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**Peggy and Frank Wood and Poughkeepsie's Catharine Street Community Center**

Charles L. James, professor of English, Swarthmore College

*I was born in Poughkeepsie in 1934 and began using the Catharine Street Community Center when I was eight or nine years old. My earliest memory of the center is associated with Peggy and Frank Wood.*

*IBM had not yet come to this region in the early 1940s, but two important industries within the city did employ a sizeable number of workers. One was the DeLaval Separator Company, which made dairy machinery for milking cows and separating the cream. When this factory converted to war work, it took on local black laborers, including my father. The other industry was the Schatz Federal Bearing Corporation, a ball bearing manufacturer whose business boomed during the war. Schatz attracted industrial workers, both white and black, from far and wide. Many of the black employees and their families gravitated to Catharine Street Community Center.*

*During World War II, what had been a trickle of black immigrants to Poughkeepsie grew to a stream, drawn by the prospect of farm work in the Hudson Valley. A shortage of laborers created by the war led farmers to hire black seasonal workers from the South. They were transported by truck to harvest crops in the surrounding countryside: apples, currants, cherries, beans, peaches, pears, grapes. They would seek relaxation in the towns nearby, including Poughkeepsie. Some simply decided to stay on when the trucks left. Many ended up living in neighborhoods adjacent to the Catharine Street center.*

*Yet in the 1940s, the area around the center was by no means all black. Many families of immigrant whites—Greeks, Italians, Irish—also lived there and sent their children to Samuel F. B. Morse School, where*

*Peggy Wood's children were students. Some few of these white immigrant families came to the center. However, I have no recollection of any of them playing on sports teams, and though a few preteens would show up for after-school activities, those connections inevitably broke off over time.*

*At Christmas there would be large gatherings of the neighborhood children at the Catharine Street center. An enormous Christmas tree sat in the main room where dances and large events otherwise were held. Frank would dress in the full Santa Claus outfit, and Peggy would be Mrs. Santa Claus. Packages, beautifully wrapped, would appear, with each of our names handwritten on a label. Peggy and Frank would call our names and invite each child to come forward to receive a package and a stocking full of candy.*

*The center had after-school programs for both boys and girls, with Frank handling the boys and Peggy the girls. We boys would do woodwork projects and play games. Ping-pong and pool were both popular, but especially ping-pong. Frank Wood was as avid a ping-pong competitor as he was a tennis player. Meanwhile, Peggy led the girls in other activities.*

*These included scouting programs, from Brownies through Girl Scouts. But Peggy also introduced programs that were more modern than some folks were comfortable with. Modern dancing was one of them. She had a very strong interest in dance, and she organized a class of preteen and teenage girls that she taught with great energy. This meant dressing to suit the occasion, in tights or shorts or both. It also meant lying on the floor and practicing synchronized routines. We guys were amused and attracted by some of this stuff. But Peggy was dedicated to it and that was that.*

*To me, Peggy was a model of female decorum that really had an impact on me. She was competitive and energetic but never lacking in*

*decorum, always displaying good taste in her manner and speech. She expected no less from us. When we boys walked into the center, we were expected to remove our hats out of respect. I remember Peggy Wood "enforcing" that practice, usually by no more than a raised eyebrow. We kids had enough regard for her to feel that we should be on our best behavior in her presence. She was a highly principled person who earned our respect and took no nonsense.*

*Catharine Street center was a key social site, especially for us kids. The only other institution that came anywhere near the center's attraction for blacks on the north side of town was the church. Catharine Street center was the focal point on weekdays and sometimes on Saturdays; church was Sundays. There was such a range of daily events going on at the center that the building would be busy until about 10:00 P.M. What with the organized sports teams, the scout troops, and the directed after-school activities, there always seemed to be a bustle. The teenage Friday night dance attracted black kids from downtown and out of town. Bottom line: it was where colored kids went to socialize.*

*When I was a Catharine Street member, the only other place where we could go for recreation was the YMCA. But that was only available at a single, designated time each week: Tuesday night, 7:00 to 10:00. And it was strictly for males. I vividly recollect that Tuesday night was called Torch Club Night, when the YMCA gymnasium and the swimming pool were available to black kids—colored kids.*

*For me, the Wood family could be considered a modern standard in the midst of Poughkeepsie's ethnicity. They were a progressive, forward-looking family of young Americans on the move, full of vitality, ambition, and self-assurance. They were a model American family with a son and a daughter and a dog named Billy, not Spot. They were devout, I believe. They were patriotic (the flag flew faithfully at Catharine Street center, and we saluted it at certain events, especially*

events related to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts). They were athletic and outdoorsy. They even drove the "American automobile," a Ford. Today, I think of them as unselfconscious paradigms of the modern era, one generation beyond the black middle-class mind-set of "established" Poughkeepsie.

By this I mean that Peggy and Frank seemed at the time to be far less conservative than their local counterparts in Poughkeepsie. When I speak of the black middle-class mind-set, I mean the conservative postures of Poughkeepsie's professional black families and of the older black families whose Hudson Valley ancestry preceded the Civil War. Some of these folk had the ear of the local white bankers, ministers, fundraisers, and entrepreneurs throughout the valley. Their notions of decorum were as staunch and inflexible as those of their most respected Southside white professional counterparts, if not more. They worried about scandal, but they also worried deeply (and widely within the race, as the expression goes) about untoward appearances—bad behavior that reflected on the race.

I think Peggy and Frank brought a more cosmopolitan view of life to the more insular dark citizenry of the region. They represented positive family life values, but they were also comparative youngsters whose values were a bit too modern to suit some of the folks "in charge" at this time. I think this is the reason many young families admired them and why they were a breath of fresh air to the local teenagers.

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