

The Long Fight For Justice

Feb. 10, 1954

The history of race relations in Champaign-Urbana is probably no better or worse than that of other Midwestern cities of a similar size. The community was never cursed with the horrific lynchings or riots that other cities experienced around the turn of the century, but it did suffer racial unrest in the 1960s and '70s. And in the early 1960s the Illinois Human Rights Commission called Champaign-Urbana "the most segregated" community among the 15 largest in Illinois.

Although perhaps not as blatant as in some areas, there is no doubt that there was segregation of and discrimination against African-Americans until well into the 1970s.

And although there was no single turning point in the lonely battle for racial justice, there were several small fights that ultimately led to a larger victory for the community's black residents. One of those fights began on Feb. 10, 1954, at a Campustown barber shop.

John's Barbershop at 506 E. Green St., C, closed that morning after University of Illinois senior Don Stokes walked into the shop and sat down on a bench.

"Sorry, fellow, we're closed," said John Barthelemy, the owner of the shop. When Stokes asked why, Barthelemy said, "We have to go to a funeral. We're closed the rest of the day."

A second black man tried to get a haircut the next day. "We're closed," Barthelemy told him.

Within weeks, UI students, most of them women who were members of the Student-Community Human Relations Council, began picketing a number of Campustown barber shops that refused to serve blacks. The demonstrations went on throughout the spring semester and resumed in the fall, finally concluding in November when the chairman of the human relations council announced that Negro students were now welcome at all campus barber shops.

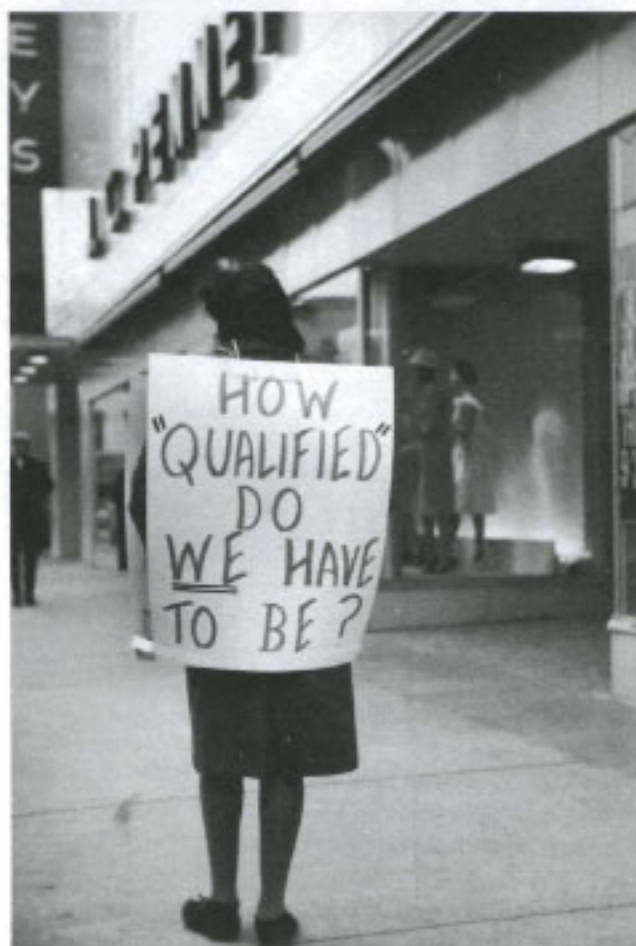
That was just one of the small advances made in arduous struggle for racial equality. As early as 1927, a black UI law student brought suit against a Campustown diner that refused to serve him. An all-white jury quickly found the restaurant owner not guilty and ordered the student to pay court costs.

In 1935 the 90 black students at the UI could eat only in the university's home economics cafeteria or at Boyd's Confectionary on South Wright Street. When Boyd's closed, the black students' choices were further limited. No other lunch rooms or restaurants would serve them. After a year a group of campus organizations, community religious leaders and UI faculty members set up a non-profit cooperative lunch room with a non-discrimination policy.

The broader community finally began to move toward some form of racial equality in the years after World War II. In 1946, five campus restaurants, threatened with court action,

agreed to stop discriminating. In 1947, the swimming pool at Crystal Lake Park in Urbana was finally integrated. And in 1948, the feisty ladies of the League of Women Voters issued the first in a series of reports on the humiliations that faced many African-Americans in Champaign-Urbana.

Titled "The Status of the Negro in Champaign County," it uncovered widespread segregation policies in everything from housing and jobs to education and entertainment. The study charged, for example, that blacks could not be members of the McKinley YMCA, could not take classes at the three private business colleges, and were barred from most bowling alleys, skating rinks and dance halls. Most movie



A picket protests the lack of black employees at the downtown Champaign J.C. Penney store in 1961. *News-Gazette photo.*



A Champaign woman and her four children inside one of the dilapidated homes that was finally cleared by urban renewal in the early 1970s. Photo courtesy of Urbana Free Library Archives.

theaters required blacks to sit in certain areas, such as back rows or balconies. And although most doctors and dentists accepted black patients, they often required them to come in after hours, when white patients weren't there.

In 1948, the League study said, two local grade schools, Lawhead and Willard, were 100 percent black, two (Marquette and Hayes) were racially mixed, and the others in Champaign-Urbana were almost 100 percent white. The oldest, most-crowded and worst-kept school in the community was Willard. It had 37 students in its third grade class, while the racially mixed Marquette School had 21 students and the all-white Gregory School had 14 students.

The League of Women Voters produced at least eight separate reports on racial discrimination between 1948 and 1963, with titles such as "Champaign-Urbana Shack Study," "Public Housing and Slum Clearance" and "The Relationship of Segregation and Financing Practices to Minority Housing Problems in Champaign-Urbana."

The prodding by the League helped lead to the adoption of open housing ordinances in both cities. And picketing was used again in 1961 when it was disclosed that the J.C. Penney store in downtown Champaign had no black employees. Store officials eventually hired several African-Americans.

Violence and racial unrest flared up in Champaign-Urbana's north end a number of times in the 1960s and early 1970s, with several shootings. Many of the disturbances were a result of charges of unfair police practices. But others were tied to poor job opportunities, inadequate city services and substandard housing in the black neighborhoods.