Davenport's Civil Rights Movement

1945-1954
The Ferment Begins

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Water fountain at a shipyard in Baltimore, Maryland, 1943. Segregation existed throughout the country following World War II, but in varying degrees. "Separate but equal" essentially encouraged segregation in Iowa and much of the North and West. In Southern states, segregation was enforced through laws and ordinances.

(Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USW3-026442-E)

On a warm July day in 1945 as they returned home from an event, Charles and Ann Toney decided they wanted some ice cream. They stopped at the Colonial Fountain and Grill on the northeast corner of Harrison and 12th Streets. They were denied service, and they believed it was because of their skin color. The Toneys didn't accept the affront. With help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), they took the business owner to court. During the trial, the business owner said she refused to serve the Toneys because of their attitude. The trial ended in a hung jury. A second trial was held, and the NAACP lawyer pressed the owner to explain why she refused to serve the Toneys. She admitted it was due to their skin color. The NAACP lawyer summed up the case to the all-White jury by noting that this was a clear violation of the Iowa Civil Rights Act of 1884. The jury quickly agreed. As a result, this Iowa law was enforced for the first time in many years.

Following this court case, Davenport residents, churches and organizations began working towards equality within local government, businesses and housing. The NAACP, the Catholic Interracial Council and other groups pushed and worked with local businesses and government. It would be a long, hard road, but it was a journey worth making.

1947 – Charles Toney is hired as a welder at Deere & Co. It is the "hottest, dirtiest job," but it is the beginning of a long and productive career.

1950 – Bill Cribbs is hired at the Davenport Post Office (The first Black person since 1918) and serves until 1957.

1954 – The League disbands. By the end of 1954, a "ferment" is well established, and notable "firsts" happened. Positive action has been taken.

1945 – In 1868, the Iowa Supreme Court banned segregation in public schools – long before the U.S. Supreme Court reached the same conclusion in 1954 following Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. So by the 1940s some of Iowa's school athletic teams are integrated. (Above left) LaVance Moore (on right) plays on the Davenport High School (DHS) basketball and track teams. Rometo (Rummy) Macias was the first Hispanic on the DHS wrestling team and helped the team win the state title in 1942.

(Photo courtesy of Putnam Digital Archives, OC Mexican American, Macias Collection)

1947 – Richard Paulos, Father Bill O'Connor and others create the Inter-Racial Club. The club conducts a survey of Davenport to determine the amount of discrimination. This leads to a report written by Richard Paulos.

(Photo courtesy of St. Ambrose University Archives)

1949 – The Inter-Racial Club, the Industrial and Human Relations Council (pictured above) at St. Ambrose and others organize a Conference on Social Responsibility. A "ferment" has been created that makes St. Ambrose "something special." For Christmas, the Inter-Racial Club collects and takes food to the Hispanic barrio at Cook's Point and finds "appalling conditions." The residents live in shacks with no running water and no electricity. The children enjoy shooting at the rats with their BB rifles.

(Photo courtesy of St. Ambrose University Archives)

1951 – In April, Labor organizer Mike Lawrence, Father Bill O'Connor and others bring all the Catholic Action groups and their members together to create the Catholic League for Social Action. The Davenport Diocese's Bishop soon changes the name to the League for Social Justice.

1952 – One of the League for Social Justice's first actions is to publish "Citizen Second Class" based on the surveys carried out by the Inter-Racial Club. This brochure is widely distributed and receives favorable publicity. It shows that segregation is widespread in Davenport in employment, housing, restaurants, hotels, medical providers, etc.

The League meets at the Davenport Public Library until the FBI investigates them for alleged Communist ideas. Undeterred, the League fights successfully to reinstate World War II rent controls to benefit the disadvantaged.

(Photo courtesy of Putnam Museum Digital Archives, Civil Rights Collection)

1952 – The League for Social Justice along with the Inter-Racial and Human Relations Clubs take an interest in the wretched conditions at Cook's Point. The riverfront area from Marquette Street west includes about 50 homes. Many are subject to flooding, and one water pump serves as the whole neighborhood's only water source.

(Photo courtesy of City of Davenport)

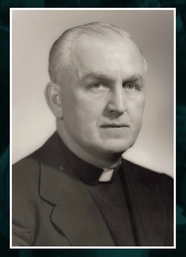
1952 – When the landowner threatens to evict the Cook's Point tenants so he can build a factory, the League organizes St. Ambrose students and faculty to help the families find decent housing. By August, the families move into existing homes or new homes, which the students had built west of Davenport's city limits. These homes are still occupied, including one by the Terronez family.

(Photo courtesy of St. Ambrose University Archives)

1954 – Wylmarie Nicholson is the first Black woman on the DHS tennis team. She is also the first Black woman president of the girls' athletic association as well as a member of the all-state orchestra.

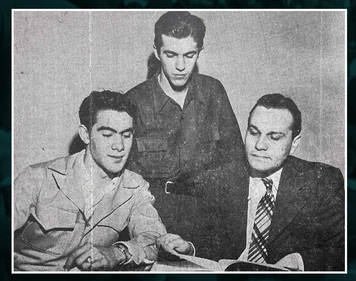
Charles Toney and his wife Ann were at the heart of Davenport's civil rights movement from start to finish. They began the movement in 1945 by winning a discrimination suit against a local ice cream establishment. Charles was hired as a welder at Deere & Co. in 1947 and rose to become Director of Minority Relations in 1972 – the same year he was the first Black person to be admitted as a member of the Crow Valley Golf Club. He served as the president of the Davenport NAACP, CIC and Quad City Merit Employment Council and on the Iowa Civil Rights Commission. The barber and beauty shop that Charles and Ann ran at 1030 Ripley from 1961 to 1976 was an informal gathering place for those involved in the civil rights movement.

(Photo courtesy of Quad-City Times)



As a Sociology Professor, Father William (Bill) O'Connor inspired a generation of St. Ambrose College students to become civil rights activists. He, more than anyone else, created the "ferment" for civil rights at St. Ambrose. He helped organize the Inter-Racial Club and the League for Social Justice.

(Photo courtesy of St. Ambrose University Archives)



John W. Reidy, Richard Paulos (center) and Paul D. Sturgis, along with other St. Ambrose students, developed and carried out a survey of race relations in Davenport. Paulos was one of the most important students influenced by Father Bill O'Connor. He helped organize the Inter-Racial Club, served as club president and led it to carry out social action.

(Photo courtesy of St. Ambrose University Archives)

Simon "Si" Roberts was the "first" in so many categories ranging from the first Black athlete to win state wrestling championships in Iowa in 1954 and then nationally, to being the first Black class president, homecoming king and football quarterback at DHS. He went on to be a civil rights activist and served as a teacher and coach at Alleman High School before transitioning to an important position at Black Hawk College. Si also hosted an important local TV interview show for several years.

(Background image credit: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-04417)