

Niria White

African American Labor History in Waterloo: the exhibit

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To tell the story of Waterloo would be impossible without talking about labor. Work is weaved into every family story, every brick building and every city street. Waterloo has been the industrious migration hub of Iowa since its establishment in 1851. Laborers from all over the world have come to work in Waterloo, making it their home. But, like many places, Waterloo had often failed to acknowledge its strongest labor force. At the turn of the 20th century thousands of African Americans fled the south in hope of jobs and better lives, Waterloo seemed like a beacon for that hope. My family, like many others, moved to Iowa in the 1890s for opportunities that seemed unattainable in Mississippi. Upon their arrival to Waterloo they were welcomed with discrimination and anger, but it was much more bearable than the harsh and legal racism in the south. Now, more than a century later, Waterloo is an entirely different place than it once was and many of the industries that built this town no longer exist, but the people that built this city still reside.

The story of African Americans in Waterloo is tied commonly to the national narrative of Civil Rights, but there is much more to the city's African American community's history than the struggle for civil liberties. These stories fit into a larger literature of the Great Migration, the history of labor, and the history of Waterloo. The African Americans who left the south looking for hope and the generations after are the people who built Waterloo. Many of the first African Americans that came to Waterloo were laborers for the Illinois Central Railroad taking unskilled jobs in the shops. During World War I and World War II, black laborers filled the positions in Rath Packing Company, a large hog processing company. Black people filled the hardest, unwanted yet necessary jobs on almost every major industry in Waterloo, while at the same time fighting redlining discrimination, job opportunity discrimination, and prejudice from the mostly white community around them. The content of this research builds the foundation for a public

history display at the Grout Museum in Waterloo, Iowa, which goal is to educate museum patrons and the community about the Black people who helped built Waterloo.

Great Migration Literature

Since the early 20th century there has been quite of bit of literature about the Great Migration. Much of the recent literature has been focused on the impact on larger cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati and St. Louis. While this literature is not directly about Waterloo, narratives tend to be similar regardless of the place. George Edmund Haynes conducted a survey in 1918 of African Americans who were moving north. Information from this article gives statistical data of population increase in North cities over about a ten-year period. Haynes describes how it is difficult to obtain official numbers of how many African American migrants left the south. Most statistics estimated based off records of insurance companies, railway ticket offices and of other sources. Haynes estimated 250,000 to 750,000 African American migrated north during the period. He also described how there were three types of migrants that moved north. The first and largest group were the younger less responsible men. The second types were industrious thrifty, unskilled workers. Many with families or other dependents. This group of migrants usually sent the man north first to earn to enough wages to later send for his family. The third types of migrant were skilled artisans business and professional men. Haynes research was published in “The Survey” journal.¹

Labor History

Although stories of the Great migration are important in the breakdown on How African Americans impacted Waterloo labor histories play the most important role. Joe Trotter jr. and

¹ George Edmund Haynes, “Negroes Move North: Their Departure from the South”, *The Survey*, vol. 40 (1918), 115-116.

Clarence Lang both have written recent literature over African American Labor History. Trotter states in one of his works how Black laborers in the North and South were viewed in the discriminatory attitude of white workers, employers and the state as inefficient, lazy and incompetent laborers. A quote from Trotter's work states:

The subordination of black workers, Robert Weaver believed, had its origins in the unfavorable position of "poor whites" in the slave era, intense competition for employment in the South during Reconstruction, and employers' repeated use of blacks as strikebreakers in the North and West during the industrial era. Black strikebreaking, he argued, was "instrumental in spreading the white fear of black workers"; by 1945 they had become "a symbol of a potential threat to the white workers" and their occupational advancement was "consciously or unconsciously feared."²

Lang wrote more recently about the struggle of African American migrants when moving to the Midwest, saying that while racism is not as overt in the north it is still just as prevalent. In one section Lang explains how even though voter rights were protected Black Midwesterners experienced electoral manipulation and domination. As a response to the Great Migration many African Americans were not allowed in public accommodations and were given poor service, hostility and dissemblance. Many Midwestern towns also converted into sundown towns, places where Black people were not allowed after dark, to prevent African Americans from living in their neighbors. He also goes on to explain Black proletarianization which is the making of African American industrial working classes, this occurred the earliest and most intensely in the urban Midwest. Lang later discussed that black laborers in the Midwest enjoyed higher wages and median family incomes than their southern counterparts. Black families in the north had an annual income of \$6,454 while families in the south only made \$3,353 annually in 1953.³

Waterloo History Literature

²Joe William Trotter Jr, "African-American workers: New directions in U.S. labor historiography," *Labor History*, no.35:4 (1994): 495-523, DOI: 1080/00236569400890321 ; Robert C. Weaver, *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1946) 3-15, 97-108

³ Clarence Lang, "Locating the Civil Rights Movement: An Essay on the Deep South, Midwest and Border South in Black Freedom Studies" *Journal of Social History*, no. 47 (2013) 271-400, URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/530703>

Many of the first African American that moved to Waterloo were laborers for the railroad, this went along with the common narrative of this time since there were increasing number of African Americans working for the railroads. Howard Risher Jr. wrote in one of his series of reports of how many African Americans were given unskilled jobs when hired to railroads. Black men were the first to be released from railroad companies as they were given the lowest ranking positions. He also gives evidence of how major railroad companies sent agents to the south to recruit African American laborers from rural area. Many of the first black families from the south were not offered housing and had to live in rail cars and tents. An Illinois Central Railroad officers stated at one point that, “We took Negro labor out of the south until it hurt.”⁴

Erin Arnesen, the author of *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* wrote literature years later that has some of the same point has Risher had early.⁵

Newspapers and historians have documented the Waterloo black community to their best abilities. Robert Neymeyer has written a few articles about black history in Waterloo and has been an actively interviewing African Americans in Waterloo. In his earliest work he talks about the number of African Americans that have migrated to Waterloo, what their jobs were, where they lived, how much money they made, etc. Neymeyer goes on to explain a significant African American community in Waterloo and how it came to be, this includes the residential groups

⁴ Howard Risher, *The Negro In The Railroad Industry* (Philadelphia: Industrial Research Unit, Department of Industry, 1971)

⁵ Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2001)

regulating the African American communities access to housing as well of other minority groups.⁶

Finally I gathered available literature about meatpacking houses and the introduction to unions specifically related Rath Packing Company. Bruce Fehn has written multiple article about Meatpacking houses in Iowa, much of his work forces on Unions, Rath Packing in Waterloo and job discrimination against African Americans. In 1995, Fehn wrote about the impact of the Local 46 section of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) had on not only the minority workers at Rath but also had a radiating effect on the Waterloo community breaking down discriminating practices. Many of the members of the Local 46 union were also impactful civil rights leaders. In 1997, Fehn again wrote about the UPWA union and the strike of 1948 in his article “African-American Women and the Struggle for Equality in the Meatpacking Industry.” In it, he wrote more about the day to day supervisor discrimination that happened at packing houses. A year later in another one of Fehn’s piece he focused specifically on the treatment of African-American Women and their impact on the UPWA union.⁷ Lastly, Rebecca Conrad’s, “Bringin’ home the Bacon: The Rath Packing Company in Waterloo 1891-1985” goes over some of the general information about Rath packing company and its founder. Conrad discusses some the jobs laborers did at Rath and the impact of unions. She later speaks about some of the marketing that Rath used and finally the decline of the company in the 1980s.⁸

⁶ Robert Neymeyer, *The Negro community in Waterloo, Iowa: The early years 1912-1919*, N.A. 1978; Robert Neymeyer, “May harmony prevail: The early history of black Waterloo”, *Palimpsest*, 80-91.

⁷ Bruce Fehn, “The Only Hope We Had”: United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa,” *The Annals of Iowa* 56, no.3, (1995); Bruce Fehn, “Ruin or Renewal: The United Packinghouse Workers of America and the 1948 Meatpacking Strike in Iowa,” *The Annals of Iowa* 56, no.4, (1997) 352-353; Bruce Fehn, “African-American Women and the Struggle for Equality in the Meatpacking Industry,” *Journal of Women’s History*, no.10 (1998), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0558>

⁸ Rebecca Conard, “Bringin’ home the Bacon: The Rath Packing Company in Waterloo 1891-1985”, *Tallgrass Historians L.C* (2010)

Narrative

The stories of African American Labor can be applied to places all across the North. This narrative is not to separate Waterloo from the black labor story, but to include it. Waterloo has a story of struggle but most importantly perseverance and resilience. The Black American struggle is one laced with strength and the will to move forward. Stories such as Robert B. Burt's exemplify that will during the Great Migration, and Waterloo's importance in African American history.

Burt was born in Mississippi in 1883, though there is not clear record as to if this is correct as census records vary. He married in 1909 to Fannie Burt, she was fifteen and he was approximately twenty-one. Within a year of their marriage they had their first child, Percy, followed by three more children, Bishop, Emma Lou, and Ada. Burt and his family all lived and worked on a farm in Lafayette County in Mississippi, which he rented. This was typical for the time especially in the south. Many families were sharecropper, working on the farms of someone else, often of white southerners, in order to make a living. Farmers in the South around this time had a lot of hardships, many work long days and never got to enjoy the wages they earn. Some were in debt to the owner of the farmland due to floods and boll weevil that would not allow their crops to grow. In addition to that racial tensions were also at its peak in the early 1900s, and to make matters worse Mississippi had the highest number of lynchings in all of the south. Robert Burt was a hardworking man with a family who looking for an opportunity to get ahead like many of the people around him. He was a man who would have done anything to provide his family with a better life, and on top of all those things, he is my Great-Great Grandfather.

Two years after Robert and Fannie's marriage, hundreds of laborers at the Illinois Central Railroad shops in Waterloo along with thousands of laborers across the nation in a strike that

would forever change Waterloo and the life of the Burt family. Illinois Central Railroad was the largest importer and exporter of goods of Waterloo in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, so stopping production was not even an option at the time. The Illinois central did what many of the railroad companies did at the time, found labor in the south. Railroad companies had been using black labor to their advantage for as long as railroads have been existing in America. Railroad companies had been using slave laborer in the South for decades to build their railways some even owned slaves. The railroad depots and workhouses were always employing black labor to do the most unwanted job as a fireman, the man who puts the coal in the fiery engine of a steam locomotive. In the North, black male laborers were given jobs they were better than their options in the south but still have some of the same issue they once had, no job security, lower pay than their white counterparts, and a low chance of advancement. Railroad companies had a compelling offer when they arrived in the south to recruit Black labor. The agents would offer black men a free train ticket north in exchange for their labor in the shops. The image that black people had of the north at the time was much like the image their ancestors had once before that it was a place of freedom and opportunity.

So with that offer they pack up and moved north. Many traveled without their families, some with only the clothes on their back. Robert left Mississippi sometime between 1911 and 1919 leaving his family behind until he could provide for them in the north. Robert was one of the hundreds of black laborers who made the journey to Waterloo in the early twentieth century. Upon their arrival to Waterloo, they were greeted with hostility not only because they were black but also because they were strikebreakers. Companies had been using the strategy of consciously and unconsciously hiring black strike breakers in white strikers' positions in order to create tension between the two races. Many Waterloo residents supported the strike, so the

arrival of black laborers did not settle well. Regardless many of the black laborers went to work, some hired into position not affected by the strike just in need of a worker. Some were placed in repair shops, boiler shops, or as break and firemen.

While these laborers took the jobs offered to them, many were denied housing. Some of the first black laborers who arrived in Waterloo lived in train cars near the Illinois Central train yard. Waterloo is split up by the East (north) and West (south) side by Cedar River. Downtown Waterloo along with a number of manufacturing plants sat on the banks of the Cedar River as it meanders south. African American were allowed to live in a small area next to the Illinois Central tracks called Smokey Row. Roughly twenty square blocks in total, the district was filled with saloons, prostitution, and dope dealers. Despite its condition, black laborers moved into Smokey Row due to a lack of housing elsewhere in Waterloo. Although Smokey Row was technically the only place that allowed for African Americans to live, there were many cases where African Americans lived outside of this area. Like Burt, who brought his first home just one block north of Smokey Row on Cottage Street, a large house to fit his family and two lodgers from Mississippi between 1919 and 1920. Smokey Row quickly filled with black laborers and their families. They built churches and community centers and were involved with as many aspects of parts of their community possible. Schools were built for the black children in Smokey row, and high school became available for teens just outside of the area. Robert and Fannie had 4 more children: Aretha, Robert jr., Dortha, and Russell. Robert built two of the oldest black church in Waterloo and was a deacon. Robert worked at the Illinois Central Railroad until his retirement many years later, but some of the men who were hired at Illinois Central

were not as lucky and were laid off and went to look for other work in Waterloo. Unlike their father, Robert's oldest sons found work in a new industry willing to hire African Americans.⁹

Rath

At the end of the nineteenth century family members of the Rath meat packing company discovered Waterloo. The city offered the Rath family \$10,000 and a plot of land in hopes to encourage the family to move their family business.¹⁰ George Rath, the owner of the original Rath meat-packing company, turned down the offer and decided to stay in Dubuque. The family decided to take the offer and move to Waterloo. Although John took the offer he was not planning on staying in charge of the company for long so he decided to guide his son into his position.¹¹ J.W. Rath's transition into the presidency came with no hiccups. Rath packing company property was located near the Cedar River in Waterloo giving them direct access to the Illinois Central Railroad tracks.¹² In the 1890s the small company employed about twenty-two

⁹ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MP8P-4RG> : accessed 10 July 2017), Robert Burt, Beat 4, Lafayette, Mississippi, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 34, sheet 3A, family 56, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1982), roll 745; FHL microfilm 1,374,758.; "United States Census, 1920," Robert Burt, Waterloo Ward 4, Black Hawk, Iowa, United States; citing ED 33, sheet 11A, line 32, family 246, NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1992), roll 478; FHL microfilm 1,820,478.; "United States Census, 1930," Robert Burt, Waterloo, Black Hawk, Iowa, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 27, sheet 23B, line 88, family 607, NARA microfilm publication T626 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2002), roll 642; FHL microfilm 2,340,377. ; "United States Census, 1940," Robert B Burt, Ward 4, Waterloo, East Waterloo Township, Black Hawk, Iowa, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 7-37, sheet 8B, line 60, family 170, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, NARA digital publication T627. Records of the Bureau of the Census, 1790 - 2007, RG 29. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2012, roll 1140. ; "United States Census, 1940 Percy Burt, Ward 4, Waterloo, East Waterloo Township, Black Hawk, Iowa, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 7-38, sheet 1A, line 27, family 7, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, NARA digital publication T627. Records of the Bureau of the Census, 1790 - 2007, RG 29. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2012, roll 1140. ; Robert Neymeyer, *The Negro community in Waterloo, Iowa: The early years 1912-1919*, N.A. 1978; Robert Neymeyer, "May harmony prevail: The early history of black Waterloo", *Palimpsest*, 80-91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Iowa Department of Transportation, "Chronology of Iowa Railroad Abonnement" (2016)

white employees working long and hard shifts. Workers usually worked ten hour shifts six days a week making about \$.15 an hour.¹³

Rath's success grew rapidly in the twentieth century. WWI increased business, causing Rath to begin and seek African American Laborers to fill the position of men and women helping with the war effort. By the 1940 Rath had reached its 50th anniversary and profit came in at \$58,258,996.53 a year and slaughtered more than 600 hogs in an hour.¹⁴

Black laborers have substantially role in the history of packinghouse companies. Meatpacking has a long narrative of being the hard, nasty work that no one wants. To this day many of the meatpacking industries employees are minorities. In the days before unions work in a packing houses was compared to a death sentence:

“Slave labor is what it was,” recalled Louis Tickal... The company something required employees to work sixteen-hour days without overtime compensation... “Without a union, we’d never have survived down there. They [the company] wouldn’t kick you out, they’d kill you” with increased labor demands that broke workers physically and emotionally.”¹⁵

Many of the issues that occurred at packing houses in Iowa were similar to problems in packing houses all over the Midwest. Black migrants were called out of the south to work for packing houses all through the twentieth century. Although the work was terrible it paid well and allowed laborers to send for family, purchase houses and have savings. Black laborers biggest contribution to packing houses were their involvement in unions. The work put into securing workers’ rights spilled over into the communities in turn desegregating public and private spaces, preventing job discrimination and fighting against police brutality. Unions were introduction

¹³ Ibid. 4.

¹⁴ John Lauber, Jeffrey Hess, “Historic American Engineering record The Rath Company,” Rocky Mountain Regional Office. (1993), 17.

¹⁵ Bruce, Fehn, “Ruin or Renewal: the United Packinghouse Workers of America and the 1948 Meatpacking Strike in Iowa,” *The Annals of Iowa* 56, vol.56, no.4, (1997) 352.

heavily in meatpacking industries during the great depression after Franklin D. Roosevelt introduces the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) allowing laborers the right to unionize and bargain collectively for higher wages and better working conditions. Unions at Rath not only gave employees benefits it also help with the treatment they were receiving from foremen. Before Unions Employees could only report mistreatment to Rath administration.¹⁶

Meat packinghouse foremen were described by employees as mean, biased, racist and sexist. While many minority workers were discriminated against women were especially targeted:

“Viola Jones, a Waterloo Rath worker, remembered that some foremen at Rath “were like bears.” She watched while a foreman fired an older woman who could not keep up the demanding pace of work. “She stood there and cried.”...Foremen exercised rigorous and arbitrary control over the shop floor... At Wilson and Company in Cedar Rapids, one foreman...appointed a woman to time her fellow workers’ restroom visits.”¹⁷

Women such as Anna Mae Weems worked hard for the rights of minority union Rath laborers. She was one of the first black women to work in the bacon department, a highly segregated department of Rath exclusive to white women, this department was also the most visited and photographed location in the entire packinghouse. Shortly after the beginning of her employment at Rath she was recruited to the Local 46 and later was elected as a union steward.¹⁸ The local 46’s were the founders of the antidiscrimination department, the first of its kind at any packinghouse in the Midwest. A majority of the jobs at Rath packing were given to men as they required hard physical labor for jobs such as killing and splitting hog caresses.¹⁹ Black men were

¹⁶ Conard, “Bringin’ Home the Bacon,” 7.

¹⁷ Bruce, Fehn, “Ruin or Renewal: the United Packinghouse Workers of America and the 1948 Meatpacking Strike in Iowa,” *The Annals of Iowa* 56, vol.56, no.4, (1997) 352-353.

¹⁸ Bruce, Fehn, “The Only Hope We Had”: United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa,” *The Annals of Iowa* 56, vol.54, no.3, (1995) 185.

¹⁹ Rebecca Conard, “Bringin’ Home the Bacon,” 5.

given the dirtiest and hardest jobs such as shackling pens, kill floor and hide cellar.²⁰ In the early years of the union black laborers Russell Lasley, Percy Burt, and Robert Burt, who are both my Great-Uncles, received help from white laborers to dismantle the racial hostility and create an interracial union. That spent some time recruiting laborers and would have meeting in each other's homes in pursuit of recruiting but during this time founders could get fired for recruiting members. After a year of roundup they had a petition for a National Labor Relations Board election ready. Union leaders pushed to have all department leaders' work together to successfully use shop-floor power force. This is a procedure in which kill floor workers, who were largely Black male laborers, would stop slaughtering hogs causing the entire packinghouse to stop production. This method was used with when Rath administration did not listen to laborers' demands. Meatpacking houses would intentional place laborers into specific departments in order to keep the racial divide in the company. The Local 46 strive to break the race line within the packinghouse not only for Rath but the entire meatpacking industry by making it possible for black laborers to have access skilled jobs. A little after Rath's 50th anniversary roughly 1,000 of Rath 6,500 employees were African American. A large amount of the new employees at Rath join the Local 46 union. In order to break the progress further the Local 46 had to tackle rights for African American women. Black women were the lowest paid employee and faced "the most egregious forms of racial and gender discrimination"²¹ Black women were usually the last to be hired and the first to be fired and tended to get the worst jobs, "For example, African-American women were overrepresented in the hog casings departments,

²⁰ Ibid. 5.

²¹ Bruce, Fehn, "The Only Hope We Had": United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa, *The Annals of Iowa* 56, vol.54, no.3,(1995) 202.

where they flushed worms and feces from the animal's intestines."²² Black women were also not allowed to any jobs in the production department. Ada Tredwell, my Great-Aunt, was one of the first black women Rath hired. She had previously been employed as a private domestic worker she was given a job as a janitor and it was which required for women to work on the hands and knees cleaning floors. This work not only was physically harmful it also enforced a harsh stereotype that African American women would only do domestic labor.²³ The local 46's paid close attention to how other meatpacking companies were handling race issues using their mistake to fuel change in at their own employer. Union members conducting their own investigation in order to find acts of discrimination in the hiring process. Rath was caught not following the labor-management agreement to not hire black women into certain department based on race. To consolidate for their mistake Rath allowed women who were currently working for the company to transfer to production jobs.²⁴ The Local 46 did not stop there, they still wanted Rath to acknowledge the black women who did not currently work at Rath were still being discriminated against. Rath once again caved and hire a new black women to work in the bacon department, and within a few months many black women worked in the bacon department. Although the Local 46 union was excited about this change is hiring, several white women employees were not happy about the new change in the beloved bacon department. Many walked out of their jobs, Rath concluded the best response to this issue would be to fire new black

²² Bruce, Fehn, "The Only Hope We Had": United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa, *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (1995) 202.

²³ Bruce, Fehn, "The Only Hope We Had": United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa, *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (1995) 203.

²⁴ Bruce, Fehn, "The Only Hope We Had": United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa, *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (1995) 204

employees , the local 46 decided to give “a show of shop-floor power” if the black women were fired.²⁵ Rath then threatened to fire the white women who walked off of the job.

In 1948, the UPWA went on a nationwide strike after the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act that restricted the power of labor unions. Rath employees went on strike to support the Union, the strike lasted almost eighty day. The strike in Waterloo started off peacefully but after weeks of no progress union members started to get frustrated. One day during the strike a black strikebreaker attempted to drive through the front gates of the packinghouse when strikers started to attack and rock the man’s vehicle. Frightened by the commotion the man raised his handgun to defend himself and shot a white striker in the head.²⁶ If anything were to tear down all of the hard work the local union accomplished it was that moment, but in the end that didn’t happen and laborers went back to work without any hostility. Rath did however punish the strikers by giving super-seniority to non-strikers and replaced others, this broke up a lot of relationships at Rath. This strike showed the dedication that the local 46 had though there union's policy of race:

“...the strike tested Local 46’s commitment to the UPWA’s racial equality policy, and worker solidarity triumphed. Black and white strikers together confronted Iowa National Guardsmen..., and black and white union members marched together in the slain worker’s funeral procession”²⁷

Anne Mae Weems went on to start the first chapter of the NAACP in Waterloo. Weems and some of the leaders from the Local 46 fought to break the color line all over the city filing grievances to business, schools boards, etc. All though Iowa’s education system had been desegregated since the late 19th century many of the school were still highly segregated due to

²⁵ Bruce, Fehn, “The Only Hope We Had”: United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa , *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (1995) 205

²⁶ Conard, “Bringin’ Home the Bacon,” 8.

²⁷ Ibid. 8.

strict housing codes, forcing black people to live in places like Smokey row and the general East side of Waterloo. Civil Right leader worked tirelessly to completely integrate the city.

Rath's impact on the Cedar Valley can still be recognized today, employment provided suitability for the city by like most factory jobs, depending on how much production they needed determined if you have a job. Over the almost hundred time period the success of employment rose and fell, in 1928 over 2000 people were employed at Rath and by 1956 over 8800 workers were in production.²⁸

This strike was the start of a union movement that changed Waterloo labor history. As for the company never reached the production rates it had before the strike of 1948. There still is debate on the reason why the company closed its doors. Some say it was change in management other same the implementation of unions ruined the family-owned business values in turn ruining the company. In the end, thousands of worker were laid off in the mid-eighties with the closing of Rath.

Methods of Collecting Historical Information

This project grew out of work with the Grout Museum chronicling the history of African Americans in Waterloo, Iowa. The Grout wanted to create a new African American history exhibit and were looking hire an intern knowledgeable in not only Waterloo history but also with the African American Community. Erin Dawson, the exhibit curator at the Grout Museum, along with the intern deliberated possible historical event that the new exhibit would display. The Grout had previously discussed the exhibit being focused on civil rights, however the intern proposed an exhibit that concentrated more on labor contributions and portraying Waterloo as a

²⁸ Ibid. 4.

blue collar town. Placing African Americans into the common narrative of Waterloo would be more impactful than sticking to the civil rights themes already told.

The first task given to the intern was to gather as much information about the exhibit theme. The intern interviewed Aretha White, a first generation Waterloo resident. Her father had made the journey to Waterloo in the 1900s to work on the Illinois Central Railroad. She was born in 1920 and grew up in the area. Aretha was able to give the interviewer specific day to day first experience details about Waterloo schools, businesses, and jobs. More of the data gathered from Aretha was using to mold this research projects. Frankie Boehmer, a long time Waterloo resident, gave details of what it was like living in the south during the Great Migration. She remembered many residents of her hometown traveling to Iowa and Illinois to work on the railroad and in packing houses. Frankie arrived in Waterloo in the 1960s and remembers the culture shock she experienced upon arrival. Frankie's hometown was heavily segregated as many other places were in Mississippi. She was not given the rights to vote until she arrived to Waterloo many years after she was legally allowed to do so.

After completing the interviews the information gather was backed up with historical news articles from the Waterloo Courier. Historical data such as Journals, books, and magazines were collected from the Rod library OneSearch! Portal databases using variations of these keywords: African American Labor History, Labor History in Waterloo, Rath Packing Company, Great Migration, Unions, Illinois Central Railroads, Railroad History, and Meatpacking. These searches lead to Christina Vaughan and Robert Neymeyer masters theses along with a later article written by Neymeyer. A University of Northern Iowa associated website, https://sites.uni.edu/chen/drupal-AA_voice/, was also used to cross-reference data. United States Census records were obtained to discover family information, marriage data, occupation data,

and a variety of excess information. Draft cards were also used to confirm data from U.S. Census reports these were all retrieved using familysearch.org. The intern collected data from the Grout museum archives were city directories, non-circulating journal articles, newspapers and books were used. The historian, Robert Neymeyer at the Grout Museum revived much of these information along with Erin Dawson. University of Northern Iowa faculty and mentors, Dr. Leisl Carr Childers and Dr. Michael Childers also assisted to reviewing historical data.

Methods of Writing

Along with construction the exhibit for the Grout Museum the intern was to complete a research paper for the McNair Scholars Program at the University of Northern Iowa. The research paper was to be completed over a series a milestones. Milestone one was to compose a literature review using the research previously gather while also obtaining new literature. After finalizing milestone one, the intern was to draft the introduction and narrative section of the research to be reviewed by Dr. Carr Childers, Dr. Childers and McNair Staff. After approval to continue the intern transcribed an abstract along with a methodology section of the project. The final task was to produce a conclusion, along with discussion and bibliography. The entire research project will be thoroughly reviewed by faculty mentors and McNair Staff.

Methods of construction an Exhibit

Along with collecting historical literature for the exhibit the intern must find objects that go complaint the story. The first task is to do a keyword search in PastPrefect, a museum collection database, the intern will then cross reference the finding from PastPrefect with the collections card in the Grout museum collections. After making a cohesive list of all the objects desired for the exhibit the collections manager will, along the intern, do a final inspection of the objects for the completed exhibit. After all the artifacts are selected the intern must compose a

series of labels for the exhibit. These labels must tell the story of the exhibit in eighty-five words or less and there should be as few labels as possible so the exhibit does not appear crowded. The labels are then reviewed and revised by the Grout Museum historian, exhibit curator, and Director, Billie Bailey. Upon approval of the label, the intern and exhibit curator, Erin Dawson, will begin installing hardware to support selected exhibit objects, finally labels will be mounted and artifacts will be placed inside exhibit.

Discussion

To make a good exhibit one must balance the story being told with their objects in order to have a cohesive outcome. Finding objects to go along with my narrative was difficult at the start of the project, the Grout museum did not have many objects that exclusively pertained to the story of African American labor history. I quickly came to realize that I would have to think of the larger picture rather than trying to find the details in the beginning. After a discussion with Dr. Leisl Carr Childers I was able to hone on what exactly what I wanted my story to be and what I needed to be about to tell that story efficiently.

Like most public historians I started searching for pictures of anything related to my topic. The Grout museum archives had a few photographs that I thought were important to showcase. The first is a map of Smokey Row, from the Waterloo zoning department, this object will provide a visual representation of what Smokey Row is and where it is located. I also chose to include a photo of the congregation of one of the first African American churches in Waterloo beside an Illinois Central sign. There is also a photo of some Illinois Central employees when African American workers first arrived in Waterloo that I will be adding to the exhibit. I recently discovered photos hanging near the entrance of that Grout museum of Rath Packing company employees that I will also be using in the exhibit. I will be using a photograph available on

Library of congress of Rath employees in production, all of these photos include African American men. These objects show the types of jobs done at Rath, to go along with these photo we will display knives, tool belts, and uniforms some of which can be seen in the pictures found on library of congress. Additionally, I have included hooks and mechanic parts from Rath Packing Company.

Conclusion

Although this narrative focuses on the Illinois Central Railroad and Rath Packing Company, there are so many stories similar to these that happened in Waterloo but also all across the North. Many of the workers the travelled to Waterloo lived here for decades and had children and grandchildren. Waterloo went from a town with less than ten African Americans in 1900 to over ten thousand in 2016. Although Black people in Waterloo did not have a huge impact in the national civil rights movement, the contributions made throughout the twenty century have substantially changed what it's like to be an African American in Waterloo. The never ending work done by the men and women of all ethnics but especially the African Americans has ended housing discrimination, job discrimination, integrated schools, and allowed for the advancement of minority youth in Waterloo. Without the influence and work of African Americans in Waterloo it would not be what it is today, Black workers are the cornerstone of Waterloo. Every unwanted but necessary jobs in every major industry has been worked by black laborers, and without them many of these industry would not have had the successes that they had. Despite this Waterloo is still highly segregated and some of the discriminatory practices still exist today. Much of the youth in Waterloo does not know about the rich history of black people and what they did to even make it possible to prosper in the North. As stated before my goal in constructing this exhibit is to give a glimpse of history to the youth of waterloo in hopes of

inspiring a new generation of history lovers who will continue to tell the rich history of
Waterloo.

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