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A Home Away From Home: Recreation Centers and Black Community Development in the Bay
Area, 1920-1960

By

Natalie N Novoa

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Waldo E. Martin, Chair

Professor David Henkin

Professor Ula Taylor

Summer 2019

Abstract

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By

Natalie N Novoa

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor Waldo E. Martin, Chair

In this dissertation, I argue that recreation centers played a pivotal role in the black community as sites of racial uplift, political activism, and as a conduit to public service agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area. My work links literature in urban history and African American history to demonstrate the unique circumstances the city landscape presented to African Americans and how they not only responded to those circumstances, but also how they shaped them, especially during World War II. In particular, the project examines the ways in which black-founded and black-directed recreation centers acted as an affirmative alternative to the confrontations and humiliations that awaited them at segregated recreational venues as well as public amusements and accommodations.

In addition, this work explores why, how, and with what consequences these black recreation centers contributed to the changing geography of the Bay Area. Creating their own agendas separate from white reformers and city officials, who believed structured recreation was a way to control and exercise surveillance over delinquent youth, black leaders viewed these recreational spaces as opportunities to provide community members with the necessary tools to challenge the racism they faced at work, school, and in the streets. The most significant scholarly intervention of this historical study is to center the lived experiences of African Americans: to explore thoroughly and critically how these recreational institutions operated in their lives and communities. Put another way, this dissertation uses the experiences of African Americans, both developing and participating in these institutions, as a lens to investigate and illuminate the broader concerns of African Americans living in the Bay Area from 1920 to 1960.

To my parents, Darlene and Rene Novoa

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Eversole, as the dissertation neared completion I could hear you from the top of the mountain yelling, “But you’re so close!” I have overcome many obstacles because of your love and support. I often tell people I was raised by three mothers, and if we are to go by the broadest definition of what mothering means (to love and nurture unconditionally), then this is a true statement. My Tías Alma Novoa-Eversole and Evelyn Mullins have been my perennial cheerleaders and offer unwavering optimism for all my pursuits—as only mothers can. To my older brothers Rene and Joseph Novoa, thank you for always bringing so much love and laughter to my life. My parents, Rene and Darlene Novoa, deserve much more than a few lines of acknowledgement. This accomplishment is a testament to the sacrifices they made on my behalf, and it is them that this dissertation is dedicated.

Natalie Nicole Novoa
Berkeley, California
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Introduction

On a warm and clear Sunday in late April 2018, Oakland resident Onsayo Abram drove down to Lake Merritt and began setting up his BBQ. Friends, including Kenzie Smith, planned to join him and make a day of enjoying the city’s public park along the water. Lake Merritt has a long history of black community gatherings, especially in the 1980s and 90s when African Americans still made up nearly half of the city’s population. Abram, an Oakland resident of forty-two years, grew up in this tradition, and attended many barbecues at the lake as a child.¹ As Abram set up his charcoal grill, a white woman named Jennifer Schulte walked up to him and started arguing over the use of the grill.² Schulte alleged that the use of charcoal was illegal at the lake and proceeded to call the police when Abram refused to leave. In subsequent interviews about the incident, Abram recalled that “...the woman called Lake Merritt ‘my park’ and told him, ‘you guys shouldn’t be here, you shouldn’t be doing this.’”³ Trying to stay non-confrontational, Abram told Schulte there were no signs saying charcoal grills were not allowed, that he was going to stay, and that she should leave him alone. Schulte reacted by calling the police and waited two hours for officers to arrive. Kenzie Smith’s wife, Michelle Snider, who arrived shortly after, filmed the woman, repeatedly asking her why she was calling the police and advising her to leave the group alone. The video ends with Schulte crying next to a police SUV, saying she was being harassed. There are, in fact, six designated barbecue areas for Lake Merritt, with three reserved for charcoal barbecues, and three for non-charcoal grills. Abram’s grill was set up in a non-charcoal area, but when the police arrived, they did not issue a ticket or citation.⁴ The officer informed Abram and Smith of the park policy and the men agreed to pack up and leave.

¹ Momo Chang, “Kenzie Smith Speaks Out,” *East Bay Express*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/kenzie-smith-speaks-out/Content?oid=16513492>.

² Jennifer Schulte was later identified as Stanford educated, with a Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering. She worked as an Air Quality & Climate Change Specialist for a company based in Oakland. She lived in Oakland since 2006. After the video went viral, Schulte closed her LinkedIn profile and tried to distance herself from media attention.

³ Dianne de Guzman, “Video Shows Woman calling police over barbecue at Lake Merritt,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 May 2018.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The confrontation is significant for a number of reasons. One, it contributed to an alarming national pattern at the start of 2018 of white individuals calling the police on African Americans for trivial matters. It followed the arrest of two black men in Philadelphia waiting for a colleague in Starbucks (the manager called police two minutes after the men sat down, claiming trespassing for not ordering coffee right away), three black women being questioned as perceived burglars as they checked out of their Airbnb in southern California, and police being called on a black Yale University graduate student for falling asleep in a chair in the common room of her dorm.⁵ Significantly, all four of the these incidents were filmed on cell phones and spread online to demonstrate the daily forms of harassment and intimidation black people face when doing the most mundane activities like barbecuing, napping, or sitting in a café. The videos sparked outrage and criticism for what many saw as outright racism. Despite the dozens of police killings of unarmed black men and women in the last few years, these white callers did not hesitate to call law enforcement, viewing their claims to space and authority as more important than the potential violence that might result on the black bodies they found offensive. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in reaction to the violence inflicted on African Americans by, not only police, but vigilantes who used the power of the state on their behalf, as seen in these events. Countless forms of discrimination, micro aggressions, and outright violence happen on a daily basis, regardless if they are covered by the media or captured on a cellphone. The incidents discussed above demonstrate that even in perceived progressive businesses like Starbucks, or spaces of higher learning like Yale, racial bias and prejudice is a common reality.

Second, the Lake Merritt incident highlighted that even cities like Oakland, which pride themselves on diversity, are not immune to racial profiling and discrimination. Thousands in Oakland protested in the streets following the election of Donald Trump, for the Women's March in 2017, and for Black Lives Matter. While the rhetoric of diversity and racial equality is easy to get behind, the reality after the crowds go home is that black Americans continually face daily forms of prejudice and harassment, regardless of where they live. Oakland's once vibrant black community has been decimated in the last decade by rising housing costs as the tech industry facilitates further gentrification throughout the Bay Area. No longer seen as a hotbed of crime, more and more young tech workers

⁵ Matt Stevens, "Starbucks C.E.O. Apologizes After Arrests of 2 Black Men," *New York Times*, 15 April 2018; Scott Neuman, "Men Arrested in Philadelphia Starbucks Reach Settlements," *NPR*, 3 May 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/03/607973546/men-arrested-in-philadelphia-starbucks-reach-settlements> The men, Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson later settled with the city of Philadelphia for a symbolic \$1 each as well as a promise from officials to establish \$200,000 public high school program for young entrepreneurs. They also "...agreed to a settlement with Starbucks for an undisclosed sum and an offer of free college tuition to complete bachelor's degrees through an online program with Arizona State University..."

Daniel Victor, "A Woman Said she Saw Burglars. They Were Just Black Airbnb Guests," *New York Times*, 8 May 2018. One of the four professional woman was Donisha Prendergast, a filmmaker, and granddaughter of Bob Marley. The women are now suing the Rialto Police Department in California for the way they were treated.

Christina Caron, "A Black Yale Student Was Napping, and a White Student Called the Police," *New York Times*, 9 May 2018. The graduate student, Lolade Siyonbola, 34, who is earning her MA in African studies, was working on a paper in the dorm's common room when she fell asleep around 1:30 am. Sarah Braasch, a white philosophy Ph.D. called the police on her saying "I have every right to call the police...you cannot sleep in that room."

are moving into formerly diverse neighborhoods, and aggressively laying claim to public spaces.⁶ Part of Abram's anger following the dispute at the lake was linked to this growing white colonization of public space. He stated, "I've been here all my life. And for somebody who probably hasn't even been in Oakland for 10 years or more is over here trying to make rules and regulations on something that me, as a property owner and as a tax payer and as a lifetime resident in Oakland, [someone is] telling me what to do, how to do it, how to move and how to live my life."⁷

Lastly, the confrontation at Lake Merritt is significant because of its very designation as a *public* park. Unlike the false claim of trespassing at Starbucks, or the "misunderstanding" at a private residence in central California, Lake Merritt is a *communal space*. Rules and regulations about trash, alcohol, or proper grill location aside, the park is meant to be a welcoming gathering place for all members of the city. Schulte's accusation that the men did not belong, that the lake was *her* park, speaks to the continuing contestation of space in urban cities since the turn of the twentieth century.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, both *de facto* and *de jure* segregation effectively excluded African Americans from many public spaces. Segregation in northern and western cities was routinely enforced by violence and intimidation by white community members and local police departments.⁸ Talking about Chicago public parks in the 1920s, Colin Fisher showed how white teenagers restricted black access to park spaces by attacking patrons with rocks, baseball bats, bottles, and fists.⁹ The city itself tried to engineer segregation at the parks and beaches by hiring black park directors and lifeguards for specific locations, making them *de facto* "black parks" and "black beaches." In San Francisco, Oakland, and the surrounding cities of the Bay Area, white communities used similar tactics to limit black access to certain neighborhoods, parks, and other public accommodations. As the recent examples demonstrate, police departments are still being used to intimidate and enforce neo-segregationist beliefs and practices.

In examining recreation and leisure in the first half of the twentieth century, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of the history of urban space and the formation of communities. Looking specifically at the San Francisco-Bay Area, this project examines how African Americans sought out and created their own forms of recreation; how recreation generated community ties and encouraged

⁶ Julia Carrie Wong, "Dropbox, Airbnb, and the Fight over San Francisco's Public Spaces," *The New Yorker*, 23 October 2014. In historically Hispanic or Black neighborhoods, like the Mission District in San Francisco, residents are finding themselves not only pushed out of housing, but public parks as well. In October 2014, a confrontation between white male employees from Dropbox and Airbnb and a group of Latino teenagers over the use of the soccer fields in Mission Playground was captured on a cellphone and went viral. The tech workers demanded the teens forfeit the field because they had paid \$27 to reserve the field online. The teens, led by a college student named Kai, explained the pickup rules (seven on seven, no time limit, whoever scores first keeps the field). The teens asked the men how long they had lived in the neighborhood. The video catches the men respond "Who gives a shit? Who cares about the neighborhood?" The video mobilized people in the neighborhood and they demanded that the city's Recreation and Park Department stop privatizing public space through online reservations systems that favor the tech community over longtime city residents and local rules. Protests led to the old pickup rules staying in place, but only for the time being. More and more public parks, fields, and campgrounds are being moved to online reservation systems throughout the country.

⁷ Dianne de Guzman, "Video Shows Woman calling police over barbecue at Lake Merritt," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 May 2018.

⁸ Colin Fisher, "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot," *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. by Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

⁹ *Ibid.*

African Americans to seek out leisure activities that helped give positive meaning to their lives. Starting with World War I, wartime industry encouraged black workers to migrate North and West to fill defense industry jobs. While racism and discrimination were certainly present in these cities, they nonetheless presented new opportunities and greater freedom. With better wages and an assortment of amusements that served metropolitan areas, African Americans living in the Bay Area participated in and created a unique culture expressed in leisure time. Frequenting jazz clubs, dance halls, joining sports leagues, and going to the local YMCA/YWCA all enhanced their social experience. Historians have written extensively about African Americans and sports, but these works generally restrict the focus to men and a specific type of recreation. This dissertation has a broader scope and analysis.

Specifically, how did teens, young adults, and families living in the Bay Area carve out a sphere of recreation despite the daily grind of work/school and the pervasiveness of social and institutional racism? To what extent did the demand for and participation in recreation alleviate, or even exacerbate racial tensions they confronted at work and school, as well as in their neighborhoods and communities? Focusing on the black YMCA, the black YWCA, the de Fremery Recreation Center in Oakland, and the Booker T. Washington Community Center in San Francisco, I demonstrate the significance of black-led community centers as significant sites for socializing, education, and recreation. More importantly, I examine how these spaces became centers for self-improvement, race pride, and community building. This dissertation centers the lived experiences of African Americans, aiming to treat as fully as possible how these recreational institutions operated in their lives. Put another way, this dissertation uses the experiences of African Americans participating in these institutions as a lens into the broader concerns of African Americans living in urban spaces.

Scholarship on organized recreation in black urban communities is limited, mostly because primary attention is given to economic and political structures within urban history and civil rights history.¹⁰ Foundational works in urban history such as Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* and Robert Self's *American Babylon* analyze the intersection of deindustrialization, housing segregation, and racial inequality in post WWII American cities and the impact those factors had on the physical shape of the city and, later, suburban development. These are important histories that explain the deteriorating conditions that cities like Detroit find themselves in today. They have also helped expand the civil rights narrative both chronologically and geographically: before the conventional movement starting date of 1954 and beyond the South.

Neither of these works, however, explores the day-to-day experiences of African Americans living in urban spaces, apart from highlighting the discriminatory policies they faced in the workplace and residential housing. A notable exception is Quintard Taylor's *The Forging of a Black Community*, which examines the growth of the black community in Seattle's central district from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Taylor focuses on the institutions fundamental to community building, including those related to recreation. He discusses at length the cultural and social importance of activities such as watching the popular semiprofessional black baseball team, the Seattle Royal Giants, the vibrant black musical scene, and the role of churches, lodges, and political clubs in organizing social events. However, recreation remains tangential to his larger argument about the black

¹⁰ Victoria Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

struggle for economic and political empowerment.¹¹ Exceptions aside, recreation is either left out of the analysis or briefly discussed as a byproduct of the larger issues of labor and housing. Municipal recreational services such as public parks, swimming pools, and recreational centers *are* in many ways tied to the politics of housing. Affluent and middle-class neighborhoods feature better recreational facilities and resources: the poorer the neighborhood, the poorer the facilities. For white and black communities, recreation was a significant issue; it was fundamentally tied to the broader struggle for control of and access to urban space.¹²

In the South, where city governments were tasked with providing "separate but equal" services for black and white residents, the black community continually lacked adequate parks and other recreational amenities. In a 1926 sociological study examining obstacles African Americans confronted in city environments, researchers compared recreational services for white and black residents in several cities.¹³ In general, African Americans had fewer and smaller parks and playgrounds, limited access to public swimming pools and beaches, and less money for maintenance and personnel.

Jim Crow practices and laws allowed local governments to segregate public services and allocate minimal resources to black facilities. In his analysis of Atlanta and the causes of white flight, Kevin Kruse touches on how recreational spaces such as golf courses, parks, and pools, which had been reserved for whites since the early days of Reconstruction, had become contested terrain by the early 1950s.¹⁴ After the success of *Brown* in 1954, black Atlantans felt confident in challenging these aspects of segregation in the courts.¹⁵ By the end of the decade, all of the city's public spaces, including parks and swimming pools, were desegregated, at least legally.

Kruse demonstrates, though, that desegregation did not mean integration. When the courts opened up public spaces to African Americans, working-class whites responded by abandoning those spaces, "effectively resegregating those places in the process."¹⁶ In mass numbers, whites moved to the suburbs and started privatizing space in order to restrict access.¹⁷ The main focus of Kruse's work is the transformation of segregationist political ideology into a modern conservatism. He especially looks at the recreational chasm that developed between working-class and upper-class whites. Public recreation was such a hotly debated issue precisely because working-class whites used public parks, pools, and golf courses on a regular basis, whereas white elites had access to and the financial means to join private clubs, notably country clubs.

In the North, *de facto* segregation kept African Americans and other minority groups out of public spaces, with whites often using violence to reinforce racial boundaries. In addition to housing and the workplace, sites of recreation became significant battlegrounds between whites and blacks.

¹¹ Quindard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 135.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ Henry McGuinn, "Part IV: Recreation," in *Negro Problems in Cities: A Study Made Under the Direction of T.J. Woofler, Jr.*, Institute of Social and Religious Research (College Park: McGrath Publishing Company, reprint 1969), 233.

¹⁴ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 117.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

For instance, in the 1919 Chicago race riot, the initial confrontation was about access to natural yet public recreational environments. The riot began on a hot day in July, when five African American boys made a raft out of railroad tires and headed into the informally segregated "black beach" of Lake Michigan.¹⁸ A white man, seeing the boys float by, began throwing rocks and hit fourteen-year-old Eugene Williams in the head, causing him to drown.¹⁹ Word spread quickly, fights broke out, and the race riot ultimately engulfed the city in four days of violence leaving "38 people dead, 537 injured, and 1,000 homeless."²⁰ Colin Fisher argues that historians have incorrectly treated the drowning of Williams and the immediate violence as essentially symptoms of deeper issues surrounding labor, housing, and politics. Fisher acknowledges that these are important factors, but argues that conflicts over access to nature and recreation were, on their own, causes of racial tension, especially in this instance.²¹

In *Race, Riots and Roller Coasters*, Victoria Wolcott places the struggles over segregated recreation at the center of her analysis by looking at commercial and municipal forms of recreation, including theme/amusement parks, roller-skating rinks, and swimming pools.²² Wolcott argues that the demand for the right to use recreation was about power and possession. Participation in leisure and mass consumption grew in conjunction with the relative prosperity of American families in the postwar years.²³ After the First and Second World Wars, the increasing numbers of African Americans with disposable income did not view recreation as a luxury beyond their reach, but as a right to be fought for and obtained. Wolcott demonstrates that the struggle for recreation, while not an official social movement, was a national movement made up of "daily interactions and disputes experienced by teenagers, mothers, and ordinary consumers who demanded equal access without having to face racial epithets and daily violence."²⁴ Unlike the previous works above, Wolcott takes seriously the question of what recreation *meant* to African Americans. It was more than just being able to roller skate at the local rink, or gain admission to an amusement park. Wolcott argues that full access to public accommodations, including recreation, was "central to the freedom struggle" because access to public space is itself a central freedom.²⁵

This dissertation builds off these works by examining the meanings that recreation had for the Bay Area's black communities. The subjects in Wolcott's narrative sought out recreational services that had traditionally been closed to them, and she examines the disputes that arose when they demanded equal access to recreational facilities like amusement parks, roller rinks, and swimming pools. The subjects I highlight turned inward and used community-based recreation as a means to

¹⁸ Colin Fisher, "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot," *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. by Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²² Victoria Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 7.

²³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 7, 189.

²⁴ Victoria Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 3, 232.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

strengthen the individual and build community bonds. This is not to say that blacks in the Bay Area did not stand up against segregation or challenge discriminatory laws. There are countless examples to show that they did.²⁶

However, the focus here is to trace the strategies black community leaders deployed in creating their own spaces that the black community could claim for themselves. Recreation centers became a vital gathering space for children, young adults, and parents. For newly-arrived migrants, organizations like the YMCA and YWCA proved vital precisely because they helped people find lodging, work, and social contacts in addition to recreational activities. Publicly-funded facilities like de Fremery, indeed, offered the physical space for gathering. With its wide range of activities for youth and young adults, moreover, community-based centers also generated a "home away from home" atmosphere. For the black directors of these programs, recreation represented an avenue for racial uplift, personal improvement, and community building. To achieve this, they provided residents with the resources, tools, and guidance to create the services that they wanted and needed. Members took advantage by organizing into political clubs, debate teams, black history classes, theater groups, and African folk dancing troops. They sought out activities that encouraged social interaction, but activities that also stimulated and satisfied their intellectual and creative needs. Teens, young adults, and families bought into the mission of these centers because they believed in the benefits it brought to themselves and the community at large.



The dissertation starts by untangling and analyzing in greater depth the theories of leisure and recreation in Chapter One. Considering both national and local ideologies, this section highlights the goals, methods, early leaders, and governmental programs that fostered the growth of playgrounds and community centers. Late nineteenth century reformers were the initial pioneers of the Playground Movement and believed that supervised play kept city youth out of trouble. Early twentieth-century Progressives, likewise, advocated recreational programs. However, many were guided by eugenic theories, and viewed recreation as a tool to engineer and maintain a superior Anglo race. African American reformers obviously embraced organized recreation for much different reasons. But, again, even within black communities, there were often conflicting goals and motivations, particularly between reformist leaders and the working-class residents they sought to help. This chapter takes a cursory look at other regions and cities to demonstrate the general pattern of recreation happening at a national level. The rest of the dissertation uses San Francisco and Oakland as the primary sites to evaluate how the meanings of recreation changed in reaction to political, economic, and social changes.

Chapter Two covers the period between 1900 and 1920, examining the ways that the Playground Movement changed the city landscapes of San Francisco and Oakland. Early playground advocates emphasized how organized play reduced juvenile delinquency. In addition, there was public

²⁶ Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

support for making the cities more aesthetically pleasing by expanding park space. Bay Area cities created playground commissions, hosted conferences, and formed collaborative projects between public and private entities. Finding themselves excluded from many of these projects, the small but vibrant middle-class black population built their own institutions, including in the area of recreation. Chapter Two investigates the racial tension that erupted when African Americans tried to gain access to public recreational opportunities. Last, this chapter examines the impact of World War I, and how the rhetoric around recreation shifted from concerns about juvenile delinquency to projects of cultural pluralism and Americanization.

Chapter Three examines the growth of black recreation between 1920 and 1940. World War I generated the first Great Migration of African Americans in the Bay Area, creating several pockets of black neighborhoods and communities. Because of their relatively small numbers, this first cohort of black migrants were not perceived as a major threat to white jobs or housing. While there was neither integration nor complete racial cohesion, there was also limited racial tension. Following the war, African Americans, on a national level, pushed for greater equality and cultivated the image of the New Negro, in part, as a way to combat the discrimination and inequality they faced at home. 1920 was also the year the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) created an Oakland chapter, Local No. 188, which advocated self-help programs and Black Nationalism within the community.²⁷ Oakland's black businessmen were especially receptive to Garvey's message of economic empowerment and called on residents to support local black businesses. The *California Voice*, an Oakland-based black newspaper, supported the UNIA and frequently encouraged its readers to embrace the tenets of Black Nationalism.²⁸ When Garvey visited Oakland in 1922 as part of his California tour, residents turned out in large numbers to hear him speak.²⁹

I argue that it is in this context of postwar expectations, disillusionment, and Garveyism, that the impulse to open black-run recreational facilities took root and flowered in the small yet growing black communities in the Bay Area. Shortly after the founding of the women's Linden Street Y in Oakland in 1920, the Booker T. Washington Community Center, at 1433 Divisadero, opened to serve the black community in San Francisco.³⁰ In 1927, Oakland's first black YMCA opened at 3431 Market Street. Though run by different local leaders, these three facilities shared common goals. They sought to provide not only recreation but vital services to help with employment, education, and child care. During the early 1920s, notions of clean, legitimate fun, and Victorian notions of gentility influenced religious organizations like the YMCA and YWCA. Black middle-class reformers viewed commercialized leisure, such as dance halls and bars, as dangerous, whereas organized and community-based recreation was considered "wholesome."³¹ In effect, organized and community-based recreation advanced locally as well as nationally among blacks a "politics of respectability": black uplift and

²⁷ Delores Nason McBroom, *Parallel Communities: African Americans in California's East Bay, 1850-1963* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 55.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 56.

³⁰ Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 157.

³¹ Sarah Mercer Judson, "Leisure is a Foe to Any Man": The Pleasure and Dangers of Atlanta During WWI," *Journal of Women's, History* 15, no. 1 (2003), 92.

affirmation, and in time, white acceptance of blacks, owing to blacks being a clearly respectable people.³²

The second half of the chapter looks at the impact of the Great Depression to the onset of World War II. The economic crash hit African Americans and other minorities the hardest. They were often the first fired, and received substantially less from federal and state relief programs. As such, community-based recreational facilities in the Bay Area shifted their resources and energy to employment services, residential placement, and providing free meals to the homeless and poor. Educational and recreational classes were still offered, though there were more options that emphasized a skill set. For instance, the Linden Street Y offered dressmaking and plain sewing. Classes like these were important for a couple of reasons. One, it taught participants a skill that could help them within their own households or help them obtain work. Second, it instilled a sense of pride and accomplishment. The focus was no longer primarily about projecting Victorian gentility or displaying a middle-class respectability: it was about survival.

Chapter Four examines the impact of the massive changes brought by World War II and subsequent developments down to 1960. United States entry into the war in 1941 triggered a second wave of black migration out of the South. In response to the developing Pacific threat, and with plenty of space and land for wartime industry, defense contracts streamed into the West. In Northern California, shipbuilding dominated the Bay Area, with shipyards constructed in San Francisco, Richmond, Oakland, Vallejo, and Sausalito.³³ The massive migration of African Americans out of the South and into the Bay Area in search of wartime jobs dramatically increased city populations and altered the dynamics of race relations. The massive numbers meant housing shortages. For families with children, and for young adults, finding a safe and comfortable space for socializing, exercise, and entertainment was an important component of building community relationships, in particular among new and old residents. Community-based recreational centers helped meet that demand. But with greater economic opportunity for African Americans, came greater expectations of what types of leisure and recreational activities they could find. No longer needing the services of just employment or housing, these rec centers expanded their programs to include classes in music, modern dance, ballet, drama, political clubs, black history classes, alongside the usual options of athletics, and social gatherings.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I explore how these spaces changed in the 1960s and took on more political significance with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Insurgency.

³² Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Higgenbotham's work is the most detailed and expansive analysis of black women in church institutions and the making of respectability politics. She demonstrates how black women fought against racism and sexism, and used positions within the church to advance welfare services to their communities. My research uncovers similar projects in the Bay Area, however, many of the women I discovered worked within both religious and secular institutions. Black churches often organized summer camps and youth sports teams and there is often overlap of community events being funded/planned by both churches and recreation centers. It is not necessarily that black churches and black recreation centers were inherently different in purpose, instead, they should be seen as working together in uplifting their communities. My choice to focus specifically on recreation centers is to expand the historiography on the ways in which African Americans created their own institutions and carved out space for themselves in urban environments.

³³ Marilynn Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 8.

Deindustrialization after the war closed many of the shipyards and the thriving economic gains started to dwindle. As the 1960s opened, the fight for civil rights and economic security became the primary focus for many black activists. In the South, African American intensified their demand for equal rights following the success of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. The following years witnessed an explosion of civil unrest as black leaders mobilized a grassroots movement and helped secure significant legislative gains. In the northern and western areas of the country where *de facto* segregation kept African Americans and other minorities out of public and private spaces, activists created different forms of resistance. Community centers continued to provide a space for political organization. As the 1960s activism expanded, especially in opposition to United States involvement in the Vietnam War, activism spilled out into the streets and into more public arenas, featuring an ever-increasing cross section of groups. Student protests at San Francisco State University and Cal Berkeley brought national attention to the Free Speech Movement in 1964 and to the fight for Ethnic Studies Departments in 1968. American Indian activists in the Bay Area formed the Indians of All Tribes and occupied Alcatraz Island for fourteen months, demanding reclamation of land and the right to self-determination. Anti-war activists and the third world resistance groups, likewise, organized and demonstrated on college campuses nationwide and in the streets. In Oakland, the Black Panthers recruited and held rallies on Sundays in de Fremery Park, marching in black leather coats, displaying a militant style of black power, especially black masculinity. These Black Panther Party (BPP) mobilizations staked claim to the park as a site for the development and public expression of strength and resistance. When the BPP renamed de Fremery Park as “Lil’ Bobby Hutton Park” after the young party member’s murder in 1968, the party furthered the effort to lay claim to and protect public spaces for black political use.



The struggle over urban space was not new at the turn of the twentieth century. It began immediately after the Civil War, as newly freed black men and women migrated from the rural fields to southern cities. Urban centers like Atlanta experienced social, cultural, and economic changes as African American sought out better employment opportunities and to distance themselves from the restraints of field labor. As freed men and women, they negotiated wages, lived in their own residences, and participated in their own leisure culture outside of work, albeit along segregated lines. The end of Reconstruction brought repressive Jim Crow laws and practices to the South that not only disenfranchised black men, but restricted black use of public and private space. Legal segregation, codified the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896, divided up city space in very specific ways. In the West, with relatively small numbers of African Americans until the First World War, racial discrimination primarily affected Chinese, Filipino and Mexican immigrants. In similar ways, these groups faced segregation in housing, work, education, and recreation. However, these immigrants of color dealt with the additional obstacles of language barriers, cultural prejudice, and lacking the rights and protections of citizenship. For African Americans, moving North and West promised an escape from

Jim Crow, but they nonetheless confronted many of the same white supremacist attitudes and customs.

In San Francisco and Oakland, an educated black middle class had made small political and social gains by the 1920s. Their initial investment and belief in community centers provided an important institutional foundation in which future growth was possible. As black southern laborers migrated in greater numbers, they remade these city spaces to meet their needs, within the confines of racial politics. Access to community centers helped new migrants find essential social services, initiate new personal relationships, and provided a retreat from daily and systemic racism. Community centers remain a ubiquitous part of the urban landscape today. YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, and local centers continue to offer services to children, adolescents, and young adults with after-school programs, sports leagues, and opportunities for social interaction. Likewise, the struggle to control public spaces persists. The proliferation of social media and the ability to share humiliating interactions with a wide audience has generated greater scrutiny of the inherent racism in these conflicts. However, as this dissertation demonstrates, contestation over city space has a long and complicated history. Black community centers offer a lens through which to understand this history.

The dissertation relies on the speeches, academic work, and personal papers of early leaders in recreation, government reports and publications, as well as archival material from the centers themselves. A bulk of the primary source material was produced by the center directors including Joshua Rose, Dorothy Pitts, and Robert Flippin, who were instrumental in the success of these programs. Their correspondence, speeches, program missions, and public work provide insight to their own personal understanding of recreation and the impact they hoped to have on the community. Material left by residents and community center members is scarcer, but their voices are uncovered through the letters they wrote to instructors and in the classes they chose to attend. In addition, the dissertation examines photographs, black newspapers, and relevant interviews from the Regional Oral History Center within the Bancroft Library.

Chapter One: Organized Recreation at the turn of the Nineteenth Century

“Our first great hope is to have our playground become a place where hundreds of children may play. We want a play factory; we want it to run at top speed, on schedule time, with the best machinery, and with skilled operatives. We want to turn out the maximum product of happiness, to utilize all the space, to be awake to new inventions, to use our minds for planning and our hearts for enthusing.” – John. H. Chase, Headworker Goodrich Home, Cleveland Ohio, 1909¹

In 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression, Dr. Hedley S. Dimock, Dean of the George Williams College of Chicago, spoke before the San Francisco Recreation Council and the Pacific Coast Camp Directors’ Association. Dimock, a social scientist, specialized in the study of adolescents and character development. He applied his work to the practices of group work, camping, counselling, and leadership training.² He worked regularly with local YMCAs, churches, and similar organizations that sought direction in developing camp programs and leadership training for counselors.³ In his address to the San Francisco Recreation Council, Dimock emphasized the transformation of youth culture and the problems confronting adolescent children. The main problem outlined was an expansion of leisure time. This of course affected adults as well, but to Dimock the immediate threat of new leisure time was on the character of the youth. The solution lay in training the youth for leisure and offering wholesome activities for them.⁴ The concept of “training” meant control for Dimock. He elaborated:

¹ John. H. Chase, “Points about Directors,” *The Playground*, vol. III, no. IV, July, 1909.

² Roy Sorenson, ed. *Hedley S. Dimock: His Life and its Meaning, 1891-1958, adapted from a birthday remembrance by his staff colleagues of the YMCA of San Francisco*, February 11, 1959, 8.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “Problems of Youth: Remarks by Dr. Hedley S. Dimock, Dean of the George Williams College of Chicago, before the Recreation Council and the Pacific Coast Camp Directors’ Association,” March 20, 1935, pg. 1, Folder 335, Box 97-17, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Divison, Moorland-Springarn Research Center.

We must provide a basis for the fruitful use of leisure, find new and wholesome things for the youth to do; we must control such borderline recreation as the movies, which means a live legislative and educational program. The biggest job of all however, is to provide an education for leisure;-of activities which are socially constructive and which also enrich the individual personality.⁵

Dimock's remaining comments addressed the more fundamental "breakdown of character" that permeated society. These ideas were not unique to Dimock, or even to social scientists. The Great Depression caused national reflection on the causes of the devastating financial and social crisis. Dimock quoted a contemporary *Harper's* magazine article, which argued that the Depression reflected a fundamental problem with individual character and a deterioration of values.⁶

The idea that planned and controlled recreation could remake the individual or shape the development of children into productive adults was widespread by the 1930s. The YMCA, founded in 1844, was based on this assumption.⁷ Whereas the YMCA initially focused on Bible study and religious instruction, the rhetoric about recreation at the turn of the century focused on the individual without necessarily linking its benefits to religion. Instead, the rhetoric centered on ideas of control, supervision, and surveillance. During the Progressive Era, social reformers lamented the rising rate of juvenile delinquency and viewed it partly as a symptom of unsupervised play as more women entered the workforce and left their children at home.

Josephine Randall, San Francisco's first Superintendent of Recreation, seconded Dimock's sentiments in a report titled, "Experiments in Recreational Needs of the Young Unemployed."⁸ Also writing during the Great Depression, Randall focused on newly graduated high school teens who had yet to enter the workforce. Without school or work to occupy their time, Randall feared the very breakdown of social relations. Reformers and public officials frequently employed hyperbolic language during the Progressive and Depression eras, and often framed the growth of leisure time as a national security issue. Randall continued, "Our national safety and our future civilization will depend upon what is offered those rapidly increasing numbers and how they occupy their leisure time."⁹ With limited options for employment, Randall feared young men and women would follow, what she considered, undesirable paths after high school: aimlessly wander the country by hitch hiking, riding freight trains or become so restless with inaction and disillusionment, they become mentally unbalanced or suicidal.¹⁰ Similar to Dimock, Randall viewed organized and supervised recreation as a solution to the problem. The "right" type of recreation taught leadership skills, civic responsibility, and ambition.

This chapter examines the development of competing theories of recreation that took hold in the decades before World War II and the distinctions made between white and black reformers. White

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ The first YMCA was founded in London in 1844. The first YMCA in the United States organized in 1851 in Boston.

⁸ Josephine D. Randall, "Experiments in Recreational Needs of the Young Unemployed," n.d., pg.1, Folder 335, Box 97-17, p.1, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Divison, Moorland-Springarn Research Center.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

reformers used recreation to Americanize immigrants, control urban youth, and engineer what they considered ideal American qualities. Black reformers believed recreation benefitted mind and body, and could be an essential component of racial uplift. Untangling these different motivations and philosophies is essential to understand the unique position and function of local black community centers.

New thoughts about recreation started with the Progressives at the turn of the century as a response to a perceived increase in teenage delinquency, and the growth of disposable income among the working class. Fears of juvenile delinquency continued into the 1920s during a decade of excess and promiscuity, especially in cities. By the time the Great Depression hit, recreation was seen as a tool to redirect the unemployed toward wholesome activities and control the social development of children and young adults. However, for African Americans, the significance and utility of organized recreation differed from these dominant discourses. For black community leaders and recreation center directors, the role of recreation expanded beyond control and surveillance, though black families also worried juvenile crime. During the Great Depression, the priority was survival and recreation centers facilitated the movement of resources to a financially struggling black population. The needs in the black community were even more acute as they faced disproportionately higher rates of unemployment and had limited access to public assistance programs. And as always, despite the goals or wishes of city officials who hoped to rein in the perceived delinquency problem, the people themselves-- the adults, teenagers, and children, who used these facilities had their own reasons for doing so, and their own expectations of what to gain from them. This chapter also examines the dominant views African Americans shared about organized recreation, the tensions between middle and working class communities, and how these ideas and tensions shifted over time.



In May 1924 President Calvin Coolidge delivered a speech at the National Conference on Outdoor Recreation in Washington, D.C. Aside from the problematic title, “The Democracy of Sports,” which segregation in sports, Coolidge highlighted many of the dominant contemporary ideas about recreation, and alluded to the influence that the federal government wanted to assert on the development of state and local recreation programs.¹¹ Echoing Dr. Hedley S. Dimock’s concern a decade later, Coolidge argued that children and young adults needed instruction on how to play. He also argued that men in particular needed to reconnect with nature. As a greater number of men went into white-collar professions, anxiety developed about the degradation of the body associated with white-collar work, and, relatedly, the benefits of physical exertion for overall health. Outdoor activities like fishing and hunting provided not only a way to connect with nature, but also to re-enact America’s nostalgic idea of the rugged frontiersmen who tamed the land and built a new nation.

¹¹ Calvin Coolidge: "Address to the National Conference on Outdoor Recreation in Washington, DC: "The Democracy of Sports"," May 22, 1924. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24169>.

For children and young adults, structured recreation was needed to keep them out of the “alleyways and streets” and guide their moral development.¹² Recreation in all its forms, including sports, gardening, playgrounds, and national forest reserves all contributed to the welfare of American citizens. According to Coolidge, ancient history provided two compelling examples of the “right” and “wrong” types of recreation. He praised the beauty of athletic games in Greek civilization, but lamented how the Romans degenerated into savagery with the gladiator games, contributing to the destruction of that once great empire.¹³

America, then, had to focus its energies on promoting “clean and manly sports” that developed healthy and productive citizens.¹⁴ Coolidge ended his address by describing recreation and sports as a natural unifier for a diverse country and a “truly democratic force.” He neglected the reality of recreation in America and how, in almost every form, it was segregated regardless of region. In professional sports, in public parks, in the private organizations like the YMCA, racial segregation continued to be official policy. The federal government was interested in promoting the growth of organized recreation, but only along racial lines.

The focus on recreation and leisure stemmed, in part, from the playground movement that developed in the late nineteenth century. Joseph Lee, a wealthy Bostonian, is often cited as the “father” of the playground movement.¹⁵ After graduating law school in 1887, Lee rejected a career in law; instead, he poured his energies into philanthropy. One of the first groups he worked with was the Family Welfare Society of Boston, in which he studied the conditions of congested neighborhoods.¹⁶ Disturbed by the practice of arresting children for illegally playing in the streets, Lee helped build a number of play spaces throughout Boston and began speaking publicly about the merits of supervised play.¹⁷ When the Playground Association of America (PAA) formed in 1906, both Lee and Jane Addams, the founder of Chicago’s Hull House, were voted co-Vice-President.¹⁸ In 1908, Lee helped lobby for a Massachusetts playground law, which required cities and towns with over 10,000 residents to provide and maintain playgrounds.¹⁹ Ralph Davol, the state representative from Taunton, who introduced the bill, believed playgrounds promoted an active, athletic lifestyle, reducing illnesses and diseases like tuberculosis.²⁰ Davol, himself, had to drop out of college due to illness, which he

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Joseph Lee,” *Play and Playground Encyclopedia*, <https://www.pgpedia.com/1/joseph-lee> ; Also cited in Butler, *Pioneers in Public Recreation*. Joseph Lee was certainly an early pioneer, but his experiments in Boston for public play spaces was not the only one happening in the country. Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood and Renee M. Blackburn argue that reform women spearheaded the playground movement from the very beginning and that it materialized out of years of reform work among middle-class women. Spencer-Wood and Blackburn, “The Creation of the American Playground Movement of Reform Women, 1885-1930: A Feminist Analysis of Materialized Ideological Transformation in Gender Identities and Power Dynamics,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 21:4 (December 2017), 937-977.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sarah Jo Peterson, “Voting for Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playgrounds,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 3: 2 (April 2004), 145; Ralph Davol, “Public Playgrounds Bill Explained by Representative Davol,” *The Playground* (December 1908), 20-21.

²⁰ Davol, 21-22.

attributed to a sedentary life.²¹ Appealing to public support for his legislation, Davol wrote in the *Taunton Herald-News*, “I believe the physical development of youth is as important a concern of a city as the mental development—that the athletic field is of equal importance with the schoolhouse and of equal moral influence.”²² According to Davol, in addition to preventing disease, playgrounds encouraged wholesome sports, and protected children from the ever-increasing automobile traffic taking over city streets and highways.²³

Significantly, Davol also stressed the inclusion of girls, stating “And not only the boys, but the girls must have a section of the playfield, for it is even more important that they be physically well developed.”²⁴ Though he does not elaborate, social discourse about women and fitness had started to evolve at the turn of the century, with commentators believing that *moderate* exercise and sport benefitted women’s mental and reproductive health.²⁵ Joseph Lee, likewise, believed girls needed supervised play, arguing that in the tomboy age (between eight and fourteen years) girls needed to learn the same values of discipline, compromise, and cooperation that benefitted boys. These values helped young girls become better wives and mothers, and thus, better citizens.²⁶

Reformers in other cities took notice of the success in Massachusetts as they attempted to implement playground laws of their own. The PAA established a Committee on State Legislation to provide information and support similar bills. Lee chaired the Committee, and published a booklet titled “Play and Playgrounds,” outlining his philosophy on play, and strategies to interest children in different age groups.²⁷ According to Lee, productive and wholesome forms of play were an “essential part of the law of growth, of the process by which he becomes a man at all.”²⁸ Lee’s rhetorical use of “law of growth” hints at the larger connection that the playground movement had with contemporary eugenic theories. The eugenics movement, grounded in the belief of a genetic hierarchy with Anglo-Saxon peoples at the top, became popular in the United States around the 1890s. Lee advocated for the poor and working class, but he also believed in the use of birth control, forced sterilization, and restrictive immigration policy to limit the growth of undesirable ethnic groups.²⁹ For the immigrants already in the country, guided play offered a solution to engender among them American ideals.

²¹ Davol, 21.

²² Davol.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵ Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women’s Sport*, second edition (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 7-11. The concentration on “moderation” for women was based in the fear that if women devoted too much of themselves to athletics and exercise, they would become too masculine. Participation in sport was not to diminish their femininity.

²⁶ Joseph Lee, *Play in Education* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1921), 392-93. Lee’s views did not extend past the time of puberty, however. He believed that once girls entered their mid-teens, their energies naturally moved toward womanhood. Lee stated, “Every girl should play with boys and should be encouraged to be as much of a boy as possible. She should learn to give and take, to accept defeat and hard knocks without crying or having her feelings hurt or becoming tragic over it. . . . If a girl does not become a good sport before she is fourteen, she never will, but will be condemned to premature youngladyhood. . . . Of course we must, here again, beware of adhesions to a passing phase. It is not a perpetual tomboy we are trying to produce, but the enduring values that are to be acquired during that period.”

²⁷ “Joseph Lee,” *Play and Playground Encyclopedia*, <https://www.pgpedia.com/1/joseph-lee> ; Also cited in Butler, *Pioneers in Public Recreation*.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Richard F. Knapp and Charles E. Hartsoe, *Play for America: The National Recreation Association, 1906-1965* (Arlington: National Recreation and Park Association, 1979), 21-22. Commissioned by the National Recreation and Park

In 1921, he expanded on the significance of guided play, stating, “There is one especial kind of adaptation exemplified in the play-built creatures and by men especially...I mean social adaptation, the building into the individual, in the form of habits and acquired reflexes, not merely of special aptitudes to meet existing physical conditions, but of forms of skill found by previous generations to be advantageous.”³⁰ Engineering a form of play to develop healthy, strong, patriotic citizens complemented a subsection of reformers who believed a superior Anglo race had to be maintained. Anxieties over increased immigration and worries about the impact of industrial labor on the body and mind guided a lot of thinking over recreation, at least in the ways it could help Anglo-Americans.³¹ Writing in 1914 about the relationship between eugenics and eugenics (external environments), psychologist William L. Dealey argued that the child-welfare movement, which included recreation and playgrounds, involved supporting genetically superior children with the necessary environmental tools and resources to reach their full potential. While controlled recreation could benefit and Americanize genetically inferior immigrant children, the focus was meant to help the dominant race.³² He wrote,

The child-welfare movements may thus rise above their present narrow individuation, and, controlled by the eugenic idea, may attain their social realization. Though maintaining adequate environments for the unfit, they should ‘prefer’ the children of sound, normal stocks; and insist that by maturity the innately inferior children should be, through education, segregation, or sterilization, placed upon a celibate basis.³³

Not all reformers grounded their activism in eugenics ideology, but for many, the “science” of eugenics gave the playground movement legitimacy. In his analysis of this relationship, Kenneth Mobily argues that there was a “cross-pollination of eugenics and play.”³⁴ He continues, “...with respect to eugenic ideologies and practices, there is evidence that several were adopted by the leaders of the Playground Movement: apprehension about ‘race suicide,’ scientific management, and segregation and restriction of ‘inferiors.’ In addition, evidence suggests that key figures in both movements comingled with one another, with potential influence on the playground and park initiatives.”³⁵

The logic of eugenics and social control as rationales for the playground movement were easy for donors and wealthy reformers to support. However, Sarah Jo Peterson argues that historians should not discount the more obvious benefits, such as the health and safety of children, which

Association, this text is a broad history of the NRA and its early leaders. It is meant to be a celebratory look at the growth of municipal recreation and demonstrate the significance of recreation in American culture.

³⁰ Joseph Lee, *Play in Education* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1921), 35.

³¹ William L. Dealey, “The Eugenic-Euthenic Relation in Child Welfare,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 19:6 (May 1914), 835-841.

³² *Ibid.*, Euthenics is defined as the science of improving the internal well-being of the human by improving the external factor of their environment. Environment resources, like healthy nutrition, and access to guided play helped children fulfill their potential.

³³ *Ibid.*, 841.

³⁴ Kenneth E. Mobily, “Eugenics and the Playground Movement,” *Annals of Leisure Research*, 21:2 (May 2017), 152.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

mobilized neighborhoods at the grassroots level.³⁶ Using Massachusetts as a case study, Peterson demonstrates that both strands of thought—eugenics and social control on one hand; and, child health and safety, on the other—contributed to successfully passing the playground law as a referendum in 1908 and increasing the amount of play space throughout the state. Eight years before, the Massachusetts Civil League (MCL) had failed to secure \$500,000 for the expansion of playgrounds. Under Joseph Lee’s leadership, the MCL refocused their efforts on mobilizing public demand for more parks and supervised play programs. Peterson demonstrates that the law was ultimately successful because of the broad appeal of children’s health and safety, as opposed to outright nativism or eugenics theory.³⁷

When Lee began his work with the PAA in 1908, he promoted a similar style of community-based recreation that focused on neighborhood support.³⁸ Peterson argues that by grounding playgrounds in neighborhoods reformers hoped to empower local leaders and provide residents with the political skills for other undertakings.³⁹ In Peterson’s interpretation, reformers, and particularly, Joseph Lee, used appeals of social engineering and control as a strategy to build a wider coalition along with local leaders. In her telling, Lee ultimately viewed play as instinctively tied to politics and that recreation had the ability to empower all participants regardless of race or ethnicity.⁴⁰ She concludes, “Playgrounds, because they were local and public, became one means to achieve a vision of democracy that found effective national citizenship in the preservation and invigoration of the most local and therefore most inclusive of politics—the neighborhood.”⁴¹ Essentially Mobily and Peterson are both correct. It is misleading to state that the playground movement was solely motivated by eugenics ideology or nativist fears. However, it is equally misleading to assert that Joseph Lee was egalitarian in his thinking. Peterson fails to address the larger issue of residential segregation that kept ethnic groups largely apart from each other. While she asserts that the PAA “explicitly included African American...neighborhoods” in their promotion of community-based recreation, it was still on segregated terms. Lee never appears to advocate for diversity or recreation as a way to ease racial and ethnic boundaries. Co-Vice President of the PAA, Jane Addams, however, did view recreation as a way to promote multiculturalism.

Widely known for spearheading the settlement house movement in the United States, Addams was also a vocal proponent for publically-funded recreation centers and playgrounds. Unlike her peers, Addams was less concerned with maintaining a superior Anglo-American stock, and more about appreciating diverse immigrant cultures and their contributions to American society. Working out of Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Addams witnessed the changing demographics of the city. She understood, that unlike the ancient European city-states of the past, an American culture had to be willing to incorporate multiculturalism. Writing in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1912, Addams argued, “...in the modern city, and especially the cities in America, solidarity

³⁶ Sarah Jo Peterson, “Voting for Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playgrounds,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 3: 2 (April 2004), 152.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 165-68.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 174

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 175

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

cannot depend upon any of these sanctions, for the state is composed of people brought together from all the nations of the earth. The patriotism of the modern state must be based not upon a consciousness of homogeneity but upon a respect for variation, not upon inherited memory but upon trained imagination.”⁴² One of the spaces to socialize new immigrants, not only with each other, but with a broader American public, was the public recreation center.”⁴³ Addams worked almost exclusively with European immigrants at Hull House, mentioning the customs of Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Norwegians in her article, but she was also sympathetic to the similar exclusion African Americans faced in society. The black population in Chicago remained below 2% at the turn of the century, limiting Addams to the true extent of black oppression. It is notable, however, that Addams hired Harriet Rice, an African American woman, as the resident physician at Hull House.⁴⁴ Similar to her peers, Addams believed supervised recreation reduced juvenile delinquency and instilled a sense of patriotism. More importantly, though, it loosened the boundaries across ethnic groups and allowed children to develop a “patriotic relationship with the youth of all nations.”⁴⁵ Addams’s alternative approach to recreation stemmed from her continuous contact with ethnic immigrants in Chicago. Living and directing programs at Hull House brought her face-to-face with the obstacles and hardships experienced by recent immigrants and their children. She witnessed how the monotonous yet strenuous reality of industrial labor threatened individual identity and Old World culture. Industrial workers were themselves part of the machine, and the work space had no room for creative thought or individualism. Whereas Lee and academics like William Dealey made their observations from a distance, Addams lived among the community she sought to help. Her intimacy with these groups deepened her empathy for and understanding of the communities she worked with and served.

The playground movement followed in the footsteps of a long history of reform in the United States. As early as the 1840s, white middle class women organized for voting rights, abolition, and temperance. The introduction of kindergartens grew out of these reform movements, along with agitation for child labor laws.⁴⁶ As Mobily argued in regards to play and eugenics, a lot of these political undertakings were intertwined or related. The Industrial Revolution caused anxieties about race, gender, and class as millions emigrated from southern and eastern Europe looking for work. Class struggles, labor strikes, and the spike in union membership at the end of the nineteenth century created an image of ethnic European immigrants as unassimilated and a threat to American democracy and capitalism. Reformers joined the playground movement for a variety of reasons. On one end of the

⁴² Jane Addams, “Recreation as a Public Function in Urban Communities,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 17: 5, 1912, 616.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 617.

⁴⁴ Dr. Harriett Alleyne Rice, an amazing woman in her own right, took the position at Hull House in 1893 because of the difficulty of finding employment as a black woman. Born in 1866, in Newport, Rhode Island, Rice was the first African American to graduate from Wellesley College in 1887. In 1888 she enrolled at the University of Michigan medical school, but an injury forced her to drop out. She, later, earned her M.D. in 1891 from the Women’s Medical College of the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. By 1896, Rice opened her own medical practice. During WWI, she served in French hospitals after being denied by the Red Cross because of her race. In 1919, the French embassy awarded her the bronze medal of Reconnaissance Française for her work with wounded soldiers. <https://www.amwaweb.org/wwibios/dr-harriett-alleyne-rice/>; “Rice, Harriett Alleyne (1866-1958),” *Jane Addams Digital Edition*, accessed October 9, 2018, <https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/1429>.

⁴⁵ Jane Addams, “Recreation as a Public Function in Urban Communities,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 17: 5, 1912, 619.

⁴⁶ Joseph Lee’s wife, Margaret Cabot Lee, was part of the kindergarten movement (as well as an activist for playgrounds), working in or running her own kindergartens for ten years prior to marriage. (Peterson, 158).

spectrum, there was the extreme belief in eugenics and recreation as a form of social control, partly as a response to the anxieties cause by the Industrial Revolution. On the other end, people like Addams viewed publically-funded recreation and leisure as a way to bring diverse populations together. Across the board, though, proponents believed in their health benefits and the positive effect they could have on the nation's youth.



Black reformers were influenced by, and contributed to, these types of Progressive theories on recreation in the opening decades of the twentieth century. African American leaders in federal positions took advantage of the opportunity to funnel resources to black neighborhoods, believing that access to recreation, even along segregated lines, was vital for community development. One of the early leaders in this movement was Ernest T. Attwell. Born in Harlem, New York in 1878, Attwell worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, learning business procedures and management.⁴⁷ By 1900, he took these skills to Tuskegee Institute, first as a private secretary to Booker T. Washington, and then as head of the business department and head coach of the football team.⁴⁸ For over twelve years, Attwell worked alongside Washington and participated in Tuskegee's mission to promote self-reliance, the practicality of "industrial education," and accommodating segregation as a way to make gains in black education and entrepreneurship.⁴⁹ This background and experience guided his work as he entered the field of recreation.

At the start of World War I, Attwell served as assistant to the food administrator for Alabama, before Herbert Hoover tapped him to head the national campaign for wartime food conservation among African Americans.⁵⁰ He excelled at this position and, after the war in 1919, was invited to join the Playground and Recreation Association of America (PRAA), which later became the National Recreation Association (NRA) in 1930.⁵¹ In 1920, he headed the Association's Bureau of Colored Work, leading that department for the next 29 years.⁵² As a branch within the PRAA, the Bureau of Colored Workers in Community Service (BCW) was initially created as a peacetime extension of the War Camp Community Services (WCCS).⁵³ After the war, the PRAA sought to convert war time rec centers into permanent neighborhood facilities, for both white and black populations. The BCW served as the designated branch to extend those programs to black communities.

⁴⁷ George Butler, *Pioneers in Public Recreation* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1965), 160-161.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey J. Pilz, "The Beginnings of Organized Play for Black Americans: E.T. Attwell and the PRAA," *The Journal of Negro History*, 70, 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1985), 60; Butler, 160.

⁴⁹ Butler; Pilz.

⁵⁰ Butler, 160-61.

⁵¹ The original name, as discussed in the section about Joseph Lee, was the Playground Association of America. In the mid-1910s, it became the Playground and Recreation Association of America, and then the National Recreation Association in 1930.

⁵² Butler, 161.

⁵³ Jeffrey J. Pilz, "The Beginnings of Organized Play for Black Americans: E.T. Attwell and the PRAA," *The Journal of Negro History*, 70, 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1985), 60; Butler, 160.

Under Attwell, the BCW acquired land for playgrounds, parks, and community centers, and worked closely with local civic leaders when establishing new programs. In addition, the Bureau provided training for recreation leaders and field service.⁵⁴ From his position, Attwell worked diligently to expand recreational opportunities and resources for minority groups. He traveled extensively to cities and small towns, offering advice and counsel in areas of "...legislation, finance campaigns, building plans, training and personnel problems, public relations, or the content of the recreation program."⁵⁵ Attwell's exhaustive efforts to expand the reach of recreational opportunities for minorities helped establish programs in places where none had existed before.

But the success of the BCW rested on the acceptance of segregation. The necessity of a separate bureau for African Americans, itself, spoke to the federal government's commitment to segregationist policies. Attwell's willingness to work within these confines was not especially controversial, and he was not alone in this strategy. Booker T. Washington represented a more conservative approach to racial uplift, as compared to more radical activists like W.E.B DuBois and Ida B. Wells, but he appealed to many black communities nonetheless.⁵⁶ In contrast to Washington's accommodationist strategy, DuBois believed that segregation fundamentally harmed white and black Americans by hardening the lines of social and cultural misunderstanding, preventing any development of empathy or human connection. In relation to recreation, DuBois held similar thoughts—that public forms of recreation should be available to black Americans without any form of exclusion or segregation. In the article, "The Problem of Amusement," DuBois advocated for exercise and sport to be administered by public schools. He argued:

In these schools of primary grade especial attention should be paid to athletic sports; boys and girls should be encouraged if not compelled to run, jump, walk, row, swim, throw, and vault...In fine, here should be developed a capacity for pure, open-hearted enjoyment of the beautiful world about us as to suggest to innocent laughing hearts that play is not a divine institution which ever has and ever will, go hand in hand with work.⁵⁷

Writing in the PRAA publication, *The Playground* in 1925, Emmett J. Scott, secretary-treasurer at Howard University and former private secretary to Washington, argued that African Americans did not want to integrate or live next to white people for the sake of being close to white people. They only wanted to gain access to modern comforts "such as pavements, street lights, fire protection,

⁵⁴ Richard F. Knapp and Charles E. Hartsoe, 84; Pilz, 60.

⁵⁵ "Ernest Ten Eyck Attwell," *Recreation* 41:9 (September 1949), 307.

⁵⁶ At the turn of the century, WEB DuBois fervently believed in integration and full equal rights for African Americans. He famously disagreed with Washington's ideas of "accommodation" in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, and he continually spoke out against segregation in all its forms in the pages of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*. In the magazine's first issue in November 1910, in reaction to separate black schools in northern cities DuBois wrote, "This is wrong and should be resisted by black men and white. Human contact, human acquaintanceship, human sympathy is the great solvent of human problems. Separate school children by wealth and the result is class misunderstanding and hatred. Separate them by race and the result is war. Separate them by color and they grow up without learning the tremendous truth that it is impossible to judge the mind of a man by the color of his face. Is there any truth that America needs to learn more?" DuBois, *The Crisis* (November 1910), 10.

⁵⁷ *W.E.B DuBois on Sociology and the Black Community*, ed. Morris Janowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 235.

sanitary plumbing...because these sections are usually the first to be provided with ample park and play space and recreational facilities.”⁵⁸ Black leaders like Washington, Attwell, and Scott felt obligated to request equality in non-threatening terms. Scott reiterated his point about white neighborhoods, stating, “The urge is because of the modern environment and not a desire for personal contact.”⁵⁹ In similar ways that scholars have framed Washington as a pragmatist, Attwell was willing to accept the conditions of segregation if it meant he could distribute resources and funding to black communities for the sake of recreation.

Similar to the sentiments expressed by President Coolidge, Attwell believed that recreation developed leadership skills, strengthened community bonds, and provided a necessary outlet for children and young adults. Throughout his career, he fought to bring facilities and resources to poverty stricken and overcrowded communities, often in northern urban cities. Writing in 1920, Attwell challenged the notion that African Americans only needed work, religion, or education to have a fulfilling life.⁶⁰ Not discounting religious or educational institutions, Attwell framed recreation as equally vital for one’s development,

He is deeply religious. He is eager to learn. But like all other peoples of all other times, he likes to play. And communities are learning that it is just as necessary to find wholesome outlets for his play instincts as it is to foster his religious and educational life—that parks and equipped play spaces are just as necessary for his development as are churches and schools.⁶¹

Half the battle for black leaders was convincing white reformers to see healthy living and recreation as equally important for black communities and communities of color. Attwell accepted the realities of segregation, yet he still challenged the status quo by arguing that recreation and leisure were rights, not privileges. Working for the national government restricted Attwell in terms of rhetoric and strategy. Step one was bringing national attention to the issue. Step two was expanding black access to parks, recreation centers, and wholesome leisure by any measure. Throughout the interwar years, he committed himself to highlighting the inequalities of access and stressed how providing recreation to black communities benefitted the country as a whole. Like white Progressives, Attwell argued that organized recreation decreased crime and molded the youth into productive and patriotic citizens. But laced underneath it all, Attwell hammered at the inequality issue and the obligation that the government had in providing resources for black communities. At the 1928 National Conference of Social Work, he commented,

Millions of colored children and adults of this racial group representing one tenth of our population have never felt the thrill of discovering a playground within their neighborhood; thousand more have not yet received the tremendous value of leisure-

⁵⁸ Emmett Scott, “Leisure Time and the Colored Citizen,” *The Playground*, 18:10 (January 1925), 593-4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Ernest T. Attwell, “Playgrounds for Colored America,” *The Park International*, 1:1 (The Park Institute of America, 1920), 217.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

time guidance or trained leadership in play or recreational activities. The development of recreation for Negroes is in the 'covered wagon' stage.⁶²

Attwell understood that African Americans, and people of color in general, needed community centers and recreational facilities *because* of the segregated world they lived in. As evidenced with the centers that developed in the Bay Area, Attwell envisioned community centers as being hubs of information and resources beyond just recreation. His first project with the PRAA involved turning the temporary War Camp Community Service Centers into permanent recreation centers in twenty-seven cities. These centers originally opened to serve military bases and provide wholesome social activities for soldiers. By turning them into permanent community centers, Attwell hoped they would act as the link for African Americans to the resources they needed for racial uplift and healthy community development. The centers often included a health center, library, nursery, trade school, welfare center, and employment agency.⁶³ Linking bureaucratic agencies or filling in the gap left by agencies refusing to work with people of color became one of the fundamental roles played by black community centers. This framework replicated itself nationally among centers opened by Attwell, and those founded and operated independently. In addition to overseeing the transition of war camp community centers into permanent neighborhood facilities, Attwell effectively led local finance campaigns to raise funds for new buildings. Meeting with black and white city officials alike, Attwell reiterated the benefits that such centers brought the city as a whole. Without them, children and young adults were left to socialize on the "sidewalks, curbstones, street corners and alleys, or in unsavory amusement places."⁶⁴

In the National Urban League's journal *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Attwell's work was praised in a 1924 article, "Play and Negro Progress."⁶⁵ The short piece reiterated the dominant beliefs about recreation, but emphasized the progress being made in terms of providing black American communities with recreation programs.⁶⁶ At the time, forty-seven cities administered recreation programs for black communities. They were supported by a combination of contributions from middle class African Americans, white allies, and city governments. An example highlighted in the article discussed how the city of Norfolk, Virginia appropriated \$5000 a year toward the "colored Community Service work."⁶⁷ *The Playground*, likewise, celebrated the Norfolk city government for its contribution to the "Colored Citizens" of the city.⁶⁸ The center became a gathering spot for various civil and social organizations, but most significantly, it acted as a makeshift health clinic. Three times

⁶² Butler, 161-62.

⁶³ Ibid, 162.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* was a journal published by the National Urban League between 1923 and 1949. The journal provided an academic, cultural, and literary forum about the life and experiences of African Americans in the U.S.

⁶⁶ "Play and Negro Progress," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, 2: 13 (January 1924), 22. See also, "THE FIRST HUNDRED NEGRO WORKERS: THE FRANK STORY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF A NEGRO WELFARE WORKER BY W.P. YOUNG.)

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Genevieve Fox, "Norfolk Considers Its Colored Citizens," *The Playground*, 16:11 (February 1923), 540. While neither the *Opportunity* nor *Playground* article provides a definitive date on when the Norfolk community center opened, I estimate that the city allocated funds in 1922. CONSULT THE NORFOLK JOURNAL AND GUIDE NEWSPAPER.

a week, fifteen doctors and six nurses rotated shifts to meet the demands of the community. *The Playground* reported that the clinic was the only one in the country “operated by a staff of colored physicians.”⁶⁹ They averaged three hundred visits a month, with services ranging from pre-natal care and training for mid-wives, to home-visits for patients with tuberculosis.⁷⁰ The doctors worked on a volunteer basis, with patients only contributing a twenty-five cent registration fee when they could afford it.⁷¹ The director of the City Bureau of Public Welfare credited the clinic with lowering the death rate among Norfolk’s black population.⁷² In addition to the community center clinic, Norfolk’s black residents had the Tidewater Hospital, a 12-bed hospital built on land donated by Dr. Wilbur A. Drake, who served as Chief of Surgery, and his wife Mrs. Drake in 1915.⁷³ The hospital was built in association with the Tidewater Colored Hospital Association. It is unclear what services Tidewater focused on, but surgery was clearly one of them. It would appear that the Tidewater facility was reserved for serious medical services, while the community health center sought to address outpatient needs. The fact that the community health center came after Tidewater, around 1922, demonstrates that Norfolk’s black residents still needed affordable access to health care. According to the article in *The Playground*, the additional services at the community center made an immediate and positive impact on the community.⁷⁴

Throughout the South, this pattern emerged. Instead of providing necessary social services and equal public space to its black residents, cities opened, or aided, community centers as a catch-all space to respond to a variety of needs. In the same year, the Indianapolis Superintendent of Public Parks celebrated the design and amenities of Douglas Park, and their choice to hire black instructors, in a self-congratulatory article, “Indianapolis Provides for Its Colored Citizens.”⁷⁵ Douglas Park certainly sounded impressive. The playground had the usual slides, swings, and play equipment for smaller children. For adults, there were tennis courts, baseball diamonds, and lighted horseshoe courts.⁷⁶ The crown jewel of the park, however, was the “finest and largest pools of the Middle West” at the “cost of seventy thousand dollars.”⁷⁷ The black YMCA in Indianapolis was so excited for the new pool, they offered free swim lessons that summer. The article is significant because it perfectly encapsulates the racial reality of the 1920s. It mentions nothing about how Douglas Park was necessary because African Americans were lawfully denied access to other public parks and services. For Superintendent Walter Jarvis, Douglas Park represented the city’s progressive and generous policies. The reality elsewhere was much more dire.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 541.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Norfolk Community Hospital,” <http://chaamp.virginia.edu/node/4032>

⁷⁴ For further information about Norfolk’s black community, see Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk*, Virginia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Lewis’s work provides an expansion view of the black community, how they navigated Jim Crow laws, how they built a “home sphere” and the different strategies they employed to fight for civil rights. Embedded within the analysis is the class tensions that also existed within the black community and how, at times, this caused divisions. Ultimately though, Lewis argues that more often than not, “. . . blacks agreed more than they disagreed over which strategy to pursue.” (6)

⁷⁵ Walter Jarvis, “Indianapolis Provides for Its Colored Citizens,” *The Playground*, 16:11 (February 1923), 540.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 541.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Looking through statistics and information compiled by the National Recreation Association (NRA) through its yearly *Recreation Yearbook*, it is clear most cities lacked adequate resources, regardless of region. The National Recreation Association continually acknowledged the glaring inequality of facilities, funding, and access for minority groups. The repeated solution was to create segregated facilities, and even segregated state parks. In 1938, the *Yearbook* reported, “It has been found that there are virtually no recreational facilities available for the Negroes. This situation is especially serious in the Southern States where the Negro population varies from 25 percent of the total population as in Tennessee to 50 percent as in Mississippi.”⁷⁸ The report listed economic conditions and lack of transportation as significant factors and recommended states build facilities closer to black communities.⁷⁹

In the same report, the NRA extolled the growing “camping movement” that was being embraced by public schools and school administrators, and the ways it was being applied to both white and black populations. In Michigan, the Detroit Board of Education operated a camp for “problem boys,” reserving “1 month for white and 1 month for Negro boys.”⁸⁰ Washington D.C., similarly, ran camps for troubled youth sent to them by welfare agencies, settlement houses, juvenile court, and public schools. Camp Good Will accommodated up to 123 white children, while Camp Pleasant hosted up to 120 black children.⁸¹ The 1938 report also noted a new camp area used primarily by the Negro YMCA in the Bay Area county of Contra Costa.⁸²

The list of achievements in 1938 is commendable. Between 1936 and 1938, the number of camps in operation jumped from nine to forty-nine, with year-round use and attendance.⁸³ The significant growth was a result of New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which employed men to build trails and campgrounds.⁸⁴ State governments also sought to increase their public land holdings during the Great Depression. In the year 1938 alone, eight states, primarily in the South, increased public lands through transfers from the Soil Conservation Service.⁸⁵ In places like Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, thousands of acres of land were developed for fishing, hiking, picnicking, and boating. The majority of the acquired land was designated for white consumption, with a rare parcel reserved specifically for African Americans. The report highlighted that “...Jones Lake is the first State recreational area for Negroes in North

⁷⁸ United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *1938 Yearbook: Park and Recreation Progress* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office), 1939, 56.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁸¹ Ibid., 74.

⁸² Ibid., 72.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ In addition to trails and campgrounds, the CCC employed unmarried young men to construct lakes, plant trees, fight forest fires, erect dams, dig wells, and perform other types of conservation projects designed to reverse soil erosion and develop natural resources. Most New Deal programs benefitted white workers over African Americans and people of color. However, there were scattered companies comprised solely of African Americans and American Indians. See William Zachary, “A Place for All: The American Indian and African American Experience in Kansas Civilian Conservation Corps Camps, 1933-1942,” *Kansas History*, 39: 1 (Spring 2016), 16-31.

⁸⁵ United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *1938 Yearbook: Park and Recreation Progress* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office), 1939, 98.

Carolina” and in South Carolina, two tracts of acquired land were marked for African American use.⁸⁶ Emphasizing the growing demand for public camp facilities, the report advocated greater cooperation between public and private agencies so that “...the educational, social, and recreational benefits of camping may be extended to more of the Nation’s people.”⁸⁷

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, African Americans gained limited access to public parks in this piece-meal fashion. The community itself had to make demands and build coalitions with white allies to get any traction. This was a slow process by any measure. It took as late as 1953 for Alabama to hire its first black park ranger to supervise the “negro recreation area” at Joe Wheeler Park.⁸⁸ It was within this restricted context that black leaders like Attwell maneuvered and negotiated for more public space. At the local level, black middle class reformers faced similar obstacles, but also had to attract the participation of their communities. Working class laborers often had different views about how they should spend their free time.



For teens and young adults, wage labor allowed greater independence and opportunities to engage in commercial recreation and leisure. Both new commercial amusements and noncommercial spaces like neighborhood streets allowed young men and women to meet the opposite sex, carry on flirtations and play with identity through clothing, music, and style.⁸⁹ Looking at young working-class immigrant women in New York, Kathy Peiss highlights the link between women entering the workforce and the opening up of new forms of leisure, such as dance halls and amusement parks that contributed to rise of a new heterosocial culture.⁹⁰ However, while these new outlets for entertainment and leisure allowed women, in general, greater access and freedom, they still operated along racial and ethnic lines. Ethnic enclaves and ghettos ensured that most social interactions remained within these communities. For African Americans, white establishments either banned their participation or allowed it on restricted terms. The exception in some cases was among children.

In his analysis of the multiracial street culture in Los Angeles, Mark Wild argues that open spaces like playgrounds, athletic fields, and the streets themselves encouraged integrated environments for children. Integrated schools and playgrounds in cities like LA, however limited, nonetheless, provided children with the opportunity to “cultivate cross-cultural relationships that often were unavailable to (or undesired) by their elders.”⁹¹ As these children aged, the opportunity for integrated play and friendships declined both from external resistance from parents, but also internal resistance

⁸⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁸ United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *1955 Yearbook: Park and Recreation Progress* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office), 1956, 8.

⁸⁹ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 56-87.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 95.

as they absorbed the racial, ethnic, class, and gender boundaries that structured their environments. In contrast to the opportunities for integrated play in open spaces, specific-use recreational facilities such as public swimming pools, tennis courts, and golf courses created ethnoracial restrictions.⁹² Wild also discusses the language schools that operated within Chinese and Japanese communities in LA, arguing that trying to preserve cultural practices and intra-ethnic ties was one parental response to the segregation they confronted in the city. Language schools played an equally important role for the Chinese and Japanese communities in San Francisco as well.

However, language schools were inherently different from the black facilities that sprouted up around the Bay Area. Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans were similarly excluded from white facilities, but language schools and ethnic specific institutions had different goals than black facilities. Immigrants dealt with the tension of preserving their culture and traditions while at the same time trying to assimilate into American society. The desire of parents to celebrate their heritage and the resistance among their children was a story played out in many ethnic enclaves. Black institutions dealt with similar obstacles and tensions. The “twoness” of identity felt by immigrants was shared by African Americans, which W.E.B. Du Bois described as double-consciousness, being both black, and American, but not enjoying the benefits of full citizenship. The separate recreational facilities opened and operated by blacks were in part a direct reaction to the exclusion of white institutions. In the initial decades of the twentieth century, though, competing ideas about recreation often divided the black community along class lines.

From the turn of the century through the First World War, new commercialized leisure caused anxiety among both white and black middle-class reformers. As Peiss demonstrated in New York, public amusements like Coney Island presented new forms of heterosocial interaction. Dates, flirting, dancing, and swimming in more revealing bathing suits threatened the morality of the youth. Sarah Mercer Judson tracked a similar story in Atlanta, Georgia. Unlike Peiss, who focused on European ethnic groups, Judson examined white and African American women as they navigated the new opportunities for leisure and carved out a space as “clubwomen” for political agency. Judson argues that these clubwomen targeted commercialized leisure as “hazardous,” thereby allowing them to define other respectable types of leisure in the city.⁹³ Their movement into the social and political sphere of Atlanta society contrasted sharply with how white male political leaders and businessmen saw the place and role of women. There were important distinctions between white and black clubwomen. They took on different issues, and used different strategies in their work. Judson explains, “White women pursued a politics of respectability that tied women’s citizenship to public displays of their chastity. African American clubwomen focused more closely on utilizing public spaces in the city to protect black Atlantans from sexual and racial assault.”⁹⁴ Black clubwomen faced the additional challenge of being black and therefore did not have the same access to political connections, and “thus their activism was more neighborhood-based and rooted in local institutions.”⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 102.

⁹³ Sarah Mercer Judson, “Leisure is a Foe to Any Man: The Pleasures and Dangers of Leisure in Atlanta during World War I,” *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 92.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Directed by middle-class sensibilities, both groups of women feared the new modern lifestyle of the twentieth century, and the changes brought by the war. Organized recreation was seen as one way to stymie the moral ruin of young men and women coming to the city in search of wartime employment. They saw the war as an opening not only for political engagement, but an opportunity to influence the perimeters of acceptable social behavior for women in public space, specifically around recreation and leisure.⁹⁶ Their initiatives and proposed alternatives to events like mixed-sex dances, gave women reformers "...a certain level of authority in fashioning the sexual politics of the city, usually at the expense of working-class women's autonomy."⁹⁷

As rural southerners migrated to cities like Atlanta for work, a hysteria developed because the majority of migrants were African Americans and white women. White men sought ways to reinforce both racial and gender boundaries, specifically the movement of these two groups in the city streets.⁹⁸ However, with war came new opportunities for African Americans and white women to participate in work, politics, and leisure. As black women received higher wages, they opted to live in boarding houses and independent female residencies in black neighborhoods as opposed to "living-in" with the white families who employed them. Social workers and reformers believed too much female independence threatened familial ties and contributed to promiscuity.⁹⁹ Black and white churches responded by opening their own boarding houses with supervising matrons. Despite these efforts, the anonymity of the city allowed single women to participate in the developing commercialized leisure, such as dance halls, cheap theaters, and bars. Concerned about the health and purity of soldiers, the Commission on Training Camp and Activities (CTCA) authorized the creation of sanitary zones and imprisoned any women suspected of being a prostitute or suffering from a venereal disease.¹⁰⁰ Reformers likewise tried to keep social and spatial order by offering women structured leisure around wholesome activities that promoted moral behavior and patriotic citizenship. Wholesome activities included knitting groups, making bandages and trench candles for the war effort, and supervised dances with nonalcoholic beverages.¹⁰¹

Controlling the style of dancing became a primary focus, as reformers combatted the trend toward intimate touching and tried to popularize more traditional folk dancing.¹⁰² In a government pamphlet titled "Regulation and Suggestion Governing Dances for Soldiers and Sailors," it "warned against the sexual dangers unregulated dancing posed, describing the 'bad social conditions that arise from our dancing.'¹⁰³ True to the Progressive conception of proper planning and rational thought, reformers believed that dancing could be made safe and enjoyable with "proper dress, the right atmosphere, and chaperones."¹⁰⁴

Entering the workforce and the war effort was a positive step forward because it allowed clubwomen to remake conceptions of female citizenship, and helped pave the way to securing the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

right to vote.¹⁰⁵ But they had to control the perimeters of these new freedoms to combat the negative stereotypes of the corrupted, indecent, dangerous single woman in the city. They did this by offering sex education and linking prostitution with treason and betrayal of citizenship. Churches, YWCAs, and clubs provided classes on sex education and defined proper moral behavior. While always segregated, black and white women shared similar goals in this regard. The Progressive Era's sense of modernity, centered around social engineering, reason, rational thought, and efficiency guided many community leaders in believing that they could mold "...women citizens to be modern individuals whose lives and choices were informed by rational thought and obligations to the 'national community.'"¹⁰⁶

Reformers at this time wanted to move past the Victorian notions of separate spheres in regards to citizenship and political participation, yet still wanted boundaries in the growing new world of public commercialized amusements.¹⁰⁷ They focused on working-class women because these women had money to engage in new commercialized spaces, but also targeted middle-class girls who did not have to work and therefore had no responsibility outside the home. These girls posed a problem because they had no "defined interests" and with more time for leisure could fall into "immoral activities out of boredom."¹⁰⁸ The priority became channeling the energies of both working-class and middle-class women into wholesome activities, and more importantly, aligning these interests and activities with the patriotic responsibilities of the war effort. Part of the process involved creating new physical spaces in the city specifically for women. African Americans had to create safe spaces for both men and women because of the heightened racial tension of having black soldiers in the city. Judson states, "The Atlanta Colored War Work Council attempted to create spaces to keep black men and women safe from racial hostility as well as to create alternatives to leisure-based commercial culture."¹⁰⁹ The link between physical surroundings and values/morals, again re-enforced dominant Progressive beliefs at the time, notably the belief that with proper planning and efficient design, one could solve societal problems. In this case, safely integrating women into formally male-dominated spaces like the city's downtown and military bases.¹¹⁰

Shared goals aside, white reformers were uninterested in the conditions of African Americans and thus uninterested in ameliorating the worst of these conditions. In creating their own spaces, black clubwomen shared similar ideas of respectability that dominated white clubwomen, but they had the additional obstacles of race, fears of sexual assault, and uplifting the men in their lives in ways white women (even working-class white women) never had to deal with. The division along racial lines put black community leaders at a disadvantage. Whereas the white business community aided white female reformers efforts in securing physical meeting spaces downtown, black reformers received no such assistance and had to rely on intracommunity cooperation to create their own safe spaces. Nationwide, black elites, business leaders, and reformers had to rely on their own efforts to raise funds

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 102.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

for recreational and community centers.¹¹¹ Having these physical buildings and spaces were significant for community building and outreach. Especially for southern blacks, having a safe space represented more than a place to play games, it was claiming a spot in the city as their own. Black reformers viewed these spaces as moral alternatives to the vice districts that operated in many black neighborhoods.

In Atlanta, the red-light district concentrated itself on Decatur Street which cut through the black community and “was one of the few places in the city in which prostitution, gambling, and other illicit activities flourished with the complicity of the police.”¹¹² White officials and law enforcement allowed vice to flourish in black neighborhoods because doing so kept it contained and out of sight of respectable whites. But similar to Harlem in New York, it provided an outlet for curious and wealthy whites to indulge in the illicit activities they craved (like jazz, drinking, and anonymous sex) without corrupting their own public spaces. The black middle-class chafed at police compliance with Decatur Street and blamed city officials for allowing prostitution and gambling to flourish, thereby undermining their efforts to promote moral behavior and responsible citizenship. This was another distinct challenge that white reformers did not have to contend with, the active encouragement of certain types of illegal behavior in their neighborhoods by law enforcement and city officials.

White women, and once the war started, white soldiers, needed to be protected from degenerate behavior. White reformers felt compelled to invest money into securing space, and formulating recreation programs to build a moral and responsibility citizenry. African Americans, however, were seen as inherently corrupt and degenerate. Black women were projected as sexually promiscuous, available for pleasure without concern for consent (both in white households when working as domestic servants or explicitly as prostitutes). Black women did not have to be prostitutes to be seen as sexually available to white men. As a result, having “respectable leisure” took on even greater importance, in an attempt to project the black community as not only capable of responsible and moral citizenship. Respectable black leisure was also important in projecting the black community as deserving of all the privileges that go along with citizenship, i.e. police protection, social and political inclusion, and opportunities for safe commercialized leisure.

Unlike white female reformers who focused so much attention on suffrage and redefining the woman citizen, black reformers had to fight for the recognition of citizenship for both men and women, within the context of disfranchisement of Jim Crow. White reformers wanted to protect white soldiers from venereal disease, while black reformers had to do far more to protect black soldiers from actual violence and the threat and reality of lynching. In the South, but throughout northern cities as well, black soldiers caused anger within white communities because their very presence undermined notions of black subordination and inferiority. Black soldiers often confronted white verbal insults and harassment for wearing their uniforms.¹¹³ Although largely regulated to menial tasks, including cooking and ditch digging, black soldiers undermined the racial hierarchy that sustained Southern society. Black soldiers embodied and publicly projected their citizenship and masculinity, threatening the foundation of Jim Crow.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 104.

¹¹² Ibid., 104-105.

¹¹³ Letter from Oscar H. Jonness to Robert Flippin, December 18, 1944.

Black reformers attempted to keep black soldiers and black women safe with the creation of hostess houses. Meant to be a haven from racial tensions, they also provided the physical space for wholesome heterosocial interaction under the watchful eye of chaperones. Similar to the obstacles in securing a recreational facility, black reformers had to raise the funds for the hostess houses themselves, and locate them on the outskirts of military bases, as opposed to centrally located hostess houses for white soldiers. Apart from being physically inconvenient, it created risks for black women having to walk to and from these hostess houses.¹¹⁴

In *To Joy My Freedom*, Tera Hunter also looks at Atlanta, focusing on the black working-class, specifically the black women who flocked to the city after the Civil War looking for better work and distance from the rural servitude of their past. Hunter's work is an important contribution to our understanding of how African Americans adjusted to the urban environment and navigated the complicated task of defining their new freedom. It is significant that she dedicates an entire chapter to the development of leisure, and how the black working-class community created their own spheres of pleasure to the dismay of black and white reformers. One of the most contentious issues was around dancing. Dancing and music had been central to black culture throughout slavery, becoming part of work, festive occasions, and weekend pleasure.¹¹⁵ Hunter argues that during slavery, dancing was sometimes tolerated by masters, but it could also threaten the social order, "as when slaves ridiculed masters through song lyrics and dance movement, when slaves defied orders by organizing clandestine dances, or when group solidarity was transformed into insurrections."¹¹⁶ As black migrants flocked to the cities after the Civil War, dancing became tied to the illicit behavior of drinking, crime, and prostitution.¹¹⁷

Unlike Judson, who analyzed clubwomen and reformers in more abstract terms, Hunter located particular black leaders who saw dancing specifically, and unstructured leisure in general, as a threat to racial uplift and progress. Middle-class professionals and educators like Lugenia Burns Hope and Henry Hugh Proctor embraced the Progressive ideas of reform and helped build a voluntary reform community once they moved to Atlanta. Excluded from the public and private aid of white institutions, black Atlantans built their own "...network of mutual aid and fraternal organizations, churches, and Sunday school associations that had aided the sick, built schools, and housed orphans and the elderly."¹¹⁸ These types of networks proliferated across the country as newly freed slaves organized their own communities in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and on the West Coast, Seattle, Los Angeles and San Francisco.¹¹⁹

For the working-class, jook joints and dives provided relief from the workday and an outlet for musical, sexual, and cultural expression. Musicians and dancers combined the influences of rural

¹¹⁴ Sarah Mercer Judson, "Leisure is a Foe to Any Man: The Pleasures and Dangers of Leisure in Atlanta during World War I," *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 108.

¹¹⁵ Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Worker's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 169; Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹¹⁶ Hunter, 169.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹¹⁹ See, Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community*.

and urban, African and European, creating new sounds and body movements.¹²⁰ In addition to dancing, working class men and women found entertainment in gambling halls, sports events, billiard rooms, restaurants, movie houses, and vaudeville shows. All of these new forms of commercial amusement constituted what black and white reformers considered dangerous and potentially immoral activities that brought men and women together in more casual and intimate ways.¹²¹

Judson and Hunter highlight a class tension that replicated itself throughout all the major cities that African Americans migrated to at the turn of the century. Working class blacks, especially after the Civil War, wanted to define their new freedom in ways that allowed them to move, love, think, play and dance freely as they wanted. In the realm of recreation, they found new commercial outlets, often found on Seventh Street in Oakland and the Fillmore District in San Francisco, even when white establishments barred their entry or only allowed it on segregated terms.

In San Francisco, and the broader Bay Area, early community and recreation centers had similar goals. These institutions wanted to provide spaces for what they considered wholesome activities. While the first black-founded centers opened in 1920, with the Linden YWCA in Oakland and the Booker T. Washington Community Center in San Francisco, the Bay Area had a long history of black activism and institution building. The small, but active black middle class from the mid-nineteenth century formed civic groups, business networks, and social society clubs that aided the development of a robust recreational movement by the 1920s. As the playground movement sparked spatial changes throughout city landscapes, black leaders fought for the inclusion of their communities. Analysis of the decades before World War I demonstrate how pervasive this movement was for both white and black residents. Chapter Two will show how black clubwomen, in particular, built a network of social services to help meet the needs of the community, who were often excluded from public agency resources like the Red Cross and Salvation Army.

The California Association of Colored Women's Clubs was formed in 1905 as an affiliate of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.¹²² The intention of the association was to provide services like housing and employment assistance and care for the orphaned and infirm. African Americans made up a very small percentage of California's total population at the turn of the century. According to the 1900 Census, only 11,045 African Americans resided in the entire state.¹²³ The small numbers meant that Bay Area organizations like Oakland's Home for the Aged and Infirm Colored People, built in 1897, could operate on small budgets and with limited space and still meet the needs of the community. The migrations tied to World War I, and later World War II, fundamentally changed the demographic makeup of Bay Area cities and strained both public and private social service agencies. The demographic shifts impacted the Bay Area in two fundamental ways: the physical shape of the cities changed, and the ways that black leaders thought about how to integrate the newcomers into the existing community changed as well. What needs had to be met? What efforts should be made to fight for fair housing and equal employment? And most importantly

¹²⁰ Ibid, 171.

¹²¹ Ibid., 146.

¹²² California Department of Parks and Recreation, "A History of Black Americans in California: Associations," *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California*, Office of Historic Preservation, December, 1988.

¹²³ U.S. Census 1910. Census statistics included the numbers for 1890 and 1900 for comparison. The number of African Americans in California doubled by 1910 to 21,645.

for this analysis, what were the possibilities and constraints of organized recreation? The networks and institutions established in the preceding decades helped initially, but to better meet the demands, these organizations had to grow, both in literal space, and in their agendas. The political and social scopes of these facilities grew to include the fight for equality and racial uplift. The proceeding chapters examine how these changes unfolded in San Francisco and Oakland.

Chapter Two: The Playground Movement Comes to the Bay Area, 1900-1920

“In dealing with the problem of crime in youth, we shall make progress just in proportion as we appreciate the absurdity of limiting our remedies to the court, the jailor and the hangman. Our plea for public playgrounds is a plea for justice to the boy. We are literally crowding him off the earth. We have no right to deny him his heritage but that is just what we are doing in nearly every large city in this county, and he is hitting back, and hitting hard when he does not mean to while we vaguely understand and stupidly punish him for crime. Why shouldn't he rebel? The amazing thing is that he is not worse than he is.” -Judge Benjamin B. Lindsay, *Fourth Annual Report of the Playground Commission*, San Francisco, 1912.

On August 12, 1912, The San Francisco Playground Commission submitted its fourth annual report to recently elected Mayor James Rolph Jr.¹ Obligated by Section 9, Article XVI of the city's charter, the annual report outlined expenditures, developments of new parks and playgrounds, park attendance statistics, petitions for new playgrounds, and short essays on the societal benefits of structured play.² The report exemplifies all the goals and strategies of the Progressives, in general, and the playground movement specifically. On the opening page, an unsigned quote lamented the past error of city planning that neglected the needs of children, and thus, stunted their proper growth and development. It cautioned, “If opportunity for play is denied, and by just so far as it is denied, stunting and perversion are the absolute inevitable results.”³

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, prevailing theories argued that supervised recreation prevented juvenile delinquency and contributed to socially healthier communities. The rhetoric espoused by early leaders, such as Joseph Lee, were mimicked in San Francisco and Oakland. San Francisco's Playground Commission included an essay by Lee in their Fourth Annual Report, as if to

¹ James Rolph Jr. was a San Francisco native who ended up serving 19 years as San Francisco's Mayor, from 1912-1931. He remains the longest-serving mayor in San Francisco history. In 1930 he was elected Governor of California, serving from 1931 until his death on June 2, 1934. The James Rolph Jr. Playground on Potrero & Cesar Chavez Street, recently finished renovations on a community center and includes a baseball field and basketball and tennis courts.

² Playground Commission, “Fourth Annual Report of the Playground Commission, San Francisco; For the Fiscal year 1911-1912, with statistics and data from 1903-1912,” Annual Report and Reports of Documents, volume/container 1911/12, Bancroft Library.

³ Ibid., 1.

draw upon a trusted authority on the subject.⁴ As for their own objectives in San Francisco, the Commission outlined three goals: to keep children off the street, to provide wholesome play, and “...to develop a law-abiding spirit to offset the widespread gang movement, which cannot be adjusted by police methods.”⁵ For the Commission, the most effective strategy included increasing play space and installing properly trained directors at these sites. Under the heading of “Supervision,” the report stated, “An essential factor in connection with the playgrounds provided in the administration of public recreation, is the necessity of leadership at all times by trained directors. Without it the playground will fail to compete with the excitement of the streets, nor realize its possibilities as a factor in civic and moral training.”⁶ These goals were similarly adopted by surrounding Bay Area cities.

The arguments expressed in the San Francisco report shifted in two different directions after the eruption of World War I. On one side, supervised recreation continued to be a process of Americanization. On the other side, related but different in intention, recreation became an agent of cultural pluralism. The distinction may be slight, but it is imperative to parse through the nuance of these agendas. Within both projects, African Americans found themselves excluded from many of the benefits of publicly-funded recreation. At the same time, the idea of cultural pluralism helped legitimize their efforts to build a thriving, albeit, separate community alongside their white and immigrant neighbors. Before proceeding with the local story, it is important, first, to define the terms *Cultural Pluralism* and *Americanization* to understand how recreation unfolded in the city space.

Cultural Pluralism:

Philosopher Horace Kallen is credited with coining the term *cultural pluralism* in 1905. Simply defined, cultural pluralism is the acceptance and celebration of difference.⁷ As a student at Harvard, Kallen developed his ideas alongside Alain LeRoi Locke, who, later, became the first African American Rhodes Scholar in 1907 and, later, in the 1920s, the unofficial “Dean” of the Harlem Renaissance.⁸ As two academic outsiders—Jewish and African American—these two scholars rejected nativism, eugenics, and anti-immigrant movements, and argued that cultural plurality could exist alongside loyalty to a nation. With the rise of European immigration at the turn of the century, Kallen envisioned

⁴ Ibid., 29. The Commission included Joseph Lee’s, “Why Have Playgrounds!” which outline the major tenets of the Playground Movement and the National Recreation Association. Starting with, “The thing that most needs to be understood about play is that it is not a luxury, but a necessity,” Lee argued that recreation kept children (specifically young boys) out of trouble and contributed to the development of civilized and responsible men.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Leonard Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 13-15; Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh, “Chapter 3: Municipal Harmony: Cultural Pluralism, Public Recreation, and Race Relations,” *from Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis: African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*, eds. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Walter Hill (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 77. Other scholars who shaped and contributed to the cultural pluralist movement included Randolph Bourne, Dewey George Herbert Mead, William I. Thomas, Robert Park, Melville J. Herskovits, and Franz Boas.

⁸ Kallen and Locke were lifelong friends after meeting at Harvard as students (graduating in 1908 and 1907 respectively), and both continuing onto Oxford. See Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

culturally separate communities harmoniously co-existing with American Anglo-Saxon Protestant traditions; that the sum of these parts made up a greater American culture. He believed this option was considerably more beneficial than a culturally uniform nation achieved through Americanization programs. Writing in 1915, in an article titled, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot,” Kallen argued

...At the present time there is no dominant American mind. Our spirit is inarticulate, not a voice, but a chorus of many voices, each singing a rather different tune. How to get order out of this cacophony is the question for all those who are concerned about those things which alone justify wealth and power, concerned about justice, the arts, literature, philosophy, science. What must, what shall this cacophony become—a unison or a harmony?⁹

Alain Locke’s ideas on cultural pluralism mirrored aspects of his colleagues, but focused on the implications these theories had for racial identity and race relations.¹⁰ Locke argued that race was socially and culturally constructed, as opposed to a biological difference.¹¹ The reality of historical prejudice and racial discrimination meant that African Americans needed to collectively act as a “race” in order to assert any kind of political power or resistance. Locke wrote,

The various creeds of race have been falsely predicated. The political crimes of nations are perpetuated and justified in the name of race; whereas in many instances the cultural virtues of race are falsely appropriated by nationalities. So that in the resultant confusion, if we argue for raciality as a desirable thing, we seem to argue for the present practice of nations and to sanction the pride and prejudice of past history. Whereas, if we condemn these things, we seem close to a rejection of race as something useful in-human life and desirable to perpetuate.¹²

A pragmatic philosopher when it came to issues of race, Locke believed that even though culturally and socially separated, African Americans could make an impact through cultural achievements. As a leader and benefactor of the Harlem Renaissance, he encouraged black artists and writers to pull from African influences and to incorporate that heritage into their work. For Locke, their African lineage was a strength and part of their collective history, and as such, part of American history. Cultural pluralism supported the idea that even if kept separate African Americans could achieve a measure of equality. As a regular contributor to *Opportunity*, the academic journal published by the National Urban League, Locke’s ideas on culture, music, and race were accessible to African Americans nationwide, including the Bay Area. In 1934, the *Oakland Tribune* reported, in its section

⁹ Horace Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot II: A Study of American Nationality,” *Nation*, 100, no. 2591 (18-25 February 1915), 217.

¹⁰ Leonard Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 14.

¹¹ Alain LeRoy Locke, “The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture,” *Howard Review* 1 (1924), 290-299, from Leonard Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 192.

¹² Alain LeRoy Locke, “The Contribution of Race to Culture,” *The Student World*, 23 (1930), 349-353, from Leonard Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 203.

titled “Activities among Negroes,” on Locke’s latest article about jazz. In it, the *Tribune* summarized Locke’s argument about the uniqueness of black music, with its spontaneous harmonies and “infectious power.” Locke believed that jazz was the true American folk music and it demonstrated one of the many ways African Americans shaped American culture.¹³ Locke’s ideas, similarly to Kallen, argued that even as “culturally separate” communities, African Americans could have loyalty to the nation and be culturally innovative. Applied to the area of recreation, black leaders viewed separate recreation centers as a necessary compromise to provide services to their communities. Cultural pluralism, as advocated by Locke and Kallen, sharply contrasted with programs of Americanization and assimilation. However, as this chapter will show, the two ideas often overlapped in the area of recreation.

Americanization and Assimilation:

Ideas about Americanization and assimilation grew alongside the rise of industrialization and increased immigration. The large numbers of people coming from Eastern and Southern Europe brought with them new languages, food, customs, and religions. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, especially with the professionalization of social work, immigrants felt more pressure to learn American traditions and adopt them as their own. Industrial companies, community centers, and schools offered English language classes and, starting with the First World War, “Americanization” classes.¹⁴ The idea of the melting pot imagined incorporating aspects of these ethnic cultures, but in ways that still allowed a dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant American tradition.

European immigrants faced discrimination and obstacles when they arrived in the United States. They lived in overcrowded ghettos, had access to primarily low-wage work, and faced the burden of assimilating. But the fact that they *could* assimilate placed them in a very different position from African Americans. Especially for their children, either born or raised as Americans, the possibility for economic and social mobility was more fluid. They received full rights under the law and laid claim to the privileges of “whiteness.”¹⁵ Proponents of Americanization wanted to erase or reduce the cultural distinctions between these new immigrants and American Anglo-Saxon traditions to maintain a status-quo on racial and class conditions.

Cultural pluralism became a popular theory among African American thinkers because it supported ideas of self-determination. In his 1933 pamphlet *The Negro in America*, Locke argued that the disillusionment from the First World War caused a “...desperate intensification of the Negro’s

¹³ Thomas E. Fleming, “Activities among Negroes, *Oakland Tribune*, 18 November 1943, 8.

¹⁴ National Recreation Association, *The Year Book, 1917* (New York: National Recreation Association, 1918), 10.

¹⁵ In *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), W.E.B. Dubois argued that the benefits of being white in a society built on black subordination prevented interracial class solidarity in the initial decades after the end of slavery. David Roediger makes a similar argument in *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991) examining how white workers used the language of “white” and “non-slave” in their identity of working class laborers before the Civil War. In his follow up, *Working toward Whiteness* (2006), Roediger extended his analysis to European ethnic immigrants in the twentieth century, demonstrating how these new immigrants initially dealt with the “in-between” status of being neither white nor black. By distancing themselves from African Americans and Asian immigrants, these newcomers adopted American customs and traditions, including racial attitudes, in order to assimilate and gain the privileges as white citizens.

race consciousness and attempt at the recovery of group morale through a racist program of self-help and self-determination which has been the outstanding development in Negro life during this generation.”¹⁶ Defining these terms is important to fully understand the rhetorical shift that happened from the teens to the 1920s. The impact of World War I motivated national leaders, local community leaders, and reformers to demonstrate American democracy through more inclusive policies, especially toward ethnic Europeans. Recreation was an area where these conflicting ideas intersected.

This chapter does three things: First, it demonstrates the ways the playground movement impacted the urban landscape in San Francisco and Oakland; second, it specifies the ways in which the black community began carving out their own spaces for recreation; and lastly, how the World War I impacted these two processes. This chapter argues that a distinct shift occurred during and after the war, that placed recreation, sports, and wholesome leisure activities at the center of international relations. Instead of principally controlling the youth, it was about bringing different cultures and ethnicities together, while simultaneously reinforcing an ideology of American superiority. Recreation came to be seen as not just a solution to juvenile rebelliousness, but also as a natural unifier across nations and ethnicities.



The Playground Movement Comes to the Bay Area:

The playground movement was picked up and advocated by Progressives in every major city in the opening decades of the twentieth century. The problem of delinquent youth seemed to grow at an alarming rate as cities expanded the options for public amusements and commercialized entertainment proliferated. Child labor restrictions and compulsory education laws increased the amount of recreation/leisure time for children and teens that reformers wanted controlled and supervised. As evidenced in the Fourth Annual Report by the Playground Commission, local officials relied on statistics and expertise to legitimize their agenda. Originally founded in 1908, the Playground Commission of San Francisco was a formal body created by an amendment to the city charter. Prior to their creation, three public parks had been created through the California Club and private donations by local civic organizations. The first public playground was built on school property at Bush and Hyde streets with the funding for structures and a director’s salary coming from the Club for the initial three years. Viewing playgrounds as a public good, the city’s Board of Supervisors gave the Board of Education \$12,000 in 1901 to build and equip a playground at Seventh and Harrison Streets.¹⁷ By 1912, the Playground Commission had an appropriated fund of \$77,500 and oversight

¹⁶ Alain Locke, *The Negro in American* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1933), 12-13.

¹⁷ Playground Commission, “Fourth Annual Report of the Playground Commission, San Francisco; For the Fiscal year 1911-1912, with statistics and data from 1903-1912,” Annual Report and Reports of Documents, volume/container 1911/12, p. 17. Bancroft Library; Playground Commission, “Annual Report: 1928-1929,” Annual Report and Reports of Documents, volume/container 1928/29, p. 17. Bancroft Library.

over six parks.¹⁸ Still, the annual report included a long list of petitions from twenty-five different sections of the city that also wanted parks and recreation centers added to their neighborhoods. Even with increased funding, the Commission could not meet all the requests on their own. Yet, the expansion in the number of playgrounds in such a short number of years demonstrated the commitment San Francisco made to increasing and supporting a recreational overhaul in the city.

Similarly in Oakland, city officials led by Mayor Frank K. Mott, dedicated themselves to expanding the amount of park space and opportunities for public recreation. Mott formed separate commissions for parks and playgrounds in April 1909, and appointed Malcolm Lamond as park superintendent and Oscar Prager as landscape architect.¹⁹ While responsible for different aspects of park development, both parks and playgrounds worked in coordination with each other in planning. Dubbed as “The Mayor who Built Oakland,” Mott initiated massive improvement projects beginning in 1907 with the purchase of properties surrounding Lake Merritt to be used as public park space. Additionally, he oversaw the building of City Hall and extensive waterfront development.²⁰ The aggressive strategy to invest and expand public park space stemmed from the pervasiveness of the playground movement, pressure from neighborhood improvement associations, and the upcoming International Exposition set to take place in San Francisco in 1915.

As national and local leaders touted the benefits of recreation, the message was absorbed by city residents. Parents—across racial lines—wanted better facilities and access for their families. Before the expansion of in-home entertainment with radio, and later, television, community centers, play fields, and cheap recreation were seen as a public necessity. In response, city leaders in San Francisco and Oakland worked to expand the acreage of park space and generate public support for municipal funds and bond issues to finance new projects. San Francisco, for its part, wanted local parks and amusements to rival that of Coney Island. In 1910, Golden Gate Park expanded its children’s section and planned a public festival for May Day weekend to highlight the newest public attractions. In a *San Francisco Call* article titled, “The Finest All-The-Year Playground in the World,” Mabel Collyer reported on the improvements and enthusiasm shared by the city’s residents.²¹ She celebrated the manipulation and mastery over the land. For all its beauty, Collyer insisted it was not the result of nature, but man-made through ingenuity and hard labor. She informed her readers, “This vast area, as far as the eye can reach, was simply a heritage of sand—almost 2,000 acres of drift sand that had to be reclaimed...and the statement holds good—that God made the sand dunes, but man made the park. And it was labor, not of weeks and months, but of long years.”²² The redesigned children’s area complemented the existing tennis courts and baseball diamonds. New amusements included donkey rides, a merry-go-round, swings, play structures, a candy shop, and bakery.²³ The bakery sold picnic lunches, including the dishware for a small deposit.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Annual Report 1911-12. These included Excelsior Homestead, Hamilton Playground, Southside Playground, Jackson Playground, Jackson Park, Presidio Playground, and North Beach Playground.

¹⁹ “Oakland’s Parks among the Best,” *San Francisco Call*, 27 August 1910, p. 7.

²⁰ “Oakland Pays \$400,000 for Big Park Tract,” *San Francisco Call*, 6 November 1907, p. 8.

²¹ Mabel Collyer, “The Finest All-The-Year-Playground in the World,” *San Francisco Call*, vol. 107, no. 152, 1 May 1910, p. 12.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

Collyer's report built excitement about the upcoming May Day festival, and showcased San Francisco as being on the forefront of the recreation movement. She discussed how Joseph Lee had "inspired municipal reformers all over the world," and that Golden Gate Park's latest transformation was just one of many projects in the works. Collyer continued, "The playground is scarcely a novel institution to San Francisco. The park may, in sooth, be rated as a pioneer in the playground movement that is just now oversweeping the country."²⁴ In this way, cities demonstrated their commitment to improving public space and providing the necessary recreational opportunities that helped crowded cities develop a sense of community. Across the Bay in Oakland, the pressure to meet the new demands of recreation were equally felt.

Mott's investment in public works projects transformed Oakland's landscape and the ways that residents experienced their environment.²⁵ Lake Merritt, while definitely the crown jewel of the city's park system, was just one of many that the park's commission brought to fruition. With only a handful of public parks available in 1900, by 1910 the city owned twenty-nine.²⁶ In its first annual report, the Oakland Park Commission outlined recent property purchases and plans for additional sites.²⁷ Between 1906 and 1909 Oakland spent just over a million dollars on property purchases for the use of parks and playgrounds. They estimated the value of all the park space combined, including property already held by the city prior to 1906, to be over three million.²⁸ Included in this buying frenzy was the De Fremery property in West Oakland in 1908. The De Fremery family stipulated that they would continue to live in their home on the property for three years, at which point it was to be converted to a community center.²⁹ Within two years, De Fremery Park contained baseball fields, play structures, and organized athletic teams for both boys and girls. Reporting on a game between the De Fremery park girls versus the Bushrod park girls, the *San Francisco Call* credited the city, stating, "The playground commission, which has been instrumental in inaugurating feminine baseball at the different Oakland playgrounds, regards the sport as the best of exercise and is looking forward to a girls' league annually."³⁰ Acquiring property, however, was just the first step in a much longer process of recreational development.

Oakland's Park Commission understood their role as setting long term goals and projects for the city. In the 1910 annual report, the commission stated, "Park development calls for systematic continuous work, which of necessity must be prolonged though a considerable number of years, and it is obviously impossible to make even an approximate estimate of the cost of improvements which are to be completed in an indefinite future; nor is such an estimate necessary."³¹ Funding for public

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Other public works projects included dredging Lake Merritt, building City Hall, the Civic Auditorium, establishing the Oakland Public Museum, and funneling funds to improve sewers, streets, lighting, electricity, and expanding police and fire departments.

²⁶ "Oakland's Parks among the Best," *San Francisco Call*, 27 August 1910, p. 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "De Fremery Property to be Open April 1," *San Francisco Call*, 17 January 1908, 4. The property covered the double block between Sixteenth and Eighteenth and Adeline and Poplar streets. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the De Fremery Community Center became a vital part of West Oakland's black community by the 1940s. Used as a USO recreation center for black soldiers during the WWII, it transferred back to the city in 1947.

³⁰ "De Fremery Girls Diamond Stars," *San Francisco Call*, 28 July 1910, p. 11.

³¹ "Oakland's Parks among the Best," *San Francisco Call*, 27 August 1910, p. 7.

parks, playgrounds, and recreation centers came to be seen as an essential function of city government and a responsibility to be carried in perpetuity. Working collaboratively, the Playground Commission submitted their own annual report in conjunction with the Park Commission, outlining plans for athletic fields, play structures, training programs for park directors, and their overarching mission of reducing juvenile delinquency.³² Oakland's Superintendent of Police Adelbert Wilson endorsed the commission's work, testifying to the correlation between the presence of playgrounds and reduced juvenile offenders.³³ Four months after publishing these reports, Oakland participated in the first annual conference of the Playground Association of California, hosted in San Francisco.

Held over three days in early December 1910 at the St. Francis hotel, the conference brought together playground professionals across California to present research, detail progress, and discuss persistent obstacles within the work of recreation.³⁴ Presenters, represented by men and women, came from all over the Bay Area, Marin County, Los Angeles and Sacramento. They held positions on playground commissions, worked in probation offices, or came from an education background.³⁵ Topics ranged from the logistics of creating recreation programs, the merits of specific games for childhood development, the role of public schools in the movement, and also, most importantly, to the various ways recreation deterred criminal habits.³⁶ In addition to panel sessions on designated topics, participants visited multiple playgrounds in San Francisco and Oakland.

National and regional conferences helped disseminate the latest theories on recreation and allowed educators and reformers to exchange ideas about setting up programs in their own cities. The growth of this network in the second decade of the century testified to the strength of the movement and the ways that in which cities mobilized support. It also demonstrated the bipartisan support for these programs. Strategies to reduce juvenile delinquency became collaborative projects between city councils, civic clubs, and schools. The public work initiatives that culminated from conferences such as these helped reshape the physical landscape of cities to reflect these priorities. Three years later in 1913, San Francisco would again play host, but for the much larger Pacific Coast Playground and Recreation congress. In the meantime, park advocates looked for ways to apply the strategies and input they had learned from the conference.

In the summer of 1911 L.H Weir, the Pacific Coast field secretary of the Playground Association of American, conducted a tour to evaluate progress in western cities. Afterwards, he wrote a letter to Oakland's Playground Director Arthur G. Tasheria to commend Oakland's "progressive system of recreation places for children." Respected as a national leader and expert in the field of recreation, Weir's comments provided powerful testimony to the positive work in Oakland. In his letter, Weir highlighted the multifaceted approach to appeal to children, teens, and young adults through a combination of playground facilities, athletic fields, community gardens, festivals, public

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Playgrounds for Children is Theme," *San Francisco Call*, 15 December 1910, p. 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. Some of the panel titles included: "The Development of the Playground in California," "The Psychology of Play," "Adequate Training of Supervisors," "The Playgrounds as Developed in San Francisco," "The Girl and the Playground," "The Play Spirit in its Relation to Girl Delinquency," "What Los Angeles is Doing," "Rural Recreation Centers," "The Significance of the Playground Movement." Presenters included academics from UC Berkeley, psychologists, probation officers, school principals, and park superintendents.

baths, and evening recreation activities.³⁷ Speaking about city's leadership, Weir wrote, "You have grasped the idea that play and recreation are for the people and made your plans accordingly. The type of people you have chosen to be leaders, guides, instructors, and companions for your children. I can safely say that in your ideals here and in carrying them out you excel all other coast cities."³⁸ Oakland had a much smaller budget for public recreation than San Francisco at the time, making this quite the complement from a prominent national organization.

Weir appeared again on the west coast the following year, this time urging San Francisco to expand its efforts. Golden Gate Park's success did not hide the fact that more park space and community centers were in greater demand. Speaking before the city's Commonwealth Club in early February 1912, Weir expounded, "Every foot of park land must be made to field something to the physical well-being of the people over and above its decorative purpose, and it is the duty of San Francisco to realize its proper leadership as the foremost city of the Pacific coast and provide for this work in connection with its forthcoming exposition."³⁹ Weir was referring to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, set to start in January 1915.⁴⁰ In addition to exhibiting the newest forms of technology and architecture, San Francisco wanted to be remembered as a scenic city along the water. The proliferation of park space contributed to the city's beautification project.

San Francisco city officials took Weir's advice to heart and a month after his speech organized a formal body to oversee park expansion. The Recreational League of San Francisco called its first meeting on March 13, 1912 at a girls' high school on Geary and Steiner streets.⁴¹ The League sought to secure "...playgrounds, schoolyards, aquatic parks, swimming tanks, public baths and other places of like nature for the children and general public of San Francisco before the exposition of 1915."⁴² To maximize results, the League's main purpose was to provide coordination between the municipality, the Board of Education, and the various private philanthropic organizations.⁴³ The League wanted park facilities evenly distributed throughout the city to impress upon visitors the breadth and range of public recreation. Modeled after a similar association in New York, the League had convened two weeks before to hear an address from Gusatvus T. Kirby, a New York recreation committee member, and voted to draw up a constitution and bylaws.⁴⁴ Kirby's address, titled "The

³⁷ "Playground Leader Commends Oakland," *San Francisco Call*, 9 August 1911, p. 8.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "Recreation Parks Said to be Need," *San Francisco Call*, vol. 111, no. 73, 11 February 1912, p. 25.

⁴⁰ The Panama-Pacific International Exposition was a world's fair held from February 20 to December 4, 1915. Officially, the Exposition celebrated the completion of the Panama Canal, but it also allowed San Francisco to showcase its recovery from the earthquake and great fire of 1906. According to the National Parks website about the event, over 18 million people visited San Francisco in those nine months. "The fair promoted technological and motor advancements...was the first world's fair to demonstrate a transcontinental telephone call, to promote wireless telegraphy and to endorse the use of the automobile." <https://www.nps.gov/goga/learn/historyculture/ppie.htm>

⁴¹ "City Clubs Unite for Playgrounds," *San Francisco Call*, vol. 111, no. 102, 11 March 1912, p. 14.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "Committee Will Aid Playgrounds: Co-ordination Between City and Various Civic Organizations Deemed Essential," *San Francisco Call*, vol. 111, no. 87, 25 February 1912, p. 52.

The creation of the League is also discussed in the Fourth Annual Report of the Playground Commission which listed six objections of the organization, mainly to facilitate "harmonious" intercommunication and planning of future recreational projects. The Report of the League's purpose, "San Francisco needs a recreational league, as one of the greatest assets to a city are its leisure centers and distracting features in an atmosphere of play and carnival." (45)

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Ideal Municipal Recreation System and What San Francisco Can Do,” was a blueprint to maximize efforts and prevent any waste or misdirection of funds.⁴⁵ Various charitable organizations and improvement clubs were invited to the first meeting on March 13, so as to include the concerns of city clubs. Mayor Rolph was also slated to speak at the event. Nowhere, of course, is there any mention of African American representatives or statements about how continued segregation impacted the end result of recreational services.

White women reformers used the upcoming Exposition as an opportunity to obtain more funding and resources for women’s facilities. Throughout the spring and summer of 1912, nearly overlapping at times with Weir and Kirby, San Francisco’s YWCA general secretary, Julia Tolman Lee, aggressively lobbied for increased funding for a new building facility. On February 19, five days before the Recreational League first convened, Lee spoke before the woman’s auxiliary of the juvenile court. She criticized the unequal funding between the city’s YMCA and YWCA branches, and the minimal resources available for San Francisco’s working-class women. Lee’s address leaned heavily on the tropes of the dangerous city that left unprotected girls at the “hands of unscrupulous men or women...” and how one of the YWCA’s functions was providing safe arrival for new migrants.⁴⁶ The YWCA’s travelers’ aid bureau met newcomers at the trains and steamers, directing girls and women traveling alone to respectable boarding houses and charitable agencies.⁴⁷ Lee framed her appeal in terms of patriotic duty and civic obligation to ensure that foreign girls and cross-country migrants found safety in their new city.

A month later, Lee delivered a similar appeal to the Council of Women at San Francisco’s Hotel Bellevue. Here, Lee broadened the stakes by explicitly discussing the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. The *San Francisco Call* reported, “Miss Lee urged that a strong concerted movement of all organizations in the welfare of girls be made to insure improved conditions *before the 1915 fair*.”⁴⁸ By the end of the meeting, the Council passed a resolution to ask the harbor commissioners to keep the women’s waiting room in the ferry building open 24-hours instead of closing at midnight.⁴⁹ As general secretary, Lee worked tirelessly to generate donations for a new facility, but also to increase awareness of the obstacles they faced at the YWCA. In August of the same year, Lee spoke before the monthly San Francisco County Nurses’ Association with an address titled, “The Movement Toward the City and Its Dangers.”⁵⁰

There was a strong link between the professionalization of nursing and social work during the Progressive Era. Similar to Lee, Beatrice McCall was a social worker in Oakland who worked directly with the Alameda County juvenile court. During the State Nurses’ Convention in July 1912, McCall

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Plea Made for Working Girls: Miss Julia Tolman Lee Presents Their Case to Women’s Auxiliary,” *San Francisco Call*, 20 February 1912, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “Help is Asked for Girls: Council of Women Hears Appeal,” *San Francisco Call*, 3 March 1912, 51. Emphasis is my own.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Personals and News Items: San Francisco County Notes,” *The Pacific Coast Journal of Nursing* (San Francisco: California State Nurses’ Association, Inc., 1912) vol. 8, no. 9 (September 1912), p. 436.

delivered an address about the impact of nursing in probation work.⁵¹ She argued that more female medical personnel were needed in detention homes to meet the needs of delinquent girls, and that medical practitioners needed to understand the underlying *causes* of youth delinquency. McCall argued that the root of the problem stemmed from poverty, alcohol, and sexual perversion.⁵² The more one indulged in alcohol, the lower they fell into poverty and perverse habits. Trying to make her point clear, McCall stated, “We have four hundred saloons, and four playgrounds in Oakland! It costs something to establish clinics for the treatment of venereal disease; but we do not detect the source of so much of this crime.”⁵³ White women reformers found a receptive audience in the Bay Area in 1912. The combination of national influence from leaders such as Joseph Lee, the anticipation of the world’s fair, and the use of statistics and expertise to support their arguments, allowed advocates for the playground movement to gain headway. White reformers and civic organizations donated money, supported progressive policies, lobbied local politicians. However, this did not always translate to their desired policy outcomes.

In November 1912, the *San Francisco Call* ran a series of articles about a proposed amendment to the city charter that would increase a tax for public parks in the upcoming election on December 10. From both news articles and the editorial page, it is clear that there was growing public demand for more park space and better funded facilities. On November 22, the editorial page asked its readers to remember the days before the creation of the park commission, the “bare, dirty, squalid places, barren of flowers and grass, eyesores and disgraces,” city parks that dotted the city in haphazard arrangements.⁵⁴ The editorial insisted that increased park space was the surest way to increase the health, joy, and moral aptitude of the entire city at the cheapest cost. By simply raising the levy for park purposes from seven cents to ten cents for each \$100 of assessed estate valuation, the park commission’s budget would increase from 350,000 to 500,000 a year. A person’s estate assessed at \$10,000 faced a mere \$3-a-year tax for the purpose of parks, a minor inconvenience compared to the perceived significant benefit.⁵⁵

The success and reputation of Golden Gate Park proved, at least for the *Call*, that, “No city has enough park room; no city can have too much.”⁵⁶ Two days later, a news article subtitled, “‘Give us More and Better Recreation Sports,’ Is Cry of Citizens” provided more empirical information about the amendment and how the Bay Area compared to other major cities parks budgets.⁵⁷ New York topped the list at 3 million a year. San Francisco and Oakland placed seven and eight on the list with 350,000 and 150,000 a year respectively.⁵⁸ Proponents wanted funding to expand the number of parks, but also to improve existing parks with needed maintenance and infrastructure including “...terracing,

⁵¹ Beatrice McCall, “The Nurse in Probation Work: Address to the California State Nurses’ Convention,” *The Pacific Coast Journal of Nursing* (San Francisco: California State Nurses’ Association, Inc., 1912) vol. 8, no. 8 (August 1912), p. 368-370.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 369.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵⁴ “For Amendment No. 16 and the Parks,” *San Francisco Call*, vol. 112, no. 175, 22 November 1912, p. 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ “Strong Support of Measure for Improving Parks,” *San Francisco Call*, 24 November 1912, p. 27.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

sewage, piping, shrubbery, waters systems, and other details.”⁵⁹ Amendment no. 16 received broad support from women’s clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, local newspapers and government officials including Golden Gate Park Superintendent John McLaren.⁶⁰ McLaren argued that an investment in parks benefitted the interests of the city’s children, but also contributed to good public health and good business. Dr. T.B.W. LeLand, the coroner of San Francisco and one-time Democratic mayoral candidate, was quoted for the article, stating, “...Parks make an impression upon visitors to the city and we need them ourselves besides. In addition to their beauty they are of great hygienic value.”⁶¹ Come election day, however, San Franciscans narrowly rejected the amendment. Thirty-seven charter amendments appeared on the ballot, and every single one that required a tax increase was rejected.⁶² The *Call* reported, “With a single exception they ratified every one of the propositions generally classified as civic betterment amendments. That single exception—the proposed increased tax levy for park support—fell within the tax amendment category and was rejected with every other proposition that provided directly for an increase of taxes.”⁶³ Propositions to expand land holdings for the civic center and Exposition passed easily because it required no additional burden on the taxpayer. The outcome demonstrated that even with substantial backing from prominent groups and city leaders, the people of San Francisco exercised their own will at the ballot box. Yet, the vote should not discount the spreading influence the playground movement had in the Bay Area. While residents may not have wanted to pay for it, they still enjoyed and took advantage of public-funded park space and recreational activities.

City-wide efforts continued into the teens, with San Francisco hosting the first Pacific Coast Playground and Recreation congress in 1913. Through these types of conferences, playground advocates kept political attention of the needs and merits of recreational programs. The results, in both San Francisco and Oakland, translated into extensive investment in park space and a reorientation of how the city landscape was used. Missing from the commissioner’s reports and conferences were the voices of African Americans. How these projects impacted the black community is more obscure. While the parks and recreation centers were constructed for public use, de facto segregation prevented African Americans from utilizing many of their benefits. Instead, the small population of African Americans in San Francisco and Oakland continued to build on a tradition of self-sufficiency.



⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Both the *San Francisco Call* and *San Francisco Chronicle* endorsed the amendment.

⁶¹ Ibid; “Leading Women Join in Fight for Improved Parks,” *San Francisco Call*, 25 November 1912, pg. 4.

⁶² “Returns Show the Fate of the Various Charter Amendments,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 December 1912, p. 2.

⁶³ “Charter Election Results Insure Bigger, Better City,” *San Francisco Call*, 12 December 1912, pg. 5. Interestingly even after barely six years removed from the Great Fire of 1906, San Franciscans rejected propositions to expand pensions for exempt firemen and the pensions for the families of firemen and policemen who died or suffered from severe injuries. They similarly voted against propositions that would have increased the number of firemen, a salary increase for the police chief, or allocating funds to reorganize a detective force. It is unclear if any organized faction organized against these propositions or if the natural inclination of San Franciscans was to reject tax increases of any kind. The fact that numerous civic and charitable groups campaigned so aggressively for a park levy and come up short demonstrates a somewhat deep-seeded resistance.

Early Black Institutions

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, African Americans in the Bay Area steadily built their own institutions. They made up a small percentage of the surrounding cities, but quickly established a small cadre of middle-class professionals.⁶⁴ The earliest black migrants traveled west for the same reasons as their white counterparts, enticed by the Gold Rush and better economic opportunities. Some tried their hands at mining, but many found employment as waiters, barbers, train porters, cooks, and general laborers.⁶⁵ Segregated housing practices allowed black women to take in boarders for income as well. California, entering the Union as a non-slave state in 1850, momentarily held the possibility of better social and political conditions for African Americans. Unfortunately, any hope for civic equality was quickly dispelled during the state's constitutional convention by excluding "Negroes, Mulattoes, and persons having one-eighth Negro blood" from voting, giving testimony in court, serving on juries, homesteading public land, or running for public office. In response, many African Americans left California, heading further north to parts of Canada and even south to areas of Latin America.⁶⁶ For those that stayed, organizing for political and civil rights became paramount. In her detailed study of California's East Bay cities, Dolores Nason McBroom argues that African Americans "developed institutions that paralleled the dominant white societies residing in the same cities."⁶⁷ Beginning in 1850, McBroom traces the early efforts taken by African Americans to organize and lobby on behalf of equal rights. These initial years of organizing is what allowed black leaders to expand their work to the area of recreation in the twentieth century.⁶⁸ One of the formative groups that would have an impact on recreation was the California State Association of Colored Women's Clubs, first convened in 1908.⁶⁹ Initially small in numbers, by the early 1990s, African Americans in the Bay Area had developed an active middle-class who actively participated in church, fraternities, women's clubs, and business associations. Concerns for recreation became more pertinent as black laborers migrated for defense industry work during the World War I. Equally pressing, if not more so, was the need to provide safe recreational spaces for black soldiers in the Bay Area, as they were excluded from the USO halls. The half-century of institution building before the war allowed black business leaders and clubwomen to tap into these resources when they focused their attention on recreation.

⁶⁴ From the 1910 Census: African Americans numbered 1,642 in San Francisco and 3,055 in Oakland. For comparison, the numbers for "foreign born white" were 130,874 and 36,822 respectively.

⁶⁵ Dolores Nason McBroom, *Parallel Communities: African Americans in California's East Bay, 1850-1963* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-9;

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁶⁸ McBroom discusses the first actions taken by concerned black citizens in California as they witnessed passage of exclusionary laws in the new state's constitution. Led by black ministers, the first major group was the State Convention of Colored Citizens in 1855. They lobbied to repeal these restrictive laws and petitioned against legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Act. McBroom, *Parallel Communities*, 8-9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

In the decades before the war, African Americans opened businesses, started newspapers, formed clubs, founded churches, and carved out space, however small, to develop a stable black middle class. Men like Peter Anderson and Philip Alexander Bell, both transplants from the East, founded important black newspapers in San Francisco. Anderson moved west during the Gold Rush and opened a tailor shop before launching the *Pacific Appeal* with Bell in 1862. Anderson was active in California politics, fighting for equal rights and participating in the California Colored Citizen's Conventions. Bell arrived on the eve of the Civil War in 1860, bringing with him political experience from the abolition and suffrage movements in the Northeast. Previously, Bell worked for William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, the *Liberator* before starting his first paper, the *Weekly Advocate* in 1837, while still living in New York.

Bell became co-editor of the *Pacific Appeal* with Peter Anderson in 1862, but soon the two men had a professional falling out and Bell started a competing paper, the *San Francisco Elevator* in 1865.⁷⁰ Black newspapers were an important resource for tracking political developments, accurately reporting racial violence, highlighting black progress, and as a source of advertisement for black businesses. As editor, Bell used the paper's columns to denounce discriminatory policies and to pressure the California legislature to pass and uphold the Reconstruction Amendments following the Civil War.⁷¹ When Tehama and Colusa County Assemblyman William S. Long proposed banning new freedmen from migrating to California, Bell responded, "Mr. Long...evidently fears if they immigrate here in any quantity they will soon become his political and social equals, and eventually his mental superiors."⁷² Within the same column, Bell asserted that the newly freed black men and women were Americans by birth, language, and habit. Furthermore, Bell argued, the expansion of California's agriculture rested on the availability of cheap labor. Who better than the former cotton hands of the South? Bell continued, "California is in need of laborers...her fields are untilled for the want of farming hands; her fertile soil, if cultivated by the freedmen, would make her the granary of the world."⁷³

Newspapers like the *Elevator* and the *Pacific Appeal* kept the Bay Area black community informed and helped mobilize political action. But it would be a mistake to see the black press as only an instrument for political proselytizing. They were also vital resources for navigating the local conditions of the cities they were published in. They advertised jobs, places to live, and the commercial

⁷⁰ Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 114.

⁷¹ Bell wrote extensively on Reconstruction, detailing its progress in Congress, criticizing President Johnson for not holding the Confederacy accountable, and demanding full equal rights for the newly freed. On September 15, 1865, Bell wrote of Reconstruction, "This is the most important subject which now engages the attention of the American people, for it depends the future welfare of the nation, and the destinies of a race but partially redeemed from bondage." Philip Alexander Bell, "Reconstruction," *The Elevator*, 15 September 1865, 2.

⁷² Bell, "Legislating on the Negro," *The Elevator*, 15 December 1865, 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.* Bell drew upon racial stereotypes to distinguish African Americans from Chinese immigrants, arguing, "True, they are an industrious, obedient race, but they are alien to our customs, habits, and language, heathen in their worship, and naturally licentious."

businesses that were safe to visit. Among the many topics relevant to African Americans in the Bay Area were recreation, travel, and leisure.

Outlining similar concerns of white reformers, the *Elevator* included a column on “Hoodlums,” in 1873, advising black parents of the essential need for wholesome recreation for their children. The article cautioned, “One of the principal causes of the rapid spread of hoodlumism is the want, on the part of parents, of a recognition of the fact that all youths require recreation and that they will have it; therefore, parents should provide for children such recreation as will useful as well as entertaining, or at least, such wherein they would be least liable to fall into error.”⁷⁴ Black parents had the same worries in raising their children, but they faced the additional task of preparing their children to survive in a world structured by racism and discrimination. Creating more recreational opportunities for their children and for themselves took concerted action and pressure. It also required confidence to venture out of their comfort zones and assert their right to participate in public spaces of recreation such as state parks.

In 1874, the *Elevator* reported on new roads connecting Yosemite to the central valley, making access much easier. Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Big Tree Grove had been designated as a state park by President Lincoln in June 1864. The legislation left the park’s care to California for the explicit use of public recreation.⁷⁵ However, it took years for roads and trails to be constructed in and out of the Valley. By 1874, a new wagon road connected the San Joaquin area to the park, allowing a comfortable journey by carriage or stagecoach. After detailing the road construction, the bulk of the article vividly described Yosemite and the natural wonders held within. The writer argued that the park’s beauty had to be seen to be appreciated, but offered an attractive description of the area’s picturesque landscape to convince readers that such a journey was worth the money, time, and effort. It read,

The foothills of the Sierra, their easy slopes sprinkled over with a growth of pine and oak, are as picturesque as an English park...The canon of the Merced River, into which the road descends and through which it passes to reach the Valley, forms a stupendous granite gateway to Yosemite, and its scenery of rock and river, of cataract and waterfall, with cliffs on either side half a mile high, fitly prepare the visitor for the wonders of the great valley he is entering.”⁷⁶

As a state park, the health benefits and recreational pleasures were meant to be enjoyed by citizens and foreign visitors alike. By placing this column on the front page, Bell explicitly called attention to the type of recreation that the Bay’s black community should take part in, or at least consider. As cities expanded and grew more congested with people and pollution, going out into nature was seen as a necessary remedy for one’s mind and body. Popular especially among the middle classes, it was common for families to retreat to the county for a week or two in the spring and summer. The *Elevator* assured its readers, “The residents of our cities will...find that recreation, pleasure, and renewed health and life, for themselves and their families, which the mountain air and

⁷⁴ “Hoodlums,” *Elevator*, 15 February 1873, 2.

⁷⁵ Yosemite’s creation as a state park was the first example of federal legislation setting aside land for preservation and public use. It set a precedent for Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Yosemite’s development and maintenance eventually became too much for California to manage, and it too became a national park in 1890.

⁷⁶ “To Yosemite Valley by Carriage,” *Elevator*, 1 August 1874, 1.

water and scenery in and about Yosemite will give them.”⁷⁷ Taking part in the new ritual of vacationing became an important status symbol, one that the professional class of African Americans expected to take part in.⁷⁸

In addition to vacations in nature, black men and women participated in a variety of “respectable” sports, including baseball (primarily for men) and cycling.⁷⁹ In spring of 1894, the black Oakland Cycling Corps was organized as a cycling club for the city’s men and women. Eager to showcase their skills, they organized races and repeatedly requested formal recognition by the League of American Wheelmen (LAW). Without formal admittance into the national organization, the records set by black cyclists were not acknowledged.⁸⁰ By October of the same year, the Corps reorganized as the Oakland Cycling Club (O.C.C) and participated in races organized by the California Associated Cycling Clubs. Black clubs gained entry to local and regional events, but primarily competed against other black cyclists. Still, the O.C.C. found ways for limited interracial collaboration. For example, when the Southern Pacific Railroad Company tried to charge cyclists additional fare for transporting their bikes on ferries, the O.C.C. joined other Bay Area cycling clubs in protesting against the fees. Clubs on both sides of the Bay declared their intention to refrain from using the ferry at all, and amid heavy pressure, the railroad company rescinded the order.⁸¹ Another opportunity of solidarity occurred in 1895, when the O.C.C. participated alongside a dozen other clubs in a street parade in San Francisco, riding down Van Ness to Market, and ending up at Golden Gate Avenue.⁸² These small interactions aside, black cyclists continued to face resistance from white clubs.

In 1895, Mrs. Idella Johnson, captain of the ladies annex within the O.C.C., set the ladies mile cycling record in a race organized by the San Jose Cycling Club. Unable to find white competitors to race against her, Johnson felt her record lacked legitimacy. Speaking to the *Call*, Johnson challenged her white counterparts, stating, “I now hold the world’s ladies’ racing record and I intend to retain it. I do not wish to do so unless it belongs to me, and the only way to definitely decide the matter is for these ladies to come to time and show what they can do. We hope to bring the white and colored cyclers together soon and I take this step to start the ball a-rolling.”⁸³

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 206-236. Allyson Hobbs forthcoming book, *Far From Sanctuary: African American Journeys and the Road to Civil Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) Fall 2019 explores how African Americans were excluded from the “national fraternity” of American motorists, and the ways in which black drivers created their own car/driving culture. Community created resources like the Green Book helped black motorists navigate confrontations with hotels, rest areas, restaurants, gas stations, and other related spaces drivers encountered on the road.

⁷⁹ The first wheelmen club on the west coast, and the second club in the country, was the San Francisco Bicycle Club, founded in December 1876. In its early years, membership was small because of the risks associated with riding bicycles. Bad road conditions and early bike models that were tall and unsteady prevented the activity from taking off. However, new technologies in tires, brake systems, and frame design generated wider participation. Cycle clubs, including the national League of American Wheelmen, also pressured cities to invest in street improvement projects. By the early 1900s, bicycle riding was more common and accessible.

⁸⁰ “On Fleet Wheels: Oakland Cycling Corps in a Race,” *The Morning Call*, 25 June 1894, 4; “Colored Riders Get No Answer: Anxious to Join the League of American Wheelmen,” *San Francisco Call*, 16 August 1896, 15.

⁸¹ “Oakland Cyclers Indignant at the Order and Glad it was Rescinded,” *San Francisco Call*, 29 August 1896, 8.

⁸² “Clubs that will be represented in the Street Parade,” *The Morning Call*, 16 February 1895, 3.

⁸³ “Colored Riders Arrange a Meet,” *San Francisco Call*, 12 July 1896, 15.



Figure 1. Officers of the Oakland Cycling Club, 1896—*San Francisco Call*, 12 July 1896.

The drawing above shows the newly elected O.C.C. officials, including Mrs. Idella Johnson in 1896. They sit dignified and sport the contemporary cycling suits and caps. The men's riding jackets resemble military uniforms and they each have a trimmed-styled mustache. Mrs. Johnson sits front and center, hair pulled back under her cap, with a high-necked sweater.⁸⁴ Together, they exhibit a stoic image of middle-class respectability. These examples demonstrate just a few of the ways that African Americans in the Bay Area started carving out spaces for recreation in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Creating wholesome activities for their children, visiting public parks, and organizing athletic clubs were stepping stones to more expansive projects in the following three decades.

The resistance African Americans faced often came from their white middle-class counterparts. The discrimination they faced in schools, housing, and employment seeped into the social realms of interaction as well. Similar to the situation faced by the O.C.C., African Americans often found that they could organize their own institutions, businesses, and clubs, but faced pushback when they initiated interracial collaboration. One area of constant tension was between white and

⁸⁴ Could include a discussion in a footnote about the discourse around women in cycling. Some thought it was good for their health, others a thin line into masculine behavior. The rhetoric around women in sports impacted both black, white, and immigrant women.

black clubwomen. Such a flair up happened in early January 1903 when Booker T. Washington was scheduled to visit and speak in San Francisco. Organized by Mrs. Burk, President of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae of the University of California, Washington was set to speak before an interracial audience at San Francisco's Mechanics' Pavilion. The pavilion, housed within the Mechanics' Institute, could fit six hundred people.⁸⁵ Of the available seats, only 200 were set aside for African American attendees. Upon hearing of Washington's visit, Mrs. Ingraham, president of the black Twentieth Century Club, requested 225 tickets for the event, and sent along \$7.50 for the cost. Mrs. Burk initially granted the request, but realizing it was an African American club, reduced the tickets to twenty-five.⁸⁶ Outraged by the insult, the Twentieth Century Club chose to return the tickets and accused the organizers of racial prejudice.⁸⁷ The irony of restricting the number of African Americans to hear a celebrated black speaker was not lost on Mrs. Ingraham. A separate lecture by Washington was planned for a black-only audience at the Zion Methodist Church in San Francisco, however, for the Twentieth Century Club, the damage had already been done.

White progressives embraced Washington's message of accommodation and gradual progress. In the Bay Area, that embrace translated to tolerance of black uplift projects as long as they did not inconvenience the white majority or require them to give up any of their own resources or privilege. In the area of neighborhood parks and recreation centers, control was maintained through improvement clubs and housing associations. White homeowners used restrictive covenants to limit where African Americans could live, thereby restricting access to neighborhood parks and recreation centers.⁸⁸ In a flattering report on Oakland's Santa Fe Improvement Club, members were credited with spearheading several civic public works projects, including securing funds for a district firehouse, and pressuring landowners to clean up unimproved property lots.⁸⁹ Additionally, the club was praised for preventing African Americans and Asian immigrants from buying homes within their district. The *Call* reported, "...the association appointed a special 'protection committee' of 50 to get all the property owners in the district to sign a 'civic agreement' not to sell, lease, or rent to colored people or Asiatics."⁹⁰ They justified their actions as basic economics, stating, "The association has no hostility whatever toward colored people or Asiatics. It is merely guided by a desire to maintain property values and a harmonious residential tone for the districts."⁹¹ This explanation, of course, ignored the institutionalized racist policies that kept property values low in black and brown neighborhoods.

⁸⁵ The Mechanics' Institute was built in 1866 on 31 Post Street between Montgomery and Kearny. The three-story building featured retail space, a ventilated library, a lecture hall (the pavilion), a chess room, a ladies sitting room, and additional spaces rented out to clubs, committees, lodges, etc. <https://www.milibrary.org/about/history>

⁸⁶ "Allege Color Line is Drawn," *San Francisco Call*, 6 January 1903, 9.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ In an article from 1912, improvement clubs and neighborhood associations were, again, highlighted for their work in civic organization and public works projects. Of expanding the number of parks, Charles Francis Adams wrote, "There has been scarcely a single improvement made with reference to parks and playgrounds during the last year which was not the result of a suggestion made by an improvement club." Charles Francis Adams, "Improvement Clubs Successful in Promoting Large Projects," *San Francisco Call*, 2 March 1912, 19.

⁸⁹ Charles Francis Adams, "Santa Fe Improvement Club a Factor in Oakland's Progress," *San Francisco Call*, 2 September 1911, 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

When African Americans tried to join white civic organizations, they were often turned away. In September 1913, a handful of white clubwomen resigned from the Oakland Civil League when black clubwomen began attending luncheon meetings. Speaking on the matter, one woman commented, “The colored women have a right to organize and carry on the work of their club, but I don’t consider them my social equals.”⁹² Mrs. B.F. Allison, the second woman to resign that day, added, “I don’t mind assisting the colored women in the work of the Civil league from a humanitarian standpoint, but I do object to attending social functions at which they are present.”⁹³ The racial prejudice demonstrated here and the use of restrictive housing covenants was a common tactic in nearly every city in the country.⁹⁴

It is important, however, to demonstrate the logic and rationale of segregation that developed in California, in general, and in the Bay Area specifically, because it demonstrates the necessity for African Americans to build their own institutions. Not just in recreation, but in all areas of life. While the West did open many opportunities for African Americans, they still had to work within a constricted set of circumstances. Navigating this racialized urban landscape required grassroots organizing and collaboration among black organizations. While the rhetoric within the playground movement centered on juvenile delinquency, black leaders knew that the concerns of white civic groups, improvement associations, and playground commissions did not extend to include the welfare of their children and families. With the outbreak of World War I, white playground advocates changed the discussion around recreational benefits to that of diversity and tolerance. African Americans, once again, found themselves excluded from the conversation.



World War I

As Europe plunged itself into war in 1914, the United States sought out ways to project itself as the ideal example of democracy and, if not total integration, as least acceptance of cultural diversity. Writing about municipal programs in this era, Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh argues that as city governments invested in the tax-supporting missions of city planning and public recreation, they were guided by these new ideas of cultural pluralism in America.⁹⁵ With the spark of war, investment in public recreation took on new patriotic connotations. The result was an interesting intersection of cultural

⁹² “Two Resign in Oakland Club Row: More Members of the Civic League Quit—Negro Women at Banquet,” *San Francisco Call*, 29 September 1913, 2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ See Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁹⁵ Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh, “Municipal Harmony: Cultural Pluralism, Public Recreation, and Race Relations, from., *Historical Roots of the Urban Crisis: African Americans in the Industrial City, 1900-1950*, eds. Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. and Walter Hill (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 77-79.

pluralism infused with American superiority. To differentiate the U.S. from the fascist regimes in Europe, the Playground and Recreation Association (PRA) opposed any form of centralized programs and advocated for community-based recreation programs.⁹⁶ PRA officials believed this developed democratic skills and self-determination.⁹⁷ As the United States entered the war in 1917, the PRA, at the request of the War Department, formed the War Camp Community Service to organize recreation resources near military bases. War Camp Community Centers opened in San Francisco and Oakland, run by local directors, to represent the values and traditions of their communities. Similar in scope and missions, municipal community-centers attempted to reflect the needs of their residents while also pushing an agenda that represented the values of the nation.

From Juvenile Delinquency to Americanization and Cultural Pluralism

In 1925, Mary E.S. Piercy, a graduate student in the Department of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote her Master's thesis on the relationship of the playground to leisure time for junior high students in Fresno, California. Fresno, at the time, had a population around 78,000; a large majority foreign born or the descendants of recent immigrants.⁹⁸ Her thesis provides interesting insight into how these theories were discussed in academic settings. It demonstrates how someone studying Education understood the changing shift of recreational purpose, especially among adolescent children. One of the main arguments presented in the thesis was that playground recreation was a process of Americanization for Fresno's diverse populace. While her analysis focused on the specific age group of junior high students, Piercy discussed how the general goal of public playgrounds and community houses was to reach all age groups, including adults. Speaking about the proper function, Piercy argued, "The playground has come to stand for the kind of recreation...which is part education, a part of active religion, a part of citizenship...Another function of the playground is the Americanization of the foreigners in the community. The playground, therefore, welcomes all nationalities, and tries to lead them to respond to the activities and customs of America, to learn the English language, and to become good American citizens."⁹⁹

Moving more aggressively after the end of the World War I, cities nationwide passed ordinances establishing park commissions and allocating municipal funds for the purpose of creating and maintaining play space. In many instances, funding was a coordinated effort between public and private interests, as seen initially in San Francisco and Oakland. Presenting national statistics for 1925 (the same year as Piercy's study), the National Association of Recreation reported that in that year alone, 505 new outdoor playgrounds for white children opened for the first time in 224 different cities. Indoor recreation centers increased by 84 in 34 different cities. The numbers for African American

⁹⁶ Ibid., 74-75.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Piercy included a census breakdown of the different nationalities in Fresno, citing the 1920 census. She put the total at 238, and listed the individual numbers for 34, most originating from Eastern and Southern European areas. The largest numbers were from Russia, Armenia, and Italy, respectively, with Mexico trailing fourth with 948.

Mary E. S. Piercy, "The Playground in its relation to the leisure time of the junior high school pupil as seen by a survey of agencies for recreation in Fresno, California," Master's thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1926, 10.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 25-27.

communities paled in comparison. The same report included separate statistics for African Americans, showing that of the 5,121 outdoor playgrounds only 232 were for the use of black children. Of the 1,613 indoor recreation centers, 83 were open to African Americans.¹⁰⁰ Piercy's case study of Fresno focused on the benefits of increasing play and recreational opportunities, but it also, subtly revealed the tensions between native-born Americans and foreign-born immigrants, as well as the racial segregation against the city's small African American population. According to the 1920 census, just over 500 African Americans lived in Fresno. In her general overview of the recreational opportunities in the city, Piercy noted the many adult and teenage basketball and baseball leagues. Out of the seventy baseball teams and ninety basketball teams, only two are listed as "colored" and it is unclear if they were able to play against the white teams.¹⁰¹ The two black teams are also the only clubs without a company sponsor, listed simply as the "Dixie Boys (colored ball club)" and the "Shasta Ball Club (colored boys)," whereas all the other teams are sponsored by oil, energy, and agriculture companies. The only other singled out group was one team designated as "Italian boys." The indicated black baseball clubs are the only reference to African Americans in her study, the rest providing general survey data to assess the scope of recreational opportunities and the types of activities they favored. One of the survey questions presented to participating students included, "How could the playground be improved for you?" Most respondents wanted more amenities such as pools and play structures, but nine girls suggested the segregation of foreigners. Though Piercy does not dwell on this interesting response, it suggests that, despite, public official's efforts to use recreation as a tool for unity, it may not have been as easy to implement in practice.¹⁰² From her data, Piercy concludes that most immigrants lived amongst themselves, sent their children to the same schools, and used the public playgrounds at similar rates as native-born Americans. In order to breakdown the dynamics of ethnic enclaves, recreational directors had to be properly trained and educated on the ideology of Americanization. She argued, "Good play leaders...may do much toward increasing the attendance of 'foreign' children on the playgrounds and so carry on most effectively, real training in American citizenship."¹⁰³

The statistics and information provided in Piercy's study demonstrates the significant rhetorical shift toward Americanization over juvenile delinquency. City officials wanted ethnic groups to feel welcomed in these public spaces, but also to see them as systems in which to embrace American citizenship and democratic ideology. Her omission of African Americans, aside from the comments on black baseball, reveals the continuity of black exclusion. As discussed in Chapter 1, Ernest Attwell traveled nationwide to aid in local efforts to secure funds for black playgrounds and community centers. Yet, the blatant disparities between facilities for black and white children continued. In Fresno, one could argue that the black community was too small to make demands or mobilize a mass effort for better recreation. But even in large cities like Chicago, white city officials ignored the needs

¹⁰⁰ "Community Recreation Leadership in 748 Cities," *Playground*, vol. 20, no. 1 (April 1926), 5-6.

¹⁰¹ It was common practice since the 1880s and 1890s for big factories or industrial companies to sponsor baseball/basketball teams as a while to foster loyalty to the company and encourage wholesome leisure as opposed to drinking or gambling. Among the many companies by Piercy included are Shell Oil, Union Oil, Richfield Oil, Telephone Company, Gas Company, San Joaquin Light and Power Company, Sun Maid Raisin Growers, etc. Piercy, 1926, 19-20.

¹⁰² Piercy, 1926, 65.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 70, 80.

of a concentrated and expanding African American population. Writing in 1926, Maxwell Bond, a black playground director, argued that black children were handicapped, not only physically, but mentally as well. As many playground advocates had been arguing for two decades, lack of physical and mental stimulation hindered the ability to become a rational, fully developed citizen.¹⁰⁴ Bond wrote, “These playgrounds are of great significance in the life of the colored child, for the colored child, unlike the white one, is without the proper facilities for training both in physical exercise and the development of the spirit of true sportsmanship—factors that are so necessary in developing good citizens.”¹⁰⁵ Strategically framing the argument for more recreation in terms of citizenship and patriotism called upon white leaders to extend the benefits being offered to not only native-born white children, but the increasing cohorts of European immigrants. Bond continued, “In the case of the white boy and girl there are many and various outlets for their physical needs: the community centers with their highly trained staff...the Y.M.C.A with its inducements and facilities for the under privileged boy, to say nothing of the churches and boys’ clubs offering similar inducements in the form of competitive play and a highly trained staff of coaches and advisers.”¹⁰⁶

Joseph Lee, the most vocal white playground advocate, wrote to the *San Francisco Call* in 1919, responding to the Editor who had argued against institutionally regulated and organized recreation. Lee refuted the idea that amusements did not require organization, citing specific activities, such as football or chorus singing, that are more likely to succeed with trained guidance. Referencing the project of Americanization, he wrote, “Forums, lectures, public discussions, library extension, parent-teachers’ associations and mothers’ clubs, educational cultural evening classes, education in food saving and gardening, the teaching of the essentials of government and the meaning of American institutions are not self-starters as a rule.”¹⁰⁷ As in Fresno, San Francisco and Oakland shifted the language underwriting their municipal projects within recreation. However, in addition to concentrating on the Americanization programs, the Bay Area celebrated the project of cultural pluralism.

In the Playground Commission Report from 1928/1929, San Francisco officials sought to highlight the growth of diversity within the city.¹⁰⁸ In a section of the report titled, “Where 37 Varieties Play,” the commission depicted San Francisco as an international hub of culture, absorbing the customs and traditions of its ethnic populations. The report proudly states,

No other city can boast, perhaps, of the diverse colors and races of children that meet to play on San Francisco’s playgrounds...Many of the characteristics that make San Francisco’s playgrounds so fascinating are clearly traceable to the thirty-odd nationalities that assemble...Thus have all the corners of the earth contributed their

¹⁰⁴ Maxwell H. Bond, “The Chicago Board of Education Playgrounds and the Colored Child: As Seen by a Colored Playground Director,” *The Playground*, vol. 20, no.4 (July 1926), 211-212.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Lee, Letter to the Editor, *The San Francisco Call*, 18 October 1919, found in the “The Joseph Lee Memorial Meeting,” *Twenty-Fourth National Recreation Congress Proceedings*, National Recreation Association, Boston Massachusetts, October 9th-13, 1939, p. 71-73.

¹⁰⁸ Playground Commission, “Annual Report 1928-1929: Playground Commission City and County of San Francisco,” Annual Report and Reports of Documents, volume/container 1928/29, Bancroft Library.

shares in making San Francisco's playgrounds especially rich in music, drama, dress, folk-lore and inspiring playgames.¹⁰⁹

In the proceeding page of the report, the commission included the headshots of sixteen children, each representing a different ethnic group [Figure 2]. In the center of the page, a picture shows children dancing together on a grass field. The quality of the picture makes it unclear if the children dancing come from the diverse groups the report is boasting about. With the photographs and list of ethnicities, the commission sought to exhibit the benefits of cultural pluralism. The interaction of diverse ethnic groups contributed to a more dynamic cultural experience and helped make San Francisco appear to be a cosmopolitan center on the west coast. The degree of exaggeration is hard to discern, but for city officials, it seems that embracing cultural pluralism did not undermine Americanization. Instead, they saw the two projects as reinforcing each other. To emphasize the point, the report included the poem, "Southside Playground," written by Miles Overholt, which included the refrain, "But Love stands stirring the Melting Pot." [Figure 3] Yet, again, the commission's report is silent on the needs and participation of African American children. In the sixty-five page report, none of the statistics or plethora of photos indicate the inclusion (or even existence) of the African American population. While the city tried to signal its progressive nature by embracing ethnic immigrants, there is a large omission of the area's black population.

From the years of experiencing struggle and conflict, black leaders understood that the white civic organizations and reform groups were not going to include them in their efforts. In response, black organizations began organizing on their own behalf. Infused with greater numbers growing out of wartime migration, neighborhood demographics started to change, as more working-class blacks migrated from the South. Building from the foundation of institutions developed between 1870 and the early 1900s, black leaders mobilized enough support to open their own YMCA's and community centers. Chapter Three examines these first black recreation centers, their leaders, and the programs they developed. Financed through public and private funds, and often initiated by black women, these early institutions provided safe spaces for recreation, education, and racial uplift.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 24.



Figure 2.

The listed ethnic groups is an obvious gesture to showcase the diversity of the city. Playground Commission. "Annual Report: 1928-1929." Annual Report and Reports of Documents, 1928/29, Bancroft Library.

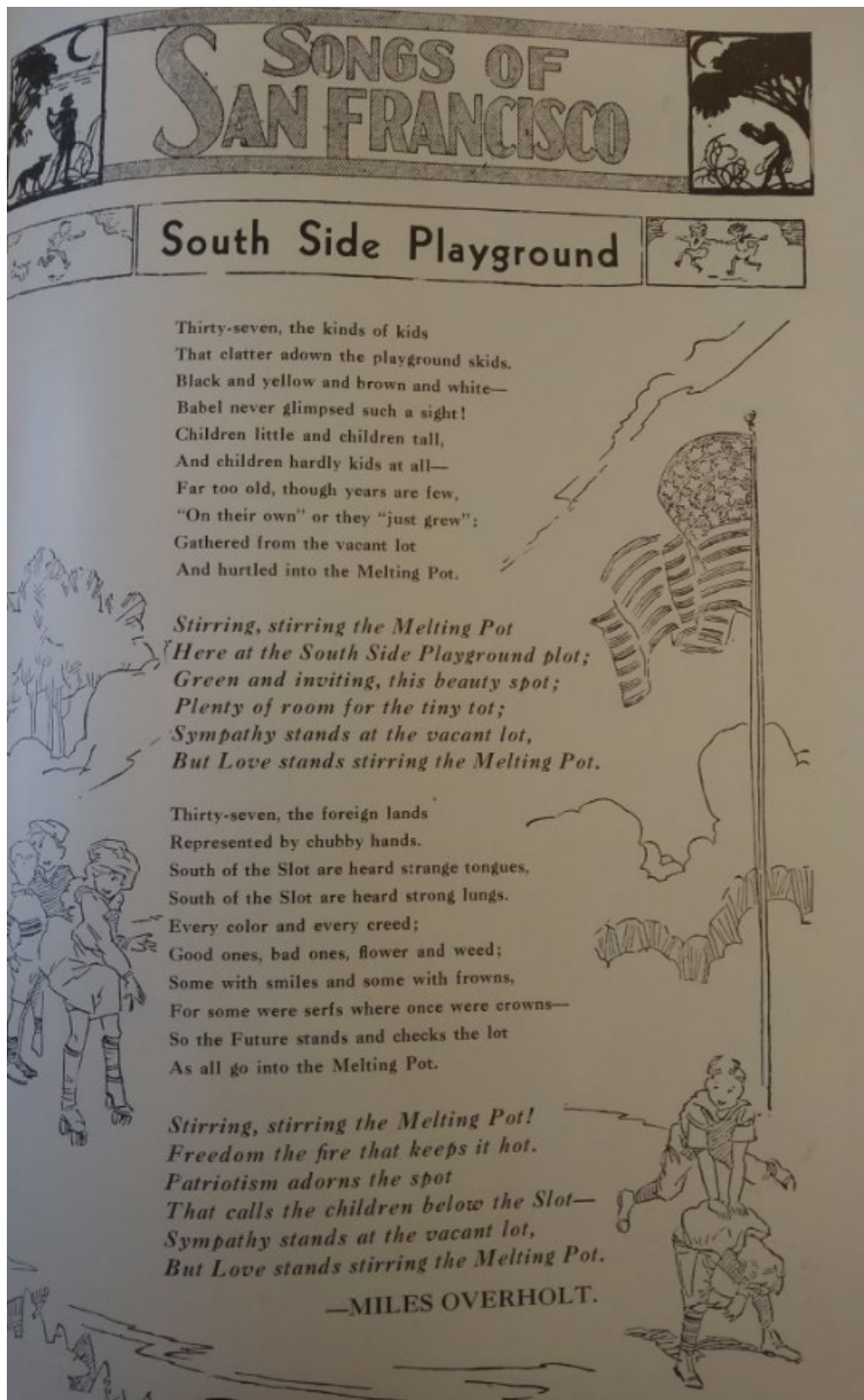


Figure 3.

The poem provides an interesting example of how cultural pluralism and Americanization could operate alongside each other. Playground Commission. "Annual Report: 1928-1929." Annual Report and Reports of Documents, 1928/29, Bancroft Library.

Chapter Three: Building their Own: Black Recreation from the 1920s through the Great Depression

In early December 1925, the Oakland Recreation Department put on its sixth annual children's Christmas Pageant. Beginning in 1919, the pageant had been held in the Oakland Municipal Auditorium, a beautiful Beaux-Arts style building on 10th Street, on the southwest end of Lake Merritt. Built in 1914, the downtown center had an arena, ballrooms, and a theater that could accommodate up to 8,000 people.¹ Miss Louise Jorgensen, Director of Folk and Dramatic Dancing, made her directorial debut in 1925, choreographing the dances and participating as a dancer herself in the pageant's finale as the "The Spirit of Christmas." Nearly 2000 children participated in the event, ranging from kindergartners to sixth graders. Jorgensen recruited children from across fifty-one Oakland public schools and led rehearsals for a month in preparation for two evening performances in the second week of December. Separated into two acts, children danced as snowballs, snowflakes, winter animals, flowers (holly, mistletoe, poinsettias, flower-spirits, and chrysanthemums), Christmas trees, ornaments, mystical fairies and elves. They danced along to a live orchestra directed by Elbert F. Cowan. Harry Troxel, head of the Recreation Department, designed all the costumes, assembling them at the Mosswood Park community center. Prominent local leaders played the adult roles of Santa Claus, Father Christmas, King Winter, and the Snow Queen. The Christmas Pageant was intended to be a truly community-wide event.² Unfortunately, the city's definition of community was limited.

¹ The auditorium changed to the Kaiser Convention Center in 1984, after Henry J. Kaiser donated money for the building's renovation. The building is #27 on the list of Oakland Historic Landmarks, and officially closed in 2006. In 2015, the city awarded a contract to Orton Development Inc. to once again renovate the space. Work is scheduled to begin in the summer of 2019. From its opening, the auditorium was used, among many things, for concerts (including legends such as Elvis in 1954, the Grateful Dead, and Ike and Tina Turner), political events (Martin Luther King, Jr., presidential candidates, the Dalai Lama), sporting events, and the annual Christmas Pageant. It also served as a hospital during the 1918 flu pandemic. The children's Christmas Pageant ran from 1919 to 1987, ending when Jorgensen retired.

² "Children to Give Christmas Pageant," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 December 1925, 29; "Two Thousand Children Participate in Oakland's Annual Christmas Fete," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 December 1925, 26; "1500 Pupils to Rehearse Yule Pageant," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 December 1927, 31. Local adults who participated in 1925 included

The rhetoric of inclusion and cultural acceptance stopped at the color line. In a publically organized pageant, led by the city's Recreation Department, black children found themselves excluded. Outraged, the *California Voice*, an Oakland-based black newspaper, ran its front page with the headline, "Segregation in Oakland Playground Department Stirs Storm of Protest." Seemingly open to all students of Oakland's public schools, black students were nonetheless prevented from appearing in the pageant with their classes. Instead, black parents were informed that their children would perform in a "Special Event," specifically programmed for them at the YWCA Colored Branch.³ As for an explanation, one of the department's Directors, Miss Hopkins, stated, "It would spoil the color scheme."⁴ Parents contacted the local chapter of the NAACP, who assembled a committee of five to lodge a formal complaint with Jay B. Nash, Superintendent of the Playground Department. Nash met with the committee, and tried to assure them that there was no official policy of segregation, despite the two differently scheduled events. The *Voice* continued,

The results of the whole program was that the colored children did not take part in the Xmas Pageant, and the colored residents and tax payers have been denied the right which is guaranteed them under the laws and constitution of California. This is a gross insult to the citizens of this community and state, and should not be tolerated under any circumstances, especially when perpetrated by servants of the people.⁵

The humiliation and anger owing to this racist exclusion, especially when it impacted their children, cut deep for African American parents. For two decades, San Francisco and Oakland expanded public park space and invested in public recreational programs. World War I energized the playground movement further by reinforcing patriotic connotations in the missions of local community centers. However, as was discussed in Chapter Two, the focus for many playground directors and reform groups was Americanizing the European immigrant population. African Americans responded by building their own recreational institutions. Invigorated by the population boost from the first wave of southern migration combined with pride in black servicemen during the war, as well as enthusiasm behind the popular ideology of the *New Negro*, middle-class blacks turned to their networks of clubwomen, businessmen, and churches to open a series of recreation centers throughout the Bay.⁶ As a part of uplift ideology, providing safe and wholesome recreation became a

Fred Le Ballister, local realtor, Edwin Stearns, executive secretary of the Alameda County Development Association, Erna Halbe, Don McCaskill, Jeane Samuel, Marion Oliver, Betty Lasher, June Phillips, and Vivian Woodsworth Broadway.

³ "Segregation in Oakland Playground Department Stirs Storm of Protest," *California Voice*, 18 December 1925, 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Initially coined by Booker T. Washington in the late-nineteenth century, the term "New Negro" gained new resonance during and after the First World War. It came to symbolize a renewed determination to gain true economic, civil, and social equality. Coming back as soldiers, black men wanted the same rights they fought to preserve overseas. While some northern cities, like Chicago, were more militant in these efforts, nationwide, African Americans organized in efforts to challenge racial discrimination. Organizations like the Urban League opened chapters in major cities, using boycotts and protests to demand equality in employment, education, and housing. On the first Great Migration and the New Negro, see James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989); Mark Robert Schneider, *"We Return Fighting": The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern

successful strategy to bring the African American community together in the Bay Area.⁷ Key leaders for many of these projects were black women.

This chapter analyzes the first black recreation centers opened in Oakland and San Francisco and highlights the leaders who ran them. These projects exemplified racial uplift and pride. Founding their own recreation centers also sent a message to their white neighbors that if the unofficial policy was exclusion, then African Americans were going to create the recreational space for themselves. From the time California entered the Union, state policies had proven hostile to African Americans. While seemingly more moderate in tone and execution from southern-style anti-black racism, discrimination in the Bay Area was damaging nonetheless. Excluding black children from an annual Christmas Pageant was not an act of physical violence, but it was an act of psychological and emotional violence that reinforced the racial divide. It projected a message that black Americans were not full citizens, and not accepted as part of the national or local community.

Black club women like Hettie B. Tilghman dedicated their lives to fighting against racism through activism. White women voluntary organizations in the Bay Area often disguised racial exclusion on the basis of pioneer pedigree, preferring members that had a clear line of ancestry to the Gold Rush or before. Black women born in the Bay Area, like Hettie Tilghman laid claim to pioneer heritage and considered themselves native daughters of California.⁸ Born in San Francisco 1871, Hettie Blonde Jones was the third daughter of John and Rebecca Jones, migrants to California in the 1850s. She attended public school in San Francisco, and as a young adult taught English language classes to Chinese children in her mother's living room.⁹ Hettie also taught Sunday school at Bethel A.M.E. Church before marrying Charles Tilghman in 1890.¹⁰

Like Hettie, her husband Charles, descended from mid-nineteenth century black pioneers. Charles's father, Robert Tilghman, migrated from Maryland during the same year the Fugitive Slave Act became law, and worked as a barber.¹¹ While it is not known whether Robert Tilghman was enslaved, free-born, or self-purchased, scholars believe he was part of the same Tilghman family whose English ancestors were among those that signed the Magna Carta.¹² Tracing his lineage through census reports, historian Marta Gutman argues that black and white Tilghmans shared the surname. She writes that "...the 1870 census reports that Robert T. Tilghman (black, 33 years old) lived in Somerset County and Robert Tilghman (white, 23 years old) lived in Worcester County. Both men were born in Maryland."¹³ No doubt influenced by their family histories, Charles and Hettie aspired to middle-class social status.

University Press, 2002); Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

⁷ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Gaines does not examine the Bay Area, but his work analyzes how uplift ideology developed, the powerful role of black women, and the class divisions this created within black communities.

⁸ Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: Times Mirror Printing, 1919), 228-229; Marta Gutman, "The Tilghman Family and 'Race Work' in West Oakland," in *Putting the "There" There: Historical Archaeologies of West Oakland*, 2005, Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University, 282-287.

⁹ Gutman, 285.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 283.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

After having children, Hettie put her voluntary work on hold, dedicating her time to raising her family. A powerful status symbol for black families was the option of in-home domesticity: staying at home to raise one's own children. When her children reached school age, Hettie dove back into volunteer work, devoting substantial time and energy to a variety of black social groups throughout the Bay Area. The first such all-black women's group in Oakland was the Fannie Jackson Coppin Club, organized in 1899.¹⁴ Named after a freed slave who became a teacher and advocate for female higher education, the club in Oakland promoted art and cultural programs.¹⁵ In addition to the Fannie Jackson Coppin Club, Tilghman joined the Art and Industrial Club, the Mother's Charity Club, co-founded the Phillis Wheatley Club of the East Bay in 1914, sat on the board of the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People, and in 1919 helped found the Linden Street YWCA.¹⁶ Throughout the 1920s, Tilghman also served as the president of the Alameda County League of Colored Women Voters.¹⁷

Many of the clubs operated independently and concentrated on local conditions, but they stayed connected to a national network of activism through the National Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and the National Association of Colored Women. When these organization held conventions or conferences in California, Tilghman and her peers attended en masse to discuss political issues, share strategies for organizing, and reported on the success or failures they experienced in their cities.¹⁸

The early clubs and fraternities, at times, reinforced class divisions. In a group photo of the Fannie Jackson Coppin Club taken in 1920 [Figure 4], the women dress conservatively with collars up to their necks and sleeves down to their wrists; the length of their skirts completely covering their legs and ankles. Their hair is styled, straightened, and pinned back above their shoulders. Even as they sit huddled comfortably with each other, they pose with serious expressions. The photo displays all the middle-class notions of domesticity and respectability—refinement, cleanliness, and sexual purity. Scholars of respectability politics have shown that black women had to constantly battle racist representations of their sexuality, character, and intellect.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid, 286.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. The first Phyllis Wheatley Women's Club was established in Nashville, Tennessee in the 1890s, followed by clubs in Illinois and Detroit. Within a decade, they could be found in most major cities across the country. After 1900, Phyllis Wheatley Women's Clubs existed in two forms: independent, or as the "colored" branch of the YWCA. Affiliating with the YWCA meant greater financial support, but at the expense of control, as they were supervised by a white board. Clubs that wanted to maintain independence could often find help from the National Association of Colored Women. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/phyllis-wheatley-womens-clubs-1895/>; Also see, Anne Meis Knupfer, "If you Can't Push, Pull, if you Can't Pull, Please Get Out of the Way": The Phyllis Wheatley Club and Home in Chicago," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 82, no. 2 (Spring, 1997), 221-231.

¹⁷ "Funeral Rites Set for Club Leader," *Oakland Tribune*, 25 September 1933, 12.

¹⁸ "Colored Clubwoman Speaks in Oakland," *San Francisco Call*, 3 August 1909, 8; "Mary McLeod Bethune Re-Elected Pres. of the National Asso. of Colored Women: Annual Address Stirs Club Women," *California Voice*, 6 August 1926, front page.

¹⁹ Jane Rhodes, "Pedagogies of Respectability: Race, Media, and Black Womanhood in the Early 20th Century," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 18:2-4, 201-214. Also See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (1993); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race* (1996); Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability* (2001). Rhodes's article examines the how ideas of black female respectability were disseminated through media, including black newspapers and film. She argues that while columnists regularly criticized "undignified behavior, they also advanced a

Darlene Clark Hine originally coined a related notion: the culture of dissemblance. This posture has been akin to that of blacks generally masking their true thoughts and feelings from their oppressors, as classically represented in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask."²⁰ Hine's innovation was to deploy the culture of dissemblance as a way to understand how black women in particular masked their true feelings and thoughts from whites. Though Hine concentrated her work on black women during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, her ideas translate across time, as these ideas vividly capture in particular how African American women have struggled to claim control over their sexuality and the ways it was publically represented into the twentieth century. Speaking about the rise of black clubwomen, Hine argued that the culture of dissemblance compelled them "to downplay, even deny, sexual expression."²¹ The rigidity of these expectations alienated some segments of the black community, particularly the working-class and poor. Yet, even in conservative circles, the ideology of racial uplift advocated communal success. It was not enough for one black family to make it, the goal was to create breakthroughs for the entire race. In her analysis of the Phyllis Wheatley Club in Chicago, Anne Meis Knupfer observed that black clubwomen recognized the double burden of racism and sexism that all African American women faced together. She argues that, "...more often than not they reached 'across' rather than 'down' to their less fortunate sisters."²²

sharp critique of Southern racism and the sexual predations of white men and offered messages of black female redemption." (207)

²⁰ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989), 912-920. In defining her idea, Hine writes, "I suggest that rape and the threat of rape influenced the development of a culture of dissemblance among Black women. By dissemblance I mean the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors." Hine's work continues to resonate in the twenty first century—her work was referred to in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the isolation or silence on the part of black women displaced by the storm. Links were also made to Beyonce's visual album *Lemonade* from 2016, because of the way it centered the intimate and private lives of black Southern women.

See Diane Harriford and Becky Thompson, "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud": Organizing Since Katrina, *Fast Capitalism*, 4:1 (2008): https://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/4_1/harrifordthompson.html;

Zandria F. Robinson, "How Beyonce's 'Lemonade' Exposes Inner Lives of Black Women: History-reclaiming visual album offers new tools to see and be seen," *Rolling Stone*, 28 April 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/how-beyonces-lemonade-exposes-inner-lives-of-black-women-36868/>

See, Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask" in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1913), 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 916.

²² Knupfer, 222.



Figure 4. Fannie Jackson Coppin Club meeting at the house of Elizabeth Brown. Hettie B. Tilghman stands to the far right of the back row in a white dress. November 2, 1920. Digital image from the African American Museum & Library at Oakland Photograph collection, MS 189, African American Museum & Library at Oakland, Oakland Public Library.

For each of these clubs, uplift ideology and the related needs for self-definition and self-determination framed their mission. In addition, racist segregation necessitated the creation of these organizations. For instance, the Fannie Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery opened in 1918 because of the exclusion of black children from private philanthropic orphanages. The Children's Home in Oakland run by the white Ladies' Relief Society since 1894, was an orphanage that operated within a network of benevolent institutions that adhered to a strict segregation policy by WWI.²³ Children of color could be admitted to one of three shelters run by the Alameda County Welfare Council, which were underfunded and lacked many of the amenities and comforts found at private charitable institutions.²⁴ Fannie Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery filled the void for black

²³ Marta Gutman, "Adopted Homes for Yesterday's Children," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 4 (November 2004), 587; Gutman, "Under Siege: Construction and Care at the Fannie Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery," Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley (September 2002), 2. According to Gutman, the West Oakland Home was initially racially integrated when it first opened. As discussed in previous chapters, the black population in the late-nineteenth century was minimal. The low numbers may have impacted the receptiveness of black children. Gutman notes that no formal rationale for the segregated policy appears in the records, but suspects that the new wave of migrants created anxiety among white residents. (6)

²⁴ Gutman, "Adopted Homes for Yesterday's Children," 594-595.

families, serving the community as an orphanage and daycare center for working mothers in a wood-frame house on Peralta Street.²⁵ Later, in 1928, when the Nursery raised enough money, they chose a second location across the street from the Linden Street black Y. Concentrating institutions close to each other reinforced the feeling of ownership of city space for black residents as well as being convenient.

The community centers differed in function from many of the gender-segregated civil and social organizations. They were meant to be more inclusive and more expansive in their purpose. The work that unfolded at the Linden Street Y demonstrates how these spaces operated in the lives of African Americans living in the Bay Area; how they provided services that the city neglected to provide for its African American citizens, and centered a project of racial uplift for the entire black community regardless of class. A middle-class sensibility clearly motivated their actions and beliefs, but the primary goal was to reach below and pull others up. The motto for many black women's clubs was "Lifting as We Climb."²⁶ The Federation of California Colored Women's Club agreed, but added the phrase, "Service Deeds not Words" to better encapsulate their intentions. The local black community centers that sprouted up all over the Bay Area in the next three decades sought to carry out this mission.



Linden Street YWCA

The first black YWCA opened in Oakland in 1920. Referred to as the Linden Street black Y for its location on 828 Linden Street, the club was led by a small group of local black women, including

²⁵ Gutman, "Under Siege," 2.

²⁶ "Lifting as We Climb" was widely used by black clubwomen with organizations under the umbrella of the National Association of Colored Women, including Oakland's Fannie Wall Children's Home. In the 1920s, only a small number of social welfare services were run by Alameda County. Private and religious benevolent institutions excluded African Americans and Asian Americans, including orphanages. Black clubwomen in opened the Fannie Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery in West Oakland in 1918. In a paper on the home, the architectural historian Marta Gutman writes, "The Fannie Wall Children's Home was the only day nursery and orphanage in Oakland that was open to African-American children during the first half of the twentieth century." Restricted by funds, members repurposed a wood-frame house on Peralta Street for the orphanage and nursery. In 1928, they raised enough money to purchase another house located across the street from the Linden Street YWCA. Fannie Wall survived until the urban renewal projects of the 1960s which destroyed many historic black institutions in West Oakland. Marta Gutman, "Under Siege: Construction and Care at the Fannie Wall Children's Home and Day Nursery," Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley (September 2002), 1-2; Gutman, "Adopted Homes for Yesterday's Children," *Pacific Historical Review*, 73: 4 (November 2004), 595. (for bib: pages 581-618).

In 1933 Elizabeth Lindsay Davis wrote an official history of the National Association of Colored Women titled, *Lifting as They Climb*. Davis started out as an educator, but became an activist and organizer in the early twentieth century. She helped form the Phyllis Wheatley Women's Club in Chicago in 1900, and wrote a history of the black women's clubs in Illinois in 1922. Just as Delilah Beasley chronicled the achievements of California's black leaders in *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (1919), Davis's histories were a significant source of pride for the work black clubwomen put into their communities. Like black newspapers, these types of published histories allowed the black community to create and control their own narratives, to highlight the ways in which they persevered over racial oppression.

Hettie B. Tilghman, Mrs. Willie Henry, and Melba Stafford.²⁷ Lacking the money to erect their own purpose-built institutions, black clubwomen converted houses into the space they needed. Indeed this was an approach used by many urban benevolent organizations regardless of race, religion, or social class.²⁸ For the Linden Street black Y, the women repurposed a two-story house into four clubrooms, a reception hall, two offices, and a small dormitory that could accommodate eleven girls [Figure 5].²⁹ Using home structures in this way helped create a “home away from” environment that fostered personal relationships and comfort. But as Hine and Gutman make clear, these spaces, at least in this period, also reinforced traditional middle-class gendered social hierarchies by promoting particular views of home life and family values.³⁰ Girls and young women were offered classes geared toward making them better mothers and wives, such as sewing, needle-work, and cooking, whereas boys were expected to learn masculine hobbies like woodworking. Sports, summer camping, and educational classes were always offered to everyone regardless of gender. So while girls were expected to get married, have children, and be good wives, within the walls of these community centers, they also learned that they should be educated, creative, and politically active.

²⁷ Donald Hausler, "The Black Y's of Oakland," *Oakland Heritage Alliance News*, Winter 1987/1988, pg. 8, Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

²⁸ Marta Gutman, "Under Siege", 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.



Figure 5. Exterior of the 828 Linden Street black Y, undated. Converting large homes was financially practical for clubwomen, but also helped create a familial atmosphere. Digital image from the African American Museum & Library at Oakland Photograph collection, MS 189, African American Museum & Library at Oakland, Oakland Public Library.

The women behind the Linden branch opened its doors to West Oakland's black residents, expecting members to gain practical skills, find entertainment and exercise, and build character. Initial services included religious training, employment services, and educational classes, along with a long list of recreational activities including handicrafts, music, sports, dramatics, hiking, and, later, a summer camp.³¹ Annual reports for the first seven years are missing. However, by 1923, the Linden Y was recognized as an official "branch" by the national organization, a recognition that is only achieved through high membership numbers.³² Funding came from a combination of private donations, membership dues, and Oakland's Community Chest.³³ Cities, on a national-scale, established Community Chests as a way to fundraise for the social service agencies in a given area. In

³¹ "Sixth Annual Meeting and Membership Dinner of the Linden Branch YWCA, 1929," p. 7, Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

³² Donal Hausler, "The Black Y's of Oakland," *Oakland heritage Alliance News* (Winter 1987/1988), 8.

³³ Community Chests were fund-raising organizations in the U.S. and Canada that collected money from local businesses and workers and distributed it to community projects. The first Community Chest, "Community Fund," was founded in 1913 in Cleveland Ohio by the Federation for Charity and Philanthropy. The number of Community Chest organizations increased from 39 to 353 between 1919 and 1929, and surpassed 1000 by 1948. In Oakland, between 51 and 53 social agencies received funding from the Community Chest.

this way, a city's residents could make one big donation that benefitted multiple groups instead of making smaller individual ones. Community center directors and clubwomen encouraged businesses, families, and neighbors to donate, knowing their viability and potential growth depended on financial stability.

Writing in 1933 in her column for the *Oakland Tribune*, the city's principal newspaper, African American community activist Delilah L. Beasley reminded her readers of the annual Community Chest drive, writing, "This is the greatest philanthropic organization in Oakland...It is your job to help make the Community Chest drive a success this year."³⁴ Here, black leaders did gain access, with a number community leaders sitting on the Community Chest board of directors, including Mrs. Elizabeth Brown, president of the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People (and the host from the photo of the Fannie Jackson Coppin Club photo), Mrs. Lydia Smith Ward from the Fanny Wall Children Home and Day Nursery, and William Watkins, executive secretary of the Filbert Street black Y, among others.³⁵

Contributions from the Community Chest were a needed source of funding, but community centers still had to fundraise on their own to keep programs running. To supplement Community Chest funding, members hosted community dances, dinners, and shows. For example, in May 1927, members of the Dramatics Club presented an operetta complete with elaborate costumes at the Berkeley High School auditorium to raise proceeds for the branch.³⁶ In this way, members were able to combine their theatrical interests—showcasing appropriate highbrow entertainment—with fundraising and community outreach.

Inside the Linden Y house, many of the services were not restricted to dues-paying members, and many women took advantage of employment placement and the dormitory. In their annual report from 1928, the branch indicated that every one of the 128 women who applied for work found positions, sixty-eight in permanent positions and sixty in part-time work.³⁷ Unfortunately, the report does not provide the specifics of the positions or the wages offered to the women, but in general black women found domestic work or low-skill factory/manufacturing positions.

The dormitory, despite its small size, provided a significant option for new migrants and for travelling workers who needed accessible and affordable accommodations. The weekly rate of three dollars provided a bed and use of the kitchen, dining room and laundry. Guests could entertain company in the downstairs parlor and telephone service was free.³⁸ In 1928, they reported offering free aid to thirty-six girls who needed an emergency place to stay. Additionally, the Linden Y was a popular spot for traveling Pullman maids who needed lodging when they had layovers.³⁹ Studies on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union usually focus on black male porters and the labor activist A. Philip Randolph. But working alongside the approximately two thousands porters were two

³⁴ Delilah L. Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes, *Oakland Tribune*, 5 February 1933, 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ "Operetta to be Given," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 May 1927, 37; "Oakland YWCA Will Hold Bazar," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 June 1927, 82. There are countless examples of different events and functions held for the purpose of raising money for the branch.

³⁷ "Sixth Annual Meeting and Membership Dinner of the Linden Branch YWCA, 1929, p. 5," Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.* In 1928, the Linden Y accommodated ninety-two Pullman maids.

hundred maids, the majority of which were black women. Pullman maids cleaned train cars and assisted women passengers with anything they needed, including watching their children, assisting with bathing, dressing, and laundry services.⁴⁰ As a national organization the YWCA had a strong reputation for providing safe accommodations for travelers. For Pullman maids and other traveling workers, black Y's were a significant resource, not only as a safe place to sleep, but as one of the few affordable spaces that welcomed black women. When the dormitory filled up, counselors referred women to reputable boarding houses or private homes that rented out extra beds. Travelers and new migrants found comfort in a home environment run by black women and trusted their recommendations when the dormitory reached capacity.⁴¹ Through networking and occasional collaboration, the Linden Y also established strong relationships with other charities and social organizations such as the Associated Charities, Welfare League, and Travelers' Aid. With expansive contacts throughout the Bay Area, the Linden Y could offer help or referrals for special circumstances that fell outside the immediate area of their services.

Inside the branch itself, counselors created classes and activities that catered to the needs of the community. Classes in dressmaking, knitting, and plain sewing offered practical skills and room for creative expression. Women produced a variety of garments including dresses, evening gowns, lingerie, and coats. They learned how to recycle old material to patch children's clothing or make adjustments to extend the life of hand-me-downs. Additionally, the women could apply these skills to find work in tailor shops, laundries, garment factories, or even work out of their homes. It is unclear how long a designated session lasted, in terms of weeks, but at the end, the women hosted a fashion show open to the community. As the women proudly displayed their work, the audience witnessed the benefits of these programs and the impact it made on the neighborhood.⁴² Inviting the residents of West Oakland to attend fashion shows and other club events helped the branch reach a wider constituency and recruit more members. In 1928 the branch estimated that over nine thousand Oakland residents attended one of their many events including teas, dinners, picnics, vespers (evening prayer service), and receptions.⁴³

The Committee of Management of the Linden Y, headed by Mrs. Allan O. Newman and Mrs. Hettie Tilghman, knew that their success depended on an active membership and community support. In order to appeal to a wide age range, they allowed members to create clubs that met their interests such as business, politics, music, dramatics, and various sports. Towards the end of the 1920s over 700 adults paid dues and over 100 teenage girls joined clubs and sports through the Girl Reserve Department. The girls had an intramural basketball team, the Challengers Tennis Club, and the Sharps and Flats Glee Club. Their theater group routinely put on musical comedies and plays, building

⁴⁰ See, Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) and Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Middle Class* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004). Pullman maids could also be assigned to helping elderly and sick passengers.

⁴¹ "Sixth Annual Meeting and Membership Dinner of the Linden Branch YWCA, 1929, p. 5," Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room. The report indicates that in addition to the women who stayed in the dormitory, seventy-two women took advantage of the room registry service that sent them to private homes or boarding houses.

⁴² "Sixth Annual Meeting and Membership Dinner of the Linden Branch YWCA, 1929, p. 6," Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

⁴³ Ibid.

oratory and confident public speaking. The young women in the Girl Reserve Department also participated in community service by serving food during holidays, organizing toy drives, and volunteering their labor during fundraising events.

Supportive of recreational activities even outside their own branch, the Linden Y routinely sponsored tournaments and competitions in the surrounding area.⁴⁴ For the intramural clubs and informal leagues, excitement came from joining a team, building camaraderie with one's peers, and representing your neighborhood.⁴⁵ For teens or young adults not familiar with the rules or techniques of games like tennis, joining a team at the Y gave them the tools to play on their own or to try out for their school teams. Frequenting local Ys and community centers helped children and teenagers see public parks and playgrounds as their own [Figure 6].

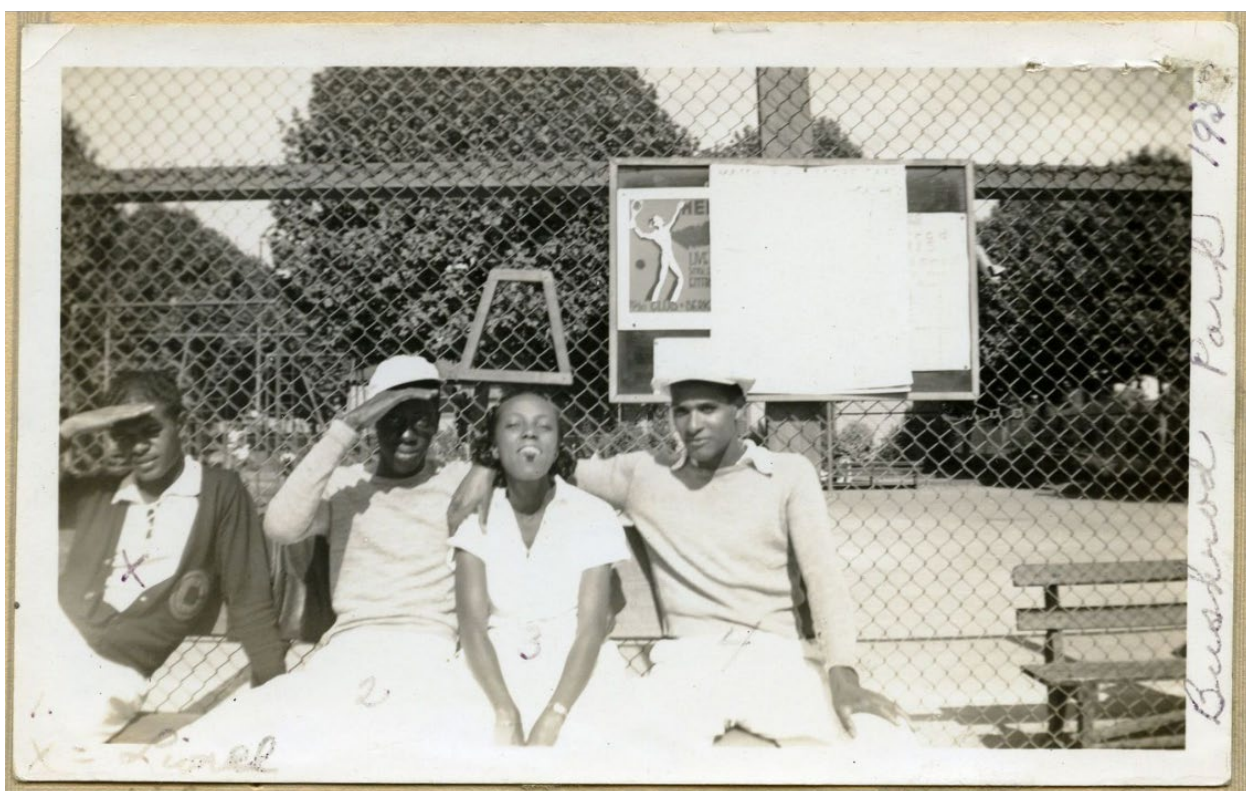


Figure 6. "Lionel Wilson, 'School boy Rowes, Florence Grant Jackson, and Lester Longrus sitting on tennis court bench at Bushrod Park, Oakland, California," 1937. Participation at local Y's and community centers helped teens and young adults see public spaces as their own. Digital image from the African American Museum & Library at Oakland Photograph collection, MS 189, African American Museum & Library at Oakland, Oakland Public Library.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ McBroom, *Parallel Communities*, 64.

⁴⁵ "Sixth Annual Meeting and Membership Dinner of the Linden Branch YWCA, 1929, p. 7," Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

⁴⁶ Lionel Wilson, seated on the far left in the photo, became the first black mayor of Oakland, serving three terms from 1977 until 1991.

The Linden Y also built connections to the wider black community by opening up their reception hall for other organizations. They reported that over forty outside clubs/organizations used their reception hall in 1928, free of charge. Black clubwomen often volunteered or worked for multiple groups, creating relationships amongst each other. For instance, Hettie Tilghman worked as both the Vice-Chairman of the Linden Y and President of the Alameda County League of Colored Women Voters and as such, the Leagues monthly meetings were routinely held at the Linden Y.⁴⁷ Having a space of their own to offer political groups like the League of Colored Voters and the NAACP helped mobilize political activism around elections and incidents of discrimination, such as in the 1925 episode when the Oakland Christmas Pageant excluded black children. The Linden Y added to the rotation of churches, schools, and fraternity clubhouses that black organizations could turn to when they needed to hold large gatherings. The branch, in turn, could count on the support from these groups for fundraising, publicizing branch events, and referring people to their services.

The reception hall was also commonly used for social gatherings, community celebrations, and cultural events that celebrated black artists. Casual receptions, for instance, were held for new incoming African American students at the University of California, Berkeley. This event was a meet-and-greet to help alleviate their isolation on a majority-white campus. They listened to their fellow black Cal graduates talk about their experiences and learned about other black organizations to connect with once school started.⁴⁸ When students finished their college studies, the reception hall hosted graduation ceremonies.

In February 1933, the Alameda County League of Colored Women Voters sponsored a celebration for a cohort of black nursing graduates from Highland Hospital, complete with a piano performance, an address by the superintendent of public health nursing, and speeches by the graduates themselves.⁴⁹ Similarly, when nationally acclaimed black artist and Berkeley resident Sargent Claude Johnson won the Harmon Foundation medal for distinguished visual art work, the ceremony took place at the Linden Y.⁵⁰ Presented by Hollis R. Thompson, secretary of the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce, before a large assemblage of community members, the Harmon medal was awarded based on two of Johnson's charcoal prints and a wood carving.⁵¹ Johnson, known for his Early Modern style and non-western techniques, was a painter, potter, ceramicist, sculptor, graphic artists, and wood carver. While living in the Bay Area, Johnson was still able to gain fame among artists in the Harlem Renaissance Movement (1920-1935), and frequently had his work displayed in San Francisco and New York.

Bringing attention to, and proudly celebrating, black accomplishments was an essential part of uplift ideology. Black leaders knew that the success of others paved the way for more to follow and undermined racist stereotypes that assumed African Americans lacked intellectual or artistic abilities. The Linden Y's use for both casual functions and honorary events reinforced its position as a central

⁴⁷ "Business in Government of City Urged," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 April 1928, 32; Delilah L. Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes," *Oakland Tribune*, 18 December 1932, T-11; Delilah L. Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes," *Oakland Tribune*, 22 January 1933, S-7. Club activities were often listed in Beasley's column throughout the 1930s.

⁴⁸ "Y.W.C.A. Branch to Hold Reception: Negro College Students to Attend Meet," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 April 1927, 30.

⁴⁹ Delilah L. Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes," *Oakland Tribune*, 5 February 1933, 20.

⁵⁰ "Berkeley Artist Receives Harmon Medal for Art Work," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 February 1930, 25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

meeting space that not only welcomed black residents, but celebrated their success. The Linden Y's extension in to so many different areas of black life—educational classes, recreation, and social services was a conscious investment back into their community. The program directors wanted members to have the tools and resources to make personal improvements in their lives that would contribute to social improvements for the black race. In the area of recreation, this included making progress in the use of outdoor spaces.

For African Americans living in cities, gaining access to rural recreational areas like state parks, campgrounds, and vacation resorts was significant for health reasons and personal pleasure. Parents wanted their children to experience a retreat away from the congested city streets and be exposed to environments outside their own. Summer camps organized by institutions like the Linden Y helped families who otherwise could not afford it, or who feared venturing into potentially hostile places. National programs such as Fresh Air, which sent low-income children to rural host families in the summer, excluded African Americans until World War II.⁵² Black recreational centers filled the void by organizing summer camps of their own.

According to their records for 1928, the Linden Y led thirty-eight girls to Camp Chabot in the San Leandro Hills, where they enjoyed, "one week of healthy sport and practice in living together."⁵³ Situated in a wooded glen adjacent to a stream, Camp Chabot offered campers access to open trails, swimming, craft-making, and plenty of fresh air. By the early 1930s, a rustic lodge was added to the camp, featuring a fireplace, lounge, reading nooks, and camp craft equipment.⁵⁴ The girls slept outside underneath oak trees, cooked over open fire, went on nature hikes, and star gazed around evening camp fires.⁵⁵ Maintained by the Oakland Recreation Department, the camp was used by a variety of East Bay community centers, playground club houses, and local youth groups for both boys and girls, albeit racially segregated.⁵⁶ For children and teenagers, Camp Chabot was appealing because it provided the opportunity to travel away from home with friends, to swim and hike in nature, and to learn exciting skills like building fires. Summer camp broke up the mundane routines of city life and promised new experiences.

Girls from the Linden Y were led by black women and surrounded by peers who looked like them. Going to camp demonstrated that they belonged in these spaces and that adventures in the outdoors should be available to them as it was to other children and families. In the annual report from 1933, twenty-two girls attended, and reported coming back "stronger, more rested, and with a clearer vision of what it means to share the experience of a real summer camp together."⁵⁷ As with

⁵² Tobin Miller Shearer, *Two Weeks Every Summer: Fresh Air Children and the Problem of Race in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). Fresh Air was a reform movement started in the 1870s that targeted low-income white and European children from cities and sent them to rural host families in the summer. Shearer argues that once African American children were included, the experience was often traumatizing and actually perpetuated racial inequalities.

⁵³ "Sixth Annual Meeting and Membership Dinner of the Linden Branch YWCA, 1929, p. 7," Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room

⁵⁴ "Camp Chabot is Popular," *Oakland Tribune*, 12 July 1932, 28.

⁵⁵ "Many Oakland Girls Enjoy Camp Chabot," *Oakland Tribute*, 5 July 1934, 19.

⁵⁶ "Camp Chabot for Girls is Popular Spot," *Oakland Tribute*, 25 June 1933, 27.

⁵⁷ "Linden Branch, Young Women's Christian Association, 1932-1933," p. 7, *The Spectator*, Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

all their programs, the Linden Y directors hoped that participation in summer camps would help their girls build confidence, develop leadership skills, and feel comfortable in unfamiliar settings.

In 1928, the Linden Y sent three delegates to the Girl Reserve Summer Conference at Asilomar. The Asilomar Conference Grounds was a conference center in Monterey, California built for the national YWCA in 1913. Here, the young women were expected to participate in the conference, attend panels, share ideas, and report back to their branch in Oakland. The report noted that the three delegates from Oakland "were inspired to have even more girls go to the next conference."⁵⁸ In 1939, Linden Street sent two more delegates to the Asilomar conference.⁵⁹ The national leadership of YMCA and YWCA did not advocate for desegregated associations until the 1940s, but they were able to participate in national or regional conferences before then. The statement by the delegates suggests that the experience was generally positive. Regardless, it is clear that the Linden Y's leadership wanted to be represented within the national organization and for their delegates to showcase the progress made in Oakland.

The expansive list of activities and clubs offered at the Linden Street Y in its first decade of operation reflected the needs of the black community in West Oakland. The religious instruction, employment aid, and cultural activities established neighborhood bonds and built social networks. Playing on an intramural basketball team provided more than just exercise, it generated friendships among teammates. Securing work for women, of course, helped them financially, but it also strengthened the community in general. Money in one's pocket translated to supporting local business, buying a house in the neighborhood, or having the resources to participate in more recreational activities. Successfully placing women in work also generated good word of mouth for the Linden Y and encouraged more women to seek out its services. Across the Bay in San Francisco, similar projects in black recreation were at work.



Booker T. Washington Community Center

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, black men and women joined the armed services for a variety of reasons, including patriotism, as an escape from poverty and low-wage work, as a way to demand full citizenship and civil rights. National black leaders such as WEB DuBois encouraged African Americans to support the war effort, seeing it as an opportunity to make the United States uphold the democratic values they claimed to be saving in Europe. Though the military remained segregated, black soldiers hoped to prove their valor on the battlefields and to gain respect once they returned home. Unfortunately, segregation remained official national policy, notably in the U.S.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ "A Review of the year 1939, YWCA, pg. 20" Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

military, through World War II, leaving many African Americans disillusioned about the prospects of achieving racial equality.⁶⁰

For the black soldiers and their families who relocated to San Francisco and stayed after the war ended, they had few resources to help them secure housing, employment, and other social services.⁶¹ The creation of the Booker T. Washington Community Center (BTWCC) came out of these needs. Led by Mrs. Mary D. McCants Stewart, Reverend W.J.J. Byers and Mr. J.H. Fisher, the center first opened in April 1920 in the basement of an old home on Farren Avenue.⁶² Before this, Mrs. McCants Stewart was director of the Victory Club, a war camp community center for black soldiers established because of their exclusion from the USO Club in San Francisco. At the end of the war, McCants Stewart requested permission to keep the remaining money in the Victory Club treasury to be used for the creation of a permanent community center.⁶³ Like the black clubwomen in Oakland, Mrs. McCants Stewart volunteered her time with a variety of organizations and projects. As the first director for BTWCC, she represented the center as a delegate to the San Francisco Neighborhood Centers Group, which was composed of all recreational agencies throughout the city.⁶⁴ When the BTWCC faced white opposition from purchasing a new facility in the Fillmore District in the 1940s, McCants Stewart served on Mayor Rolph's committee to investigate and report on discrimination regarding renting and sale of property to black residents and, later, became a member of the more expansive Bay Area Council Against Segregation and Discrimination. Additionally, she was a member of the Board of Directors of the NAACP, San Francisco Chapter.⁶⁵ McCants Stewart embraced these leadership roles and used her position as BTWCC's Director to connect recreational projects with political activism.

In the initial basement location on Farren Avenue, activities were planned to engage the whole family, through dramatics, parties, games, and informal social gatherings. More than anything else, it helped newcomers socialize with other families and network about jobs and housing. As interest grew, the founders formed a planning committee to raise money for their own building. In 1923 they purchased the property at 1433 Divisadero Street, where they remained until 1942.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ While stationed abroad, many black soldiers found better treatment from their French and British allies. All the facilities and institutions the US military set up followed a rigid line of racial segregation, including recreation centers set up for troops. "Winter Storms Take Joys Out of Camp Life," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 February 1918, 13. The YMCA set up "huts" in areas of France to provide outdoor athletics, show movies, and supply leisure activities. The article notes, "The camp authorities have rigidly divided the camp in such a manner that all the colored soldiers who live there permanently shall be by themselves, with their own quarters and even their own YMCA building which is in the process of construction now."

⁶¹ Eleanor M. Ramsey and Janice S. Lewis, "A History of Black Americans in California: Associations," from *Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California*, (Sacramento: State of California, the Resources Agency, Department of Parks and Recreation, Office of Preservation, 2004) <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online%5Fbooks/5views/5views.htm>

⁶² "History of Booker T. Washington Community Center," undated. Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert B. Flippin, Booker T. Washington Center, Box 97-18, Folder 349, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Mary D. Weir Stewart, Biographical Sketch," undated, Box 97-7, Folder 124, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Charolette Harris Stewart Stephens, Gilchrist Stewart, Mary D. Weir Stewart, Manuscripts Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3. McCants Stewart also supported the first Nursery School for black families that grew initially formed during the Great Depression

⁶⁶ In 1942 BTWCC moved to 2031 Bush Street, a building formerly owned by a Japanese America organization. This is discussed in depth in Chapter Four.

Similar to the Linden Y in Oakland, the BTWCC quickly established itself as a central space in the city for African Americans to socialize and find recreation, but also as a site of activism and organizing. One month after opening, in May 1920, the Negro Equity League began using the BTWCC for its weekly meetings. The Negro Equity League was a national organization with local branches that worked to “arouse among colored voters active participation in civic affairs.”⁶⁷ Other politically minded groups, including the NAACP and the Colored Women’s Voters League, held meetings there as well. Access to cheap or free meeting spaces allowed black civic and social groups to build their own memberships and generate support for their projects.⁶⁸

Once relocated on Divisadero, the BTWCC expanded its activities and services, offering baseball, basketball, track and boxing.⁶⁹ They did not yet have their own courts or fields, so they made use of the public parks in the surrounding area. Next to sports, the most popular program in the 1920s was dramatics and the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Club. The choral club was named after the bi-racial English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor who gained world-wide fame in the early 1900s.⁷⁰ He played tours in the United States before white and black audiences in 1904, 1906, and 1910, and had opportunities to meet privately with President Roosevelt and Booker T. Washington on his travels. Although British, Coleridge-Taylor was an admired example of black excellence. African Americans were in the midst of their own musical renaissance with the development and spread of jazz and blues, but Coleridge-Taylor demonstrated that black musicians could also master European classical music.

Trained by Mrs. Ethel R. Clark, who served as BTWCC’s director of recreation and social welfare activities, the Choral Club had thirty-two singers and specialized in spirituals and music by contemporary black composers. When the group performed their first public recital in the auditorium of the Women’s City Club, the papers credited them with being the first black chorus of its kind in San Francisco.⁷¹ The group practiced at the BTWCC, but performed all over the city, including spots on the local radio station KPO.⁷² Drawing upon popular spirituals and folk songs, their repertoire included the Negro National Anthem “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” “Who’ll Be a Witness for My Lord?” and “You’re Gonna Reap Jus’ What You Sow” just to name a few. Reflecting the sacred dimension of black music, they chose songs with religious undertones that spoke of suffering, strength, redemption, and overcoming hardships. That their performances were widely attended and praised in the newspapers demonstrated the commitment among the singers to their craft and from the director herself in building such a robust and widely admired program.

⁶⁷ “Negro Equity League is Organized in S.F.,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 May 1920, 8. The league met every Sunday at the BTWCC at 4 pm, led by its President Edward D. Mabson, a local black attorney.

⁶⁸ Under “Outside Organizations,” the annual report stated, “Fraternal organizations and independent clubs use the Center as their headquarters and for the giving of socials. Total attendance for these groups for the year 1929-4,790.” It does not specify the names of each group but is clear that smaller organizations without their own facilities took advantage of the space at BTWCC. “Annual Report of the Booker T. Washington Community Service Center, 1929,” p. 4, Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁶⁹ “Boys’ Athletic Club Will Stage Show,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 12 June 1927, 65.

⁷⁰ Coleridge-Taylor’s mother was English and his father was Sierra Leone Creole. He died at the young age of 37 from pneumonia.

⁷¹ “S.F. Negro Chorus to Give First Recital,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 April 1927, 16.

⁷² “Entertaining Attractions to be Aired by Radio KPO,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 May 1927, 47.

In 1928 the BTWCC became a participating member of the Community Chest, which helped guarantee financial stability and contributed to a paid position for a director.⁷³ In the years before, all the leadership positions were done on a volunteer basis.⁷⁴ In the center's annual report for 1929, they listed \$4,075.97 as coming from the Community Chest and \$2,535.86 from other sources. Below the tallied numbers, the report states, "We are pleased to call to the attention of the public the fact, as indicated above, that we are more than one-third percent self-supporting." Membership in the Community Chest was important for funding, and it was equally important to be recognized by the city as a legitimate community organization. The center, however, also wanted to emphasize its ability to sustain itself. The additional fundraising the center achieved on its own symbolized an investment from the city's black residents. By 1929, enrollment in many of their clubs and programs reached into the hundreds, with participation from entire families regardless of age and gender.

For small-age and elementary school children (four to twelve years old), Monday's Folk Dancing classes brought in 686 participants for the year. Under the broad title of Folk Dancing, the classes included play-acting, singing games, and folk play that encouraged creativity and imaginative thinking. The Monday classes, scheduled from 3:30-5 pm, provided an after-school activity that engaged their attention while still providing a break from the mundane instruction of school work. For working parents, after-school classes also functioned as a form of child-care.

Unlike the black Y's which separated by gender, the BTWCC was open to everyone, but created Girls Clubs and Boys Clubs to administer gender specific activities. For girls, there were age divisions as juniors (eleven to fourteen), intermediates (fifteen to seventeen), and seniors (eighteen to twenty-one) to better meet their interests and abilities. The young girls in the junior division, known as the Go-Getters Club, focused on crafts, dramatics, hiking, and organizing small social parties.⁷⁵ There is no indication of where the girls hiked, but they likely included walks through Golden Gate Park and John McLaren Park, which was first conceived by the Board of Supervisors in 1926 and officially finished in the 1940s. Hiking trail construction in San Francisco, Point Reyes, and the East Bay grew during the Great Depression through the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps, but there were still options in the 1920s.

The intermediate division called themselves the Harriet Tubman Ever Ready Club, linking themselves to the heroic abolitionist and Underground Railroad activist. Symbolic gestures such as this were important because it kept the names and memories of black historical actors and black heroes at the forefront of the mind. Black pride and racial uplift were woven into the fabric of every club and activity offered at centers like BTWCC and the Linden Y. The young women in this club were expected to take on greater planning responsibilities, including throwing the center's annual Christmas party. Planning large-scale events in this era involved labor intensive tasks such as locating addresses for a guest list, making invitations (either handwritten or selecting a pattern for purchase), selecting

⁷³ "Annual Report of the Booker T. Washington Community Service Center, 1929," Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁷⁴ Emily Huntington, "Neighborhood Centers Study: Preliminary Report on the Booker T. Washington Community Center," p. 4a, 1939, Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁷⁵ Annual Report of Booker T. Washington Community Center, 1929, 1.

themes for decoration, and organizing music and food. Girls had to delegate among themselves and coordinate their efforts.⁷⁶

Lastly, the senior division was known as the Carpe Diem Club, and attracted young women interested in business. They often led fundraising efforts by throwing dances and public events to support the center. In 1929, their big function was the spring fashion show. The participants designed their own clothes, no doubt from skills they learned in the center's dressmaking and sewing classes, and organized the show for a public audience. The annual report proudly stated, "Their first public presentation was a most delightful June Fashion Show conceived and executed in every detail by the girls themselves. Half the net proceeds from this entertainment were magnanimously and voluntarily presented to the Center."⁷⁷ Each division, for the girls and boys, were supervised by adult volunteer leaders. They acted as guides and resources to help their group complete projects, but as much as possible the teens were given space to create and lead their own ideas to fruition.

Gender stereotypes dictated some of the activities that were available to girls and boys. Whereas the girl's clubs focused on party planning and feminine-associated skills like sewing, the boy's junior club was known as the Monarchs Athletic Club. They met weekly in the evenings and dedicated their time to playing games and scrimmaging among themselves. Girls and young women did, however, have access to sports, with basketball being the most popular. The boys had enough to fill three full teams, playing every Tuesday at Galileo High School from 7 to 9 pm. They also competed in public exhibition games at the Salvation Army Gym. The girl's team practiced every Monday on a court in Telegraph Hill, and went undefeated in their 1929 spring season.⁷⁸ Women and girls also signed up in large numbers for swim classes, which were regularly held at the white Central YMCA on Sutter Street. The BTWCC, even at its newer Divisadero Street location, lacked its own basketball court or pool.

The young men's senior division, interestingly, disbanded during the summer of 1929. The report stated,

Dissatisfaction, caused by limitation of activities and selfish interests, gave this group the impetus to withdraw from Center supervision and affiliation during the summer. All friends and officers of the Center regret the loss to the boys that are and to the men they some day will be.⁷⁹

The senior division ranged between fifteen and twenty-one year olds, but there is no reference to the average age of the participants or if an older boy led the others away as an unofficial leader. The inclusion of their departure in the annual report is significant because it demonstrates how members acted on their own self-interest. BTWCC's effectiveness in recruiting and sustaining attendance depended on their ability to fulfill the black community's wants and needs in the realm of amusements and recreation. In this instance, at least for the summer months, the young men did not see any benefits in attending or it quite simply stopped being fun.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.

Community centers and churches were up against a growing list of commercial amusements like movies, pool halls, candy stores (which often had games), music clubs, and bars that offered more illicit fun and less supervision. To keep teens and young adults coming back, community centers and churches had to rival these commercial spaces with their own dances and forms of entertainment, or provide activities that the youth could not find elsewhere such as joining a dramatics club, sports team, or becoming a member of the prestigious Coleridge-Taylor Choral Club. Every Friday night, for instance, they offered Recreation Night from 8-10:30 pm for the older teens to dance and socialize. An individual fee of 10 cents helped cover the cost of music, and the evening was supervised by the chorus director Mrs. Ethel Clark.⁸⁰ While young adults and older teens may not have appreciated the watchful eyes of Mrs. Clark, parents welcomed chaperoned events and felt more comfortable with their kids going to a place they knew and trusted. For the reported 1929 year, the center calculated 1,678 teenagers attended the weekly social gathering, placing the average on any given Friday night around forty-six. BTWCC may not have prevented black residents from enjoying other forms of commercialized leisure, but it added to the variety of available options. Middle-class clubwomen like Mrs. Ethel Clark who worked and volunteered at the center provided what they saw as wholesome activities that would prepare the youth for a responsible adulthood. They focused on leadership, practical skills, and recreational activities that build confidence and comradery.

Additionally, the center created classes that catered to new parents and young families. The Mother's Fidelity Club, led by Mrs. Ella Bailey, provided a network for new mothers and families with pre-school age children.⁸¹ At weekly meetings, the children were entertained by a volunteer with nursery games while the mothers had an opportunity to discuss methods of child-rearing, education, and other related parenting concerns. Juvenile delinquency had dominated so much of the rhetoric around recreation for white reformers and playground advocates, but is largely absent in the limited records from the BTWCC and Linden Y. The clubs for parents and the activities for teenagers stressed resources and opportunities but not necessarily as a reaction to increased crime or bad behavior. This would change in the 1940s when the number of black residents dramatically increased. During the 1940s, the BTWCC created official positions to handle the social service needs of the expanding population, including addressing juvenile delinquency and helping black teens at juvenile court. But in the 1920s and 30s, as noted above, none of the urgency expressed by their white counterparts regarding juvenile crime shows up as in the Linden Y or BTWCC records. Social services related to employment, housing, and juvenile delinquency were addressed on an ad hoc basis, informally relying on the network of the close-knit black middle class. In the 1929 report, Director Ethel Clark briefly commented on these cases, stating,

Although we are primarily a recreational agency, all sorts of social services demands are made on our office, such as employment, housing, juvenile delinquency and problem cases, etc. The total number of persons using our office for such purpose during the year 1929 was 317.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 3.

⁸² Ibid., 4.

In his study of San Francisco, Albert Broussard argued that before the Great Depression, black juvenile cases were small and usually concerned minor offenses. Compared to other northern cities, African Americans made up such a small percentage of the population that the development of street gangs was nonexistent.⁸³ Looking at court records, Broussard found that between 1928 and 1929, the same year as the annual report by BTWCC, that black teens were only three of 463 cases in juvenile court.⁸⁴ Expanding his investigation of sources, Broussard wrote that, "...newspapers, public records, and personal interviews reveal that black children in San Francisco were orderly and well behaved and that the majority of their social and recreational activities were structured and organized through schools, churches, and community centers."⁸⁵ Broussard argued that San Francisco was unique in this way, especially compared to cities like New York and Philadelphia which had more robust black populations, and longer histories of poverty and crime. His explanation rests partly on the small numbers in the Bay Area, but also on the longevity and strength of black middle-class institutions, such as the BTWCC and black Ys that developed early enough to influence the shape of black growth. This should not imply that African Americans in the Bay Area did not struggle with poverty or crime, because they did. Nor that the black community was a monolithic constituency, because it was not.

Still, black community centers provided an anchor for many the Bay Area families. They became central gathering spots for a wide range of fraternal and civic organizations, so that even if residents were not official members of the center, they were still coming into contact with the program directors and familiar with the scope of their projects. Black residents appreciated the significance of having spaces of their own, operated and led by people that understood the obstacles they faced on a daily basis. BTWCC kept track of how many outside organizations used their space and a tally of the number of nonmembers who utilized their social service resources, attended social events/fundraisers, and joined friends who were official members.⁸⁶ That the Bay Area's black population remained relatively small during the 1920s and 30s allowed community centers to have a substantial influence and outreach program. When the Great Depression started in 1929, the general mission of racial uplift remained at the heart of their programs, but centers had to shift priorities and focus on the immediate needs of basic survival.



⁸³ Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 28.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁸⁶ Annual BTWCC Report, 1929, p. 4. Under "General Attendance," the report states, "Number of persons who visited the Center but were not members of any organized group or activity. Total 1929-1101."

Great Depression

The general prosperity of the 1920s had bypassed many African Americans, as a result of falling cotton prices in the South and depressed wages in the North from increased mechanization in factories, leaving the majority without savings to fall back on. When unemployment skyrocketed in the early 1930s, desperate white workers took the low-paying menial positions that had usually been reserved for black labor. As the financial crisis worsened after the stock market crash in 1929, people turned to their churches, social welfare agencies, and benevolent societies for relief. The collapse radicalized many parts of the nation leading to thousands of strikes across the country and a surge in union membership and communist activism.⁸⁷ The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) gained considerable power in the mid-1930s, drawing workers in on a platform of mass industrial unionism, including skilled and unskilled labor and without regard to race or ethnicity. Independent religious organizations like Father Divine's Peace Mission movement and Sweet Daddy Grace's United House of Prayer for All People grew their ranks with anxious followers looking for stability and solutions.

In this period of drastic upheaval, black institutions in the Bay Area, likewise, tried to provide their communities with a lifeline. Not as dependent on industrial employment as their northeastern counterparts, Oakland and San Francisco's unemployment levels staggered behind other cities.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, black workers in the Bay Area endured massive layoffs, home foreclosures, and economic uncertainty. The Linden Y in Oakland and the BTWCC in San Francisco responded by opening their doors indiscriminately to anyone they could help with food, employment, and lodging, even if only temporarily.

In the Linden Y's annual report for 1932, it is clear that the majority of the club's efforts went toward mitigating the effects of the Great Depression on Oakland's black residents. By this time Hettie Tilghman no longer held the Vice-Chairman position, passing leadership to Mrs. Ivah L. Gray and a whole new team of clubwomen. The following September, in 1933, Tilghman would pass away at the age 62. The leadership she brought to so many organizations in Oakland was dearly missed, but in her wake, black clubwomen stepped up and continued the mission of racial uplift and community building. Mrs. Ivah L. Gray led the branch as Chairwoman but over nineteen women held leadership posts on varying committees, including a new position on interracial relations (led by Miss Mary. I. Bentley).⁸⁹ On the second page of the report, across from their stated purpose and motto, they included a short parable titled, "Wasn't the Depression Awful?" that cautioned against focusing too much on one's

⁸⁷ There are many significant works of scholarship that examine the variety of African American experiences during the Great Depression. See, Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Beth Thompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980); Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).

⁸⁸ Broussard, 116. Broussard quotes a report from the California State Relief Administration which stated, "Due to the comparatively slight industrialization of California, the disastrous results of the crisis were felt in the industries and trade of the state somewhat later, and to a lesser degree, than in the highly industrial states of the East."

⁸⁹ "The Spectator: Linden Branch Young Women's Christian Association, 1932-1933," Annual Report, Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

troubles. The crux of the story is that someone else's troubles can always be worse than your own, so it is better to not complain. In the final paragraph, it reminded readers,

We often overestimate the weight of our troubles and it takes something like the depression to make us realize that things are never so bad that they couldn't be worse. If we could stop complaining long enough to count some of our blessings, maybe we could see a different side. Didn't someone say: It is the shadows that make us human; it is well to be happy, but better to be human?⁹⁰

In 1932, the Great Depression had not yet hit its greatest depths. The use of past tense in the story's title suggests the full extent of the crisis had not yet been reached. This episode supports Broussard's argument that California lagged slightly behind in feeling the effects of the Great Depression. It also represented a middle-class mentality of personal responsibility and accountability. The Business Girls Club adopted the motto, "Side Stepping the Depression," and administered a series of questionnaires aimed at inspiring self-improvement amongst its members. Despite the tough-love message at the beginning, the rest of the report demonstrates how the branch initiated relief programs to help families in need. They organized clothing drives and volunteered to mend garments for free. They raised money for the Fannie Wall Children's Home by throwing luncheons for the city's businessmen, and during the holiday season they ran a toy drive to bring Christmas cheer to more than sixty children.⁹¹

These efforts supplemented the usual services of work placement and lodging for women in need. The program leaders knew that the center itself served an important purpose in just being a place where people could congregate, relax, and find solace. Under its list of established clubs, the report noted,

In times of stress and strain the Y.W.C.A., is always looked to as one of the agencies to help keep minds active and therefore happy. Many girls and young women have found Linden Branch a source of real joy where an evening of fun could be had for the taking.⁹²

As the 1930s progressed, the Linden Y expanded vocational classes to include cooking, dining room service, and what was called scientific cleaning, which focused on the tasks and skills needed to apply for hotel, restaurant, and large business cleaning positions.⁹³ In 1939, the Business and Industrial Department, which provided education to young women in the field of business, focused their energy on advocating for better working conditions for domestic workers. Aware of the labor organizing

⁹⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁹¹ Ibid., 6; The number of cloth drives, food drives, and fundraisers for the unemployed were also reported on by Delilah L. Beasley in her column for the *Oakland Tribune*. "The Board of Management of Linden branch Y.W.C.A held a dinner Tuesday for the benefit of the unemployed. It was well attended. They are also collecting clothing for the families of many suffering Negroes of the County." Delilah L. Beasley, "Activities Among Negroes," *Oakland Tribune*, 18 December 1932, 11.

⁹² Ibid., 4.

⁹³ Donald Hausler, "The Black Y's of Oakland," *Oakland Heritage Alliance News*, Winter 1987/1988, pg. 8., Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

happening around them, and influenced by the growth of union movements, YWCA branches nationwide advocated for domestic workers to be recognized and protected by the National Recovery Administration (NRA) in 1933.⁹⁴ They wanted domestic service treated as a legitimate profession and for women to be hired as live-out household assistants with standardized pay and hours.⁹⁵ The NRA, as it was passed in 1933 did not include domestic or agricultural workers, and ultimately it was ruled unconstitutional in 1935. Neither the benefits of federal support and intervention as organized workers nor Social Security, which also excluded domestics, extended to black female domestics. Nevertheless, organizations like the black Ys lobbied hard for better conditions and wages for these workers.

In the Bay Area, the Linden Y joined forces with surrounding branches in the state to lobby for the Household Employee's Bill, which came before the California State Legislature in 1939.⁹⁶ Similar bills had been introduced before, but a renewed effort arose from the Household Employee's Alliance of the Bay Area, composed of an interracial coalition of YWCA clubs in San Francisco and Oakland.⁹⁷ The bill in 1939 called for a maximum 54-hour-work-week and standardized wages. Although the bill failed, the Linden Y reported that they would "continue their efforts to raise standards of working conditions and wages for household employees through public education and other methods."⁹⁸ Federal programs that excluded domestic and agriculture workers, such as the Social Security Act, disproportionately impacted African Americans and almost guaranteed a perpetual cycle of poverty for many in the black community.⁹⁹

The NAACP and other civil rights groups protested the exclusionary aspects of New Deal legislation, but black citizens continued to face discriminatory policies that sharply reduced their access to financial relief programs. Without unions of their own, domestic workers were especially vulnerable, and for black domestic workers in particular, depressed wages was compounded by having to often live-in with white families. The absence of union support put clubs like the YWCA in a pivotal position to advocate on behalf of women's labor. The Linden Y's support and participation in seeking legislative protections for domestic workers gave a voice to Bay Area black women who had little negotiating power with their employers. The Linden Y provided one of the avenues for black women to become politically active and draw attention to policies that impacted their lives.

In San Francisco, the BTWCC engaged in similar relief programs like those of the Linden Y to collect clothes, food, and home supplies for families facing dire financial situations. During the

⁹⁴ Phyllis M. Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 119.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113. Labor advocates within the YWCA argued that live-in domestics often worked well over 8 hours and never had the relief of being off the clock like industrial workers. In her study of domestic service in the US, Palmer found how individual Y branches conducted studies to empirically prove that women toiled in hard conditions. She writes, "In 1935-1936, the Seattle YWCA conducted a study that had the predictable result of revealing 'cases of girls working 14 to 16 hours a day. While many other conditions needed improvement, hours were the employees' chief grievance.'" (129)

⁹⁶ "A Review of the year 1939, YWCA: Linden Branch," Annual Report, p. 20. Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

⁹⁷ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 130.

⁹⁸ "A Review of the year 1939, YWCA: Linden Branch," Annual Report, p. 20. Young Women's Christian Association, Linden Branch Folder, Oakland History Room.

⁹⁹ See, Ira Katzelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

Christmas holiday in 1930, the Mother's Fidelity Club organized a supply drive to make Christmas baskets for the needy which were then distributed by the Visiting Nurses' Association.¹⁰⁰ The youth clubs threw dances and staged plays to raise and donate money.¹⁰¹

The biggest concern, however, was helping people find work. In March of 1937, both the BTWCC and the Linden Y joined the local NAACP chapters and a number of black fraternities to discuss the problem of unemployment. Under the umbrella of the "Joint Vocational, Educational, Occupational Guidance Committee," the representatives from each organization met at the Linden Y and planned a two-day conference to address the needs of the youth finding work, and educating young adults on options for higher education.¹⁰² At the planning meeting, delegates shared the most common requests from teens and young adults at their recreation centers, which included finding part-time jobs, having accurate information on which industries/companies hired black workers, access to college guidance counselors, and hearing speakers from colleges discuss the opportunities and challenges of higher education.¹⁰³ The planning committee agreed to tackle these topics at the conference. The conference included a panel on trade unions led by C.L. Dellums.¹⁰⁴ Dellums was a prominent labor activist from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and an officer in the Berkeley branch of the NAACP. The conference, planned for the weekend of May 15 at the Linden Y, culminated with a keynote speech by Floyd Covington titled "New Job Frontiers for Negro Youth."¹⁰⁵

Even as the BTWCC focused energy on alleviating some of the hardships cause by the depression, they never reduced the activities at the center. The Fall Program from 1937 listed over twenty different classes, often with five to seven different options on each day of the week between 1pm and 9 pm.¹⁰⁶ Knitting was one of most popular, offering classes three days a week, for three hours a session. Cooking and dressmaking also remained a favorite among women members. There was a growth, however, in more creative courses as well, including dance, piano lessons, drawing, and leather crafts.

Creative outlets were therapeutic during times of uncertainty, and San Francisco's black residents took advantage of the opportunities at the center. For some members, exposure to creative classes like drama and dance unlocked incredible talent and passion. For instance, future radio and television star Eddie Anderson, known for his role as Rochester on the *Jack Benny Show*, performed briefly with the center's dramatics club in the early 1920s when he was in junior high.¹⁰⁷ In the 1930s,

¹⁰⁰ "Booker T. Washington Center Will Hold Christmas Tree Exercises," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 December 1930, 26.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² "Joint Vocational, Educational, Occupational Guidance Committee," 30 March 1937, Miss Carole Ivey, recording secretary, Box 97-17, Folder 335, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert B. Flippin, Organizational Affiliations, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Floyd Covington was a prominent black leader in Los Angeles starting in the 1920s. He started his work at the 28th Street Branch YMCA in LA before becoming industrial secretary of the LA branch of the National Urban League. He became the League's executive director in 1931 and held that position until 1950.

¹⁰⁶ "1937: Booker T. Washington Center Fall Program," Folder 365, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

¹⁰⁷ "Mary D. Weir Stewart, Biographical Sketch," undated, p.2, Box 97-7, Folder 124, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Charlotte Harris Stewart Stephens Gilchrist Stewart, Mary D. Weir Stewart, Manuscripts Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

the dramatics club became known as the Negro Players and gained state-wide recognition by winning the Northern California Drama Tournament three separate times.¹⁰⁸ In 1934, the group's performance of *King Argimenes and the Unknown Warrior*, won them the tournament and praise in the local papers. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported,

...it proved a peculiarly effective vehicle for these Negro players. For they all have resonant voices and the natural instinct for rhyme which is part of their racial inheritance...the performance had an eloquence and sincerity which no group of white actors could have hoped to attain.¹⁰⁹

Clubs like the Negro Players provided members the opportunity to try new hobbies and be creative in ways that neither school nor work allowed. Whether because of racial segregation, as seen in the 1925 Oakland's children pageant, or because schools lacked funding, black students did not always have access to extracurricular activities. Recreation centers opened up these possibilities. During the Great Depression, the Linden Y and the BTWCC focused more energy on social services like job placement, but they still understood their purpose as prompting racial uplift through fun and meaningful recreational programs. The expansion of social services that started in the Great Depression continued during World War II. The rapid growth of the black population into San Francisco and Oakland put a strain on housing, work, and social service agencies. Often working in coordination with city agencies, churches, and black civic organizations, recreation centers worked hard to become a one-stop resource for new black families.

For the first time, however, with a second wave of the Great Migration during World War II, recreational center directors confronted a largely new and in some ways unknown community in the flood of black migrants streaming into the area from the South. Class tensions simmered at times, as black reformers tried to impose middle-class values on the newcomers and steer them away from what they considered unwholesome commercial amusements. Additional black Y's and recreation centers opened in response to the large increase in local black populations, including the de Fremery Community Center in West Oakland. The following chapter analyzes the impact of World War II on these black recreation centers and the ways they functioned in black people's lives.

¹⁰⁸ "Negro Group Wins Drama Tounrey," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 May 1934, 12; George C. Warren, "Negro Cast Gives Enhanced Values to Dunsany Drama," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 June 1933, 9. Their wins are also mentioned in the biographical sketch on Mary McCants Stewart.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter Four: Response to War: Black Recreation Centers, 1940-1950

On August 26, 1943 Robert Browning Flippin, director of San Francisco's Booker T. Washington Community Center, delivered a speech titled "The Negro in San Francisco." In it, Flippin talked about the massive demographic change prompted by the war and the challenges facing new black migrants from the South. He referred to the newcomers as "modern refugees" escaping the "static warm organic" simple life of southern folk culture and the terrors of plantation life to join the production lines in the chaotic and impersonal city.¹ He called on his audience to help these their families adjust to the city and help them navigate the nuances of urban life. Flippin also called on the city itself to be an example of true democracy, to reject racial discrimination and guarantee a system of fair play in employment, housing, and social opportunities.² While new arrivals confronted discrimination in countless social situations, the main problem was housing. Confined to specific areas through restrictive covenants, redlining, and de facto segregation, African Americans were forced into overcrowded, dilapidated apartment buildings. With up to six or eight people living in a room, or multiple families sharing a single family dwelling, Flippin argued that the formation of black ghettos contributed to juvenile delinquency, family disorganization, crime, high death rates, and the prevalence of disease.³ In such conditions Flippin argued it was amazing African Americans succeeded at all, but that with fair conditions, their community could truly thrive.

The restrictive and degrading conditions African Americans faced in San Francisco and Oakland grew worse in the 1940s as demand for housing outstripped supply. In cities across the North

¹ Robert Flippin, "The Negro in San Francisco," August 26, 1943, Folder 204, Box 97-11, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

and West, black migrants looking for wartime employment met similar circumstances. As shown in early chapters, inclusiveness of the new modern city culture extended solely to European immigrants. Their adoption of a white racial formation was predicated on the exclusion of African Americans and other people of color such as Mexican Americans, and Asian immigrants.⁴ As a result, the features of the new mass culture that permeated throughout urban spaces in the form of movies, amusement parks, department stores, museums, etc., were largely closed off to black patrons, or allowed for only segregated participation. At the end of the war, cities underwent another new spatial arrangement, as federally subsidized suburbanization encouraged millions of white workers and families to flee the “urban blight” developing around them. Eric Avila argues that postwar suburban development solidified a new “white” identity that absorbed any remaining European ethnic groups still feeling outside the bounds of Americanness.⁵

However, even before the new spatial divide between urban and suburban, African Americans had to observe formal and informal racial boundaries within the city environment. The role of recreation took on new meaning during the war years. Whereas during the Great Depression, the focus of recreation and community centers (for both white and blacks) was on providing meals, job placement, and emergency shelter, the infusion of steady wartime wages and a general economic boom nationwide, meant that working-class city residents had expendable cash for the first time in years.

Black residents continued to face de facto segregation in cities around the Bay Area, often excluded from using public pools, parks, roller rinks, restaurants, and other public and private amusements.⁶ In a 1944 study about the experiences of African Americans living in San Francisco, researchers called twenty-five businesses of recreation, including bowling alleys, swimming pools, and skating rinks. Asked directly if they served black patrons, eleven stated they did not allow African Americans to participate. In two other cases, patronage was limited to black servicemen.⁷ People of color, however, still found outlets for recreation and leisure. Frequenting jazz clubs, dance halls, bars, joining sports teams, and signing up for recreational activities at local community centers all contributed to their social experience. For families with children, and for young adults, finding a safe and comfortable space for socializing, exercise, and entertainment was an important component of building community relationships among new and old residents. Recreation centers helped meet that demand. No longer needing the services of just employment or housing, these rec centers expanded classes in music, drama, political clubs, black history classes, alongside the usual options of athletics and social gatherings. Never working within a vacuum, these Bay Area community centers worked in conjunction with each other, schools, and churches. It was not uncommon for multiple groups to fundraise for a common cause, to hold meetings in each other’s social halls, or attract new participants from church members.⁸

⁴ Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro War Worker in San Francisco, a local self-survey*. Technical staff: Charles S. Johnson, Herman H. Long and Grace Jones. A project, financed by a San Francisco citizen, administered by the YWCA and carried out in connection with the Race relations program of the American Missionary Association, Dr. Charles S. Johnson, director, and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, 1944, p. 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸ “De Fremery Easter Party,” *Oakland Tribune*, 28 April 1946, 22.

This chapter examines World War II's impact on community recreation centers in the Bay Area. These centers underwent a transition as they absorbed millions of new black migrants and sought to provide services that encouraged community growth and racial uplift. Hiring strong dynamic black leaders to lead West Oakland's de Fremery Recreation Center, the black Oakland black Ys, and San Francisco's Booker T. Washington Community Center was just the first step in a larger project of building sites of recreation that also encouraged a doctrine of self-improvement and race pride. The next step, for these directors, involved designing programs that met the entertainment and leisure needs of its community members and linking those activities to a larger purpose of racial equality. Since the 1920s, developing recreational activities in of itself was a statement that even as working-class laborers, as children, as young adults—black communities deserved the same opportunities to partake in recreation and leisure. And while black reformers had been organizing community centers from as early as the nineteenth century, there were often competing notions of bourgeois and working-class respectability that limited widespread participation in the past. The Great Depression erased a lot of these class boundaries as the economic crisis forced a reconfiguration of priorities, mainly helping people get the basic necessities of food and shelter. That is not to say that class distinctions did not exist during World War II. As seen from the women behind the Linden Y and the BTWCC, the directors of these community centers often came from middle-class backgrounds, and were college educated. Their goals stemmed, in part, from their own middle-class experiences, as they did for the black clubwomen in the 1920s. Yet, in general, there was more fluid participation that crossed class lines during and after the war. As a result, these centers acted as a main source for socializing, recreation, and political activism.



By 1943, when Robert Browning Flippin delivered his speech on the conditions of African Americans in San Francisco, he was more than just the Director of the Booker T. Washington Community Center. He was the Treasurer of the local NAACP, a Boy Scout Troop leader, a member of the Community Chest Speakers Bureau and the Port of Oakland Youth Service Group, and on the Advisory Board of Trustees for the Mental Hygiene Society.⁹ He gave this speech and others like it in college classrooms, to nursing students, fraternal clubs, women's groups, and community centers. He also spoke before the California legislature to discuss what legislative actions could help unemployment and "youth problems."¹⁰ Concerns about black juvenile delinquency had been largely absent from community center records in the 1920s and 1930s. As the population grew, however, the rate of crime climbed as well. While the conditions and obstacles of African Americans in San

⁹ Robert Flippin, "List of Accomplishments," Folder 170, Box 97-10, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

¹⁰ Mr. Olwen Davies to Robert Flippin, letter, October 10, 1939; Alfred G. Fisk to Robert Flippin, letter, May 16, 1945; Pauline Friedlander to Robert Flippin, letter, May 21, 1941; Mrs. W.E. Knierieman to Robert Flippin, letter, March 16, 1944; Congressman Edward F. O'Day to Robert Flippin, letter, April 27, 1940, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

Francisco were Flippin's top priority, he also spoke about the need to work with other minority groups, racial prejudice in the U.S. in general, and the position of blacks in the aftermath of war. Similar to community center directors Dorothy Pitts and Joshua Rose in Oakland, Flippin had a long history of experience in recreation and social work before arriving in San Francisco. That experience guided his vision for recreation in the Bay Area and influenced the programs he developed.

Born in Nebraska in December 1905, Flippin was the son of a black physician and grew up in a middle class world. His interest in recreation started in high school when he served as secretary in the only community recreation organization available to African Americans in his town of Stromsburg.¹¹ While attending the University of Nebraska, he worked as the secretary of the black YMCA near campus, and, later, volunteered at the St. Paul Community House as he pursued a medical technician degree from the Northwest Institute of Medical Technology in Minneapolis in 1935. After graduating, Flippin became an X-Ray technician and secured a job at a state hospital in Chicago, where in his words, he observed "...the plight of many Negroes needing treatment."¹² Working in the medical field and being the son of a physician, Flippin witnessed first-hand the types of services that a working class neighborhood needed. Flippin also spent one summer studying under renowned African American sociologist Dr. Horace R. Cayton Jr., who co-authored *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* in 1945.¹³

All of these experiences shaped Flippin's world view and influenced the programs he developed in San Francisco. He highlighted housing as the main obstacle facing new black migrants, but this was inevitably tied to recreation. Flippin advocated for federal housing projects to meet the demand, including the West side Courts homes built in 1943 in the Western Addition district of San Francisco.¹⁴ When housing developed opened, Flippin was appointed by San Francisco Housing Authority to manage its first year.¹⁵ While not officially designated as a black-only housing project, the Western Addition and Fillmore neighborhoods had a majority of black residents, and constituted the area's greatest need. The West Side Courts, however, only had 136 units and hardly made a dent in alleviating the crisis. As more war industry workers moved into the Bay Area, Flippin argued that the lack of housing posed health risks. Speaking to the *Chronicle* in 1943, Flippin highlighted the conditions of sub-standard dwellings stating, "There are some families living in quarters without gas or water in San Francisco. Once building housing 14 families hasn't had water for months."¹⁶ With multiple people sharing rooms, and families sharing houses, there was little to no privacy or space for

¹¹ Robert Flippin, "Cover letter to Mrs. Augustine Seville—application for director position at BWCC," July 14, 1937, Folder 348, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, written by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, is a significant sociological study of black life in Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century. The massive amount of research was conducted by field workers working under the Works Progress Administration in the late 1930s. In general, it provides an analysis of black migration, community structure, and the racial tension southern blacks confronted in the city.

¹⁴ James Murray, "What's Being Done about Housing for Negroes in the Bay Area?" *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 April 1943, 10.

¹⁵ Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 176.

¹⁶ Ibid.

entertainment and relaxation. Community centers became the living rooms, the parlor spaces, and backyards that people did not have as part of their home space.

There is a lot to say about the leaders of these centers. They are easy to write about because they left significant sources behind and participated in a number of civic and community organizations alongside their director roles. It is more difficult to get at the personal motivations and goals of the participants themselves, at least in their own words. But examining how often they frequented community centers, the types of activities they joined, the needs they expressed to staff and directors sheds light on the role these spaces played in their lives. In 1939, Robert Flippin allowed UC Berkeley economic professor Emily Huntington and her graduate students to conduct a study on the Booker T. Washington Community Center (BWCC), analyzing its relationship to the neighborhood, the members (their economic status, and social resources), and the purposes and objectives of the center, which changed slightly after 1938 when the BWCC adopted a new constitution.¹⁷ An economic analysis is of course limited in its scope, but it nonetheless reveals significant information about the center and its relationship to the black community.

The first interesting observation in the report is that the researchers did not qualify BWCC as a “neighborhood” center because its aim was “...to serve a minority racial community whose constituents are widely scattered.”¹⁸ As in Oakland and throughout the Bay Area, African Americans had less resources at their disposal. The few community centers open to African Americans had to serve a larger public than their white counterparts. This made publicizing very important, but also meant that they had to stretch their resources to meet a growing demand. In 1939 BWCC operated out of a small building at 1433 Divisadero Street, which they purchased in 1923 and renovated. While catering to the black residents in the area, the neighborhood also consisted of Japanese and Russian families, and small number of Filipinos. These ethnic groups lived amongst each other but were

¹⁷ Letter from Emily Huntington to Robert Flippin, May 26, 1939, Folder 352, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center; Emily Huntington, “Neighborhood Centers Study: Preliminary Report on the Booker T. Washington Community Center,” p. 8, 1939, Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center.

In the original constitution, the statement of objectives was short, vague, and contained a religious aspect. It stated: “The object of this organization shall be to promote Social, Physical, Scriptural, and Industrial development of the people in San Francisco.”

In the 1938 revision, the statement of objectives stated, “It shall be the purpose of this organization to promote a wholesome community-wide recreational, educational, and character building program for the adult and juvenile citizens of San Francisco and the establishment and maintenance of an adequate Center in which to house such and other approved activities.” The change resulted from a collaborative effort by the BWCC Board, staff, and registered members that reflected a general shift in how they envisioned the BWCC functioning. According to the Berkeley researches, the change allowed for the “adoption of different techniques” in meeting the social problems and social needs of the black community. The researchers commented, “While the professional group worker expects his techniques to produce certain results in the way of character development, to the lay members of this Board ‘character building’ is a much more definite thing.” The revised objectives also specified the desire to reach both adults and young adults in their programs.

¹⁸ Emily Huntington, “Neighborhood Centers Study: Preliminary Report on the Booker T. Washington Community Center,” p. 1, 1939, Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center.

divided in many social settings. The Japanese, for instance, similarly ran their own YMCAs because of exclusion from white chapters.

African Americans occupied less than 6.4 percent of the dwellings, yet in 1939, 21.9 percent of members of the center received some form of public aid, other than health services.¹⁹ Researchers found that black residents in this area paid three to seven more dollars per month in rent than white residents, and that about 40 percent of their dwellings were rated sub-standard.²⁰ Before the explosion of wartime industrial work, about half the men worked in domestic or personal service with less than one-third in manufacturing industries, trade, and transportation.²¹ For African American women, nearly two-thirds worked in domestic or personal service, and about one-fourth in manufacturing and mechanical industries.²² Working in low-wage labor and being forced to pay higher rents meant there was little dispensable income for entertainment and leisure activities. For young adults, and families with children, community centers offered a low cost option for recreation and entertainment. For “junior membership,” parents could sign up their children, ages 10 to 14 for fifty cents for the year, or five cents per month.²³ Intermediate membership, ages 14 to 21 cost \$1 a year or 10 cents a month, and members over 21 cost \$2 a year. People unable to afford these costs earned their membership privileges by doing volunteer work at the center.²⁴ Membership fees contributed less than 2% of the center’s income, with about 20% coming from renting out facility space to third party groups and a little over 75% coming from the Community Chest.²⁵

In addition to serving a community well beyond their district borders, the BWCC and similar institutions had to deal with white opposition. White residents often resisted efforts for black community centers to secure facility locations. The irony here is that white residents often crouched their discrimination through rhetoric of “black crime,” but also wanted to refuse them services that would contribute to crime reduction. Before moving to their location on Divisadero, BWCC administrators battled the white Divisadero Improvement Association, which resisted their purchase of a building in the neighborhood.²⁶ To quell fears, the Flippin “...visited nearly thirty white clubs and groups, in order to obtain a clearer understanding of their attitudes toward the Center, and insofar as possible, to develop an appreciation of the Center’s aims.”²⁷ In November 1942, the BWCC moved again from their Divisadero site to 2031 Bush Street in a building formally used by Japanese residents. Japanese internment made that specific space and surrounding residential dwellings available to the expanding black population.²⁸

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 15.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. Community Chests were fund-raising organizations in the U.S. and Canada that collected money from local businesses and workers and distributed it to community projects. The first Community Chest, “Community Fund,” was founded in 1913 in Cleveland Ohio by the Federation for Charity and Philanthropy. The number of Community Chest organizations increased from 39 to 353 between 1919 and 1929, and surpassed 1000 by 1948.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Booker T. Washington Community Center, 2031 Bush Street,” undated, folder 359, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

The BWCC generated public support by establishing public-private relationships between other like-minded organizations and agencies. BWCC worked with the local black YMCA/YWCAs, the public schools, the Juvenile Court, San Quentin and Folsom prisons, the Family Service Agency, Travelers Aid, and, through the Visiting Nurse Association, a variety of clinics. They worked closely with the Tuberculosis Association and held frequent TB testing in the center itself.²⁹ Inter-organizational relationships helped in the recruiting process but also in maintaining an image that was hard for white antagonists to criticize. Community centers also recruited by distributing monthly Bulletins to its members, making announcements in churches and schools, going door to door, and speaking on radio programs.³⁰

One of the most significant functions of the centers included acting as a vital source of information for African Americans. Such information could be as simple as providing a list of hotels that served black guests, as Flippin did for a Miss Charlie Mae Boozer who was visiting from Ohio. The list had five such hotels, with a note at the bottom indicating that the Fairmont Hotel was a “first class white hotel, which will accept the better class of Negroes.”³¹ However, more significantly, community centers such as the BWCC helped black residents navigate the often complicated map of bureaucratic resources. The relationships between public and private services were essential for this purpose. In an internal report outlining the BWCC’s role in counseling clients, it detailed how to help residents find the necessary resources to meet their needs, and stressed the importance of working cooperatively with public agencies that handled pensions, medical care, housing, economic relief, child care, recreation, education, rights for veterans, and employment.³² This was especially important when working with new southern migrants who were “accustomed to the official indifference of southern bureaucracy.”³³

Community center counselors were tasked with identifying a client’s problem, decide which agency or agencies should handle the case, and provide the necessary information to take action, including: location, telephone numbers, and explaining to their client the type of service to expect from the agency. Counselors helped residents fill out forms, provided letters of introduction if needed, and conducted follow up appointments to make sure a client obtained said services.³⁴ With the passage of the GI bill after the war, the BWCC expected some of the greatest demand to be from veterans trying to access the rights and privileges granted within that legislation. The report instructed counselors to prepare as it would be “vital to be able to refer [veterans] to the proper agency or bureau.”³⁵ The other high demand was employment, especially after the war ended. The BWCC prepared itself by working with the United States Employment Service (USES) and trying to get weekly

²⁹ Emily Huntington, “Neighborhood Centers Study: Preliminary Report on the Booker T. Washington Community Center,” p. 1, 1939, Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Robert Flippin to Miss Charlie Mae Boozer, letter, not dated, folder 350, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

³² “Booker T. Washington Community Center Counseling and Information,” not dated, folder 358, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

³³ Ibid., 1.

³⁴ Ibid., 1.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

or monthly information on available jobs.³⁶ In this type of position, community centers saw themselves as not only helping residents gain access to resources, but holding public agencies accountable. The internal report stressed this role, stating:

The counseling department should be tactfully persistent in seeing that other agencies assume their responsibilities, that they really act rather than merely confer. We can be a stimulating force toward that end. We can be a coordinating force when a case requires the attention of more than one agency, as School and Health Departments, School and Juvenile Court, Family Service and Health Department, and so on.³⁷

Never forgetting its other fundamental functions, the report ended by encouraging counselors to direct clients to available leisure time activities at the center and to be active agents in “steering individuals into wholesome activities, companionships, and attitudes.”³⁸

In addition to directing residents to the appropriate public agencies, the BWCC also tried to provide basic services within the center itself, including health services. The center regularly scheduled free tuberculosis testing and fluoroscopic examinations through the San Francisco Tuberculosis Association.³⁹ They offered multiple time options and screened movies during the wait time to encourage greater participation.⁴⁰ In the 1940s, the BWCC created a health and recreation department within their institution to help meet the health care needs of the community. In 1943, this division was headed by Muriel Anderson who used radio, among other social media, to talk about the health risks and resources available to black residents.⁴¹ A BWCC newsletter credited Anderson with “stimulating great public interest in the health problems” of the black community, and expanding the services of the health program to meet greater public need.⁴² This involved forming a Red Cross Home Nursing class at the BWCC, which taught students Red Cross first aid lessons and techniques, and the creation of a “National Negro Health Week,” which “informed the community of the many health resources available.”⁴³

The center also directed efforts at pulling people out of precarious living situations. In July 1942, this meant going to Juvenile Court and securing the release of a girl found to be working in a brothel.⁴⁴ BWCC counselors placed the girl in a home and planned to enroll her in school in the fall. In the same month, counselors helped a single mother get back on public relief after her husband

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Edward W. Koehler, public relations representative, to Robert Flippin, letter, February 21, 1942, folder 353, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Booker T. Washington Community News,” May 8, 1942, folder 358, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Booker T. Washington Community News,” May 1, 1942, folder 358, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁴⁴ “Board Meeting July 1942, Agenda,” folder 360, box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

deserted her. They accompanied her down to the District Attorney's office and Domestic Relations department to file a warrant against him. In the meantime, the center provided her and her family with food. Both are examples of how community centers filled the void left by inadequate public services or agencies not willing to work with people of color. In the research conducted by the Berkeley economists, they noted that black San Franciscans expected and demanded this type of personal interaction, "the right to be recognized as individuals—which public departments could not," either because of philosophy, organization, or institutional racism.⁴⁵

Lastly, the BWCC of course offered a variety of recreational, educational, and leisure activities that met the needs and interests of African Americans living in San Francisco. For sports the center offered young men boxing, tumbling, wrestling, organized baseball and basketball, and swimming.⁴⁶ In the area of crafts, men signed up for wood carving, and paper and leathercraft. Social clubs included glee clubs, tap and social dancing, dramatics, piano lessons, Boy Scout troops, and Cub Scout troops.

For young girls the sport activities were more limited (at least at BWCC), but they managed to have basketball, volleyball, and swimming.⁴⁷ In crafts, women did paper and leathercraft, wood burning, sewing and knitting. Woman and young girls had access to the same social clubs as men and all members had access to simple games, such as checkers, ping-pong, dominoes, and cards. There were also many "discussion groups" for political issues, a "college club," and monthly NAACP meetings. There were age appropriate games for small children, and specific forum clubs for men and women over the age 21.⁴⁸ It is easy to list these activities as just a catalogue of traditional games, but they offered important opportunities for social interaction, and the resources to fulfill intellectual and creative needs.

The community center simultaneously provided a respite from the stress of work, home life, and school, and acted as a site for political engagement. Essentially, it became a space for members to make their own. At least at the BWCC, program directors and staffers listened to demands of members, eliminating programs that dropped in attendance and creating new ones to meet expressed interests.⁴⁹ For instance, in early 1944, responding to requests from young mothers and expecting mothers, Flippin introduced the "Mothers Club," which brought in volunteer nurses to discuss prenatal care and information on child development.⁵⁰ A month after this meeting for mothers, the

⁴⁵ Emily Huntington, "Neighborhood Centers Study: Preliminary Report on the Booker T. Washington Community Center," p. 6, 1939, Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁷ "Annual Report of the Booker T. Washington Community Service Center, 1929," Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁴⁸ Emily Huntington, "Neighborhood Centers Study: Preliminary Report on the Booker T. Washington Community Center," p. 10, 1939, Folder 357, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11. From the above report: "The Center has eliminated activities which were poorly conducted...activities which would give individuals opportunities for self-expression were substituted for those numerous groups. The Board has required study on the part of staff members and has itself developed an interest in program planning in relationship to community needs. Participation in activities is not limited to those who could meet rigid individual standards. These are taken of the fact that the Center is interested more in the growth of the individuals than in the successful conduct of activities."

⁵⁰ Robert Flippin to "Mothers," newsletter, March 22, 1944, Folder 362, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

BWCC advertised a mass meeting for ship workers to be held at the Center to discuss segregated unions. The Bulletin announced in big, black bold lettering, “NEGRO SHIPYARD WORKERS! WILL JIM CROW UNION AUXILIARIES SOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS? WILL AUXILIARIES HELP WIN THIS WAR?”⁵¹ The meeting was organized by the San Francisco Committee against Negro Discrimination and Segregation, hosted by BWCC and open to the public free of charge. At the bottom of the bulletin it encouraged wide participation, stating “Following the reports, open discussion is not only allowed, but invited.”

Community centers became the starting point for all of these types of political, social, and recreational interaction. To be successful, they had to have strong leadership, but more importantly, they had to be receptive to their members. The BWCC held a significant position in San Francisco, and all throughout the Bay Area, similar institutions worked to meet the needs of the swelling numbers of incoming African Americans. In many instances these centers worked together, in hosting events, fundraising, and offering services when public agencies fell short. Other strong community center directors like Joshua Rose and Dorothy Pitts shared Robert Flippin’s vision of racial uplift and community building, but their programs were influenced by their own life experiences, and as such, their institutions stressed different types of public engagement.



Just as the BWCC looked for new leadership towards the end of the Great Depression, the black YMCA in Oakland (the black Y) sought stability and change through a dynamic leader. In 1939 they hired Joshua Rose from Pittsburgh. In 1946, under Rose’s leadership, a new building opened on 3265 Market Street, where it still functions today.

Rose brought stability to the black Y, and a perspective about community recreation that grew from his own experiences in Pittsburgh and New Jersey. As a youth and young adult, Rose joined fraternal associations and social clubs that sought to break down racial barriers. A member of both the Ritz Klub and the Holy Cross Amateur Athletic Club of Pittsburgh, Rose believed in the power of recreation to build better character and unite communities. The preamble of the Ritz Klub stated:

We...do bind ourselves together to strive for better entertainment among our group, to break down social and racial barriers in all forms, to fight segregation in public buildings, to place a greater number of colored employees in city and county offices, to make Pittsburgh colored society a society of the people, by the people and for the people.⁵²

⁵¹ “Negro Shipyard Workers!” Bulletin, April 4, Folder 365, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁵² “Ritz Klub History,” undated, Joshua Rose Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, “Biographical Miscellaneous 1920s-1980s,” African American Museum and Library.

In the spring of 1927, the Ritz Klub merged with the Holy Cross Club (to which Rose also belonged), and the Phantoms of Pittsburgh (another athletic social club) to form The Greater Pittsburgh Inner-Club Council. The goals of these associations and clubs ranged from establishing and maintaining friendships, initiating dialogues about contemporary political issues, promoting health and well-being, and creating a proactive community. From there, Rose became a volunteer and part time employee of the black YMCA in Pittsburgh from 1923 to 1929, working as a clerk, desk man, custodian, dormitory and cafeteria manager, physical director, swimming instructor, and group leader.⁵³

Once in college at the University of Pittsburgh, Rose organized the first YMCA camp for underprivileged boys, helped develop testing programs to discover the potential of youths to achieve scholastically, and fought to enroll the first black swimmers on the University of Pittsburgh swimming team. After graduating, Rose took a position with the YMCA in Montclair, New Jersey where he organized the first interracial learn-to-swim-campaign.⁵⁴ His impressive resume prompted Oakland to offer him a position and, with his arrival in 1939, he continued to make a significant impact in the black community.

Like Dorothy Pitts and Robert Flippin, Rose believed that recreational centers provided programs that helped build character and leadership skills. One area he was especially passionate about was nature. Both in Pittsburgh and Oakland, Rose instituted outdoor summer camping trips that took inner-city youth into the wilderness, which for many participants, was a completely new experience. In the fall of 1930, working as the Y's Boys' Work Secretary, he organized Camp Indian Head for the spring of 1931. It was recognized as the "first bona fide camp to be sponsored by the Central Avenue Branch," and quickly became a hit among members.⁵⁵ Located at the base of Laurel Ridge Mountain about sixty miles southeast of Pittsburgh, Camp Indian Head tried to reach the individual on multiple levels: physical, social, educational, and devotional.⁵⁶ Rose believed that being away from the city allowed boys the space and freedom to express their "spiritual and emotional sides."⁵⁷ One can imagine that for the boys and young men who participated, going out into nature provided a nice reprieve from the congested and concrete atmosphere of the city. At camp, they hiked, swam, and engaged in activities that promoted teamwork and leadership skills. Older teenagers volunteered as camp counselors and acted as "big brothers" to the younger boys, allowing the teens to take on more responsibilities and helping boys of varying ages establish relationships.⁵⁸ The local paper reported:

Campfires, with their story-telling and singing, seemed to draw out the boys like nothing else could. It was then that frank discussions of common problems lead to a clearer understanding, and formed a firmer bond among the campers. Another

⁵³ "Joshua A Rose- Work History to 1950s," undated, Joshua Rose Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, "Biographical Miscellaneous 1920s-1980s," African American Museum and Library.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁶ Norine West, "Camp Indian Head has Unprecedented Success," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 August 1932, 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "Ideal Vacations Offered Boys at Camp Indian Head: Josh Rose to Head Up Big Summer for 'Y,'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 June 1934, 6.

experience that will remain vivid to the boys was an overnight hike, when they slept under the stars in the open.⁵⁹

Offered at the inexpensive price of \$6.50 for ten days, which included transportation and meals, many families took this opportunity to give their sons this invaluable experience. In 1932, 125 boys signed up for the first of two sessions, demonstrating its early popularity.

His success in Pittsburgh contributed to the type of program and atmosphere Rose tried to institute at the Oakland black Y. He organized both local summer day camps, and annual trips to Yosemite, hoping to broaden the experiences of Oakland's black youth.⁶⁰ At the summer day camps, participants engaged in arts and crafts, sports, and day trips to local parks like Nichol Park in Richmond and Alum Rock Park in San Jose.⁶¹ The end of summer culminated in the organized trip to Yosemite, where members immersed themselves in one of the most beautiful national parks in the country.⁶²

For Rose, outdoor recreation was a significant activity that pushed participants out of their comfort zone, contributed to better health, and helped build character. Outdoor excursions had long been associated with the YMCA and other boys programs like the Boy's Scouts. Camping trips and outdoor activities were often used to reinforce active notions of masculinity and manhood.⁶³ However, for Rose and those who joined (in Pittsburgh and Oakland), outdoor recreation satisfied more than just the need to distance themselves from the chaos and challenges of the city. For African Americans, city life often meant confronting discrimination on a daily basis at school, work, or in any public space. Recreational centers, themselves, provided a barrier against racial prejudice, but week-long camping trips removed members completely from the racialized restrictions of the city. It gave them a greater sense of freedom to be out in nature, amongst neighbors and friends without the stress of racial tension. Clearly, Rose's own affinity towards nature and wilderness shaped the type of program he offered at the Y, but the fact that these outdoor trips became annual and attracted consistent participation demonstrates the enthusiasm among the community.

The BWCC took members out on hikes, and the Linden Street YWCA in Oakland, as discussed in the previous chapter, had hiking clubs and sent young girls out on annual camping trips. The black YMCAs and YWCA's were incredibly important in serving the black community, especially in West Oakland. In November 1944, however, the central Oakland YWCA integrated the Linden Street branch "to make its program available to all women and girls irrespective of race, creed, or color."⁶⁴ It was renamed the West Oakland Center of the YWCA, and sought to "provide for better service to the West Oakland area." This change in national YWCA policy was two years ahead of their counterpart, the YMCA, which did not officially advocate for integration until 1946. Regardless, West

⁵⁹ "Ideal Vacations Offered Boys at Camp Indian Head: Josh Rose to Head Up Big Summer for 'Y,'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 June 1934, 6.

⁶⁰ Mary Ellen Butler, "Joshua R. Rose: Oakland's Pioneer Leader," *The Northern California Center for Afro-Americans History and Life*, (Fall 1990), 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Abigail A. Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 10.

⁶⁴ "YWCA Widens its Functions," *Oakland Tribune*, 8 November 1944, p. D-14.

Oakland's growing African American population during the war meant that most members at the YWCA continued to be black women. For over twenty years, the Linden Street Y functioned as a significant asset to the black community. It was a social space where members could find camaraderie, improve educational and work skills, and find recreational opportunities. With the end of segregated branches, there was also greater opportunity for cooperation between recreational centers, like de Fremery Community Center.

The de Fremery Community Center and Park, named after the family who originally owned the property, had been purchased by the city of Oakland in 1908. Situated on Adeline and Poplar in West Oakland, the park included baseball fields, basketball courts, and tennis nets. The original residence, a 1860s Victorian mansion, was built by successful San Francisco banker James de Fremery. The mansion, built among oak groves, was intended to be a retreat from the growing industrial and crowded streets of San Francisco.⁶⁵ However, as Oakland itself became more urbanized with the arrival of the transcontinental railroad, the de Fremery estate offered less of a buffer from the encroachment of industrialization. Influenced by the Progressive Movement, de Fremery supported causes aimed at preventing urban decay and providing philanthropic resources to women and children.⁶⁶ As discussed in chapter one, the Playground Movement gained considerable support and momentum from the Bay Area's elite at the turn of the century. Contributing to the cause, James de Fremery Jr. sold the entire estate to the city for specific use as a public park. Initially utilized by a predominately white neighborhood, the demographics changed at the beginning of World War II because of its proximity to the port and train lines. Black war industry workers moved into West Oakland, bringing their families and changing the makeup of the city. When the U.S. entered the war, black servicemen stationed in Bay Area, once again, were excluded from the San Francisco USO Club. The BTWCC provided one option, but in the East Bay, black clubwomen decided to turn de Fremery into a Hospitality House. Led by Frances Mary Albrier, a black clubwomen and political activist, the de Fremery Hospitality Committee organized recreation, social events, and dances for the area's black soldiers [Figure 7].⁶⁷ When the war ended, the center was turned back over to the city for public recreation. Here, the guiding hand of Dorothy Pitts helped transition de Fremery from a USO hospitality house to an integral part of Oakland's black community in the late 1940s and 1950s.

⁶⁵ Chance Grable, "De Fremery Park and Recreation Center West Oakland," Shaping San Francisco's Digital Archive @FoundSF, 2015, http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=De_Fremery_Park_and_Recreation_Center_West_Oakland

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ McBroome, *Parallel Communities*, 115. Frances Mary Albrier deserves a history of her own for her lifetime career of activism and leadership. In the 1920s she was a Black Cross Nurse and vice-president of the organizations Women's Auxiliary. She was an early support of Garvey and the UNIA, believing that black self-determination was essential to racial uplift. Needing income, she left the Black Cross Nurses Corps and worked as a Pullman Maid before becoming a welder in the Richmond Kaiser Shipyards in WWII.



Figure 7. Francis Albrier, Harry Rocker, unidentified woman, Kenneth Johnson standing on steps of de Fremery Park USO building, June 22, 1942. Digital image from the African American Museum & Library at Oakland Photograph collection, MS 189, African American Museum & Library at Oakland, Oakland Public Library.

Pitts graduated from LeMoyne College in 1935, a historically black college in Memphis, Tennessee.⁶⁸ She then received her Master's in French from Howard University in Washington, DC. While still a college student at LeMoyne, Pitts took a summer job with the Memphis Park Commission in 1934. This work sparked her interests in recreation, but the blatant disparity between white and black recreational facilities left her feeling discouraged. After finishing the Master's at Howard, Pitts worked for Paine College in Augusta, Georgia, the Bureau of Census, and for the Surgeon General before joining the American Red Cross during World War II.⁶⁹ First stationed in the Philippines, Pitts served as program director of a small recreation club. Shortly after, she moved to Yokohama, Japan to set up a hobby and craft shop in a much larger recreation center.⁷⁰ Of her experience she wrote, "These were the days of the segregated army and we served several thousand troops, mostly Negro soldiers...This experience served to inbred in me an awareness of human social needs and to expand my knowledge in administration and recreational activities."⁷¹ Pitts's prior experiences with public recreational work made her a prime candidate for the de Fremery position. More importantly, her

⁶⁸ It is now LeMoyne-Owen College. In 1968 the two colleges merged.

⁶⁹ Dorothy Pitts, *A Special Place for Special People: The De Fremery Story* (Memphis: Better Communications, 1993), 30.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

background influenced the way she viewed the function of recreation. For Pitts, recreational programs served as a way to develop better people and provide the space needed for growth and development.⁷²

Pitts signed a two-year contract in 1947 and became the first African American Resident Director for a recreational center in United States. She ended up living in the de Fremery house for eight and a half years, serving as a counselor to teenagers, scheduling and offering recreational activities, and organizing community events. Pitts's leadership helped turn de Fremery into a bedrock of the West Oakland community, but her presence alone does not account for the center's success in drawing out neighborhood support and participation. There needed to be like-minded adults to lead the programs. And perhaps, most importantly, there needed to be participants who believed in the benefits of these programs: young men and women who actively sought out community space and eagerly joined in the classes and activities offered.

Under Pitts's reign, the de Fremery house typically offered classes in music, drama, African folk dance, ballroom dancing, youth councils, athletics (for boys and girls), charm classes for women and escort training for men. There were vocational classes, educational classes, adult arts and crafts, and youth workshops (ranging in subjects from politics, to education, to drug awareness). The main hall of the center was also used as a gathering spot for holidays, debutante balls, dances, and music concerts.⁷³ It is clear from Pitts's background and from her own writing that she believed these programs could mold the youth into productive and responsible citizens.

In 1947, the year that Pitts took over as director, Ruth Beckford started the first recreational modern dance department in the United States at de Fremery. That same year, she became the first black member of the Orchesis Modern Dance Honor Society at the University of California, Berkeley, and in 1950 helped found the Oakland Dance Association.⁷⁴ Born and raised in Oakland, Beckford believed that through dance, she could help people strengthen their body and mind. Talking about her time at de Fremery in a documentary titled *Claiming Open Spaces*, Beckford stated that she did not see herself as just a dance instructor, but instead as a "trainer of the whole personality." Dance was about discipline, strength, rhythm, and dedication. These were skills she believed helped her students do well in all other aspects of their lives.⁷⁵ Former student Delores Alexander Brown recalled of her time under Beckford, "I think Modern Dance gave me a sense of discipline...it gave me a sense of pride for myself and made me proud of my peers...it makes you feel strong; your mind gets strong."⁷⁶ Young women dominated Beckford's classes, but young men participated as well. The end of a dance session always concluded with a concert open to the local residents, giving the students the opportunity to display their new skills and gain confidence performing in front of audiences.

Directors and program instructors like Ruth Beckford embedded lessons about confidence, pride, and discipline in every class they offered. The immediate appeal of attending a recreational center might be the social outlet, which on its own was still an important community function. It

⁷² Austin Allen & Gloria House, writers, *Claiming Open Spaces*, Urban Garden Films, New York: Third World Newsreel, 1995, DVD. Interviews with Dorothy Pitt, David Hillard, and Ruth Beckford.

⁷³ Dorothy Pitts, *A Special Place for Special People: The De Fremery Story* (Memphis: Better Communications, 1993), 13-140.

⁷⁴ Ruth Beckford, interviewed by The History Makers, 31 March 2002, <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/ruth-beckford-40>

⁷⁵ Austin Allen & Gloria House, writers, *Claiming Open Spaces*, Urban Garden Films, New York: Third World Newsreel, 1995, DVD. Interviews with Dorothy Pitt, David Hillard, and Ruth Beckford.

⁷⁶ Dorothy Pitts, *A Special Place for Special People: The De Fremery Story* (Memphis: Better Communications, 1993), 112.

helped establish relationships with friends, neighbors, classmates, coworkers, even strangers outside the bounds of school and work. But in addition to the socializing function, recreational activities offered at de Fremery instilled qualities of character and confidence that both leaders and participants believed were significant. These qualities were, likewise, emphasized in the charm school workshops led by Annette Starr Bruce.

Like Ruth Beckford, Annette Starr was born and raised in Oakland, attending Golden Gate Junior High School in 1936, and graduated from University High School in 1939.⁷⁷ In her junior high yearbook, Starr was described as "tidy," she listed her hobbies as "sports," and she stated her ambition was to become a "great athlete." Naturally, she listed her favorite hangout as the "playground."⁷⁸ At first glance one might see a disconnection between a young girl who favored sports and the outdoors becoming a charm school instructor. However, at the core, the two activities share many characteristics. The topic of women in sports is outside the scope of this dissertation, but in the 1930s, women were not making major headways in the world of sports apart from school teams or local recreational leagues. Within Starr's class of forty-eight students, only three other girls listed their hobbies as sports. Regardless, sports have always been associated with building leadership, confidence, and, obviously, athletic skill. Starr's personal papers do not shed light on her youth, but if sports were her hobby and her ambition was to become a great athlete, it is safe to assume that she played lots of sports as a youth, developing useful leadership skills by the time she became an adult. The fact that her appearance was described as "tidy" may also demonstrate an early propensity towards a respectable outward appearance.

As an instructor of charm and etiquette classes, Starr tried to promote similar behaviors in her students. She began teaching classes at the de Fremery center in 1950, but eventually opened up her own studio in 1954. In a handbook for her workshop, there is an entire section on how people "arm" themselves in public through shyness, fear, or suspicion. Part of the class was overcoming these traits and learning how, through poise, to disarm others who displayed them.⁷⁹ Another section dealt directly with appearance and the proper exercises to tone and accentuate every part of the body. There is an emphasis on personal hygiene, removing hair to appear more feminine, and having proper posture.

The focus on proper appearance harkens back to the rhetoric of the politics of respectability, the strong ideology among the black middle class at the turn of the century that stressed the application of temperance, cleanliness, thrift, polite manners and sexual purity as a means to uplift the race generally, and black women specifically.⁸⁰ As Victoria Wolcott argues, however, by the 1940s it was more about, what she terms, working-class respectability.⁸¹ Black men and women were more concerned about the opinions of members within their own community than in seeking the approval

⁷⁷ "Golden Gate Anchor Yearbook," January 1936, Annette Starr Bruce Hudson Papers, Box 5:2 "Education," African American Museum and Library at Oakland.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Annette Bruce, "Teen Girls Charm Workshop, 1958," Oakland Recreation Department Folder, Oakland History Room.

⁸⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

⁸¹ Victoria Wilcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interracial Detroit* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 9-10.

of whites.⁸² Starr's workshops aimed to empower young women and teach them the skills to have a poised and self-assured demeanor in public. Reflecting back, former students remembered Starr saying, "You must emphasize the positive; minimize the negative...look at what you like about yourself, emphasize that, highlight that..."⁸³

The young women who completed her course, and later the adults who attended her adult charm class, left feeling like they gained skills to make positive changes to their lives. Many students sent Starr pictures of themselves, professional headshots with notes of gratitude. In an undated letter to Starr, one admirer of her work wrote,

Your work in the community has been a potent factor in shaping the lives of many young people. I remember very keenly the classes you conducted in Oakland, at the de Fremery Recreational Center where you taught the young people the fundamentals of life, namely: education, self-help, poise, recreation, beauty and how to apply for employment. Your efforts in this direction have not been in vain and it will show up in the lives of those you taught so diligently in the years that lie a head of them...There should be a "RENAISSANCE" in the Bay Area to help the young people as well as adults, and this can be done with the help of the leaders in Churches, Lodges, YMCA, YWCA and Recreational Centers. Awake my friends and in the language of Emerson, 'Hitch your Wagon to a Star.'⁸⁴

The letter is signed by E.A. Johnson, Sr. The only other information in the letter indicates he was a local resident of Oakland, and there is no reference to him having had a daughter pass through one of Starr's workshops. As a community observer, Mr. Johnson recognized not only the benefits of Annette Starr's classes, but recreational programs in general. He advocated for a "renaissance" grounded in getting young people involved in community-based recreational centers. Social spaces, he believed, provided education, self-help, and the skills necessary to obtain gainful employment. All of the programs at de Fremery had the goal of molding confident men and women, but not necessarily to impress white society. Yes, program leaders like Starr, Beckford, and Pitts wanted to develop better citizens, but first and foremost, they wanted community members to have pride in themselves. The process started within. Letters like the one sent in by Mr. Johnson demonstrate that this was a community effort.



All over the Bay Area, organized recreation was recognized as a powerful means to strengthen the individual and the community. Black recreation centers had a strong institutional history by the time World War II began that allowed new directors to meet the needs of a growing black population.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Dorothy Pitts, *A Special Place for Special People: The De Fremery Story* (Memphis: Better Communications, 1993), 76.

⁸⁴ E.A. Johnson, Sr., letter to Annette Starr, undated, Annette Starr Bruce Hudson Papers, Box 5:4 "Correspondence," African American Museum and Library at Oakland.

Understanding the benefits of organized recreation was not a twentieth century invention. The YMCA, founded in 1844 in London, arrived to the United States by 1852. Exclusion by the organization did not deter middle-class blacks from seeing the benefits of such institutions. Anthony Bowen, a former slave from Maryland opened the first YMCA for African Americans in Washington, D.C. in 1853.⁸⁵ The first black YMCA's functioned as little more than Bible study meetings, but towards the end of Reconstruction, urban middle-class and elite black men started investing in the expansion of black YMCAs.⁸⁶ Nina Mjagkij argues that in reaction to the adoption of Jim Crow in the South, elite black men used the YMCA as a venue to affirm and assert their masculinity.⁸⁷ These early leaders believed that if black men displayed all the virtues of traditional Victorian gentility, they could command the respect of white society.⁸⁸ This was part of the politics of respectability, focusing on modifying behavior to win respect and gain full citizenship. Into the twentieth century, however, the purpose of these organizations shifted. In the 1920s and especially during the Great Depression, black YMCAs and YWCAs, and other community centers like the BWCC, acted as community safety nets, helping people get back on their feet during the economic crisis. It also became clear by the end of World War I that exhibiting Victorian gentility, or national patriotism did not translate to full citizenship. Despite fighting in the war, attending black universities and expanding the black middle-class in many cities, African Americans still lacked equality in every sector of political and social life. In the Bay Area the black Y's and community centers that opened up emphasized community relationships, and developing the individual for the sake of that individual and the race as a whole.

World War II and the postwar years are especially important, because of the massive demographic changes that brought thousands of Southern blacks to the west and forced them to form new communities and build their own social spaces. Confronting discrimination and segregation in public amusements made recreational and community centers all the more important to establish safe and social spaces for families. They also played a critical role in helping its members navigate a growing bureaucracy of social service agencies.

Although sources from participants are limited, there have been studies on the impact and meaning of recreation for African Americans in general. In the early 1990s, the National and Park Association funded a project to collect data on the opinions of African Americans who participated in urban recreation during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.⁸⁹ The researchers sent out surveys to cities across the country, including Oakland, and tabulated quantitative data about how respondents felt about the recreational activities they engaged in as children and young adults. The general purpose of the study was to gather evidence showing the positive impact of publicly funded recreation to help

⁸⁵ Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 17.

⁸⁶ Nina Mjagkij, "True Manhood: The YMCA and Racial Advancement, 1890-1930," in *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City*, ed. by Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 141.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ladd Colston, Lydia Patton, *The Critical Impact of Urban Recreation on the African American Community: A summary of public opinion survey data from African-American consumers nationwide, 1992-1992*, The National Recreation and Park Association, 1994, 1.

reverse the trend of city budget cuts. According to researchers Dr. Ladd Colston and Dr. Lydia Patton, public-supported recreation grew after World War I.⁹⁰ Noting the powerful influence of Ernest Attwell in maintaining public support for municipal recreational programs, Colston and Patton argue that the years following his death in 1949, "...marked a period in America when public-supported urban recreation became increasingly known as a social service to the poor, the old and the very young, rather than as an invaluable service to society at large."⁹¹ Their survey results clearly show that when available, African Americans took advantage of public recreation and appreciated its benefits in the same way as witnessed in West Oakland and San Francisco. Asking respondents about how recreation influenced their personal and social development, 74% answered that it "helped me to be responsible to myself and others," while 92% agreed that recreation had developed leadership abilities.⁹² Through over 60 questions, respondents demonstrated overwhelming support for what they saw as the positive influences of public recreation.

The findings in this report cannot be used to explain fully how Bay Area residents felt about recreation, but it provides a useful gauge of how African Americans in general viewed the social benefits of recreation and community centers. Unlike the 1890s, the emphasis was no longer on displaying the virtues of Victorian gentility. Instead, it became a site of personal improvement, race pride, and community building. The opportunities borne from World War II brought thousands of African Americans to northern and western cities. In the Bay Area, new migrants created new relationships through participation in recreational programs. Institutions like de Fremery, BWCC and the local black Y's acted as economic safety nets, provided tools for self-improvement, and, perhaps most importantly, sites for social engagement. Community members used these spaces to organize union meetings, mobilize Double V campaigns, and engage in political debates about how to advance civil rights. Directors and staff organized sports leagues, educational classes and dances, but they also acted as counselors, aiding struggling families by helping them access vital government services. In a time of drastic economic and social change, community centers provided stability and essential services that fundamentally shaped the Bay Area's black community.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

Epilogue

On February 23, 1945 Robert Flippin submitted a letter of resignation to Douglas Simpson, President of the Board of Directors for Booker T. Washington Community Center.¹ As the war brought a greater number of black migrants to San Francisco, Flippin believed the opportunity to improve economic and social opportunities was imminent. To pressure local employers and housing boards to end discriminatory policies, he delivered speeches, wrote articles for the local newspapers, and joined the mayor's Civic Unity Community. At BTWCC he initiated social services programs, health education classes, and fought for the inclusion of black residents in public housing projects. Speaking about the many barriers new black migrants faced, Flippin lamented, "Locked by tradition into restricted city areas, curtailed in his right to participate in industry and the professions, victimized in a racketeering housing situation, the migrant Negro and his children, have in some few instances, succeeded admirably, but in all to many other instances they have failed."² As Director, Flippin had used his position not only to bring attention San Francisco's blatant racial inequalities, but also help alleviate them. Still, he felt ineffective in carrying out his necessary responsibilities. Writing to Simpson, Flippin regretted that he could not devote all of his time and energy to the center itself. The catch-all nature of the services provided at community centers demanded more from the directors and program leaders. In his seventeen years as Director, Flippin had overseen an incredible growth of not only black recreation, but also political activism that fought against racial discrimination in all its forms. Ultimately, Flippin felt he was doing a disservice to BTWCC by diverting energy in different directions.

¹ Robert B. Flippin to Douglas Simpson, Letter of Resignation, 23 February 1945, Correspondence O-W, Folder 345, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert B. Flippin, Booker T. Washington Community Center, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

² Flippin, "The Negro in San Francisco," 26 August 1943, 4, Speech, Folder 204, Box 97-11, Robert B. Flippin, Personal Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

Initially, Simpson and the Board of Directors rejected Flippin's letter of resignation, proposing instead, more funds and staff to help him continue his work. After presenting Flippin's letter of resignation to the Board, Simpson wrote, "It was their unanimous opinion that a new situation has now been created in which the Director and the Board have a real opportunity to make the Booker T. Washington Community Center a strong community force...Because of your untiring efforts for community good, your loyalty and devotion to the cause..."³ Flippin stayed at BTWCC through the summer of 1945, before passing the torch to James Stratten, another activist with a long history in black recreation.⁴

Flippin later took a position as a parole officer at San Quentin prison and started the first Alcoholics Anonymous program within a prison in the entire county. He counseled inmates, invited inspirational speakers to address them, and became an advocate for inmates to the outside public.⁵ Flippin had dedicated his career to fighting for his community and spoke out against the racial inequalities that constricted the lives of so many African Americans. The BTWCC continued to grow after Flippin's departure, but as the 1950s came to an end, black community centers began to lose ground as central institution and force in people's lives.

The end of World War II resulted in job loss, deindustrialization, and, as Robert Self demonstrates in Oakland, decentralization.⁶ Self argues that the industrial suburban corridor surrounding Oakland—San Leandro, Milpitas, Fremont, and Hayward—attracted industry and homebuyers with lower taxes and racial residential barriers, excluding African Americans. For Oakland, San Francisco, and similar wartime boom-cities, suburban development policies undermined their economic stability. Speaking about the impact of suburban growth, Self writes, "Homeowners in the suburban East Bay...participated in a regional and ultimately national redistribution of public resources and public responsibility. In simplest terms, the property tax base moved to the suburbs...while the greater proportion of social problems, and financial responsibility for them, remained in the central city."⁷ For recreational and community centers, this meant less municipal investment and further strain on social services agencies.

Reflecting about her time as Director of de Fremery, Dorothy Pitts referred to the period between 1947 and 1964 as the golden age of public recreation for the Oakland Recreation Department (ORD). Pitts had always understood that her job was to help each individual reach their full potential, a responsibility that required complete immersion in the community. Pitts and her staff established personal relationships with members, their parents, neighborhood residents, and networked across agencies and other community centers. When Pitts was promoted to District Supervisor for West

³ Douglas Simpson to Robert Flippin, 11 June 1945, Correspondence O-W, Folder 345, Box 97-18, Stewart-Flippin Papers, Robert B. Flippin, Booker T. Washington Community Center, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

⁴ Stratten migrated to San Francisco in 1941 and worked as the regional supervisor of the YMCA-USO and the West Coast area director during the war. As Director, Stratten became a strong leader in the city's black community becoming the first black member of the San Francisco Grand Jury, a commissioner in the redevelopment agency, and the first black member to the San Francisco School Board. Broussard, 184.

⁵ "AA to Hear Parole Officer," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 January 1956, 7; "Robert B. Flippin Memorial Service," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 September 1963, 23; Albert Broussard, "Robert Browning Flippin (1903-1963)" Biographical Sketch, 2 November 2015, *Black Past*, https://www.blackpast.org/aaw/vignette_aahw/robert-browning-flippin-1903-1963/

⁶ Robert Self, *American Babylon*, 129.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

Oakland, she trained new recreational leaders who then took positions in other centers throughout Oakland. At the center of her philosophy was the belief that children and teens learned by doing; that to gain confidence and develop leadership skills they had to think for themselves and be part of the process. In discussing juvenile delinquency, Pitts argued, “You do not assist teenagers by promoting the prevention of juvenile delinquency. You assist them to plan, organize and execute programs of their choice—programming designed by them, for them that interest and challenge them...If you accomplish this goal, the by-product will be the prevention of juvenile delinquency.”⁸

Unfortunately, by the early 1960s, economic and social disruptions left institutions like de Fremery vulnerable. Self shows that between 1945 and the 1960s, West Oakland received none of the capital investment that fueled suburban growth outside the city.⁹ Property values plummeted for black homeowners, preventing them from being able to sell. Renters lived in dilapidated apartment units, unable to re-locate and unwelcomed in white neighborhoods. In a time of great economic strain, Pitts found her superiors at ORD unwilling to provide the resources she needed to continue her usual programming. She made the difficult decision to resign in 1965 because ORD cut the leadership training programs and limited her responsibilities to teaching first aid and basic center supervision. Writing in the 1990s about her frustration, Pitts recalled,

I didn't respond, because he didn't know I was teaching FIRST AID to those in the ghetto, in the areas where the racially restricted covenants no longer were observed. I was teaching FIRST AID to those who needed the REAL FIRST AID against racism and misunderstanding, constantly battered against lost manhood or womanhood.¹⁰

No longer afforded either the resources or discretion to run de Fremery as she wanted, Pitts left and briefly worked for the Richmond Community Development Demonstration Project. In 1966 she became the Senior Citizens Program Director for the city of Berkeley, staying until her retirement in 1978 from a position of Chief of the Division on Aging.¹¹

Robert Flippin, Dorothy Pitts, Joshua Rose, and the legion of program leaders who worked alongside them, led recreation centers during a transitional moment for both the Bay Area's black population and for the cities in general. They adapted their missions and services to try and meet the demand imposed by a rapidly growing population and a fracturing economy in the postwar period; a period significantly shaped by wide-ranging, deep-seated, and persistent racial inequality, locally and nationally.

In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement galvanized African Americans across the country. Black political organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Congress of Racial Equality rapidly grew as thousands engaged in protests and civil disobedience. Whereas the early black recreational pioneers had focused so much on learning the skills to succeed within the system, the radicalism of the late 1960s, in particular, was

⁸ Dorothy Pitts, *A Special Place for Special People: The De Fremery Story* (Memphis: Better Communications, 1993), 47.

⁹ Self, *American Babylon*, 139.

¹⁰ Pitts, 132.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

about destroying the system. The black middle-class sensibilities espoused by the clubwomen of the 1920s became outdated as African Americans faced crippling poverty, crime, and police brutality. BTWCC, de Fremery, and integrated YMCAs/YWCAs continued to operate and provided safe spaces for recreation, but it became increasingly clear that they could not meet the burden of transforming their neighborhoods. While they continued to help black communities, these were no longer exclusively black spaces. Regardless, parks, playgrounds, and community centers continued to be used as sites of black political organizing.

In 1966 Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Oakland, representing the profound shift in black political activism from civil rights to Black Power. More revolutionary than most previous black organizations, the BPP challenged police brutality, framed black communities as internal colonies within the US, and connected the domestic black freedom struggle with the global fight against American imperialism.¹² Locally, they started community programs that in some ways replicated the goals of earlier institutions: providing health care, breakfast programs, and investing in black businesses. In West Oakland, the Panthers recruited members and held large rallies in de Fremery Park. In this way, the park strikingly symbolized militant black political resistance and became a site of black strength and hope. When Bobby Hutton was murdered in 1968 by police, the Panthers renamed de Fremery, Lil' Bobby Hutton Park, a name still affectionately used for the park by many Oaklanders today.

Community centers remain a ubiquitous part of the urban landscape today. They concentrate services on children and young teens, primarily with after-school programs, sports leagues, and summer camps. They are no longer racially segregated, and depending on the location, can have a diverse class as well as ethno-racial constituency. The history of black recreation offers a lens into how urban space was contested in the first half of the twentieth century; how recreation centers contributed to a long tradition of black institution building in response to racial segregation. The period between 1920 and 1960 in the Bay Area saw local African Americans uniquely making these recreational spaces their own. In the programs they built and through the largely unsung work of the remarkable group of people who led them, black recreation centers provided their communities with safety and belonging: a powerful and noteworthy achievement.

¹² Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 3.

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