Respectability and Reciprocity:
How African Americans Formed a Community in Elkhart, Indiana (1918-1948)

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It was the spring of 1923, Jack Terry, an African-American farmer in rural Tennessee who broke horses and raised crops to support his family, wanted to do something special for his daughter, Annie. He promised his soon-to-be married teenage daughter that he would buy her something nice if they had a good harvest; Annie told him that she wanted an organ, which she had spotted in a Sears and Roebuck catalogue. The crop that year turned out to be good enough to have some leftover money, meaning Annie could get that organ she wanted. However, when it came time to make the purchase, she told her father that she no longer wanted the musical instrument. Instead, she wanted to move to Elkhart, Indiana. True to his word, Terry gave his daughter the present she desired. They left the farm and moved to Elkhart, where he got a job working for the railroad.

Several years later, Annie gave birth to her son, Bill, who grew up during the formative years of a burgeoning and tight-knit black community in Elkhart—a community that centered on challenging, strenuous work but also delighted in family and neighborhood connections. Jack Terry had not blindly followed his daughter’s wish, nor was her desire to come to Elkhart a random request to move. By 1923 African Americans in the South had come to learn that Elkhart was a railroad hub where blacks could make much better wages than were available in the South.  

Bill Phillips’ family story is representative of the decisions many African Americans throughout the South made to leave their lives on the farm in favor of industrial labor in a northern city. This movement, known as the “Great Migration,” occurred between World War I and the Great Depression. Economically expanding, industrial locations were particularly

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1 A special thanks is owed to Bill Phillips, who met with me numerous times, providing his memories, reflections, photos, and documents. His efforts to set up interviews with other people who grew up at this time were invaluable.

2 Bill Phillips, interview with Jan Bender Shetler, Elkhart, IN, August 16, 2011.
appealing to Southern blacks, as the South offered little economic or social opportunity.\textsuperscript{3} Elkhart, with its range of railroad-based jobs, offered the very type of employment that was open to blacks during this time period: work that was physically taxing and generally unwanted by whites.\textsuperscript{4} For working women, employment was similarly challenging. The only significant source of jobs available to black women was domestic service—work no white women wanted. A handful of women during this era found work in factories, but only as janitorial staff.\textsuperscript{5}

The lack of employment opportunities for both black men and women owed significantly to the pervasive nature of racism in Elkhart and throughout the country at this time. It tinged nearly every interaction in some way, significantly limiting the choices black people could make in their lives. Yet, even in this hostile climate, African Americans in Elkhart retained agency and successfully created a tight knit community through the shared experiences of employment, neighborhood, values and institutions, and—paradoxically—racism. This combination, in turn, fostered an especially vibrant community life for at least thirty years.

Within the community they created, African Americans in Elkhart could raise their children, take pride in themselves and each other, and strive to achieve success for the future. They still managed to be active members of society who determined the course of their own future. The community that they formed to realize those actions was centered on shared experiences like work, school, and living in close proximity to one another. In addition to the various institutions they managed and in which they participated, blacks shared a set of

\textsuperscript{4} Dick Bowers, interview with author, January 6, 2012; Fred Carter, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, February 5, 2012.
\textsuperscript{5} Chris Edgerton, interview with Jan Bender Shetler, September 13, 2011.
communal values that undergirded their lives. These values, which emphasized hard work, education, respectability, and reciprocal care, shone through in the various experiences blacks shared in their social lives and in their actions as employees, parents, volunteers, and church members.

**Background: The Great Migration and Elkhart, Indiana**

A key factor pushing blacks to migrate to the North was the lack of economic opportunity in the South. Dire economic conditions in the South helped to spur the northward movement of African Americans who, in 1900, still resided predominantly in former slave states and disproportionately participated in agricultural work like share-cropping or tenant farming. Poor weather and the boll weevil infestation during the 1910s hurt cotton production and left many blacks looking for better employment.⁶ African Americans’ responses in surveys at the time indicated that economic concerns were the dominant motivation in leaving the South.⁷

At the same time as a lack of economic opportunity pushed blacks out of the South, the chance to earn enough money to support one’s family through manual labor pulled many northward. Recruiters from railroad companies throughout the North distributed Northern newspapers and letters in the South describing work opportunities, housing, and Northern life for prospective migrants.⁸ Railroad companies across the North anxious for cheap laborers recruited Southern blacks and often offered free transportation on their railroad. In some cases, the railroad would take several empty passenger cars down to a Southern town and attempt to fill them

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within a few days with young black males to join the work force. The rail-yards of Elkhart, Indiana were no exception.\footnote{Milton C. Sernett, \textit{Bound for the Promised Land} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 40.}

Another key impetus for the migration of blacks to northern cities like Elkhart was the possibility for a more open social climate. Jim Crow laws in the South stymied the efforts of blacks to make any gains in society and defined life. Despite persistent racism throughout the region, Northern society offered significantly more social freedom than that of the South. For blacks residing in the South, physical safety was assured only if one “knew his place.” For Southern African Americans who diligently avoided conflict with whites, there were no memorable instances of white-led violence.\footnote{Bill Phillips, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, January 11, 2012.} But central to staying in one’s place was maintaining the preeminence of whites in the social hierarchy, which severely limited Southern blacks’ opportunities. There is little doubt that constant social deferral to whites was tiring for Southern African Americans and a strong factor pushing them northward. Life on the northern side of the Mason-Dixon line seemed guaranteed to be at least somewhat better than life in the South for African Americans.\footnote{Sernett, \textit{Bound for the Promised Land}, 45.}

Also in the minds of nearly all African-Americans was the horrifying and ugly practice of lynching. During the three decades spanning from 1889 through 1918 that preceded the black northbound exodus—years that would have been formative for those who moved—there were 3,224 lynchings in the United States. Of those lynchings, 2,522 of the victims, or roughly 78 percent, were black. And broken down along regional lines, 96 percent of those 2,522 lynchings
of African-Americans occurred in the South.\textsuperscript{12} An even starker comparison is the juxtaposition of lynchings in Indiana and the numbers in states that were the most common places of origin for black migrants in the 1920 Elkhart Census. The top two states of origin for black migrants to Elkhart between 1910 and 1920 were Tennessee (108 migrants) and Kentucky (60 migrants).\textsuperscript{13} During the three decades preceding that census, Tennessee lynched 162 blacks and Kentucky lynched 124 blacks; these two states stand in stark comparison to Indiana, where 10 blacks were lynched over those thirty years.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, a part of Indiana’s lower number of lynchings was its comparatively small black population. While Indiana was certainly no racial utopia for African Americans during the opening decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the contrasting lower level of violence towards blacks was certainly not lost on black people seeking to leave the South.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to the discrimination and limited economic opportunities that pushed blacks out of the South, the growing number of industrial jobs in the North pulled them northward. During World War I, jobs in the industrial North opened up for blacks as white Americans went to war. Normally, the employers filled the openings with the relatively cheap labor of immigrants. However, the global nature of the First World War made it nearly impossible for European workers to travel across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States.\textsuperscript{16} For years the industrial North relied on the cheap labor of European immigrants. Immigrants from Europe in 1914, at the beginning of the war, numbered over 1 million; by 1918, at the end of the war, there

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\item \textsuperscript{12} National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, \textit{Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States} (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1919), 31.
\item \textsuperscript{13} U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1920 US Census of Elkhart, IN, Goshen Public Library.
\item \textsuperscript{14} NAACP, \textit{Thirty Years of Lynching}, 32.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Later, in the 1920s, Indiana would be home to an active and violent Ku Klux Klan and would see brutal racial violence. But in the early 1900s, it was relatively safe compared with Kentucky and Tennessee.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Paul Spickard, \textit{Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity} (New York: Routledge, 2007), 250-52
\end{itemize}
were just 110,000. This shortage needed to be filled somewhere. Thus, northern factories turned to southern blacks to fill the labor shortage and began recruiting young black men vigorously in 1915.\textsuperscript{17}

It took a full year, however, for the federal government to take note. By that time, already, the government described the movement as a “great migratory stream” of blacks leaving the South.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, the migration rate of blacks moving from the South to the North from 1910-1920 nearly tripled over the previous decade of 1900-1910; the rate jumped from 25 per 1000 to 70 per 1000 moving out of the South, with much of that spike occurring in the last five years of the second decade.\textsuperscript{19}

Within Northern Indiana, the town of Elkhart—a small city of roughly 50,000 residents with numerous opportunities for manufacturing employment—stood out for its uniquely large black population, which at nearly 8,000 is still today the highest in Elkhart County.\textsuperscript{20} The county seat, Goshen, located a mere 10 miles away, has historically had a comparably small black population. That may be explained in part by the fact that it had the reputation of being a “sundown town,” that is, a community where blacks had to leave city limits before sunset or face threats of verbal or physical assault.\textsuperscript{21} More importantly, however, Elkhart attracted African Americans because of its important position on the New York Central Railroad’s line. The

\textsuperscript{17} Sernett, \textit{Bound for the Promised Land}, 38.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 38.
railroad was almost certainly a key factor in the town’s uncharacteristically high number of factories for being a relatively small city in a rural county. During the first part of the 20th century, when trains were still coal-powered steam engines, the railroad industry had to provide maintenance and upkeep for the machinery. Due to the technological constraints of the era, railroad companies stationed foundries where they performed maintenance on machinery at so-called “division points” spaced at roughly every 100 miles. Heading east from Chicago, the first division point was Elkhart, Indiana, with the next one at Toledo, Ohio.22 This meant that Elkhart could offer railroad construction jobs more typical of a large industrial city in terms of types of employment. Elkhart could be said to have more in common with Chicago than Goshen in this manner.

Despite numerous studies focusing on the Great Migration in cities throughout the North, few have explored the characteristics of the movement of blacks to smaller communities in a rural context like Elkhart. In contrast to the many studies examining cities like Chicago and Detroit that ended up with large black populations, Elkhart has not been the focus of scholarly attention. Although Elkhart’s railroad-based employment made it resemble other larger destinations for African Americans, the community stood out for its placement in a rural county where the distance between farmland and Main Street is never that great. The nearest black community—dating to the antebellum era—was in Cassopolis, Michigan, which at roughly a half hour away, offered a place for black Elkhart residents to visit and form close relationships with others with similar experiences.23 Because of Elkhart’s unique range of railroad based jobs as a

22 Bowers, interview.
division point and its location in a rural county, it merits scholarly attention with regards to the migration of African Americans.

The national trends of the Great Migration are helpful in placing Elkhart into a broader narrative of northward black movement. Yet again, Elkhart’s story does not conform completely to this larger account. Nationwide, the Great Migration began in 1915. Yet, the first African Americans to arrive from the South during this time period did not arrive in Elkhart until the end of 1917. This year is significant for two reasons. First, 1917 was the year the United States entered World War I, which meant that many white workers in the North were forced to leave their jobs in order to join the military. In 1917, with the Great Migration just underway, whites clearly constituted the majority of the workforce throughout the North, including Elkhart. Thus, the draft, although universal, led to a significant departure of white workers and opened the door for a change in the racial composition of the Northern workforce.

African Americans were particularly appealing potential workers for Northern companies like the New York Central Railroad for other reasons as well. During 1917, the New York Central Railroad was experiencing widespread strikes, leaving them desperate for replacement workers. On March 22, 1917, the president of the New York Central Railroad testified to the Interstate Commerce Commission in Congress, saying, “There is hardly a day, I might say, that goes over our head that we do not have a strike somewhere. Strikes are breaking out even at the moment.” Elkhart felt the effect of these strikes. A local denominational paper from Elkhart,

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The Wesford News, recounted the origins of the black community in 1937, writing that there were very few African Americans in Elkhart in 1917. The paper explained, “It was in the same year, however, that the railroad was bothered with strike trouble. In order to offset the plans of the laborers, they packed two carloads of negroes into the city from the poor cotton fields of the South.”

The New York Central Railroad, anxious to fill its job openings in Elkhart, recruited a handful of young black men to work in the foundry, the roundhouse, or on track repair. They stayed through the winter and then began to send for more of their family members. The need for cheap labor persisted, though, and the New York Central Railroad continued to recruit Southern, young black men to work in Elkhart.

For African Americans who arrived in Elkhart on their own in search of work, the railroad offered a relatively easy way to get hired, as long as one was willing to do the most challenging and unrewarding work. Said one former railroad worker, Fred Carter, “the only job a black could get was a job the whites didn’t want. Foundry, roundhouse… that’s a pretty low job. You don’t need a high school education for that.” Despite the difficulties of the work, for black migrants from the South it represented a chance to improve their standing in life. The wages paid for the grueling work on the railroad were not high, but compared to the South, the decision to move north seemed quite logical when viewed from an economic standpoint. The railroad paid wages substantially higher than the typical wage for southern farm workers of less than a dollar a day; Bill Phillips recalls his grandfather saying that it was common knowledge

28 Erickson, “Blacks in Elkhart”; Bill Phillips, interview, January 11, 2012;
29 Erickson, “Blacks in Elkhart.”
30 Bowers, interview.
31 Carter, interview.
that the railroad in Elkhart paid $5 a day.\textsuperscript{32} That wage rate, even if inflated, was quite close to the national average for blacks in industrial jobs of $3 or $4 per day.\textsuperscript{33} For African Americans looking to get ahead economically, Elkhart was a fairly alluring place.

Another crucial reason for the railroad serving as one of the primary sources of employment for blacks was that most other work was off-limits. Elkhart had a variety of factories and industrial jobs even in the 1920s. However, the vast majority of these factories refused to hire African Americans. According to black workers who lived through this time period, it wasn’t until the 1950s that musical instrument, electronic, and pharmaceutical companies in Elkhart were willing to hire blacks.\textsuperscript{34} The shortage of low-wage, white immigrant workers in World War II forced white factory owners’ hand and opened up employment for blacks in factory jobs to some extent. Yet, by no means did this mark the end of discrimination in employment. In fact, numerous Elkhart residents concur that throughout the 1950s the sizable Miles Medical Company (purchased by the Bayer Corporation in 1979) would only hire African Americans to serve as janitors, doing simply menial labor.\textsuperscript{35} Illustrating the lack of job opportunities for blacks at this time, Bill Phillips explained, “discrimination was very rampant in those days—so if you got a job here, whatever it was, it might be shining shoes or being a busboy or whatever, you stayed with that job even if you had an education.”\textsuperscript{36} For the first wave of African American migrants to Elkhart, the prospects for employment were limited to menial labor, the vast majority of which were connected to the railroad.

\textsuperscript{32} Bill Phillips, interview with author, January 14, 2012.
\textsuperscript{33} Sernett, \textit{Bound for the Promised Land}, 45.
\textsuperscript{34} Lee Roy Robinson, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, Elkhart, IN, January 30, 2012; Chris Edgerton and Bill Phillips, interview with Jan Bender Shetler, Elkhart, IN, September 13, 2011.
\textsuperscript{35} Bill Phillips, Chris Edgerton, and Pierce Atkins, interview with Jan Bender Shetler, Bristol, IN, September 13, 2011; Burson, Clark, and Bass, interview, February 15, 2012.
\textsuperscript{36} Bill Phillips, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, Elkhart, IN, January 11, 2012.
Indeed, the limited employment prospects for blacks during this time owed in large part to discrimination. Racism was rife in Elkhart and throughout the United States, impacting African Americans’ decisions in almost every aspect of life. As David Freund’s study of white Americans’ racial attitudes towards blacks during the first half of the 20th century revealed, whites viewed blacks as lacking biological, economic, and cultural similarities with European-descended people, thus making them inferior.37

Violence and intimidation were two of the most common tools employed by racist Northern whites to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods.38 These tactics were carried out with particular success in nearby Goshen, which was most likely a “sundown town,” where it was understood by many blacks at the time that it was “illegal for blacks to walk on the street after six.”39 Historian James Loewen’s website, which takes contributions from former and current residents of towns, is devoted to exposing sundown towns. Based on feedback from residents of Goshen, the website describes Goshen’s method of excluding blacks as “Threat of Violence; Private Bad Behavior; Reputation.”40 Bonnie Clark, who grew up in Elkhart during the 1930s and 1940s explained, “We couldn’t drive through Goshen!”41 Whether or not there were official laws on the books in Elkhart or Goshen that restricted where blacks could live, the “threat of violence and private bad behavior” were often strong enough deterrents to keep them out of particular areas.

39 Bass, interview.
41 Clark, interview.
However, although racism was rampant during this time and underlay nearly every aspect of black life in Elkhart in some way, it was only one part of the story. Paradoxically, the discrimination that so shaped their lives also served as a unifying experience, as all African Americans in Elkhart had to deal with racism, often coming together as a community to respond to the struggles they encountered in the variety of other aspects they shared in common, such as employment, neighborhood, and communal values and institutions. Employment was quite possibly the most essential of these positive experiences, given the amount of time it demanded.

**Shared experience of employment**

For black men in Elkhart, one of the primary community-forming experiences they shared was working together for the railroad, which owed largely to the limited number of jobs available to blacks and the relatively low level of skill and training common among many Southern blacks at the time.\(^42\) Still, there were a handful of other business ventures in which black entrepreneurs were involved, but these often had some link to the rail industry. For example, W.C. Brown was a watchmaker who owned a jewelry store on Main Street near the New York Central Railroad tracks. He serviced watches for railroad employees, such as engineers, conductors, and brakemen. Being the only person in the town with such capability, Brown had a corner on the market. Ben Barnes (senior) was well-known as a skilled plasterer, but that was his second job. His primary employment was as a foreman in the New York Central foundry.\(^43\) Other businesses in the black community included a tire shop, a car wash, and a pool hall; additionally, two men, Bertrand Parker and Julius Reeves, worked as chauffeurs.\(^44\)

\(^{42}\) Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 41.

\(^{43}\) Emory G. Davis, Sr. “Elkhart Memories,” 2-7, accessible at the Elkhart County Historical Museum.

\(^{44}\) Davis, “Elkhart Memories,” 2-5; Jean Colley, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, Elkhart, IN, January 28, 2012.
Although such sources for employment were notable and a source of pride in the community, they were not representative of the majority of African Americans during this era in Elkhart. The railroad was far and away the largest source of employment for black men during this era.

The work that African Americans did with the New York Central Railroad varied somewhat, yet all jobs shared the characteristic of being physically demanding. One key task done at a division point was re-trueing the riding wheels and repairing the locomotives.\textsuperscript{45} Other work included the coal dock, where workers refueled the trains that were ready to go back into service. But reaching one of the more highly regarded positions such as engineer was not an option. Perhaps, African Americans could become firemen, but for the most part they were relegated to subordinate positions of menial labor. Many blacks working on the railroad throughout the U.S. during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century worked as Pullman porters who took care of the passengers and their luggage. However, because trains generally began and ended their lines in large cities, such as Chicago, which often required porters to live in those destinations, it does not appear that this was a significant source of employment for blacks in Elkhart. Instead, blacks were limited during the first few decades following their arrival to menial labor in the foundry, roundhouse, or on the track repair gang.\textsuperscript{46}

Work in the New York Central foundry was representative of the labor many black men in Elkhart performed on a daily basis. Pierce Atkins explained the work his father did, saying, “He was one pouring hot metal. He used to make it up, put in there iron… [and] hot metal go down and that’s the way they make all those big turn wheels in the railroad.”\textsuperscript{47} The work in the roundhouse, which focused primarily on maintenance, included servicing the locomotives by

\textsuperscript{45} Bowers, interview; and Pierce Atkins, interview with Jan Bender Shetler, Bristol, IN, September 13, 2011.
\textsuperscript{46} Bowers, interview.
\textsuperscript{47} Pierce Atkins, interview with Jan Bender Shetler, Bristol, Indiana, September 13, 2011.
cleaning out the coal engines. This involved removing the “clinkers,” or the residue left by the burnt coal, to make the locomotives run smoothly again. Bill Phillips described the maintenance work that men like his father did, saying that they would “have to go in there with hammers and jacks and air to clean it out.” This work presented a substantial health risk, as the men worked in poorly ventilated spaces with high concentrations of coal dust. Chris Edgerton’s father, who worked in the New York Central roundhouse for many years, contracted tuberculosis and later died from emphysema, both of which were likely correlated to his years of high exposure to coal dust while on the job. These strenuous, hazardous work conditions were the norm for many black men in Elkhart seeking to support their family through their work.

The types of jobs these men performed for the railroad were not all the same, though. Being a division point on the railroad, Elkhart featured a variety of maintenance jobs, some of which involved rather extensive traveling on the tracks. The New York Central Railroad divided its responsibilities for track maintenance into sections, with crews from each division point covering roughly half the territory between theirs and the next division point. For Elkhart, this meant that the workers on the “section gangs” who repaired the tracks traveled as far as 70 miles away from Elkhart, going to towns such as Chesterton, Indiana.

Track maintenance work was a common occupation for black teenage boys, integrating them into part of the community experience. Bill Phillips and Harold Burson both worked on the section gang as adolescents, starting as early as age 13 or 14. This section gang work involved waking up before sunrise and reporting to work and then getting on a 5 AM train to ride to the

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50 Chris Edgerton, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, Elkhart, IN, January 18, 2012.
location where maintenance was required.\textsuperscript{52} While neither of these two men worked for many years on the railroad to support their families as their fathers did, their hard work on the railroad connected them to the experiences of their parents’ generation.

In efforts to provide more money for their families, some black men sought second and third jobs to supplement their income from the railroad. The story of Harold Burson’s father exemplifies a common experience within the occupational lives of the first black men in Elkhart. Hugh Burson, Sr. was a pastor at Canaan Baptist, but because that did not pay much, he worked two other jobs as well. From Monday to Friday he worked at the foundry, on Saturdays he was a barber, and on Sundays he served as the reverend to many of his coworkers and customers at Canaan Baptist.\textsuperscript{53} Of course, the stories of men’s occupational lives in these three decades are only half of the story.

While black men shared the common employment experience of working on the railroad, black women shared the experience of domestic labor, although it was in dispersed places. Certainly, some mothers were able to stay at home and focus primarily on raising their children. However, given the low paying nature of jobs for most African Americans at the time in Elkhart, numerous mothers left the house each morning to go to work in the homes of white families who lived outside of the black community in order to supplement the family income. For some of the women, domestic service was the avenue through which they arrived to Elkhart, as the wealthy white families they worked for in the South brought the black domestics with them when they moved to Elkhart.\textsuperscript{54} This employment arrangement was fraught with complex, paradoxical social interactions. Gaps in power, opportunity, and wealth were pronounced. However, for black

\textsuperscript{52} Phillips, interview, January 11, 2012; Bill Phillips and Harold Burson, interview with author, February 20, 2012.
\textsuperscript{53} Burson, Clark, and Bass, interview.
\textsuperscript{54} Burson, Clark, and Bass, interview.
families struggling to make ends meet, there was little room to complain about the circumstances of the work. If washing and ironing clothes, cleaning the house, and caring for another family’s children were the requirements for providing one’s family with economic security, then so be it. Black women working as domestic servants were aware of the demeaning aspects of the work, but refused to let it define their labor, focusing instead on the noble aspects of the work. Shirley Gordon Jackson, whose mother worked as a domestic, explained, “There’s nothing in the world wrong with working as a domestic. It is hard, honest work, though its practitioners are usually grossly underpaid.”

Children became oriented to this experience as well, as mothers, such as Marie Hansbrough, who came to Elkhart as a domestic servant, would often take their young children along with them to work, getting them to dust, sweep, get the mail, and assist them in ironing clothes. Victor Burson explained that if his mother told he and his siblings to go with her, they would not dare question her: “They were domestics! It was expected.” This gave young black children interactions with the white children of their mothers’ employers, building friendships across racial lines. However, if a mother had many children and if some of them were older, she could not take them all to her work. One way mothers dealt with the problem of leaving their children at home alone was to leave them notes with their tasks for the day, outlining what they needed to accomplish before they returned home.

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57 Edgerton, interview, January 18, 2012; Victor Burson, interview.
58 Clark, interview; and Edgerton, interview, January 18, 2012.
60 Edgerton, interview, September 13, 2011.
Working as domestic servants was such a common experience amongst black women in Elkhart, though, that community members had to help meet the need of looking out for the children whose parents were working. Jean Colley recalled that her parents had instructed she and her siblings where they were allowed to go in the neighborhood. She explained that it was as if they had an “invisible fence” that they could not cross, because other people in the community would tell their mother if they went where they were not supposed to go. Thus, their mother’s “word was the babysitter,” although it did not function fully without some substantial help from other members of the community.61

Members of the black community viewed the widespread employment of black women as domestic servants in a complex manner, respecting the sacrifice and challenging nature of the work, while also expecting subsequent generations to use education to obtain better employment. True to the community-wide emphasis on educational attainment as means of improvement, Marie Edgerton exhorted her daughter Chris to find better work. She asked her, “Do you wanna sweep floors like I’m doing? I’m expecting you to go to school and do your best. I’m expecting you to grow up and be self-supportive. If you don’t go to school and work hard, you’re not going to have anything you can do except this. This is honest work, but you can do better.”62 Shirley Gordon Jackson’s mother repeatedly told Shirley and her sister to aim higher and get a good education so they would have the ability to support a family on their own if necessary. She wrote, “By getting an education, we would be able to work at something other than scrubbing people’s floors for a living!”63 For the women doing domestic work, they viewed their toils as a means of creating opportunities for the next generation in their community. Because of the extent

61 Colley, interview.
63 Gordon Jackson, A Place to be Someone, 124.
of the sacrifices these women had to make, they placed high expectations upon their children to make the most of their opportunities, particularly in the areas of education and respectable behavior.

**Shared Experiences of the Neighborhood**

In addition to working similar jobs, African Americans in Elkhart also lived in close proximity to one another, forming a physical community that served as a safe haven for blacks within a racist society. One of the main reasons for the separate black community, though, was the fact that white racism determined the neighborhoods open to blacks, a trend that was prevalent throughout the country. Many African Americans correctly observed that the North was more open to blacks than the South. As one initial worker on the New York Central Railroad told his brother, “Leave the South, where you’ll never be able to make much money or have a chance to do something better for yourself and your family.”64 While there was more opportunity for blacks in the North, racism was still rampant, and in fact, segregation was typically more prevalent in the North than in the South, where, as Stephen Grant Meyer showed through his research on 20th century segregation, Jim Crow assured that living in close proximity would not result in equality. The bicultural arrangement of the South and the clear structure of institutions and legal oppression assured white supremacy.65 The multicultural North, however, did not have such assurance of white supremacy. Thus, in the North, segregation became one of the key ways to maintain the racial hierarchy. Meyer provided evidence that public policy often supported segregation through the creation of practices like restrictive covenants and redlined districts.66 Governments and institutions instituted redlining or restrictive covenants as a way to bring about

64 Gordon Jackson, *A Place to Be Someone*, 52.
65 Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don’t*, 5.
66 Ibid., 5.
peace and order after the racist white public responded negatively and often violently to integrated neighborhoods.

Challenging as such realities were, African-Americans who participated in the Great Migration were able to create a thriving neighborhood in Elkhart within the confines of a racist climate. Communication within families and networks of friends allowed the black community to grow rapidly, tripling its size in just a few years.\(^{67}\) One of the most conventional ways this rapid growth occurred was for one family member to get a house by him or herself. Then he or she would send for the rest of the family, typically telling about the opportunities to get ahead in the North.\(^{68}\) Cornelius Owens, who arrived in Elkhart in 1940 from Arkansas with his parents, explained how his father found a job with the railroad. “He was jumping for joy and saying to my mother that because he found a job she would probably find one, too.”\(^{69}\) Bill Phillips’ family story is similar. Initially in 1922, just his father, mother, and maternal grandparents came to Elkhart, having found work on the railroad. Within two years, however, nearly everyone on both sides of his extended family lived in Elkhart.\(^{70}\) This phenomenon of family and friends following the initial migrants to the new location is known as “chain migration.” In Elkhart, this chain migration occurred overwhelmingly through jobs available on the railroad, and for the young men seeking to find work through the railroad, familial connections were extremely important. In the case of Fred Carter, whose brother was already working at the railroad foundry, finding a job

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\(^{67}\) U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1910 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1920 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library.

\(^{68}\) Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 45.

\(^{69}\) Cornelius Owens, interview with author, Elkhart, IN, January 24, 2012.

\(^{70}\) Bill Phillips, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, Elkhart, IN, January 28, 2012.
took all of two days thanks to his brother’s connection. Fred described his arrival to Elkhart: “I came here on a Saturday night, and I was working on a Monday morning.”

For Carter and many other African Americans arriving in Elkhart, their first living arrangement was as a boarder in the home of a family member or another, previously established, black community member. The census records indicate just how prevalent it was for African Americans to live as boarders in the homes of already-established, non-familial community members. By accepting boarders, a mere 24 houses on St. Joe Street in 1920 supported an impressive 150 people, or a little over half of the black population at the time. The home at the address of 401 St. Joe Street in the 1920 census exemplified the trend of African Americans in Elkhart turning their homes into boarding houses. At the time of the census, the family who owned the home there consisted of four members; also living in the house with them were ten single, black boarders from a variety of locations, including Tennessee, Kentucky, Texas, Mississippi, and North Carolina. On St. Joe Street, 18 out of the 24 homes on the street had taken in boarders. For the majority of African Americans in Elkhart at this time, having boarders was the norm.

Thanks to the abundance of jobs and the multiplying effect of chain migration, the number of African Americans living in Elkhart increased rapidly over a very short period of time, quickly forming itself into an identifiable community. In 1910 there were less than 100

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71 Carter, interview.
72 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1920 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library.
African Americans in Elkhart; in 1920 there were nearly 300; and by 1930 there were over 500.\textsuperscript{74} The tripling in size of the black community between the 1910 and 1920 censuses occurred almost entirely between 1918 and 1920, which speaks to the power of chain migration in quickly adding to the migrant population. In his study of white Americans’ racial attitudes towards segregation, Stephen Grant Meyer found that many whites compared this pattern of chain migration—where a few come first and then send back for their families—to “the invasion of an army.”\textsuperscript{75} Meyer argued that whites viewed the initial black workers as an advance outpost who would scout out the land and then send for the masses. This rhetoric raised the specter of a black assault on white areas, and often resulted in white retaliation against the perceived threat. Meyer found that discrimination occurred both formally and informally, affecting the places African Americans could both live and work.\textsuperscript{76} This was undoubtedly the case for Elkhart, as almost all blacks were confined to a single neighborhood.

Discrimination in housing was an all too common part of life throughout the United States during the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Ku Klux Klan leaders such as Alma White preached against racial integration, keying in on white men’s fears of retribution by black men and the potential loss of supremacy.\textsuperscript{77} Xenophobia on the part of whites was a significant factor in the intimidation of black migrants.\textsuperscript{78} In spite of the location, the Klan became quite popular throughout northern Indiana, including Elkhart County.\textsuperscript{79} Throughout Indiana, whites began

\textsuperscript{74} U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1910 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1920 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library.
\textsuperscript{75} Grant Meyer, \textit{As Long as They Don’t}, 6.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{77} Kathleen M. Blee, \textit{Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 76.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 1.
suppressing the rights of African Americans; numerous cities across the state passed housing ordinances that legalized segregation, such as Indianapolis’ zoning law that prohibited whites and blacks from living in the same communities.\textsuperscript{80} Segregation became more prevalent during the 1920s in Indiana cities, including Elkhart, which previously had not been segregated. The general trend was that the higher the concentration of black migrants that came to an Indiana city, the stronger white residents pushed for segregation.\textsuperscript{81} While discrimination and intimidation did not come only from Klan members—non-Klan members were often just as racist as actual KKK members—the KKK made its impact felt in Elkhart through numerous actions, including the burning of a cross outside of the railroad foundry.\textsuperscript{82}

It was the more moderate part of the white population, though, that often posed the biggest challenge to African Americans seeking to move into a community like Elkhart through support of housing segregation. Even by the middle of the century, whites living in Elkhart still resisted the idea of integration. In a 1948 \textit{Elkhart Truth} poll of racial attitudes, 42 percent of Elkhart residents responded that they opposed integrating the schools, and 37 percent responded that they would object to having a black doctor or nurse.\textsuperscript{83} Although not a majority opinion, such racism amongst white Elkhart residents posed one of the key challenges for African Americans seeking to build a community in the town.

As a result of whites’ significant resistance to black equality, Elkhart conformed to the trend of \textit{de facto} segregation, with was pervasive during the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.,” 608.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.,” 594; Pierce Atkins, interview with Jan Bender Shetler, Elkhart, IN, September 13, 2011.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Elkhart Truth} poll, 1948, available at Time Was Museum, Elkhart, Indiana in file on black history.
throughout the North. David M.P. Freund, who studied housing segregation in northern states, found that whites often limited the number of homes that were available for blacks to live in not through formal laws, but through intimidation and harassment, thus making the community segregated in practical terms.\textsuperscript{84} This appears to have been the case in Elkhart, where blacks lived in almost complete segregation due to white intimidation and white realtors’ unwillingness to sell homes in white neighborhoods to blacks.\textsuperscript{85}

While segregation played a substantial role in blacks’ choice of neighborhood, blacks’ decision of where to live was also integral to the formation of the black community in Elkhart. One of the key motivations for forming the community was the ability to live in an accepting community with people of similar backgrounds, employment, and values. Paradoxically, Elkhart’s \textit{de facto} segregation helped to create a tight-knit black community. Given the limited number of jobs open to African Americans at the time and the small size of the community, many African Americans knew one another from working the same jobs and attending the same churches and community events. Thus, the chance to live close to friends, coworkers, and family encouraged blacks to settle nearby one another. Likewise, distance from work also played a role in many black migrants’ choice of home, as the vast majority of blacks lived near the railroad factories where they worked, reducing their daily commute time. For the first black workers who arrived to work for the railroad, proximity to work was taken to another level as they lived in the rail yard in old boxcars in the area called “The Hump.” Once these workers saved enough

\textsuperscript{84} Freund, \textit{Colored Property}, 45.  
\textsuperscript{85} Burson, Clark, and Bass, interview; Phillips, interview, January 28, 2012.
money, they found housing elsewhere in the community, although they generally tended to stay close to the railroad and their work.\footnote{Canaan Baptist Church Souvenir Book “Mortgage Burning” Edition - 1982, available at Elkhart County Historical Museum. Elk 286 Ha c. 2}

The black community in Elkhart, which began to form within the first few years of significant black in-migration, served to help blacks build and preserve cultural values and institutions. African Americans who lived in Elkhart before the Great Migration—which in Elkhart began in 1918—resided on streets as far apart as Hickory on the south side of the tracks and Lexington, Fulton, and Washington far north of the tracks. By the time of the 1920 census, however, they had consolidated into an identifiable, single entity within the larger community, which is often referred to as an ethnic enclave. Michael Liu and Kim Geron, who studied how ethnic enclaves are connected to minority groups’ desire for equality, found that when there is a general lack of acceptance in the community, the creation of an ethnic enclave often helps to “provide protection from hostile elements in society, aid in the retention of cultural norms… and allow for participation in community, religious, and cultural organizations and residence with members of the same ethnic group.”\footnote{Michael Liu and Kim Geron, "Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice," Social Justice 35, no. 2 (June 2008): 18, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed January 23, 2012).} Thus, black residents of Elkhart quickly came together to form a community where they could share their time, experiences, and values with one another. The physical creation of the black community is illustrated through the changes in black residence on the maps of the censuses from 1910 and 1920.
Figure 1: Black population in 1910, based on 1910 US Census of Elkhart, IN imposed over 1927 Sanborn Fire Insurance broad view city map - image created by author.

Figure 2: Black population in 1920, based on 1920 US Census of Elkhart, IN imposed over 1927 Sanborn Fire Insurance broad view city map - image created by author.

🌟 = 52 percent of black population resided on St. Joseph Street
By 1920, blacks lived overwhelmingly on the streets of St. Joe, Wagner, Chapman, Lincoln, and Pearl, all of which were situated close to one another. However, they were not without some white neighbors. The continued presence of whites living on the streets that became known as part of the black community points out a key distinction in social life between whites and blacks during this time period. Many whites did not want to live in black neighborhoods, although some whites did live alongside African Americans on streets like Wagner, St. Joe, Sixth, and Hickory. While not all whites did moved away, they at least had the option of finding housing in other parts of the city, as long as they could afford it. This was a luxury that blacks simply did not have.

The concentration of African Americans into a single community continued throughout the 1920s, with more whites leaving the neighborhood—as they were able to—and several hundred more blacks moving in. By the time of the 1930 census, the black community had spread to include sizable numbers of residents not just on the streets of St. Joe, Wagner, and Chapman, but also on Maryland, Hickory, and Sixth Street. The transformation from a dispersed black community to a nearly homogenous black enclave was essentially completed. In the 1930 census, a total of 19 black residents lived outside of the black “South Side” neighborhood, or roughly 3 percent of the black population. That is even starker than the 1920 census, when 46 black residents lived in other parts of the community, comprising 16 percent of the total. For further contrast, in 1910 there was no single place that stood out as “the black

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88 US Census Bureau. 1920 Census of Elkhart County, IN, Goshen Public Library.
89 US Census Bureau, 1930 Census of Elkhart County, IN, Goshen Public Library; Edgerton, interview, January 18, 2012.
90 Bill Phillips and Harold Burson, interview with author, Elkhart, IN, February 20, 2012.
91 U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1930 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library.
92 U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1930 Census of Elkhart County, Indiana, Goshen Public Library.
The African Americans who settled into Elkhart’s black community during the 1910s and 1920s also largely shared a common place of origin with the vast majority coming from the South. In the 1930 census, which came at about the end of the first large wave of black migrants to Elkhart, the most common place of birth for black residents of Elkhart was Tennessee; roughly 35 percent of the population had been born there. The high prevalence of migrants from Tennessee and Kentucky—together they comprised 47 percent of the black population in Elkhart in the 1930 census—fits Elkhart into the broader trend of “due north” migration proposed by
Thomas Maloney in a study of black migration during the 1910s. His study showed that African Americans throughout the South moved to locations that were generally straight north of them.\textsuperscript{94} Seven of the top ten states of birth for black migrants in the 1930 census were southern states relatively due south of Indiana; the most common southern states of origin were Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Missouri. Neighboring northern states Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio were also common areas of birth for black Elkhart residents in 1930.\textsuperscript{95} Further examination of the housing patterns in subsequent years is needed for better understanding the shift of the black community in Elkhart. However, given the 72-year waiting period until census data becomes available to the public, neither the 1940 nor 1950 censuses are able to be included in this paper.

While many blacks living in Elkhart by 1930 were from the South, a sizeable portion was born in the North. Indiana was the second highest place of birth with about 25 percent of the population. However, of the 131 black Elkhart residents born in Indiana, 103 of them were children born to parents from the South, still giving a connection to the South. This made these children in-between migrants of sorts, as they had no personal recollections of the South, yet it was a significant part of their family history.\textsuperscript{96} These northern-born children of southern parents can be classified as “second generation” migrants. Because they had no lived experience in the South, their reality was substantially different from their parents and even from other southern-born black children who came north while still young, who are classified as the “1.5-generation”

\textsuperscript{94} Maloney, “African American Migration,” 2.  
\textsuperscript{95} U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930 Census Elkhart County Indiana, Goshen Public Library.  
\textsuperscript{96} U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1930 Census of Elkhart County Indiana. Goshen Public Library.
based on their dual experiences.\textsuperscript{97} Regardless of their own place of birth, it was the children of southern-born migrant parents who went on to achieve great success later in life, aided in large part by their parents’ sacrifices. They became Elkhart’s first black police officer (Cornelius “Speed” Owens, 1961) and first black city councilman (Bill Phillips, 1963). Others gained national recognition, such as Thomas I. Atkins, who worked in Boston as a lawyer and was general counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Charles E. Gordone. All of them shared the experience of being the children of southern black parents, growing up in the prejudiced community of Elkhart, and also having a close-knit, supportive black community where nearly everyone knew and helped support one another—a typical upbringing for many black residents of Elkhart during this time.

\textbf{A Community of Shared Values - Respectability and Reciprocity}

Given the extent of the sacrifices black parents in Elkhart made through their long, hard, and poorly compensated labor, they placed high expectations on their children to make the most of their opportunities, particularly in the areas of education and respectable behavior. Parents emphasized these values both in home life and also in the various institutions they created, ran, and participated in, such as churches, the community center, and the school. Of the values that they stressed in these settings, education was one of the most integral, as it represented a means of getting ahead. Marsha Bass explained the importance of education with regards to her father’s pension, which is smaller than that of many retired white people of similar work experience. She said, “If people are not allowed to make as much money over the course of their lifetime, then

their pension is not as much. And that’s where the call for equality, as far as education… is concerned, is so important, because it goes all the way through.” Noting the lingering challenges of institutional racism, Bass continued, “[But] even with education, sometimes, that’s not enough,” as equal pay is not a guaranty.98

Despite the lack of assurance for success later in life, education was still one of the key ingredients in the recipe many black families had for success; the tools they had at their disposal to achieve success and overcome the discrimination they faced may have been somewhat limited, but they employed them with full force. Parents’ expectations were clear: if you want to become successful in life, education is one of the most important steps in the process. Chris Edgerton recalls that all of her black classmates, who combined made up fewer than 20 out of the roughly 300 total students, graduated from high school, with Edgerton going on to get a masters degree and many other classmates going to college. Parents and community members simply expected young black men and women to graduate from high school and go on to become successful adults.99 Education was an integral part of the communal values, representing a possibility for the younger generation that their parents generally did not have as working class employees.

Respectable behavior and mutual support were other essential shared values within Elkhart’s black community. To exhibit respectful, proper behavior meant that the children had to, as Bill Phillips said, “Respect the old people, say yes sir, yes ma’am.”100 The small size of the black community in Elkhart allowed for its residents to support each other in ways that larger communities could not. Chris Edgerton explained the ways in which members of the community looked out for one another: “Everybody knew you…in the neighborhood. The saying that it takes

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98 Bass, interview.
99 Edgerton, interview, September 13, 2012.
100 Phillips, interview, February 20, 2012.
a whole village to raise a child, well, we had that kind of experience growing up because everyone knew us.”  

She also explained the importance of acting respectful in public. If she or any of her friends misbehaved while walking to school, their parents almost certainly already knew by the time they got home, thanks to a phone call from a concerned neighbor. Acknowledging the elderly community members was an important part of this, as children were expected to be kind and respectful to everyone, always greeting those whom they saw in public. Edgerton explained, “You were supposed to be polite and speak to people. If they saw you, and you were doing something wrong somewhere, then they had the privilege of talking to you and correcting you and saying, ‘You shouldn’t do this or I’ll tell your parents.’ So kids were pretty respectful when we were growing up.”

In addition to preaching respectful behavior, adults in the black community in Elkhart also assisted one another in upholding their shared values. Marsha Bass explained this, saying, “We took care of each other. We were all family. We raised everybody else’s kids.” Her cousin, Bonnie Clark agreed, stating, “It was like a village.” Because of the small size of the community and the close relationships many of the residents had with one another, they were able to rely on one another to make sure they were behaving as they were expected to. A key part of this was the social arrangement of the 1920s and 1930s, where elderly community members would sit on their front porches, observing the proceedings of the day. Also important was the fact that Elkhart’s black community was small enough for everyone to know each other by name. Parents relied on each other to instill their children with the values of respectable behavior. Sometimes this occurred through parents encouraging other adults to enforce rules and

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101 Edgerton, interview, September 13, 2011.
102 Ibid.
103 Bass and Clark, interview.
104 Edgerton, Phillips, and Atkins, interview, September 13, 2011.
expectations for them. Pierce Atkins explained that his father gave his teacher a note that read: “If my son makes any noise and do something in there, you whoop him.” And if the boys got too big for the teacher to whoop them, then the janitor, Mr. Shaw, “would take them down to the furnace room,” as Bill Phillips explained, and whoop them instead. Atkins continued, “And when you came out of that furnace room, you were smiling. You were, ‘Oh, yes ma’am.’ You didn’t know what the word ‘no’ was.”

Proper behavior went beyond just saying, “Yes sir” and “Yes ma’am,” though, as it also included cleanliness and appearance. Chris Edgerton explained that their black teachers at South Side School impressed upon them the importance of the values of cleanliness and hygiene. She said, “The first thing in the morning Mrs. Mallory would walk down the aisles and see if your hands and nails were clean. And if your hands and nails weren’t clean, she’d send you to the bathroom.” Mrs. Mallory stressed personal hygiene for her students. Edgerton recalled, “If they came to school and had not combed their hair, she would come their hair… And the parents didn’t resent it… because a lot of times parents went to work before the kids went to school.”

Black teachers were an essential part of the community, helping to raise the children to uphold the important values of respectful appearance and behavior.

Part of the value of respectability was maintaining a clean and orderly home. Chris Edgerton, whose mother, Marie Simmons, had two jobs—one at the hospital, the other as a domestic servant—recalled that the tasks her mother left for the children often aimed at making the house immaculately clean. Simmons gave her daughters the weekly chore of scrubbing and

105 Atkins, interview, September 13, 2011.
106 Phillips, interview, September 13, 2011.
107 Atkins, interview, September 13, 2011.
108 Edgerton, interview, September 13, 2011.
109 Ibid.
waxing the linoleum, teaching them the values of hard work and cleanliness. Edgerton’s next-door neighbors, the Irving family, had a similar work and parenting situation. Mrs. Irving worked long hours as both a domestic and a janitor at a factory, much like Marie Simmons, and she also left tasks to her many children. Edgerton recalled, “One did the washing, one did the ironing, one did the cleaning, one did the cooking. She had a job for each one of those kids to do.”

Giving their children tasks to do served the dual purpose of maintaining a clean home and teaching their children the value of hard work.

Related to the tasks parents left their children while at work was their ability to enforce the rules while absent. Jean Colley described the way that she and her siblings knew where they could and could not go in the neighborhood based off their parents’ instructions. “This one lady at church said that my parents had an invisible fence. They’d tell us what not to do and they’d say, ‘Go to that corner, and don’t go in the next block.’ So we just went around the block, like we had an invisible fence.” If children broke the rules, though, they could count on other community members to call them out and get them back into line. Bonnie Clark recounted the way older people in the community would look out for she and her siblings as they walked home from Elkhart High School. One woman in particular, Mrs. Wagner, exemplified this, as Clark explained, “I’d pass her house and if she saw us with some kids she didn’t think our mother would appreciate us being with, she would call us on the porch and say, ‘What are you doing walking with that girl? She’s a bad girl. You don’t walk her.’ Our upbringing told us you don’t hang with the wrong crowd.”

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110 Edgerton, interview, January 18, 2012.
111 Ibid.
112 Colley, interview.
113 Clark, interview.
learning and maintaining respectful, proper behavior, and for that reason many parents and concerned community members sought to keep a close eye on children’s behavior.

It is hard to determine exactly why members of Elkhart’s black community placed so much importance on the value of respect and on the reciprocal actions of community members in helping each other to uphold it, although larger national trends help offer potential ways of understanding this. One interpretation, which Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham suggests in her book *Righteous Discontent* about black women’s response to racism, suggests that black mothers were concerned about the way their children’s actions would be viewed by others, particularly whites, in the community. The last thing they wanted was for their children to be labeled as rude, lazy, or irresponsible. Much of this was borne out of a response to the ever-present white racism that labeled African Americans, especially women, as childlike, immoral, and unworthy of respect or attention. Higginbotham argued that as a way of disproving these racist assumptions, many black women sought to claim respectability through their manners and morals. The National Baptist Convention explained this in 1903, stating, “Every mother can become a benefactor to the race. It matters not how poor the mother if she possesses a character in which sobriety, honor and integrity, and every other wholesome virtue hold sway.”

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114 Credit for the coining of the phrase “Respect and Reciprocity” goes to Goshen College professor of history Jan Bender Shetler who was a big help in this project, as I worked alongside her as her research assistant for a similar research project she was doing for the Elkhart County Historical Museum. For that reason, the vast majority of the interviews were conducted largely by her, while I merely contributed some questions and took notes. I would like to recognize the invaluable help she contributed to the creation of this paper; without her it wouldn’t be what it is; Another special thanks is owed to Regina Shands Stoltzfus, professor of Sociology and Bible & Religion at Goshen College, who met with me several times, helping me to make sense of information I found confusing. Her thoughtful suggestions and ideas were instrumental to the creation of this paper, particularly in trying to interpret the meaning of stressing the value of respectability, as well as understanding the prevalence of taking in boarders.


116 Ibid., 192.
Simmons exemplified this way of thinking as a mother working two low-income jobs while trying to raise her children to uphold such wholesome virtues, a work ethic typical of many parents in the black community of Elkhart.

Making sure their children behaved respectably was a common concern for many black mothers in Elkhart during this era. Marie Simmons exemplified this concern through one particularly memorable story from the early 1940s. Her daughter, Chris Edgerton, explained that she, her little brother, and her mother were returning home from a movie when her mother heard loud music coming from a house in the neighborhood. Simmons soon realized that the raucous house was her own—her oldest children had invited over a number of kids to play music and “have a jam session,” as Edgerton explained it. Simmons saw the numerous kids, both black and white, dancing on her porch, and she asked them, “Do your parents know that you’re here?” Edgerton then described what really incensed her mother: “They had a tub of beer in the middle of the kitchen floor. And my mom was livid. She said, ‘If you don’t get that out of here, I won’t be responsible for what I’ll do to you. You better get it out, now!’” Edgerton explained what had made her mother so angry, “She didn’t care about the kids [being there], as long as their parents knew where they were. But the beer…” Simmons explained to her husband upon his arrival home why she was so upset, saying, “They had beer on the kitchen floor—they could have been arrested.”

Marie Simmons’ concern over her children’s actions spoke to widespread concerns among many religious black mothers in Elkhart during that time. As pious women who were often integrally involved in the church, immoral behavior spoke poorly upon their ability as parents to pass along their Christian values to their children. If Higginbotham’s interpretation is

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correct, then these black women’s behavior demonstrated that they felt their actions truly were ever visible to the white gaze. Higginbotham posits that for these religious black mothers, there could be no carelessness in the areas of sexual conduct, cleanliness, temperance, hard work or politeness. No disobedience of society’s norms was allowed, either in public spaces or in the privacy of their own homes. No action was completely hidden from the gaze of white society, which was ever so quick to judge and label African Americans as inferior and unworthy of white approval.118

Respectable behavior would only go so far, though, and black women throughout the country, and in Elkhart, were aware that no matter how well they acted, they would likely never be fully accepted by mainstream white society. For black mothers in Elkhart, responding to white racism appears to be a part, but not all of the motivation for their emphasis on respectable behavior. Emphasizing proper hygiene and respectable behavior was simply the way of life in the black community in Elkhart. While these values may have aided in blacks’ efforts to disprove racist whites’ assumptions, African Americans embraced them also out of their own convictions of proper conduct and it is unclear that they upheld them as a conscious decision to combat racism.

Blacks living in Elkhart practiced and reinforced these shared beliefs of proper conduct through the institutions they created and oversaw, such as the Booker T. Washington Community Center. One of the most visible institutions of the black community during these three decades (1918-1948), the community center functioned as a gathering place for the majority of black, school-age children. The center blossomed quickly to serve the needs of a community in which oftentimes both parents worked and were unable to look after their children after school.

118 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 196.
Founded in 1921 by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Booker T. Washington Settlement House (later the “Booker T. Washington Community Center”) served the medical needs of young black parents through its “Well Baby Clinic.”

(Booker T. Washington Center - “Well Baby Clinic” ca. 1940, from the personal collection of Bill Phillips)

This clinic offered mothers the ability to get the medical attention their children required that was not available for them in white-run institutions. The community center quickly expanded its role to better meet the social needs of the community as well. There were soon clubs for young men and women and after school tutoring for students. The center had a “drop in anytime” policy, which was especially practical for the significant amount of students whose mothers also worked outside the home.\textsuperscript{119} The Booker T. Washington Center functioned as a

\textsuperscript{119} Kim Jackson, “Black History of Elkhart, Indiana,” available at Elkhart County Historical Museum; and Edgerton, interview, January 18, 2012.
place for school age children to go that their parents felt comfortable with.\textsuperscript{120} It was clear through the various programs available at the community center that black leaders stressed the values of education, proper dress and appearance, and respectable behavior. Herbert Tolson and his wife Ruth ran the center upon their arrival to Elkhart in 1941 until their resignation in 1956; without the passionate leadership of the Tolsons, the center closed and did not reopen.\textsuperscript{121} Before and during the Tolsons’ time running the center, it functioned as the heart of the black community. It was a unifying place where everyone went, regardless of where (or if) they worshipped on Sundays and where they worked during the week.

The existence of a black community center spoke to both the desire within the black community to have a unifying institution as well as the white racism that excluded them from participation outside of the black community. The clubs that the center offered often mirrored those of the white after-school clubs. For example, for black girls who wanted to be in a club, the community center had the “Girl Reserves,” which was the counterpart to the white-only “Campfire Girls.” The black Girl Reserves went to summer camp in Michigan just like the white Campfire Girls did—in fact, they went right next door to one another.\textsuperscript{122} In this way, the Booker T. Washington Center fulfilled a purpose created by the prejudice and racism prevalent in Elkhart. Still, the community center was not merely a response to white racism. It also created a chance for members of the black community to interact with one another, feel a sense of togetherness, and instill their children with the values they held most dear. One club that appears to exemplify this was The Dukes.

\textsuperscript{120} Edgerton, interview, January 18, 2012; Phillips, Atkins, and Edgerton, interview, September 13, 2011; Colley, interview.
\textsuperscript{121} Elkhart Truth, “Herbert M. Tolson is Dead,” September 22, 1975, available at Elkhart County Historical Museum.
\textsuperscript{122} Edgerton, interview, January 18, 2012.
Mr. Tolson and other leaders at the community center tried to instill pride, accountability, and proper conduct in these young men, viewing the club as a way to help provide them with the skills their working parents wanted them to have.\textsuperscript{123} The activities at the Booker T. Washington Center fit the criteria many parents had as necessary for their children to have a good upbringing. Paramount in importance for many parents in the black community of Elkhart at this time were the values of cleanliness, education, and respectable behavior, all of which were dealt with adequately by the community center. In addition to being a unifying gathering place for the black

\textsuperscript{123} Phillips, interview, January 11, 2012.
community, the Booker T. Washington Center also helped to continue and reinforce the communal values that were so important at the time.

While the community center had a broad reach, the black-founded churches may have had an even more significant impact in social life. Canaan Baptist Church was founded in 1918, almost immediately after the first blacks arrived in the Great Migration period. Another key church, St. James AME, had already been established in 1906. These churches became instrumental in organizing the activities, discussions, and values of the community. Church members sang in choirs and ate meals together on a weekly basis, and during the summer, churches would organize community-wide picnics for which the majority of the black community showed up and socialized together, further binding them together. In addition to these picnics, Canaan Baptist organized and ran social and cultural activities like poetry readings and choir concerts, while nearly every church had summer Bible Schools. Within the black churches, women represented the majority of the attendees and organized most of the organizations, such as the “Pastor’s Aid” that provided financial assistance for the family of the preacher. Women’s activity in black churches like St. James AME, Canaan Baptist, the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church also generally included some variation of work helping needy people in the community. These women were often labeled as “saints” or were part of the “Missionary Society” within the church. They would go to the homes of those with need in the community and cook food, clean their house, or

provide whatever financial assistance they could offer. They provided this help regardless of church affiliation. In fact, some African Americans went back and forth between churches in the community, further allowing people to know one another. Without a doubt, the churches helped build, not divide, the community.

Tellingly, when churches such as Canaan Baptist needed to raise money, they often turned to the women of the congregation for help. The women would bake pies and sell them, typically to people outside the black community, such as the employers of domestic servants. This represented a chance for black women to show off their baking skills, demonstrate good will by giving pies to people they would normally not associate with, all while earning money predominantly from upper-class white women.

The churches also functioned as a way for black residents of Elkhart to respond to and counteract the racism they experienced. They did this not only through providing a safe space to gather, converse, and worship, but they also hosted meetings and discussions about issues of discrimination. In particular, St. James AME held NAACP meetings and developed a reputation for progressivity and agitation on issues of civil rights. Nearly all the St. James AME pastors played some sort of role in the community, offering social and education programs.

In addition to the community center and the churches, another key institution that blacks took ownership in was the school. Similar to the situation in housing, Elkhart initially had integrated education. In 1929, however, African Americans requested to have their own, all-

128 Colley, interview.
129 Pat Simmons, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, Elkhart, IN, February 5, 2012.
131 Robinson, interview.
black school, which became called “South Side School.” Support for segregated schooling on the part of whites fits into the well-documented racism of that era. Although it may initially seem counterintuitive, the black community also supported this because of the chance to have control leadership in the education of their youth, as well as to provide insulation from racism. South Side School, with its black teachers and principal, allowed for a level of trust that could not have existed in an integrated setting. As Jesse Jackson and Bill Phillips, who both attended in the 1930s, explained while looking back six decades later, they and their fellow black youth benefited because the all-black school fostered a sense of community, not inferiority.

However, a lack of school funding and the once again growing size of the black community during and immediately following World War II created problems of overcrowding and led to a popular desire to close South Side School. Jean Colley, who attended South Side as a young girl, described the situation: “They didn’t have enough books. Kids were sitting 2 and 3 to a desk trying to read out of one book. It wasn’t good… they didn’t have the funding. Well, they didn’t care about the funding.” By 1948, the school board—with prompting from the local chapter of the NAACP and other citizens—decided to close the South Side School and end segregation in Elkhart’s schools. The NAACP’s role in the decision was integral, as they pushed not just for integration but also the continued employment of black teachers. Writing in the summer of 1948 to the Elkhart School Board of Education, local NAACP President Earl Drye called for “the retention of the presently employed Negro teachers… and in the future, if

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134 Not the famous Jesse Jackson.
135 Blair, “Vivid dreams of hope.”
136 Colley, interview.
and when teaching vacancies occur other Negro teachers will be employed.” In both the decision to separate in 1929 and to re-integrate in 1948, the black community exhibited its agency in securing the best possible opportunities for both its youth and educators. Initially, it appeared that separate education would serve best, as black teachers could instruct and serve as role models to young black students. However, as it became clear that the city would not provide them with adequate funding, the black community again moved to best educate its students, pushing for integration as a means of ensuring equal education and opportunity.

While certainly a step in the direction of equal rights, integration paradoxically eliminated one of the unifying pillars of the black community at the time. The black principal and teachers were transferred throughout the district, with some having to leave Elkhart to find employment. The transition from the insulated community of South Side School with its black educators and role models to inter-racial education (with mostly white teachers) was not easy, as students’ initial experiences at new schools makes clear. Jean Colley, who was in elementary school in 1948, described the discrimination she faced at the new school, saying, “Oh, they were terrible! The few teachers that treated me nice—I thought they were angels.” Bonnie Clark had a similar experience going to Hawthorne Elementary School as a fifth grade student in 1948, saying, “I was the first African American child to go to Hawthorne School, and it was… not a nice experience.” Clark continued, saying that one girl who later became her friend told her that their parents told them “that we carry knives and that we would be beating them up and we’d pull their hair.” In the face of such negative experiences, blacks in Elkhart used their shared

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139 Burson, Clark, and Bass, interview.
140 Colley, interview.
141 Clark, interview.
principles to protect themselves. But furthermore, they stressed the ideals of hard work, respectable behavior, proper dress, and reciprocal care as a way of forging a community that met the needs of its members. The black residents of Elkhart’s black neighborhood used the small size of their community to their advantage by employing the power of close, personal relationships to uphold their communal values.

**The Paradoxes of Racism and Community**

In seems ironic that white racism, which aimed to destroy African-American personhood, served as one of the key unifying experiences for a thriving African-American community in Elkhart. This is not to say that racism was a positive thing in any way. Rather, it was in the face of racism that common experiences in the workplace, neighborhood, and civic relationships helped forge a vibrant community. And that community, in turn, sustained its members in the face of brutal racial realities.

Both men and women encountered racism every day, at times in painful and even life-threatening ways. For black men, their encounters with racism in the workplace occurred primarily through the railroad. Bill Phillips’ father, Earvin, experienced firsthand the racism that existed even amongst his own white co-workers. One cold November night, Phillips was riding his bicycle back from work at the coal dock after finishing the second shift. His wife knew when to expect him, and when he did not arrive at his usual time of a bit past midnight, she got in her car and retraced his route to work to find him. She first came upon his crumpled bike on the side of the road; then she saw him laying some distance away with two broken legs. A white co-worker, who had also just gotten off work, had hit him with his car. Ignoring what had to have been a significant collision, he had not bothered to stop after striking Phillips. When Phillips finally recovered enough to return to work, he confronted the man who hit him about helping
him pay his hospital bill, to which the man responded, “See my lawyer.” Phillips admitted later that he considered, but ultimately resisted, doing the prejudiced co-worker bodily harm. His son, Bill, explained, “There was a lot of prejudice in Elkhart at that time.” For many black men working on the railroad in Elkhart during this time, encounters with racism like this were all too common.

The isolation of Elkhart’s rather insolated black community in the rural, mostly white landscape of northern Indiana became painfully clear at times for African Americans during this time. Harold Burson, who worked on the section gang for the New York Central Railroad repairing the rails and ties as a young man in the years prior to World War II, ventured out one day during a break from the job in Chesterton. He and some other workers went into a store and asked the owner where the part of town was that the blacks lived. The owner responded, “You see that tree over there? That’s where the last one hung out.” While interactions such as these certainly were not everyday occurrences, they helped to bring about recognition of the extent of hostility that was common throughout the region, as well as the comparative safety that existed within the black neighborhood in Elkhart.

Although there were certainly many positive interactions between whites and blacks in Elkhart, the predominant treatment of blacks moving outside the proscribed boundaries of their neighborhood was harsh and meant to intimidate. Prospective buyers were routinely discouraged and denied opportunities to buy homes outside of the boundaries imposed upon them. Harold Burson explained the story of the Crewie family, who tried to purchase a home outside of the black neighborhood. The husband was light-skinned, Burson explained, saying, “He was half

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143 Harold Burson, interview, February 20, 2012.
white looking his face was so light.”

Due to his light complexion, Mr. Crewie was welcomed into the home to sign the bill. However, when the owner saw Crewie’s daughter, who had much darker skin, the owner told Crewie to “get up and get out.” As Burson recalls, and many others in the black community likely could have foreseen, the white owner let them know, “Oh no, we ain’t selling no house to no blacks!”

While many African Americans in Elkhart turned encounters with racism into opportunities to pull together as a community, some internalized the beliefs of white superiority and struggled with low self-worth. Dealing with this internalized form of racism was a challenging and all too common experience for numerous blacks growing up in Elkhart. Shirley Gordon Jackson wrote of her parents’ preference for lighter skinned people. Her father was advised, “Don’t ever marry a black, black woman, because they are evil, mean-tempered, and hard to get along with.” He even internalized these feelings as a dark skinned man, saying to God, “Why and how in the world did You make something so black and ugly?” The standard for beauty was (and too often remains) defined by white people and white features. Victor Burson described one practice he observed growing up, saying, “Many a black woman would have marks back here (points to back of neck) from the hot comb to straighten their hair.” Bonnie Clark explained why they did this, saying, “Many of them started straightening their hair because they wanted to relate [to white culture].”

144 Harold Burson, interview, February 20, 2012.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
147 Gordon Jackson, A Place to be Somebody, 31.
148 Ibid., 31.
149 Victor Burson, interview.
150 Clark, interview.
Still, many members of the black community retained feelings of high self-worth and pride thanks in no small part to their vibrant community, although, the members of the community who grew up during the era between the two World Wars speak about discrimination today much differently than their children. Many older residents hesitate to talk about racism in broad terms, either saying they did not really experience it or it was just part of life that has thankfully changed.\textsuperscript{151} When describing life growing up in Elkhart, though, they acknowledge the existence of racism through specific stories. Still, it is their children who are much more open and willing to discuss discrimination and ways that their community responded to and fought against it. One potential explanation for this may pertain to the context of race relations throughout the country at the time each of these generations came of age. During the 1920s and 1930s, segregation and scientific racism remained stubbornly entrenched in American society, offering blacks little hope of bringing about equality. For the children who came of age during the 1950s and 1960s, however, the expectations had changed significantly—nationwide, blacks were valiantly and steadfastly gaining their civil rights, which perhaps explains the lack of stories about communal responses to racism during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and the plethora of stories from the subsequent decades.

It is the younger generation that has many of the stories that represent how African Americans in Elkhart countered racism in a manner that allowed them to unify and persevere together. Pat Simmons recalled an incident that revealed just how quickly and strongly the community could mobilize. While on a class trip to a nearby lake in 1965, the white owners refused the entry of Simmons’ sister, Bertha. Simmons recalled that within a few days, with help from the Urban League, a group of high school students went up to the lake en masse to pay and

\textsuperscript{151} Phillips, interview, January 11, 2012; Phillips, interview, January 14, 2012; Carter, interview; Owens, interview; Atkins, interview, February 10, 2012.
enter, demonstrating their solidarity as a community that would quickly move to protect its members. Although it took decades for blacks to achieve more noticeably equal treatment in Elkhart, they persistently strove to turn racism from a negative, debilitating force into an opportunity to rally around one another and form an even closer community.

Through living almost entirely together by 1930, when 97 percent of blacks lived in a single neighborhood, African Americans in Elkhart were able to form a community that supported and cared for one another, reinforcing positive views of themselves and others. Their shared experiences shaped the way they lived and the values they stressed. By working long, challenging hours in similar jobs, adults and parents in the black community forged an identity of sacrifice and determination, seeking to provide better opportunities for the next generation. The variety of institutions in which African Americans created and took leadership roles in Elkhart, including numerous churches, an all-black school, and a community center, all contributed to the narrative of self worth and communal pride they were forging. Using their abundance of social and personal resources to augment their limited economic resources, African Americans in Elkhart built a community where they could raise their children in accordance with their values of educational attainment, respect, and reciprocal, communal care. Even racism, which underlay so many social interactions, was not able to destroy the community. Paradoxically, it represented an opportunity for the black community to pull together through yet another shared experience by relying on their communal values. The black community was anchored in these common circumstances of racism, employment, neighborhood, and institutions and values, and through these experiences its members constructed a place to live, worship, work, play, and care for one another even in the face of strikingly challenging circumstances.

152 Pat Simmons, interview with Jan Bender Shetler and author, Elkhart, IN, March 17, 2012.
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