ever willing to cooperate for a better understanding and the uplift of the colored race."³⁸

Beasley also took special pride in the interracial activities that occurred among local black and white clubwomen, activities she participated in personally. She pointed out, for example, when white clubwomen invited black women to a meeting at a fashionable restaurant and noted that white clubwomen made sure that black women sat at the table with them, rather than being expected to withdraw during the meal.³⁹ In 1928, a delegation of white women from the Alameda district of the League of Women Voters attended a meeting of the California Federated Women's Clubs and invited Beasley and other black clubwomen to attend their International Institute, a week-long gathering of prominent Bay Area women. The invitation and resultant events were recounted in the *Oakland Tribune*:

"The president of the Alameda County Federation of Women's Clubs sent an invitation to the colored club women to jointly attend an International Institute... It was a beautiful sight that of the eight hundred or more guests at the dinner, Miss Beasley accompanied by ten of the outstanding club women of her race occupied a table."⁴⁰

³⁸ Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes," *Oakland Tribune*, October 4, 1925, B-4; August 7, 1932, M-4.

³⁹ Ibid, August 7, 1932, M-4.

⁴⁰ Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*, p. 193; Delilah Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes," *Oakland*

Following the meeting, Mrs. Henry Frances Grady, chairman of the Institute wrote to Beasley stating that she hoped the meeting would further race relations in the East Bay. She asked Beasley to thank black clubwomen for their participation. Their presence, Grady wrote, had “inspired” her “to hope that the contact of the races during the institute will be the means for breaking down the barriers... For after all [,] we are all human beings.”⁴¹

Although it is impossible to gauge the full impact of Beasley’s journalism, her obituary pointed out that her writing had an important influence on Oakland’s black and white communities. Beasley’s obituary stated: “It was through her writings that the racial relations were eased greatly in the cosmopolitan city of Oakland.” It continued, “Her articles on activities among Negroes served as an educational contact and were unsurpassed.”⁴² Beasley’s efforts at promoting cross-racial engagement among Oakland’s black and white residents, and especially their clubwomen, garnered some success. However, racial prejudices continued to overpower real progress of a general nature in the city. The decades leading up to World War II presented black Oaklanders with a harsh confrontation between their expectations for a better life and the realities of economic, social, and political

Tribune, January 8, 1928, p. 20A and April 20, 1930, p 4M.

⁴¹ Delilah Beasley, “Activities Among Negroes,” Oakland Tribune, March 11, 1928, p. 6B.

⁴² Lena M. Wysinger, “Activities Among Negroes; In Memoriam—Miss Delilah L. Beasley,” Oakland Tribune, October 14, 1934, B-5.

inequality. Amid rising expectations, the feasibility of faithfully adhering to an accommodationist and gradualist approach to racial equality would come into question. At the epicenter of this developing debate in Oakland was a younger generation of black female activists. As members of intercollegiate black-Greek lettered sororities at the University of California, Berkeley, they grappled with whether their status as part of the black educated elite would define their activist agenda or if local and national issues of concern to the black community would structure their strategies for racial reform to meet the changing current of the social, political and economic milieu. Their responses to such questions would not only have implications for their movement but, would also greatly influence the trajectory of black female activism in Oakland well into the World War II and post World War II periods.

CHAPTER FIVE

SISTERS CALLED TO SERVE: HIGHER EDUCATION, THE BLACK SORORAL MOVEMENT, AND THE CHANGING TIDE OF BLACK FEMALE ACTIVISM

During the first three decades of the twentieth-century, a small group of black women pursued degrees at the University of California, Berkeley. Much like their sisters elsewhere, these collegiate women were also filled with a comparable sense of obligation to the black community and aspired to use their education and resources to advance the social, political, and economic position of the race. Through their personal, educational, professional, and social activist pursuits, these Berkeley co-eds embraced and answered the call to activism and service that black women had championed for generations.

From its inception, the University of California, Berkeley's campus opened its doors to African American women. The first African American student to enroll at UC Berkeley was Alexander Dumas Jones in 1881. However, it was not until 1905 that Berkeley celebrated its first African American graduate, Charles Edward Carpenter and then, in 1909, its first African American female graduate, Vivian Logan Rodgers.¹ By the early 1920s, there were approximately seventeen African American students enrolled at Berkeley, eight of whom were women. Among those was Mississippian Ida Louise Jackson.

Ida Jackson was born on October 12, 1902, the only girl and youngest of eight children born to Pompey and Nellie Jackson. Her father was a minister, farmer, and businessman and her mother a homemaker. Before Ida was born, her family fled from Louisiana after a jury ruled in her father's favor over a land dispute. As a result of her father's victory, the Jacksons learned that they were the targets of a lynch mob. In fear for their lives, they packed only a few possessions and headed for the other side of the Mississippi River, eventually landing in Vicksburg.²

The importance of attaining an education had been instilled in Ida since she was a young child. Jackson recalled, "You see, my father passed on when I was ten. My mother and father wanted us all to put education ahead of everything. My father used to say, 'Get an education. It's the one thing the white man can't take from you.'" Ida's mother always told her that she could go to school, as long as she wanted to get an education but warned her that if she wanted to "court," her help for Ida's education would end because, "'boys and books don't mix.'" ³ Jackson's journey to Berkeley began when she learned to read. Due to her intelligence and precociousness, Jackson entered high school at the age of eleven. After graduating

¹ Of important note, Vivian Logan Rodger's father was California pioneer Moses Logan Rodgers. Rodgers came to California in 1849 during the gold rush and amassed a great deal of wealth as a miner.

² Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, "Ida Jackson: Overcoming Barriers in Education," Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 3; and Obituary/Funeral Program; A Synopsis of the Life Journey of the Late Dr. Ida Louise Jackson, p. 1.

³ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, "Ida Jackson: Overcoming Barriers in Education," Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 5.

from high school in 1913, Jackson entered Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi and in 1916, transferred to New Orleans University (now Dillard University). She graduated from the normal department, with certificates in teaching and in domestic science and art. After receiving her degree, Jackson was offered the opportunity to further her education in the college department by teaching two beginning classes in sewing in Peck Home, which was part of New Orleans University. However, not long after teaching at the Peck Home, Jackson and her mother decided to join her brother William in California. They settled in Oakland in 1918.⁴

In reflecting upon her family's move to California, Jackson noted, "good old California proved not to be as liberal as my brother [William] had thought it was, because people are people." Even so, the Jacksons found solace, like many other African Americans, in West Oakland. After settling into their new home, Ida soon began to make plans for what she was going to do now that her family was established in Oakland. Her professors at New Orleans University became very interested when they found out she was moving to California and suggested that she take a transcript of her record with her. One day, when mulling around downtown Oakland, Jackson ran into Alvin Nourse, a young man she had known in New Orleans who was attending the University of California at Berkeley.

⁴ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, "Ida Jackson: Overcoming Barriers in Education," Bancroft

Nourse suggested that Jackson accompany him to the university and take a tour.

Jackson recalled, “He Had a Model A Ford, so, I rode with him and went to the administration building.”⁵ Upon arriving to the registrar’s office and making an inquiry about enrolling, she, at first was turned down. The registrar said, “I don’t think you can register now, classes have already begun.” Seeing the disappointment on Jackson’s face, the registrar made a concession and decided to give Ida a registration card and told her that if she was able to “sign up in ten units of classes” then, she would let her enroll. Upon receiving those instructions, Nourse and Jackson moved from classroom to classroom on the Berkeley campus and by the end of the day, Jackson was registered with thirteen units of coursework.⁶

As one of only a handful of African American students at Berkeley, Jackson recalled that relations with some of the white students on campus were not always congenial. “[O]ne of the most difficult problems I faced,” Jackson noted, “was entering classes day after day, sitting beside students who acted as if my seat were unoccupied, showing no signs of recognition, never giving a smile or a nod.”⁷

One way in which African American women like Jackson coped with the

Library, University of California at Berkeley, 5-6; A Synopsis of the Life Journey of the Late Dr. Ida Louise Jackson, 1-2.

⁵ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, “Ida Jackson: Overcoming Barriers in Education,” Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 6.

⁶ Ibid, 8-9.

⁷ California Monthly, The Celebration of Miss Ida Jackson. October 1977, p. 6.

prejudice and isolation was through the creation of their own clubs and organizations. Notably, one year prior to her undergraduate graduation, Ida, along with fellow Berkeley students Ruby Jefferson, Coral E. Johnson, Myrtle Price, Virginia Stephens, and Oreathial Richardson Tatum would leave an enduring mark on the Berkeley campus when they chartered a chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (AKA).⁸ AKA was founded on the campus of Howard University on January 15, 1908. It was the first intercollegiate black-Greek letter sorority founded for black college women. Using the words of their constitution as their guide, AKA set forth to “promote scholarship and ethics improv[e] the social status of [the] race, rais[e] moral standards, and increase[e] educational efficiency.”⁹ In order to establish a chapter of the sorority on campus, the national organization required that the women get approval from Lucy Stebbins, UC Berkeley’s Dean of Women. Dean Stebbins approved their application and the Rho Chapter of AKA was officially established on August 21, 1921, when Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Price, Stephens, and Tatum were duly initiated into the sorority and recognized as charter members of the chapter.¹⁰

According to Jackson, the day that Dean Stebbins approved their

⁸ Charter Certificate. Rho Chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. August 21, 1921.

⁹ Marjorie H. Parker, The Past Is Prologue: The History of Alpha Kappa Alpha, 1908-1999 (Washington DC: Author, 1999), 181.

¹⁰ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, “Ida Jackson: Overcoming Barriers in Education,” Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 9-10. Charter Certificate. Rho Chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. August 21, 1921.

application, the *Daily Californian* published an article about another black sorority already organized with Vivian Osborne (Marsh) as President, Louise Thompson (Patterson) as Secretary and Elizabeth Fisher as Treasurer.”¹¹ That sorority was Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (Delta). In 1920, when Dean Stebbins told Vivian Osborne, a Berkeley senior, about Delta Sigma Theta Sorority’s interest in the black women of the university, she did not hesitate to set the wheels in motion for the formation of that sorority on the Berkeley campus. Intrigued by Delta’s overall program and its demand for high scholastic achievement, Osborne contacted other black female students and sought their response. Shortly after she graduated with her bachelor’s degree, Osborne led the way in chartering a chapter of Delta Sigma Theta on the Berkeley campus. The Kappa Chapter of the sorority was established on February 21, 1921, as the first black-Greek lettered organization located West of the Rocky Mountains. From its founding on January 13, 1913, also on the campus of Howard University, the twenty-two founders of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority desired to “establish and maintain high standards of morality and scholarship among women generally” and to also advance the scope and span of sorority life.¹² The founders felt that the times demanded of women everywhere “evidence of their emancipated thinking and acting.” In keeping with this

¹¹ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, “Ida Jackson: Overcoming Barriers in Education,” Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley,, 9-10.

¹² Paula Giddings, In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenges of the Black Sorority Movement (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988) 125.

objective, the founders of the new sorority would, in March of 1913, just two months after their founding, participate in a march for women's suffrage in Washington, D.C. This public act, besides making visible the racial and gender consciousness of the founders also placed the sorority among the vanguard in social activism at the turn of the twentieth-century and beyond.¹³

African American women attending Berkeley used their memberships in AKA and Delta as a critical source of support among each other, a context for social life, and a link with the community. One of the practical functions of the sororities was to provide a network through which students were able to find housing and jobs. Landlords in the campus area refused to rent to black students, the university did not provide housing, and the sororities with their own housing were white only. Tarea Hall (Pittman) recalled:

“The only housing that was available for Negro students was in private homes. There were not very many of them, nor were they close to campus, which created a problem. Some male students got food and lodging at the frat houses where they worked...white sorority houses didn't have Negro girls working in them.”¹⁴

Despite such obstacles, through the social networks created by these sororities many of Berkeley's first African American collegiate women found support. Ida Jackson recalled that while she and Vivian Osborne were in different sororities,

¹³ Mary Elizabeth Vroman, Shaped To Its Purpose: Delta Sigma Theta: The First Fifty Years (Random House: New York, 1965) 12.

¹⁴ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, “Tarea Hall Pittman: NAACP Official and Civil Rights Worker,” Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 7.

they were good friends. “Vivan’s [sic] home and my home were the only places that black young people could go, because the others attending the university were rooming with people.”¹⁵

These organizations, in addition to providing support for members while attending Berkeley also prepared them for public service and social activism upon graduation. After graduating from UC Berkeley, both Jackson and Osborne carried the work of their respective sororities not only into the larger Oakland community, but also the nation. In 1929, Jackson spearheaded the formation of the Alpha Nu Omega Chapter of AKA, and Vivian Osborne Marsh, the Omega Sigma Alumnae Chapter of Delta in Oakland.¹⁶ In organizing the Alpha Nu Omega Chapter, Jackson remarked that the chapter was established, for the purpose of encouraging “high scholastic standards for themselves and among other Negro college students; to keep alive the interest of alumni in college life and the progressive movements emanating there from; and to assume responsibilities in their respective churches, clubs, schools, communities and in the nation as a whole.”¹⁷ Jackson and Osborne also served as regional and national officers of their particular organizations. In 1921, Ida Jackson was elected as the first Far West Regional Director of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and in 1925 Vivian Osborne Marsh was elected as Delta

¹⁵ 35th Annual Boule, San Francisco, California, 1955; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, “Historical Sketch of Alpha Nu Omega Chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

¹⁶ Now known as the Berkeley Bay Area Alumnae Chapter.

Sigma Theta's first Far West Regional Director—a position she held for four years. In 1933, Jackson was elected as AKA's Eighth International President, serving in that capacity until 1936; and Osborne Marsh was elected Delta's Seventh National President during the sorority's Thirteenth National Convention and served from 1935 to 1939.

The early goals and objectives of both sororities reflected a dedication to pushing forth tenets of racial self-help. As historian Jacqueline Moore has noted:

“... the daughters of the black elite emulated their mothers. Just as black clubwomen and churchwomen were leading the way in social welfare reform and racial uplift, so the early black sororities hoped to promote community service at the college level...”¹⁸

While AKA and Delta both expressed a concern for the socio-moral within the black community, under the leadership of Jackson and Marsh, both sororities began to develop more politically directed programs of service and public betterment. The restructuring of the sororities' national platforms reflected a broader trend occurring amongst the ranks of black middle-class female activists. In the wake of the Great Depression, and seemingly insurmountable racial inequality, black women began to question whether reform, based on the tenets of self-help and gradualism were valid. In their attempts to address a myriad number of socio-economic and political changes, black women had the opportunity to

¹⁷ 35th Annual Boule, San Francisco, California, 1955; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, “Historical Sketch of Alpha Nu Omega Chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.”

create new paradigms of protest.

As early as 1919, the *New York Times* asserted that the emergence of World War I prompted a “new Negro problem.” The New York publication was referring to the growing militancy amongst a new and younger generation of men and women, “who were not under the influence of Booker T. Washington.”¹⁹ That same year, A. Phillip Randolph’s radical *Messenger* also recognized the militant spirit of a younger generation of activists and called for new black leadership. The socialist paper asserted that the reform efforts of prevailing blacks were ineffective and did not serve the socio-economic interests of the masses. It cited that “the old leadership ha[d] failed miserably.”²⁰ In addition, Randolph and others criticized the use of racial self-help and the defense of black social and cultural integrity as a viable political schema. Activists argued, “social equality is [not] based [on outward behavior].” Social equality is based “...upon the inescapable fact that every member of the human race is equally endowed by his Creator with certain definite basic rights...”²¹ It was within the context of such criticism and internal reflection that the leaders of the black sorority movement reframed their activism throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

During the 1920s, Delta Sigma Theta demonstrated its commitment to

¹⁸ Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation’s Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999) 117.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, October 5, 1919.

²⁰ *The Messenger*, May-June 1919.

broadening its organization's agenda through the introduction of its National Vigilance Committee. The goals of the committee were to address political issues relevant to African Americans, endorse the appointment of African Americans to policy-making positions, and lobby the federal government on a number of issues of international and domestic concern.²² According to Paula Giddings, the sorority was "galvanizing its organization to go beyond criticizing racism in the broader society to demand that the federal government abandon its own discriminatory politics as well as use its power to redress racial injustice."²³ During Osborne Marsh's tenure as National President, in addition to its National Vigilance Committee, Delta (as well as AKA), also accepted an invitation to become a member of the Joint Committee for National Recovery (JCNR). An outgrowth of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programming, the JCNR was a coalition of professional associations and national organizations committed to ensuring that African Americans had fair access to newly created government jobs.²⁴ The sorority also moved to pool its efforts with other black organizations, such as the NAACP, the National Urban League and the National Negro Congress. For example, in February of 1938, Walter White, the NAACP's Executive Secretary, asked Osborne Marsh to serve as a lobbyist for the passage of the Costigan-

²¹ Chicago Defender, August 2, 1929.

²²Giddings, 40

²³ Ibid, 128.

Wagner federal anti-lynching bill.²⁵ During the 1930s, AKA created its Non-Partisan Council on Public Affairs. The council was an attempt by the organization to create a new approach to confronting some of the problems of exploitation in employment, education, and public service. Its primary goal was to make members more aware of broader social concerns of minority groups and to help such groups participate in all levels of American democracy.²⁶

While changes in the activism and reform efforts pursued by Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta sororities and their respective members were quite discernable on a national scale, said objectives were also evident in view of the activism pursued on both a collective but more prominently, on an individual basis by members of the organizations in Oakland. For example, in 1931, members of the Kappa Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., with the support of the Northern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, protested against the passage of a piece of discriminatory legislation sponsored by the League of California Municipalities. The bill in question proposed to designate specific hours and days upon which African American children could use public parks, swimming pools, and playgrounds. In response to the proposal, the sorority members drafted a

²⁴ Gunnar Mydal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944) 817.

²⁵ Giddings, 180.

²⁶ Parker, *In the Eye of the Beholder*, 75 and 93; The National Non-Partisan Council on Public Affairs" Alpha Kappa Alpha, Ivy Leaf 18 (March 1940): 5 See: The Ivy Leaf 1921-1998, University Publications of America, Research Collections, Bethesda, Maryland, 1999.

resolution to be sent to the Honorable Frederick Madison Roberts²⁷, representing the 62nd district in Los Angeles. Roberts was the only black member of the California State Assembly. In their petition, the young women asked that Roberts use his “best efforts before the legislature to prevent the passage of the bill.”²⁸ As individuals, Ida Jackson and Tarea Hall Pittman for example, drew on varied methods of protest to define their activism and service to the black community.

Following her time at Berkeley, Delta member Tarea Hall Pittman quickly emerged as a prominent leader in Oakland’s African American community. Pittman was born in 1903 in Bakersfield, California where her parents were among one of the early black settlers.²⁹ Her parents, William Hall and Emily Pinkney married and raised a family of six children. William worked on the farm they bought and Emily played the organ at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Bakersfield. Hall and his four brothers established the first local branch of the NAACP in Bakersfield—an organization that was at the center of his daughter’s life following her tenure at Berkeley.³⁰

During the 1930s and continuing into the 40s, Pittman was a member of the Alameda County Branch of the NAACP. Projects Pittman worked on during her

²⁷ Frederick Madison Roberts was also the first African American elected to serve as a member of the California State Assembly. He was elected for the first time in 1918. He is also the grandson of Sally Hemings. Obituary: Los Angeles Sentinel, 24 July 1952.

²⁸ Oakland Tribune, “Local Notes” January 18, 1931. I have been unable to document Robert’s response and what happened to the bill.

²⁹ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, “Tarea Hall Pitman: NAACP Official and Civil Rights Worker,” Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 1.

early years of activity with the organization included protests against discriminatory practices within the local police and fire departments, as well as local businesses. In commenting on the NAACP's efforts at fighting discrimination in the civil service, Pittman stated the following:

“...they were working very hard on it. They had committees; they were applying to everyone that was in authority: the County Board of Supervisors, the city council where things came under the jurisdiction of the city. Of course the chief offenders were the Civil Service jobs that we were trying very hard to have on a non-discriminatory basis, the Police Department and the Fire Department.”³¹

For their efforts, the NAACP was able to, according to Pittman, get “a few Negroes on the police force...a few in the Sheriff's Department.” And, they finally “got several Negro women in the Sheriff's Department.” All in all, Pittman and the NAACP broke down much of the discrimination that had to do with housing prisoners and tried to do away with police brutality.

Aside from participating in efforts to petition city officials, Pittman also took part in a number of boycotts. For example, in an interview, Pittman recalled one case in which the owner of a cocktail lounge refused service to black patrons. In response, Pittman and other members of the NAACP were instrumental in getting a Civil Rights Law passed in which an owner of a local business could be fined \$100, plus court costs, for each offense of discrimination put on the books. Pittman

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 67.

once stated, “It is true it was only a \$100 fine and court costs but this was a step forward.”³² In their attempts to thwart the discriminatory acts of this particular lounge owner, NAACP officials sent a white member of the Alameda County Branch into the cocktail lounge, “with a Negro member who was refused and he acted as a witness.” As a result, the owner was found guilty and after that, “Negroes went in his place.” Pittman recalled that the owner, at first, “was very arrogant and he said, “Oh, he didn't mind paying \$100. It was worth it to keep ‘Niggers’ out of his place.” However, “he got so many cases that he came to the Board of Directors of the NAACP and pleaded with us—I was there at that Board meeting.” Pittman continued, “He pleaded with us not to fine him any more and said his doors were open. He said that this was ruining him, about to put him out of business, and that his place was open to all and that he welcomed us and so forth.” So in the end, though the \$100 fine plus the cost of court was “very small,” according to Pittman, “it did act as a deterrent in many cases where we could prove that they did discriminate and refused to give service because of race.”³³

Ida Jackson made her greatest contribution to the city of Oakland and its African American community through her pursuit of a career as a school teacher. In a 1977 interview with a California Magazine, Jackson made the following remark: “A great many of us have been aware of the shortcomings of society, its

³² Ibid.

injustices, and have tried all our lives to change, ameliorate, and correct them. I am more than ever convinced that education is the greatest factor in the upward climb of any person or people.”³⁴ She continued that her education had “enabled [her] to realize the vast avenues of learning and culture to be explored and strengthened a desire to try, and in the exploration to take others along on the journey.”³⁵ As such, in 1923, with her undergraduate degree in hand, she applied for a teaching position in the Oakland public school system, hoping that she could extend to others the opportunities which had been bequeathed upon her.

When Jackson first arrived to Oakland, she had planned to continue her career as a teacher. She remembered being in the home of a fellow West Oakland family when one of her brother’s friends asked her, “well, what are you going to do now that you have all of your education?” Jackson said, “Oh, I’m going to teach.” To Jackson’s dismay, the entire room “burst into laughter and said, ‘the day that you apply for a job, The Tribune will carry the news, ‘Burly Negress Applies for Job in Oakland Public Schools.’”³⁶ Unfortunately, the premonition of Jackson’s friends was not too far from the truth. Upon submitting her application to the Oakland Public Schools, she was told that she needed, “more education.” In recalling the denial of her application, Jackson remarked, “apparently it was a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ California Monthly, The Celebration of Miss Ida Jackson. October 1977, p. 6.

³⁵ Ibid.

deep-seated feeling that no blacks should become teachers in the Oakland public schools.”³⁷

In spite of such subtle resistance, Jackson returned to UC Berkeley in pursuit of a Masters degree. Jackson’s masters thesis was entitled, “The Development of Negro Children in Relation to Education,” a topic she chose, because she felt that “factors other than inherited mentality affected the IQ of an individual. And at the time there was a widely accepted notion that the Negro’s highest mental age was fifteen.”³⁸ Jackson successfully completed the requirements for her Masters degree in 1923 and with her graduate degree in hand Jackson reapplied for a teaching position in the Oakland public school system.

This time, in attempting to further deter her, she was told that she needed “teaching experience.” Subsequently, she was offered and accepted a position in a high school in El Centro, California, where parents of minority children were demanding a teacher of color. Jackson completed her assignment there and as a result, she went down in history as the first African American certified by the State of California to teach in a California public high school.

Following her time in El Centro, Jackson, yet again, reapplied to teach in Oakland public schools. Although not offered a full-time teaching position, she

³⁶ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, “Ida Jackson: Overcoming Barriers in Education,” Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 8.

³⁷ Ibid, 13.

³⁸ California Monthly, The Celebration of Miss Ida Jackson. October 1977. Page 6.

was offered a long-term substitute position at Prescott Junior High School and accepted. In spite of the fact that the students related most positively to the new teacher and their achievement test scores significantly improved, some of the teachers on the staff at Prescott protested the hiring of an African American as a teacher. They demonstrated their malevolence by organizing a march on the administration building.³⁹

The Superintendent of Schools faced the protestors and pacified them by informing them that it had been some time since Jackson had first applied for a position and that even then, she had been hired only as a long-term substitute. However, he did acknowledge to them that her educational qualifications exceeded his, and conceivably, most of theirs. In fact, Jackson's quest to share her knowledge and broaden her effectiveness led her back to the University of California at Berkeley to seek the Administrative Credential to become certified by the state of California as a school administrator—requirements she completed in 1936.⁴⁰

Furthermore, her strong desire for further knowledge soon led her to pursue course work in the doctoral degree programs of UC Berkeley and Columbia University. Although not completing the doctorate, during this period of her life, she was asked to serve as Dean of Women at Tuskegee Institute (University) in

Alabama. There, she was able to hone her administrative skills, and she carried out her duties laudably. In spite of her broad experiences, Jackson remained in the classroom for all of her twenty-seven years with the Oakland public school system. When she once inquired about an opening for a principalship at a local school, Jackson recalled being told by one of her superintendents, “the time is not ripe for a Negro principal.”⁴¹ In spite of such setbacks, Jackson took her skills, talents, and desire to educate African Americans beyond the scope of the classroom. During the 1930s, Jackson worked as an assistant to Mary McLeod Bethune during the organizational stages of the National Council of Negro Women and, as a result, was frequently asked to speak at public affairs. As a result of her speaking engagements and exposure, she became renowned, and commensurately, her popularity grew as a woman with a powerful message to deliver.

Black newspapers such as *The Crisis* commended members of Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Kappa Alpha sororities for their “coming of age” and implementation of intraracial, economic and political programs that transgressed social activities.⁴² Despite any personal setbacks, African American women such as the young women who chartered chapters of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta on UC Berkeley’s campus during the 1920s were determined to and

³⁹ A Synopsis of the Life Journey of the Late Dr. Ida Louise Jackson, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 4.

⁴¹ Ibid. *California Monthly*, The Celebration of Miss Ida Jackson. October 1977. Page 6.

⁴² White, *Too Heavy A Load*, 158; *The Crisis*, February 1935.

did excel. With their success, came much responsibility and throughout their lives, they worked hard to ensure that future generations of African Americans were afforded the same opportunities. This perseverance is reflected most pointedly by a poem written by Ida Jackson and printed in her funeral program. The poem, entitled “Anyway,” reads:

“If People are unreasonable, illogical and self centered
Love them anyway.
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.
The biggest people with the biggest IQ’s can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds.
Think big anyway.
People favor underdogs but follow top dogs.
Fight for some underdogs anyway.
What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.
Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you’ve got anyway.”⁴³

And it was with such courage that black female activists proceeded with their activism during the remainder of the 1930s, as well as into the burgeoning struggle for civil rights as it emerged during the World War II and post World War II periods in the city.

⁴³ Ida Louise Jackson’s funeral program.

CHAPTER SIX

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE: WORLD WAR II MIGRANTS AND THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN OAKLAND'S AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

During the early twentieth-century, African Americans in Oakland held a generally optimistic perspective of race relations in the city. Particularly, the city's black clubwomen strove to push forward an agenda aimed at sustaining ties between Oakland's black and white communities and establishing new ones. Nevertheless, changes within the city's economic and political landscape during the late 1920s and early 1930s motivated younger generations of black female activists to question the strategic methods guiding their reform efforts. This was especially true of members of intercollegiate-black sororities.

The black women's club and sorority movements chipped away at the walls of segregation and discrimination in Oakland throughout the first three decades of the twentieth-century. By the end of the 1930s however, a number of new organizations led by black men emerged and took the helm of the city's ongoing black freedom struggle. Black women began to critically consider their position as race workers within this changing cultural, social and political milieu. Yet, they nonetheless found ways to assert their activist voices and make additional contributions to the black freedom struggle. Black female activists, whose leadership was nurtured within the confines of women's clubs and sororities,

sought to position themselves alongside this new cadre of black male leadership. However, as the black industrial workforce grew dramatically with the advent of World War II, black “old-timers” made minimal efforts to organize this mushrooming section of Oakland’s changing black community. Hence, during the 1950s and particularly the 1960s the new black “proletariat” had to fend for themselves.

The NAACP had been a powerful voice in Oakland during the nineteen teens and the early 1920s. In 1922, under the leadership of Rev. John Drake, pastor of the North Oakland Baptist Church, the NAACP pushed the Oakland City Council into passing an anti-Ku Klux Klan initiative.¹ Such efforts fortified the NAACP’s position as a principal black political organization in the city. However, membership dropped significantly during the late 1920s, and into the 1930s.² Much of the downward spiral can be attributed to the Great Depression, which led to massive black underemployment. Oakland blacks were less than 2 percent of the total population, but comprised 12 percent of the unemployed.³ In the wake of such unemployment, some black reformers began to reassess traditional leadership and organizational methods. In 1929, *The California Voice* wrote:

“One growing need is a larger participation in the affairs of the organization [NAACP] by members and less putting over measures by officers. The lay

¹ See clipping file, John D. Drake in the Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

² Albert S. Broussard, “Organizing the Black Community in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1915-1930,” *Arizona and the West* 23 (Winter, 1981) 343.

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Census of the United States, Characteristics of the Population, v. p. I, p. 640.

members must be made to feel that they are important cogs in the wheel; the organization must be more responsive to the people who are expected to support it, otherwise apathy will rule.”⁴

Others noted that the local NAACP “perpetuates in office the same Board of Directors,” who, though honest, sincere, and loyal, “have been members so long that they feel a propriety interest in the organization.”⁵ The same source also noted the fear of “anything new being sponsored to the STAND-PAT board as now constituted.”⁶

Most of those who advocated changes in black reform efforts were recent additions to Oakland’s black community. For example, Rev. H.T.S. Johnson had come to Oakland from Oklahoma in the mid-1920s. He was a graduate of Leland College, Oberlin College, and the Gammon Theological Seminary. In 1928, Johnson was appointed pastor of West Oakland’s Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church. There, Johnson labored to organize the black community. He was a staunch advocate of consumer cooperatives and sponsored several open forums on the subject in his church. By the mid-1930s, Johnson had become involved in the labor movement to such a great degree that his obituary noted, “each time a man walks the streets in a picket line...the indomitable spirit of HTS [sic] Johnson will say ‘press on.’”⁷

⁴ California Voice, February 15, 1929, p. 1

⁵ Oakland Independent, October 19, 1929, p. 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See clipping on H.T.S. Johnson in the Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

Another newcomer to Oakland's black community who advocated a new approach to politics in the city was Rev. Edward Stovall. Stovall came to Oakland in 1922, initially joined a local Baptist church and in 1935 founded the Progressive Baptist Church in Berkeley. Stovall was very active in secular community activities and reportedly was instrumental in the "bridging of relationship [sic] between the Negro and the white communities."⁸

Perhaps, the most significant black leader to gain prominence during the 1930s was C.L. Dellums, Oakland's representative to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids (BSCPM). The BSCPM was a labor union organized by African American employees of the Pullman Company in 1925.⁹ Members of the union not only included Pullman porters but also cooks, waiters, redcaps, baggage handlers, railyard laborers, and maids. Led nationally by A. Phillip Randolph, the union was at the forefront of African American labor and civil rights struggles throughout the twentieth century. C.L. Dellums had been a porter in Oakland during the 1920s and became the city's union representative in 1928.¹⁰ Under Dellums' leadership, the BSCPM's Oakland local became a powerful force in a community where, by 1920, railroad workers constituted one-third of all black

⁸ Article in Berkeley News, August 11, 1965, p. 65, located in clipping file, Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

⁹ For more information on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, see Beth Tompkins Bates, Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945 (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001); William H. Harris, Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-1937 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

wage earners.¹¹ Although many of the established community leaders who were railroad employees feared that militancy would spark a white backlash, a substantial pool of young men, such as Dellums, were willing to take risks. As the depression wore on and labor militancy increased, Dellums' stance, which included support for the 1934 General Strike on the San Francisco waterfront¹² and his active cooperation with the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), became widely acceptable in the black community. In 1936, Dellums sponsored a resolution, which prohibited the black listing of any employer who hired non-unionized black laborers when they were excluded from joining the proper union.¹³ In 1937, Dellums was elected as Vice-President of the Northern California Branch of the NAACP. Dellums' election symbolized a depression-spawned linkage between two very different forms of protest: "the NAACP's reliance on legal action and persuasion aimed at political and civic leaders, and the BSCPM's

¹⁰ For more information about C.L. Dellums and his involvement with the Oakland local of the BSCPM, see Harris, *Keeping the Faith* and also Robert Self's, *American Babylon*.

¹¹ Stuart Henry, "Railroad Mean and Race Leadership in Oakland" (unpublished manuscript prepared as a student at University of California, Berkeley, 1985) 7.

¹² Although the General Strike of San Francisco took place from July 16 to 19, 1934, it had been brewing for months. In March, Harry Bridges led his International Longshoremen's Association (a union of dockworkers), in a vote to strike for control of hiring halls, better pay, and better hours. The ILA strike officially began on May 9, 1934. On July 5, when employers tried to open the docks and unload ships, strikers clashed with one thousand armed police officers. When it was over, 64 were injured and two men were killed on what became known as "Bloody Thursday." The deaths of the men and the huge, public funeral for them helped Bridges rally the support of other unions in the city to join the strike. This General Strike effectively shut down the city of San Francisco for four days. The strike was a success and many of the ILA's demands were met. The following year, 1935, the Wagner Act created the National Labor Relations Board that protects the rights of workers to organize into unions. The General Strike brought economic and political power for labor unions that would last for decades. For more information on the 1934 General Strike, see David F. Selvin's, *A Terrible Anger: The 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996).

¹³ A.M. Rosenson, "The CIO Movement in Alameda County," unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1937, 56.

organizing of working people in a context of strong trade unionism.”¹⁴

Further shifts in the direction of black political organization and activism in Oakland during the latter half of the 1930s was also due in large measure to a shift in the relationship between African Americans and the local government. A change in the structure of city government in Oakland reduced the effectiveness of “back-room bargaining” as a means of gaining access to public resources. In 1930, *Oakland Tribune* publisher John R. Knowland led a campaign to install a city-manager form of government after numerous civil servants were indicted on bribery charges in a paving scandal during the late 1920s. As a result of Knowland’s newspaper publicity, the election of 1930 swept the existing power structure of then mayor John L. Davie out of office and replaced him and his cronies with members of Oakland’s business community. The election also marked the end of district elections, which Knowland believed invited political machine domination. After 1930 citywide elections took place.¹⁵ Under the previous electoral setup, African Americans, who were largely concentrated in West Oakland, had been able to wield some influence with council members from their districts, trading votes for city jobs and using personal contacts to handle specific

¹⁴ C.L. Dellums, “International President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Civil Rights Leader.” Regional Oral History Office and Earl Warren Oral History Project (Bancroft Library) University of California, Berkeley, 52-56.

¹⁵ Edward C. Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?* (New York: 1972) 13-17; John A. Gothberg, “The Local Influence of J.R. Knowland’s *Oakland Tribune*,” *Journalism Quarterly* 45: 3 (1968), 490 and 494.

items of business. Evidence of the way in which the previous political system benefited African Americans is reflected in the *California Voice's* public eulogy for the longtime city auditor Harry Williams:

“Mr. Williams was a friend of the people, regardless of creed or color, a friend to the rich and poor alike. He had through his influence saved many from disaster and disgrace.”¹⁶

Another quote noted that Williams “will be missed by many colored citizens who will remember him as a friend and champion of the downtrodden.”¹⁷

Comprising less than 5 percent of the city’s total population, black voters did not represent a significant bloc under the new system. Instead, in order to get on the city agenda, blacks had to attract attention by public action. For example, in the 1930s when Oakland City Council members refused to vote on a resolution to construct the first low-income housing project, C.L.Dellums gained the votes of council members by bringing large numbers of people to speak at every council meeting during the deliberations. Dellums recalled:

“The Oakland City Council would not consider an enabling resolution. So I started to lead demonstrations in city council meetings through Labor's Non-Partisan League, because my strength was in the labor movement and it was where I could get a crowd.”¹⁸

City Hall, according to Dellums, was looked upon as a “jail house.” The jail was on the 13th floor of the building and for that reason African Americans did not like

¹⁶ *California Voice*, November 12, 1941, p. 1.

¹⁷ Ibid, 2.

¹⁸ Dellums, 66-67.

to go there. But Dellums knew that within the labor movement, he could get an audience. “...One strategy we used,” Dellums remembered, “was getting down there early and cluttering up at the door so when they unlocked the door to the council chambers, all our people would crowd in. So the whole audience was with *us* then...So finally we went down one night and I went to sign up to speak and the city clerk wouldn’t let me sign up. He said, ‘Oh, no, you’re not going to speak tonight, nobody will hear you.’ So I said, ‘Okay, I’ll find out, since when did my city, Oakland, go fascist.’...I turned and started to walk away and he grabbed me. He said, ‘Come back here, man. Don’t you know I’m ribbing you.’ So I walked back to him and said, ‘What goes? He said, ‘Well you are still not going to sign up and you are not going to speak,’ he said, ‘because they are going to do it tonight. So just sit down and watch.’ So sure enough they not only considered it, they voted it over!’”¹⁹

Black leaders such as Johnson, Stovall, and Dellums encouraged members of Oakland’s black community to become more politically organized. The economic problems that black Oaklanders faced during the 1930s may have inspired such demands but the depression undoubtedly limited the community’s ability to act upon them. Also, the black community in Oakland remained very small, and thus its economic resources were severely limited—the black population

¹⁹ Ibid.

grew by less than one thousand from 1930 to 1940. This was partially due to the rise of Los Angeles as the prominent city of black settlement in California. Los Angeles seems to have offered blacks a wider variety of employment opportunities than did Oakland and its black population increased during the 1930s by over 40,000.²⁰ In Oakland, fundamental political organizing would have to wait until the upheavals of World War II.

Between 1940 and 1945, defense industries borne of the war created an unprecedented demand for labor and seemed to promise a share of the California dream to every able-bodied worker who could make the journey. In setting out to claim what Oakland had to offer, black migrants also transformed the basic premises on which the pre-war black community had existed. Their sheer numbers suddenly made African Americans highly visible in public places and also displaced the sense of community, which previously framed black society. These “newcomers” challenged old assumptions of unity. Although they outnumbered the “old-timers” of Oakland’s black community, black leadership for at least the first two post-World War II decades would come predominantly from those who had established their position in the 1930s. Having developed successful interracial coalitions and protest styles to deal with the prolonged crisis of the depression as

²⁰ In 1930, Los Angeles’ black population was 20,713. By 1940, the population had increased to 63,774. For details, see United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930. T626, 2,667 rolls; United States Bureau of Census. *Sixteenth*

well as continuing discrimination in virtually every area of life, it is a tribute to the vision of the “old-timers,” their determination and adaptability that they were able to play decisive roles in the new context.

World War II had a great impact on black communities throughout the country, but especially on those along the Pacific Coast. The migration of defense workers tripled and quadrupled the black populations of a number of cities, most notably Oakland. While prior to the war, the vast majority of Oakland blacks were service workers and domestics, the war created many opportunities in the industrial sector. Shipyard jobs became abundant and high paying and attracted blacks from throughout the country, but especially the South. Oakland’s black population grew from 8,462 in 1940 to 47,562 by 1950.²¹ In observing the stark change in the city’s African American demographic, one native black Oaklander remarked, “[W]e’d go down to the Sixteenth Street station after school to watch the people get off the trains, and it was like a parade. You just couldn’t believe that that many people would come in, and some didn’t even have any luggage; they would come with boxes, with three or four children with no place to stay...”²²

The great increase in population caused severe housing shortages during the war period. The Oakland Housing Authority reported that 20,000 new families

Census of the United States 1940, Population vol. 2, Characteristics of the Population, parts 1,5,7 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1943), tables 31, 35.

²¹ Douglas Henry Daniels, Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 165.

came to Oakland between 1940 and 1943 but the city constructed only 13,536 new dwelling units.²³ For those African Americans who could find housing, the vast majority settled in West Oakland. The confinement of black migrants to the West Oakland area was due in large part to an increase in racist housing covenants throughout the city.²⁴ In most cases, African Americans were often forced to double, triple or quadruple up, as multiple families occupied the same home. Moreover, one-third of all housing in the West Oakland area had no private bath and 19 percent had no running water.²⁵ Many African Americans were forced to share bathroom facilities with next-door neighbors or use bathrooms in nearby service stations. Realizing the severity of the housing issue, black community leaders quickly responded. C.L. Dellums, for example, strongly lobbied for the construction of low-income housing to accommodate the mass of black migrants entering the city. The local chapter of the NAACP, led by attorney Walter A. Gordon, supported the efforts of several black real estate brokers in their attempts to break up all white neighborhoods by posing legal challenges to racial covenants and other discriminatory housing policies through the court system.²⁶

In addition to housing discrimination, black Oaklanders also challenged discriminatory hiring practices in defense related industries. African American

²² Cited in Oakland's Office of Community Development, "Oakland 1979," 18.

²³ Hayes, 55.

²⁴ Floyd Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California*. Oakland, 1964, 12.

²⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Census of the United States, Statistics of the Census Tracts*, V. III, 3.

women were especially engaged in this battle. In the past, most gainfully employed black women worked in domestic service. During World War II however, for the first time many black women, “old-timers” and “newcomers” alike experienced expanded employment options. Despite these advances, they nonetheless continued to occupy some of the lowest rungs of the job ladder, suffering racial as well as gender discrimination.²⁷

During the war, black women in Oakland found jobs in a wide variety of East Bay industries: shipyards, canneries, hospitals, military supply depots, railroads, and service occupations. The most coveted jobs, however, were skilled and supervisory positions in the shipyards. Black women seldom received these “good” jobs. Even after the shipyards began recruiting black workers, union discrimination prevented many men and women from finding skilled jobs in defense industries. The Boilermakers Union, which controlled the largest number of shipyard crafts, negotiated closed-shop agreements with East Bay shipyards early in the war. At the same time, it excluded black workers from locals, effectively blocking their access to skilled crafts. In early 1942, the Boilermakers finally created a separate auxiliary for Oakland’s black shipyard workers. However, it was not until 1943, following the protests organized by longtime black resident, Oakland clubwoman and political activist Frances Albrier, that the union

²⁶ Dellums, 92-96.

established a black auxiliary at the huge Kaiser shipbuilding facility in Richmond, California.²⁸

Frances Albrier's beginnings as an activist started in the 1920s, when she was a member of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). After graduating from Howard University in 1920, Albrier migrated to Berkeley to live with her father. Although her bachelor's degree was in social welfare, she had taken two years of coursework in nursing and desired to work in that field. When she came West, Albrier recalled that whites "weren't prepared for black nurses." They often just said, "... I know you're qualified, but we just don't hire black nurses."²⁹ Albrier joined the UNIA in 1921 after hearing a speech by Marcus Garvey at the Oakland Auditorium. It was through the UNIA's Oakland branch that Albrier was able to practice nursing, as a Black Cross Nurse. The Black Cross Nurses was an auxiliary of the UNIA. They performed benevolent community work and provided public health services to black neighborhoods, specializing in infant health and home care. Though not paid for her services, as a Black Cross Nurse, Albrier provided a great service to the black community by

²⁷ Karen Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II." *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982) 84. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

²⁸ Marilyn S. Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 71.

²⁹ Frances Mary Albrier, "Determined Advocate for Racial Equality," Women in History Oral History Project, Black Women Oral History Project, Bancroft Library, the University of California at Berkeley, 1979, 31.

training other black women in Oakland and Berkeley in practical nursing. Albrier became vice-president of the local auxiliary in 1923.³⁰

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Albrier was active with a number of other black political organizations and also assumed a variety of occupations. By the 1940s, Albrier sought work in the defense industry in the Richmond, California shipyards. After completing double the required number of hours of training as a welder and securing a recommendation from her instructor, she applied for a job. She was told that because the boilermakers' union had not established a black auxiliary at Kaiser and blacks were not accepted into the regular local, she could not be hired.³¹ Blacks could be hired as unskilled laborers in Richmond and in Oakland, Moore Shipyard hosted a black auxiliary union for craft workers, which included welders. However, Albrier wanted to work at Kaiser because the facility was newer, working conditions were better, and the trip to work was shorter. When she was rejected, the experienced community activist went into action. Albrier went directly to the head of the Richmond yards and threatened to go to the White House and charge Kaiser with violating Executive Order 8802, which prohibited racial discrimination in the national defense industry. Her tactics were successful and through special arrangements she was allowed to work without union membership. In the fall of 1942, Frances Albrier became the first black woman

³⁰ Ibid, 65 and 67-68.

hired at Shipyard #2 in Richmond. Reporting to work outfitted in welder's regalia, many of the black shipwrights stopped and asked, "how did you get in here?" Albrier explained, "Well, I just happened to bust my way in here."³² Even after Albrier's victory, it would take another six months before Local A-36 of the Boilermakers was established in February 1943, to accommodate black craft workers in Richmond.³³

Besides fighting discriminatory practices in the shipyard, Local A-36 played an active role in the black community. Among its achievements were the placement of fifteen black women in positions in the Richmond Recreational Department and the contribution of funds to purchase a site for a playground in North Richmond. Black shipyard workers also organized the United Negro Labor Committee (UNLC) with support from white workers and members of the Communist Party. The UNLC represented Richmond workers in persuading the Boilermakers' national organization to provide insurance benefits and to extend the right to vote in union-elections to members of the black auxiliary.³⁴ On May 7, 1943, the UNLC and Local A-36 co-sponsored ceremonies to launch the Liberty Ship George Washington Carver at which black dignitaries and thousands of black

³¹ Ibid, 129-134.

³² Ibid, 134.

³³ Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910-1963 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 59.

³⁴ Tilghman Press, We Also Serve: Ten Percent of a Nation Working and Fighting for Victory (Berkeley: Tilghman Press, 1945) 25.

families joined in an enormous display of hope and determination. Ultimately, the demands of the war and sustained demands by blacks for equal treatment made racial discrimination in employment a luxury the shipyards could not afford. Although black shipyard workers were discharged when the war ended, their experience in the industry and their continuing presence in the East Bay meant that there could be no return to the prewar status quo.³⁵

Black leaders also concerned themselves with the health of black migrants in West Oakland. Poor housing conditions resulted in unusually high rates of tuberculosis. Though they were only 3 percent of the total population, blacks were 7 percent of the tuberculosis cases in Alameda County. In order to mitigate this disease rate, black clubwomen sponsored a forum in which lectures were given on tuberculosis, diphtheria, typhoid, and other communicable diseases. Additionally, William Byron Rumford, a black owner of a pharmacy in West Oakland and also an inspector for the state venereal disease program assigned to the Oakland Health Department, made an investigation of the incidence of venereal disease in West Oakland for the Alameda County Hospital.³⁶

Rumford was born in Courtland, Arizona in 1908. In 1915, he moved with his mother and stepfather, a barber, to Los Angeles. Rumford's stepfather, Elmer J. Williams soon moved back to Arizona. In 1926, Rumford returned to California as

³⁵ Ibid.

a student at the University of California, Berkeley.³⁷ In 1931, Rumford earned his degree in pharmacy from the University of California College of Pharmacy. He applied for positions with the state and faced many difficulties:

“Not too many blacks worked for the state at the time; you were lucky to get a job as a janitor. I think I frightened everybody when I went for my oral examinations. They were asking silly questions about Joe Louis that had nothing to do with the position, and I flunked. They were really trying to get rid of blacks, and we had no recourse.”³⁸

Eventually, Rumford took an examination with the county and went on to work at Highland Hospital in Oakland. After eight years he purchased a drugstore in Berkeley. Rumford was also a prominent civil rights leader in Oakland and the larger East Bay community. Through his activism, Rumford not only fought discrimination in housing and employment but he also served on committees which worked to ease racial tensions between local residents and the many defense workers coming from the South.

The massive migration of blacks into Oakland caused a very heavy white backlash. There were numerous reports of racially motivated bombings to discourage blacks from moving into white neighborhoods. Racial violence erupted in March of 1944 on a local train and spread to include 2,000 white and black servicemen and civilians. The *Oakland Observer* attributed the violence to “(a) a

³⁶ *Negro's Who's Who in California* (not published) 1948 (Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley).

³⁷ Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, “Byron Rumford, Legislator for Fair Employment and Housing” Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

semi-mining camp civilization and (b) a new race problem, brought about by the influx of what might be called socially-liberated or uninhibited Negroes who are not bound by the old and peaceful understanding between the Negro and the white in Oakland...”³⁹ In commenting upon the influx of migrants, Rumford noted that “frankly...the influx of people from the South [created] an exaggerated social problem.”⁴⁰ In an effort to ameliorate some of the tension, Rumford and others organized the Berkeley Interracial Committee. According to Rumford, “we did a lot of good work to welcome people and to ameliorate some of the problems. Signs appeared saying ‘No Negro Trade Solicited’ and we urged that they be taken down. Whatever the problems that arose, we’d try to iron them out.”⁴¹ Rumford also stated that:

“Some of the ‘more stable citizens’ were a little unhappy with the newcomers. People were just fearful of this great influx of blacks. We had incidents on the bus and on the trains going back and forth to the shipyards in Richmond—shoving, pushing, fighting and things of that nature. You see, not only did you have the blacks, you had white Southerners moving out here—the Okies. There was always some kind of incident in line to get your paycheck, that type of thing. It would spill over into the bars and restaurants...”⁴²

Aside from the incidents of physical violence, as recounted by Rumford and others, one result of greater levels of racism was increased segregation. Although the black population from 1900 to 1930 generally had settled in a dispersed

³⁹ “That Riot on Twelfth Street...,” Oakland Observer, XXXIV (March 1, 1944): 1.

⁴⁰ Rumford, 9.

⁴¹ Ibid.

manner, with a majority concentrated in West Oakland, the World War II period witnessed the advent of neighborhood proscription. Census tract data shows that West Oakland contained 60 percent of the black population in 1940, but by 1950 it contained 80 percent. In 1940, 23.6 percent of the census tracts (17 out of 72) contained 83.9 percent of the total non-white population. By 1950, 22.2 percent of the census tracts (16 out of 72) contained 89.9 percent of the non-white population, which had expanded greatly during those years. Thus, a greater number of non-whites were packed into fewer census tracts.⁴³

Housing segregation also meant public school segregation, as white parents moved to non-integrated neighborhoods and took their children out of West Oakland's schools. Figures from McClymonds High School illustrate this process. By 1938 648 whites and 115 blacks attended the school. By 1944 493 whites and 797 blacks attended. These figures show that as the black population increased, whites fled. The problem of segregation was a special concern. African Americans had witnessed the downfall of an integrated situation and the schools their children attended began to deteriorate quickly. One observer noted that "The schools in the Negro areas, as the communities in general into which Negroes are confined, are the poorest and oldest in the city. The buildings are old, the grounds are poor, the

⁴² Ibid, 9-10.

⁴³ R. Bryce Young, "Oakland's Changing Community Patterns: A Report on Change in the Non-White Owner Occupancy," unpublished paper for the Coro Foundation, Oakland California, 1961, 5.

streets are not serviced adequately by the city cleaning department.”⁴⁴ To combat these developments, the black leadership in Oakland worked with the NAACP to confer with school administrators and argue for increased funding especially to ensure that qualified teachers were hired to teach in black districts. During the late 1940s, it was rumored that white teachers were being sent into West Oakland as a disciplinary measure, a situation that black leaders quickly challenged.⁴⁵

During this period, similar to the influx of World War II migrants, some Oakland residents participated in events, which sought to uphold traditional relations between the races. For many of Oakland’s black residents, the needs of the new black migrants were secondary to the high levels of racism affecting the community as a whole. Black clubwomen were an integral part of the Hospitality and Recreation Committee of the local Defense Council and managed to have a recreation center built for African Americans in the Oakland area.⁴⁶ Numerous black clubwomen were also involved in the Red Cross as first aid instructors. Others worked in the USO and visited troops on the army bases in the Bay Area. Black women also staffed sewing units and took defense classes.⁴⁷ Nearly every article written about these activities noted that black Oaklanders were concerned

⁴⁴ “What Tensions Exist Between Groups in the Local Community?” seminar report by the Oakland Institute on Human Relations, November 13, 1945, 2. Located in the Oakland History Room of the Oakland Public Library.

⁴⁵ See Alameda County Branch NAACP Bulletin, January 1950, no. 3.

⁴⁶ Oakland Tribune, April 17, 1942 and August 2, 1942 (clippings located in the Oakland History Reading Room, Oakland Public Library).

⁴⁷ Oakland Tribune, April 14, 1942, Oakland History Reading Room.

with the “Double V campaign,” victory at home and abroad. Blacks were cognizant of their duties towards further racial progress at home and took part in numerous protests aimed at decreasing discrimination in employment and housing. Several black Oaklanders appeared at the California State Fair in 1941 and spoke on the theme, “The Negro: His Place in National Defense,” and they also served on various anti-discrimination councils developed by state and local employment agencies and labor unions.⁴⁸

Most of the racial barriers broken down during the war years were due to the labor shortage. Naturally these barriers reappeared after the war and white labor was again in abundance. The problems that concerned Oakland’s “old-timers” — segregation in housing, for example, would grow more severe after the war when whites fled to the suburbs. As the “old-timers” concerned themselves with issues of discrimination, racism, and segregation, which affected the whole community, they did not concentrate on the problems faced by the black newcomers. As a result, the black migrants had to develop their own institutions, which helped them to adjust to urban life in the West.

The new migrants enriched the East Bay cultural scene with music, spirituality, southern food, story telling and craft traditions. Their expressive religious tradition manifested in a host of small churches, which provided a critical

⁴⁸ California Voice, August 22, 1941, 2.

structure of sustaining relationships, shared values, and a new communalism. Although the rural southerners made the strongest impression because their experience and culture were in such contrast to East Bay traditions, not all newly arrived black migrants were rural or southern. Many came from northern and midwestern cities bringing with them long histories and traditions of political assertiveness and organization. This diversity and expansion no longer implied familiarity or an automatic loyalty. Developing a sense of black community would now be a difficult challenge. However, difficulty never stopped East Bay blacks. At the war's end, the underlying issue for African Americans was to demand the position in the community to which their numbers entitled them. The first round of the struggle focused on employment. Black Oaklanders and other East Bay residents responded to CIO union recruitment efforts, participated in a general strike in Oakland in 1946 and took part in unsuccessful campaigns to secure federal and state fair employment practices laws. When the California legislature rejected the state bill, blacks launched a statewide campaign for an initiative measure, but this was also defeated by a wide margin.⁴⁹

The 1948 election of William Byron Rumford to the State Assembly symbolized black determination to not treat wartime gains as temporary but as part of their rights as citizens. Democrat Rumford's election was accomplished by the

⁴⁹ Statement of the Vote, General Election 1946, State of California, 35.

political acumen of former Republican D.G. Gibson, who constructed an alliance between blacks, the CIO-led branch of the labor movement, and white liberals in the Council of Churches. It was this coalition which would proceed through the 1950s to institutionalize principles of equal opportunity through such state legislation as Rumford's bills for fair employment (passed in 1959) and fair housing (1963). In order to pass such legislation, it was necessary to mount a years-long organizing effort, which included annual demonstrations in Sacramento and the careful use of a strategic mailing list to mobilize pressure on legislators at critical moments. C.L. Dellums, who chaired a statewide committee on fair employment and was appointed to the Fair Employment Practices Commission when it was finally created, recounted how the organizers refused to give up but repeated their efforts for nine years until Rumford's legislation finally passed.⁵⁰ Tarea Hall Pittman had once used similar tactics representing the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Childcare assistance was an urgent need for many black women who worked outside the home and for whom industry employment had been an improvement over previous service jobs. Although the NCNW effort did not produce state-supported child-care, it mobilized black women to participate actively in all levels of politics.⁵¹

The turn to government was a double edge sword. It came at the expense of

⁵⁰ Dellums, 115-126.

the self-contained black voluntary organizations. This was especially challenging for black women's organizations. Although the leading women's clubs survived, the new scale of the black population required much larger structures to deliver needed services. For example, Tarea Hall Pittman's return to graduate school in the 1940s for professional training as a social worker was motivated in part by her wish to improve her effectiveness in bringing the Fannie Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery into compliance with state regulations. Her work for the NCNW and the NAACP focused on making demands of government rather than on providing services through voluntary organizations.⁵² As a consequence of governmental participation in these areas, the older organizations lost an important aspect of their leadership role and no longer automatically attracted the most talented young people to active involvement. Integration ended the distinctive role of the black YWCA, for example, which was absorbed into the parent organization where blacks did not have leadership roles.

With such drastic changes in Oakland's African American community, leaders, especially black women, nonetheless continued to work creatively and courageously to bring about solutions to racial problems and to create an environment of high expectations and aspirations. These efforts are seen through the examples of Frances Albrier and Tarea Hall Pittman. Furthermore, as black

⁵¹ Tarea Hall Pittman, "NAACP Official and Civil Rights Worker." Regional Oral History Office and Earl Warren

Oaklanders pushed into the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, there was reason to hope that the visionary leadership that had characterized the community of African Americans in the city since the 1850s would succeed in setting a course leading to contemporary strategies of social and political activism and economic betterment among the current generation of African Americans and beyond.

Oral History Project (Bancroft Library) University of California, Berkeley, 55-60.

⁵² Ibid, 48-50

EPILOGUE

Throughout American history, African Americans have waged a multi-front battle against white supremacy and racial injustice. Through centuries of enslavement, political disenfranchisement, and social and economic inequality, Africans and their descendants have forged notions of power, community, and identity into weapons that challenged the dominant society. While the efforts of African Americans in this regard, particularly the efforts of African American northerners and southerners has been well-documented, the experiences of African Americans in the West has largely been ignored. Although they were few in number—particularly during the nineteenth and throughout the early part of the twentieth-century—there was a progressive and active community of African Americans residing in the West—most prominently in the state of California. Just as their brethren in the North and the South, the scourge of racism also confronted California’s black pioneers, many of who migrated to California with dreams of new opportunities for advancement; and likewise, they devised ways in which to transform the restrictive social, economic, and political conditions fashioning their new existence. At the turn of the twentieth-century, black women were especially engaged in dialogue over the direction and framework of the race’s struggle for survival, empowerment, and uplift. In an attempt to position black Californians within this larger narrative of black struggle, *We Did What We Had to Do* offers a

new and nuanced interpretation that emphasizes the pioneering efforts and activism of these largely invisible black trailblazers.

As part of an activist lineage and ideological heritage, which began with black educator Elizabeth Flood, black clubwomen in Oakland used the self-help tradition to conduct their race work in the twentieth century. In their efforts to protect and defend black children and black womanhood, they established the Fannie Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery, as well as a "colored" branch of the Young Women's Christian Association. Moreover, in their attempts to promote racial gradualism, clubwomen, led by black journalist Delilah Beasley, engaged in activities, which encouraged interracial understanding and cooperation in the city.

However, with demographic changes as a result of black migration in the decades immediately proceeding World War II, my dissertation suggests that black women began to critically reassess racial self-help and accommodationist racial ideologies, particularly amid changes occurring on both a national and local scale. Specifically, this study explored how intercollegiate black-Greek letter sororities and its members refashioned their activist agendas away from the socio-moral toward the political during the 1920s and 1930s. This shift in focus is observed most clearly through the activist and personal pursuits of UC Berkeley co-eds and sorority members, Ida Louise Jackson and Tarea Hall Pittman. By drawing upon the life experiences and activism of a range of women, the interconnected chapters

of this study have provided detailed examinations of the factors that inspired interpretations of race reform and facilitated shifts in strategy among significant groups of black female activists.

Locating Oakland's community of black female activists into the broader national intellectual and social dialogue of racial progress during the early twentieth-century provides a fresh perspective of the African American push for civil rights and first-class citizenship. This history reveals that from the moment of Oakland's founding, black women were actively engaged in shaping the processes of black community development and political activism in the city. Moreover, placing the activism of black club and collegiate women at the center of my study provides an opportunity to interrogate what, if anything, the particulars and peculiarities of a small western city may challenge about black activism during this period. Oakland's demographic exceptionalism as an urban area, as well as the activist potency of its middle-class black women reveals much in the way of where and how social and political change occurred during the pre-World War II decades.

In his seminal work on the development of the black freedom struggle in America, historian Vincent Harding used the metaphor of a river to describe its long, continuous movement. Harding describes the movement as "sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with the ice and snow of seemingly endless winters, all too often streaked

and running with blood.” For Harding, the river of black struggle is not only people but also the hope, the movement, and the transformative power that humans create and that creates them. What I hope to translate through my research is that all of us, regardless of race, class, gender or other categories, which may define us, are all part of that river and continuum of struggle to indeed make our “union, a more perfect one.” An awareness of the various ways in which local peoples actively shaped their lives can only illuminate and expand our understanding of a number of historical social, political, and economic developments and movements and at the same time, will help us to define and frame our place as part of that continuum.

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