

6-1-1985

## Prairie Politics: Black Life In The Midwest, 1890-1940

Marjorie Murphy

*Swarthmore College*, [mmurphy1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:mmurphy1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Marjorie Murphy. (1985). "Prairie Politics: Black Life In The Midwest, 1890-1940". *Reviews In American History*. Volume 13, Issue 2. 251-256.

<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/134>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).



---

Prairie Politics: Black Life in the Midwest, 1890-1940

Down from Equality: Black Chicagoans and the Public Schools, 1920-1941 by Michael W. Homel; Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942 by Dominic C. Capeci,; Race and Kinship in a Midwestern Town: The Black Experience in Monroe, Michigan, 1900-1915 by James E. DeVries

Review by: Marjorie Murphy

*Reviews in American History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Jun., 1985), pp. 251-256

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2702420>

Accessed: 03/12/2014 15:20

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Reviews in American History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## PRAIRIE POLITICS: BLACK LIFE IN THE MIDWEST, 1890-1940

Marjorie Murphy

**Michael W. Homel.** *Down from Equality: Black Chicagoans and the Public Schools, 1920-1941.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984. xiii + 219 Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliographic essay, and index. \$19.95.

**Dominic C. Capeci, Jr.** *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984. xii + 240 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$37.95.

**James E. DeVries.** *Race and Kinship in a Midwestern Town: The Black Experience in Monroe, Michigan, 1900-1915.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984. xiii + 189 Maps, table, illustrations, notes, appendixes, and index. \$17.50.

Harold Washington's maverick rise to power in Chicago in the 1980s is the culmination of nearly a century of black politics in the Windy City. Politicians have heralded his success as symbolic of the transition of the black political power base to urban centers. In a recent discussion of the historic significance of this transformation, Vernon Jarrett warned that the urban arena remains a contested terrain albeit one where blacks have at last realized power.<sup>1</sup> It should surprise no one that this shift in urban power came in the Midwest, where the inroads in urban politics appeared first in Gary, Indiana. Yet, historically the struggle for this power has been difficult to achieve. Once home to the sterling personalities upon whom Ray Ginger bestowed the Lincoln ideal, the Midwest has had a checkered career in race relations to say the least. The books reviewed here represent the most recent scholarship on blacks in Chicago, Detroit, and the small midwestern town of Monroe, Michigan. Moving beyond previous accounts of the famous race riots in Chicago and Detroit they give us an account of the process of twentieth-century urban problems through the black experience. Relying on oral history, some quantitative research, and careful genealogical searches, all three monographs contribute a new richness to the social history of black America.

The structural constraints of urban institutions play a crucial role in Michael W. Homel's well written *Down from Equality*. He argues convincingly that segregated schools developed after large numbers of blacks migrated to the city and furthermore, that in the World War I era black children attended a partially integrated school system. Segregation was never a formal policy in Chicago, although principals and teachers of integrated schools introduced social segregation in school extracurricular activities without a policy directive. After 1915, as race relations deteriorated in the city, a Progressive reformer in school politics who represented middle-class Hyde Park residents pressed for a formal segregation policy, but the idea foundered as a bitter school board controversy paralyzed the system until 1919. As race riots erupted that summer Progressive reformers remained bitterly divided over rising educational costs, corruption in school politics, and an antiunion campaign that plagued the city's teachers. Perhaps these divisions conspired to produce the mildly-integrationist race commission report that went so far as to repeal the segregation of extracurricular activities. Homel then traces the mass migration of southern blacks to the city and correctly shows that this expansion coincided tragically with the financial demise and eventual collapse of the Board of Education's instructional budget. The Chicago public educational system's deficit financing began in 1915 and continued until 1933, when the system could no longer meet its payroll. Despite the growing crisis school construction continued, although Homel points out that the overcrowded Southside neighborhoods did not benefit from this extravagance. Black school buildings were older, salaries for teachers and administrators in the black neighborhoods remained 16 percent lower than in low status white schools, and a 47 percent gap in school maintenance expenditures between black and low status schools contributed to further deterioration in education.

Homel does not dismiss the power of human agency in creating this educational nightmare. "In a large institution, like the Chicago public schools," he writes, "discrimination stemmed not from any one official or policy directive but from a variety of individual decisions. White teachers who transferred out of ghetto classrooms, administrators who allocated staff and money, and Board of Education members who allocated staff and money, and Board of Education members who supervised the system each helped make ghetto schools unequal as well as separate" (p. 73). Homel's chapter on the relationship between home, community, and classroom shows with particular sensitivity the problems of working families, unsupervised children, deference to school authority, and the laxity of police protection on the Southside to reveal the complexity of school problems. Homel does not condemn teachers or lambast school authorities; instead he demonstrates that institutional pro-

grams reinforced racism. Yet the racial biases of white teachers appeared to be reiterated in school textbooks and the introduction of IQ testing in the 1920s. IQ testing proved highly controversial in Chicago as blacks, immigrants, and rural-born Americans could not compete fairly with white, native, and urban-born children. Although Homel might have shown that school teachers opposed the introduction of IQ testing, theirs was not a protest born of concern over racial discrimination. What is important in Homel's analysis is the excavation of school problems that still plague urban reformers today.

More than relevance, however, graces this fine text. Homel is an astute master of the political narrative and has gathered in this slim volume an excellent portrait of black influence as it grew under the leadership of Mayor Edward J. Kelly (1933–1947). Homel argues that as late arrivals to Kelly's operation, black voters, in their shift from the Republican to Democratic party, had less leverage in an increasingly centralized political system. Consequently, despite the first appointment of a black school board member in 1939, blacks could not overcome the structural deficiencies already in place in the educational system. Nor was integration necessarily the solution or even the goal of the black community, as Homel demonstrates in the de facto segregation case of the Edmonds-Shoop schools, where despite the protests of the NAACP, only 130 residents in the black neighborhood of Morgan Park signed the antisegregation petition. Integration, Homel argues, was a symbolic issue to defend the black race which was of particular interest to the black middle class yet was not viewed with the same intensity by all blacks. Moreover, victories over the overcrowding, increasing isolation, and financial inequities were not always gained through peaceful protest over symbolic issues, as the arsonists in the case of the Lilydale school portables proved. Residents had waited through many Board meetings to gain a promised replacement of these "temporary" school structures but the promises were never kept until unknown arsonists put the Lilydale portables to the torch.

Such direct tactics may have marked a new turning point in urban race relations, at least this is the argument made in the case of housing reform in the city of Detroit. In the Detroit housing example, however, whites protested a federal housing project designed exclusively for black residents and named the Sojourner Truth Homes. Dominic C. Capeci, Jr. wrote his *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit* to serve as a prelude to his planned sequel on the race riots of 1943, and he argues that the bitter controversy over Sojourner Truth set the stage for a race riot a year later. The first incident in his two-part history occurred one cold weekend in February of 1942 as black families preparing to move into one of the first public housing projects of its kind were stopped by angry white Polish protestors. The incident escalated

when Mayor Edward J. Jeffries called off the attempted move and promised the white mob there would be no "sneak moves" into the project. In response, 3,000 blacks met to protest and sent a delegation to the mayor to remind him that his mandate was to represent all Detroit citizens. Meanwhile, police kept the nearly 1,000 black and white demonstrators at bay but arrested 109 rioters, of whom only 3 were white.

Capeci tells a fascinating story of the intrigue behind the riot uncovered by investigators after the event as city officials continued unsuccessfully to negotiate a settlement to the dispute. White members of the Ku Klux Klan, the National Workers League, and other proto-Nazi groups challenged black workers backed by liberals, unions, and sometime Communist party members. In Capeci's utilization of the many investigations of the incident, he essentially translates an ethnic dispute into its ideological components, using the sources of the trials of the arrested rioters, the investigations of the FBI, and the results of a grand jury investigation. Capeci then compares this incident to other urban riots to highlight the distinctive nature of the conflict. The theme of racism in the war itself, the demand for worker solidarity in the UAW organizing campaign between 1937 and 1941, the neighborhood location set between eastside Detroit and increasingly white Hamtramck, and the bungling of federal and local officials — all fuelled the controversy.

Capeci portrays governmental roles as inept or cynical. He shows how city officials thought the rioters were young teenagers, when in fact married male defense workers dominated the arrest dockets. These were black workers who had benefited from the efforts of the FEPC but remained wary of government promises. The federal government intentionally promoted segregated housing even when such a policy pitted white workers against black workers in an increasingly tight housing market. Moreover, federal authorities appeared ignorant of the Polish community's attachment to home ownership as an expression of status. Sojourner Truth protestors felt that the war justified their rebellion because their white counterparts flirted with Fascist groups yet received protection from the state. "In sum," Capeci writes, "the Sojourner Truth controversy stood as a transition between the collapse of one racial order and the creation of another. Consensus broke down over the position of Afro-Americans in a war-torn society, promoting both conflict and reevaluation" (p. 166).

Despite an intriguing analysis and careful research Capeci's book is difficult to read. The shift in racial polarization during the war years is sometimes lost in the detailed analysis of Mayor Jeffries's political career, which appears before the reader is aware of just what happened at the Sojourner Truth Homes. The organizational flaws in the book, however, should not deflate the significance of Capeci's achievement nor detract from anticipating his analysis of the riot of 1943.

Both Capeci and Homel view race relations before 1917 as a product of a less segregated era and not as fraught with the urban race tensions that characterized postwar life in the two most industrialized cities on the Lakes. In contrast, James E. DeVries demonstrates that scientific racism and the southern Jim Crow system gained northern acceptance before the Progressive Era. Racism permeated both urban and rural populations, and that, if not as physically violent as in the South, its psychological deterrents prevented the potential for the creation of the black subculture necessary to black empowerment. DeVries agrees with Kenneth Kusmer that shifts in public opinion on the race issue were national not just sectional experiences.<sup>2</sup> He adds that in the small community of Monro, Michigan. "While known Afro-Americans fitted 'naturally' into their environments, they were never allowed to forget the stigma of race" (p. 134).

DeVries has used census records, oral histories, family reconstruction, and newspapers to recreate everyday life for Monroe's black citizens. He is at times so determined to expunge the vision of idyllic life in a small town that he fails to offer a comparison between the black experience in the small town and in the big city. He points out, however, that the small numbers preclude him from drawing the same conclusions that Kusmer and Katzman have offered for Cleveland and Detroit.<sup>3</sup> With only forty-three Negroes at most in Monroe, geographic and social mobility studies could hardly be statistically worthwhile. Indeed, Monroe's black citizenry comprised less than one percent of a population that grew from 2,813 in 1850 to 11,573 in 1920. But DeVries uncovers a rich history in this small enclave that reminds us that there is still much to be gained from a generous borrowing from Clifford Geertz and the art of close description. For example, DeVries introduces four generations of the Bromley family, including one Jim Bromley, whose celebration of "Emancipation Day" in August 1922 – a celebration of the emancipation of British West Indian Slaves – caused quite a stir in this predominantly white town.

DeVries wishes to demonstrate how the stereotypes of what was expected of blacks contrasted sharply with what these individuals were like. The dangerous persistence of such ideas as the "beast negro" kept blacks from further self-expression. In the story of Sheriff Dull, for example, a black transient was accused of robbery by a white hobo and when the sheriff went to apprehend a black man of no resemblance to the description, the suspect responded by shooting the lawman. The transient served a life sentence after his half-hour trial, even though the white hobo lied about the robbery. Nevertheless, the convicted black man was considered lucky to avoid the angry mobs demanding a cruder form of "justice." In fact, so closely had Monroe identified mob violence with blacks that when a white man was lynched for rape the incident was remembered as a black lynching. Conform-

ity to white values promised little relief from small-town prejudices. DeVries provides poignant examples of how young adolescent blacks imitated the mores of their white high school counterparts and yet continually experienced the stigma of racial prejudice. "Ultimately, however only those who ceased being black," he writes, "could pursue the American dream" (p. 153).

The black subculture DeVries speaks of emerged in Monroe in the 1930s after a considerable migration had made such a subculture possible. At the same time black Chicagoans were making their objections against institutional racism heard in the public schools and Mayor Jeffries of Detroit was beginning to court the black voter. Perhaps the process of urban isolation served as a chrysalis from which a new black subculture emerged, but there is something to be said for the timing of this emergence, which was after Marcus Garvey swept the enthusiasm of eastern urban blacks but before the war economy gave rise to new expectations and disappointments.

The move toward empowerment clearly depended upon demography, but the slow and hostile white response in the Midwest, especially in the cities where the Depression had wreaked fiscal havoc in public institutions, meant that blacks had to move forcefully and deliberately to make gains. If Capeci is right and race relations changed dramatically from consensus to conflict in the war years, then the pattern of the civil rights movement had been long set before the staging of the fifties and sixties. But if Homel is correct, then the structural difficulties preventing change were set in motion before World War II as cities had to come to grips with a depression economy. "Black education in Richard J. Daley's and Jesse Jackson's Chicago was essentially the product of the 1920's and 1930's," Homel writes (p. 188). These histories indicate that the legacy of race relations still determines the contours of possible change while a new generation of black leaders takes the urban helm.

*Marjorie Murphy, Department of History, Swarthmore College, is the author of "Telling Stories, Telling Tales: Literary Theory, Ideology and Narrative History," in the Radical History Review (Dec. 1984).*

1. Vernon Jarrett, "Race and Politics in Chicago: Perspectives on Mayor Harold Washington's 1983 Triumph," panel discussion at the American Historical Association's sixtieth annual meeting, Chicago, December 1984.

2. Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (1976).

3. David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (1973).