Davenport's Civil Rights Movement

1955-1963
The Ferment Grows

PUTNAM



Following the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case, Southern schools are forced to integrate, and sometimes violence results. These Black students are integrating a school in Clinton, Tennessee, in December 1956.

(Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-U9- 6578-14)



The integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas prompts a protest rally at the state capital on August 20, 1959. Nine African Americans, at great risk to themselves and their families, are admitted to the school and integration is accomplished through the intervention of President Eisenhower and the 101st Airborne.

(Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-U9- 2908-15)



The Black-owned Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama, is bombed in May 1963. Martin Luther King Jr. stayed at the hotel during the campaign to desegregate the city. This non-violent, direct-action campaign encountered violent attempts to stop it, which gained national publicity. The city and protesters reached an agreement to desegregate the city on May 11, 1963. The hotel was bombed a few days later.

(Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-U9- 9771-17)



The 1963 March on Washington leads to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and is remembered especially for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in front of 250,000 marchers.

(Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-U9- U9- 10360-5)



The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) holds a march to honor Black children killed in the Birmingham church bombing in September 1963.

(Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC- U9- 10515-6A)



Ku Klux Klan theme song, 1913. The KKK and other white supremacist groups gain strength during the 1950s and 1960s as a backlash to the Civil Rights Movement.

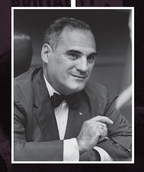


1957 – The Catholic Interracial Council (CIC) forms as a logical successor to the Inter-Racial Club and the League for Social Justice. The CIC almost immediately begins organizing informal home visits to cross the racial divide. Father Marvin Mottet, ordained in 1956, is its spiritual leader. Charles Toney becomes its president in 1959 and stays in the position for a decade. The CIC is the driving force for Davenport's civil rights movement. In most cities, the movement draws leaders from national organizations and predominantly Black, especially Baptist, churches. The CIC makes Davenport's story unique.



1959 – Harry Vargas, Ernie Rodriguez, John Terronez and others organize the Davenport branch of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). LULAC is the main organization pushing for getting out the Hispanic vote, convincing the Davenport School system to have a bilingual program and more.

(Photo courtesy of Putnam Digital Archives, QC Mexican American, Vargas Collection)

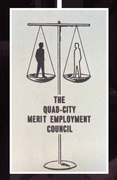


1959 – With critical support from the CIC, Mayor Don Petruccelli creates a Special Committee on Human Rights which previews virtually all of the agenda for the Civil Rights Movement. It reports widespread discrimination and sees the need to end it.

(Photo courtesy of Davenport Public Library Special Collections)

1962 – Charles Toney along with the CIC and others create the QC Merit Employment Council. The Council gathers commitments from all major area employers to hire and promote based on merit, not skin color or any other discriminatory basis. They will have success prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

(Photo courtesy of Putnam Museum Archives, Jack Schneiders Collection)

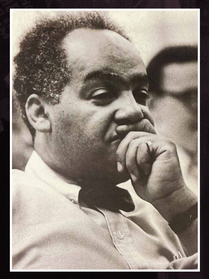




August 1963 – The CIC and other organizations organize a March on Davenport as a prelude to the August 1963 March on Washington, D.C. This march helps lead the Iowa legislature to pass the Fair Employment Practices Act of 1963, which bans discrimination in employment based on race, color, religion or national origin.

(Photo courtesy of Putnam Museum Archives, CIC Collection)

By the end of 1963, Davenport's civil rights movement makes great strides in addressing the issues of racial discrimination in Davenport and helps achieve a major legislative success at the state level. The CIC, LULAC and other organizations played a central role in these accomplishments.



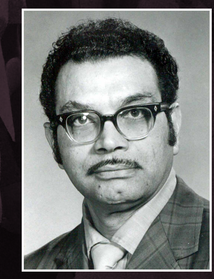
Tom Kelly moved from Seattle, Washington, to Davenport in 1958, establishing his legal practice here. He became one of the recognized leaders of Davenport's civil rights movement. He eventually became head of the Davenport NAACP and later the head of the Iowa NAACP.

(Photo courtesy of Quad-City Times)



Father Marvin A. Mottet was energized as a student by Father Bill O'Connor. He became ordained as a priest in 1956 in large part because someone he respected thought he'd make a fine priest "because I had such a good sense of humor." Father Mottet served as the unofficial spiritual leader of the CIC and Davenport's civil rights movement. He was a major factor in helping that movement to be non-violent and effective. He remained fully committed to social justice concerns until his death in 2016.

(Photo courtesy of Putnam Museum Archives, CIC Collection)



Ernie Rodriguez was one of the founding members of LULAC in Davenport and helped make it an effective engine for positive change. Like Father Mottet, he had remained constant in his commitment to combating discrimination and helping those who often can't help themselves.

(Photo courtesy of Quad-City Times)

(Background image credit: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-03128)